

The grounded body: Performance Art and nature

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This brief account focuses on a range of approaches Performance Art in nature. It is not an attempt to give an authorial academic text on this area of practice, rather, an introduction to a few artists, their work and how they explore aspects of the body in, or in relation to, the natural environment.

To begin with, I offer background information in order to introduce some context. I will use the term, 'Performance Art' - a predominantly European and North American phrase from the 1950s and 60s; a time when, after the Second World War, artists broke free from traditional practices, in particular from painting. There are other terms, which could be used here, such as Body Art, Environmental Art, and Land Art. The latter two seemingly have less connection to performance. However, some artists who have been discussed within these categories used their own bodies within the landscape to make works, and are therefore relevant here.

Previous to the 1950s and 60s, early 20th century European artists had already explored alternative forms of practice, including performance, for example, the Dada movement including artists such as Hugo Ball, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Tristan Tzara. Mirroring the chaos surrounding them of the First World War, their cabaret night called Cabaret Voltaire was held in Zurich, Switzerland – a neutral country - and included experimental and idiosyncratic performances full of satire, chaos and nonsense. Later in mid-century France, Yves Klein, made several works involving the body in time and space. Two of the most well known are *Anthropométries*, which involved painted female models using their bodies as brushes to make paintings, under the gaze of an audience dressed in formal evening-wear. He is also well known for his iconic photograph, *Leap into the Void*.¹ Klein is one of the artists credited with making performance a normative inclusion in an artist's practice. Both the Dadaists and Klein were offering gestures of defiance to 'respectable society' and the bourgeoisie, and they were certainly responding to the rise of dictatorships and authoritarian movements and governments.

¹ *Le Saut dans le Vide (Leap into the Void)* shows Klein seemingly leaping from a high wall, to a painful end on the street below. It was in fact a photomontage by Shunk-Kender, the result of a less risky performance by Klein in Fontenay-aux-Roses, 1960.

Both were especially playful in their politicised resistance to the established order.

The politics of these more urban irreverent practices, as well as others mentioned, such as Land Art, influenced future generations, producing many artists whose work explores, in a variety of performative ways, how we exist alongside, or within, the natural world.

It is important to note here the highly influential Gutai Group, comprising of several Japanese artists working in the 1950s, and who quite literally exploded painting. Nothing could be the same after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and artists responded to such traumas by questioning all the ideas and traditions of the past. They threw paint (*Hurling Colours*, 1956, by Shozo Shimamoto), they ran through paper (*At One Moment Opening Six Holes*, 1955, by Saburo Murakami), they became the artwork (*Electric Dress*, 1956, by Atsuko Tanaka). After the Gutai Group, and the photographs of Jackson Pollock making his paintings, the actions of the body could no longer be seen as marginal excursions, but, potentially, the temporal could become the focus.

The need to make 'great' works of art that lasted for all time, and considered worthy of the art historical canon, was questionable. After all, who had the authority to decide what was 'great'? How could authority be trusted anymore? In the USA, Abstract Expressionism had been purported by some critics as the highest art form, transcendent, the ultimate expression of humanity. However, exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism had also been financially supported by the US government, as a means to proselytise about Western

artistic freedom versus Soviet Communism. Some artists questioned and rejected this state intervention, even if it resulted in a lack of financial support. For example, Conceptual artists, such as Adrian Piper and Denis Oppenheim, were more interested in the idea than the object or instinct, and Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, Martha Rosler and Richard Hamilton were more interested in popular culture, political ideas such as Feminism, and the mass-produced, rather than the individualism of a unique work. If one was questioning claims of validity and the establishment, then it would follow that one should also question the form in which the work was made.

There are many more strands to this history than I can expand on here, and of course, there are many traditions of art around the world using the 'body-

in-time', but which may not historically have used the term 'performance art'. This text will continue by focusing on a few artists, in order to offer some thoughts about modes of performance within, or in relation to, nature. I have broken it down into two areas. One is the use of the raw materials of nature, whatever the context, but especially within nature itself. The other strand of work utilises nature in relation to, or within, urban contexts.

I should establish my terms of use for the word 'nature'. Here I am talking about, for example, the earth, the grass, water, trees and plants - materials made not by humans, but sometimes exploited by them. I am talking about *flora* not *fauna*.

It is sometimes hard to establish the exact contexts of Performance Art in nature, often because all that remains after the performance are images of the action and maybe some text and anecdotal information. Depending on how the works were documented, we can only speculate or imagine what happened or exactly where they took place. Our interpretation of a work therefore might be skewed; the work might take on a very different meaning in a different environment. For example, a work performed outside by a forest,

would mean something very different from the same work being performed in a city centre.

The ground itself: mud and earth

Whilst more concerned with expanding the nature of painting, rather than an interest in performance, Kazuo Shiraga, who predominantly painted with his feet, made a work with his whole body in 1955, titled *Challenging Mud*. This was a work made for the First Gutai Art Exhibition in Tokyo, and Shiraga wrestled with mud in order to create a 'painting'. The documentation shows such a fierce relationship to the materials that it's impossible not to consider this a live struggle with nature, or even a somewhat apocalyptic vision. But we can be fairly certain that the relationship of the artist to his materials here is one of mutual determination. The mud has as much power as Shiraga.

This mutuality with materials is also evident in the work of the Dutch artist, Alexandra Engelfriet. Her recent works have involved using her body to sculpt large-scale clay landscapes, which are then fired *in situ*. The viscerality of her work is palpable and physically demanding, even extreme to witness. But I will focus here on one work from 2011 titled *Dust to Dust*. To quote Engelfriet from her website, "Clay is the material from which everything arises and into

which everything returns”² and clearly by this and the title, the body and its own temporality are under scrutiny. The work is set in a room full of clay. The clay is pulled and manipulated with some kind of fabric, to create new shapes, but which never strays far from a sense of the corporeal. The task that she sets herself is immense and hard fought. The struggle leads to a consideration of the labours of life, not a resolution or transformation. It is hard work, which she is prepared to undertake in order to demonstrate our struggle with our own weightiness, and perhaps even mortality.

As I’m on the subject of mud/earth I will mention the British artist Richard Long. On a journey between his Bristol home and art college in London, he stopped in a field and made *A Line Made by Walking* (1967)³. This simple act of treading drew the presence of the human self into the landscape. Whilst important relationships are at play here regarding time and the lived presence within the landscape, there isn’t a sense of a struggle or grappling with the difficulty of the body, which has become so much a part of performance art traditions. I have never heard anyone call Long a Performance Artist, only a Land Artist, but of course this could be open for reconsideration. Certainly

² <https://www.alexandra-engelfriet.nl/>

³ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/long-a-line-made-by-walking-p07149>

this act of being in nature and recording the moment is a close relation, and he is known to hold a “lifelong concern with impermanence, motion and relativity”⁴. The same could be applied to conceptual photographer, Keith Arnatt in his work *Self Burial* (1969), comprising of nine images of his gradual vertical burial into the ground. In this period his works “were installations and acts thought of as environmental or contextual modifications”⁵. His expression is resigned, the work somewhat humorous, but he disappears, swallowed up, becoming part of nature itself.

⁴ see footnote 3

⁵ <http://www.keitharnatt.com/about.html>



Dust to Dust, 2011, Punt WG, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Photo: Marlou van den Berge

Similar to Long and Arnatt, Ana Mendieta went into the natural environment to photograph her actions. Whether accompanied or not, she made a series of 'earth-body' works, most well known are the *Silhueta* series of the 1970s. She wasn't seeking a broad universality of 'man in nature', as perhaps some of her male peers were doing. Rather she wanted to connect physically with the ultimate feminine goddess, the source of all life, so-called 'mother nature'. These may seem like unfashionable terms in the 21st century, but there was

a fight for gender equality in 1970s America, (amongst other places), necessary to challenge male-dominated society. This included ideas around female spirituality, which may seem essentialist now, but then were important reclamations of power. Mendieta's aim was to become spiritually connected and renewed to mother earth. This desire partially sprang from her own life as an exile from Cuba, her own particular strand of Cuban pantheistic Catholicism (Santeria), as well as other religions from South America. The *Silhueta* series was made

[...] in Iowa and Mexico, [where] she carved and shaped her figure into the earth, with arms overhead to represent the merger of earth and sky; floating in water to symbolize the minimal space between land and sea; or with arms raised and legs together to signify a wandering soul. These bodily traces were fashioned from a variety of materials, including flowers, tree branches, moss, gunpowder, and fire, occasionally combined with animals' hearts or handprints that she branded directly into the ground. (Trotman n.d.: www)

As Mendieta herself said, "Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an

extension of my body.”⁶ One of her works that successfully embraces this idea of ‘becoming’ is *Tree of Life* (1976). Covered in mud and grass, Mendieta stands, eyes closed, arms raised in front of a large tree trunk. She becomes almost imperceptible, she could be on her way to disappearing or becoming part of the tree. She is certainly honouring the tree, not unlike the power of the mud and clay defining the works of Shiraga and Engelfriet, the tree is the one with all the power.

In order to highlight this power, Iranian artist Tara Goudarzi has also made several works where she becomes almost merged with the landscape. In a series of works entitled *Squat* (Hormuz Island 2, 2011 and Kordestan 2009), she curls up inside small spaces, such as in between some rocks or in the hollow of a tree. Likewise in her *Sabzeh* series, where grass acts as clothing and camouflage, she becomes embryonic and part of nature itself. In a similar mode, *Like Stone* (Hormuz Island, 2010) takes the action a step further as she lies curled up by the sea, covered in a fabric, waiting for the tide to embrace and overwhelm her. In all her work Goudarzi creates a place of contemplation of the human self. By embedding herself within nature this

⁶ Online quote originally from Ana Mendieta in Moure, Gloria ed (2001) *Ana Mendieta*
<http://www.azquotes.com/quote/646559>

contemplation also highlights our, sometimes taken for granted, physical relationship to the world around us. Her work is a series of singular actions or moments, which celebrate and question the position of the self in the world by allowing her surroundings to envelop her body. She isn't fully disappearing but honouring the environment, by becoming one with the rocks, the sea and the grass.

Similarly, Indian artist Paramita Das places herself, often prone, within the elements, sometimes with an audience, sometimes undertaking private actions documented on video or still images. Despite the knowledge that there is another person documenting, there is a sense that Das is completely alone in barren or vast landscapes. Her varying acts might be a necessary undertaking to cleanse the body, or they are attempts to reflect on and contest some of the (Hindu) ritual uses of the body in the public sphere. Certainly they challenge the representation of women's bodies in the cultures we find ourselves in, and they do so often with a brutality. In one work, *Immersion: An Art of Punishment* (2014), she rolls along a beach leaving an imprint of her body, a far cry from Klein's *Anthropométries*, which seems only to be utilising female bodies as an entertainment. In Das' work there is a struggle, the rolling continues for long enough for the viewer to understand

that it must be painful. The question here then is - what is the relationship of nature to the female body? What is natural? Das is confronting the notion of a 'natural order'. Unlike Mendieta, she shows not an essential connection, but a conflict, a difficulty in fitting in with one's surroundings, highlighting that belonging is not a given.



An Art of Punishment, 2014, Paramita Das. Taalsaari (Near Subamarekha River), West Bengal, India. Photo: Beatrice Didier

A rock and a hard place: nature inside the perimeters of the urban

The above artists have all made works outside, within nature, but something else happens when nature is brought to the urban environment. Performing in nature offers a clear communing with the elements and the landscape. In an urban environment it offers a counterpoint.

All the following works under discussion were made within cities or towns, and all were more likely to be viewed by live audiences, whether purposeful or incidental.

My own work has predominantly been concerned with human bodily materials, such as hair and milk. However, in 2016 I made a four hour performance titled *embed* for the festival Tempting Failure, London. The space was a very large modern warehouse where I began with a one tonne mound of earth, which I spread gradually to form a square. This was much like making a drawing, with a nod in recognition towards Minimal Art practices and their simplicity of form, but with the need to demonstrate the hard labour of 'making'. My interest was in what is buried beneath our feet, the unseen. This could be perceived to be exploring personal or collective loss, but equally I was interested in the incongruity of a material from outdoors becoming a dominant force for an artwork in an interior urban space. The

idea of what is considered natural has always been a question in my work, for example, by re-positioning natural materials in unusual ways to consider the notion of normativity. In this case the earth also became a place that I was trying to nourish in order to find a temporary home.

Often in work combining urbanisation and nature there can be a fraught relationship between the two. This is evident in Ingrid Mwangi's work *Eastleigh Crossing* (2009). In a busy street in Nairobi a burst sewerage pipe has flooded the street. Mwangi wades through it; clearly this is unusual behaviour. A crowd begins to watch her, but keeps a distance as she splashes and finally repeatedly cries 'I'm thirsty'. This is a work that doesn't shy away from the filthy water that must have inevitably covered Mwangi as she performed. In an interview in 2014, she says that she and her partner Robert Hutter, with whom she collaborates extensively, wanted to "to perform on the streets with more immediacy" and in this case they wanted to confront the location and intervene, which in their words was "especially interesting to us, considering the rapid demographic shifts and constant changes in Nairobi and many other cities"⁷. In her direct and spontaneous intervention, Mwangi

⁷ Ingrid Mwangi (2014) <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/mwangi-hutter-robert-hutter-ingrid-mwangi-eastleigh-crossing>

highlights crises in cities, such as water shortages, or inadequate infrastructure, such as sanitation problems.

Such pressures on nature to fuel our commoditised lifestyles and demands on the planet's resources led the artists' organisation Liberate Tate, in 2011, to protest BP's sponsorship of Tate Britain in London. In one of several protests over the years, masked members of the organisation entered Tate Britain's Duveen Gallery and poured a substance that looked like oil over another, naked, member, Amy Scaife, for her performance *Human Cost*. According to Rowena Mason, in *The Telegraph* newspaper at the time, they were protesting "against the environmental impact of BP's oil sands projects in Canada and Arctic exploration, as well as its Gulf of Mexico oil spill."⁸ In 2017, BP decided to cease sponsoring the Tate, after twenty-six years. It isn't clear whether pressure was brought to bear by such activist art, but the action certainly highlighted the uncomfortable marriage between art and large corporations, here involved in the potential undermining of the earth's, and therefore human, well being.

⁸ Rowena Mason – The Telegraph Online, 20th April 2011:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/oilandgas/8464338/Artists-fight-against-BPs-Tate-donations.html>

Activist performance can be very direct, but a similar directness can be found in work that offers a less protest-like, and more spiritually concerned action. Lee Wen's performances *Journey of a Yellow Man* have focused on a variety of similar direct questions about how nature has been changed and exploited by human activity. In 1997 he made a work called *No. 9: Trees Resurrection* in Chiapas, Mexico. In Wen's words,

I was participating in an international sculpture symposium that was commemorating the 100 years anniversary of Japanese immigration to Mexico. In front of our hotel runs a beautiful river and tall trees, that to me was such unique splendor [sic]. To my surprise another Mexican artist who grew up there told me what we saw today had been a grander forest with clean rivers flowing and it was decimated by development. His lamentations motivated me to make a homage to nature working around the trees, looking closely and stroking them and picking up as much fallen branches as I am able to carry them and presenting them at the entrance of the symposium venue. I placed the branches in a bundle and wrote the words with corn to "live in harmony with nature". (Wen n.d.: www)

This act of communing and connecting with nature can be traced back as far as existing documentation of human habitation. Whether stemming from a social, cultural or religious tradition, the need to praise, worship, respect, or to attain a unity with nature can be seen in cultures across the world. Sometimes this extends to Shamanism and ritualistic actions. Traditionally a Shaman was a person considered to have access to, and connection with good and evil spirits, and often a trance-like ritual would have been undertaken to reach the spirit world. As a result, Shamans were considered to be able to heal and conjure the divine for the good of their people. There are examples of Shamanistic practices across the world, but most specifically Asia and the Americas. This connection to other worlds, and the rituals that might come with them, have played an important role in Performance Art, for example, in the work of Joseph Beuys.

Beuys is most known for two works that communed with live and dead animals – *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) and *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). But he was also extremely concerned with the environment and began making a more direct work *7000 Thousand Oaks* in 1982. In response to the increasing urbanisation of Kassel in Germany, he worked with others to plant 7000 trees over several years. For each tree

planted, an accompanying basalt post was also planted. This was perhaps prophetic - that one day the tree would outgrow the marker. It also pre-empted the huge growth of the Green movement in Germany and the global awareness of ecological issues. Two artists who may also be considered to have elements in their performances that relate to the shamanistic, are Gustaf Broms and Kurt Johannessen. Their live works are often poetic in their relationship with natural materials.

In many works the Swedish artist, Broms, creates narratives that lead to encasing himself in leaves, twigs protruding from his body, mud covering his head and face, and he then undertakes journeys, for example, across town centres. On his website, he says that he has been “spending the last few years looking into the dualistic concept of “I”, in terms of association with the idea of BEING NATURE”⁹. He wears and carries natural materials like costumes ready for a ritual. But the ritual is not one easily recognizable in the 21st Century. So what is the ritual for? Where will the journey take him? Is he calling upon a higher force? There is a sense that he is of the past, a time when these actions might have been clearly understood. Now they seem to

⁹ Gustaf Broms quote from <http://www.orgchaosmik.org/statement.html>

be yearning for something. A solo attempt, perhaps, to show how far away from nature we have come.



untitled (pentagram), 2013, Gustaf Broms. Fado Performance Art Center, Toronto, Canada. Photo:
Henry Chan

In the Norwegian artist Johannessen's work he "frequently minimize[s] to one image and then create[s] microscopic variations within this frame [...] The works are often related to place."¹ For example, embracing a rock in a gallery, carrying a large rolled up rug across a vast landscape, or using a domestic light to help see his way up a hill in the Arctic. Natural elemental materials are brought to the urban, or urban materials re-placed into nature. Both of their work has a somewhat gentle discourse with the natural world. These detailed and intense investigations shine a light on many of the concerns of artists working in nature or with natural materials. Some artists in this text are led by a clear concern about climate change, our general disrespect of nature and its impact on us all. Some connect centuries old considerations of how humans occupy land with resultant contemporary issues, such as the impact of urban development, the disappearance of rites and cultures deep within the fabric of cities. Others are challenging the very idea of a natural order. All these artists working with natural materials, whether within nature or within the human made, highlight the strangeness of our behaviour and development. And not to be forgotten, there is also a sense of celebration, respect and a recognition of symbiosis.

¹ Kurt Johannessen quote from Sùndero Art Gallery website: <https://sundero-gallery.com/portfolio/kurt-johannessen/>

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Once in a while it's important to clear out your glory hole, 2012, Helena Goldwater. Venice International Performance Art Week, Italy. Photo: Monika Sobczak

Helena Goldwater lives and works in London, making performance art since 1989 and paintings since 2003. She often makes performances that last many hours and her paintings can take months to make. This dedication to the process is a way of exploring how concepts can be developed over time to inhabit something 'other' than the human realm, questioning the positioning of subjectivity and transforming the everyday into a devotional act.

Her work has been shown at many galleries and festivals, nationally and internationally, including Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool, Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall in the UK, and at the 1st Venice International Performance Art Week, Italy, Performatorium, Canada, and de Appel, Amsterdam. Most recent exhibitions and performances include: *gut flora*, MOCA, London (2018); *embed*, Tempting Failure, London (2016) and *Hairline*, 1st Morni Hills International Performance Art Biennial, India (2016).

She is included in publications such as *Nature Morte* by Michael Petry (Thames and Hudson), *Double Exposures* by Manuel Vason (LADA/Intellect), and contributed to *Living and Present: Laurie Anderson on Performance Art* on BBC Radio 3. In 2016 she compiled an online resource about UK Performance Artists from the 1970s, *Glimpses of before* for the Live Art Development Agency and Queen Mary, University of London: <http://1970s.thisisliveart.co.uk>

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