

Visual Essay

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Greenham: Costume, memory and activism in outdoor performance

ABSTRACT

This visual essay illustrates the transformative, performative and narrative potential costume can have in the context of outdoor site-responsive work, by looking at Ceschi + Lane's recent R&D project, Greenham. The project included two performances that took place on Greenham Common, the site of a former RAF and American Army base in the English countryside, which is now common land. Greenham is also the former site of the Greenham Common Women's Peace camp, set up in 1981 to protest against the British government allowing American cruise missiles to be stored at the base. In response to the scarred landscape of the post-Cold War dereliction and the contested history of Greenham Common, we created costumes that embodied imaginative and provocative ideas around landscape and memory, the body and its environment and women's relationship to power. These costumes acted as critical intervention and commentary in a public space. This

KEYWORDS

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visual essay provides retrospective analysis of these costumes, their effect on the performers and their contribution to the dramaturgy of the site-responsive performance. Drawing on contemporary references, it attempts to articulate the work's contribution to the wider discussion around costume's agency and costume as carrier of meaning in public spaces and as part of site-responsive performance practice.

INTRODUCTION

Ceschi + Lane is a collaboration between contemporary performance practitioner and movement director Valentina Ceschi and interdisciplinary artist/scenographer Kate Lane. Our work sits on the intersection between performance and visual art. We are interested in the post-dramatic theatre idea that the body, in our case the costumed body, becomes the 'agent provocateur of an experience' with the performance developed 'with/on/to the body' (Lehman 2006: 162–63). Through the processes of embodiment and kinetic empathy, we examine the physical effect of a costume, as Melissa Trimingham states, 'felt above all when the costume is prominent (e.g. heavy, probably visually startling, built up)' (2017: 137), on the performer and the spaces they inhabit. Exploring this process indoors, in the controllable atmospheres of black-box spaces is one thing, however, we have found that performing or exhibiting our work (as we often have), in galleries and public spaces, is quite another. When reflecting on the *Tribes* project, which we saw at the Prague Quadrennial in 2015, we were interested to see how, as Sofia Pantouvaki observes, a public space, the city centre of Prague, was transformed into 'scenography' with the presence of the embodied costumes, the 'artefacts' of the exhibition, walking down its cobbled streets (Pantouvaki 2016b). In setting out on our first outdoor project, we were keen on exploring this idea of how costume, as a 'carrier of meaning' (Pantouvaki 2016b: 36), can transform a space and how sometimes its mere 'presence' (Lotker 2017) in an environment, proposing imaginative and provocative ideas, is a form of 'critical intervention' (Pantouvaki 2016b: 36). In *Brave New Worlds*' performance *Greenham*, these critical interventions can be analysed under the following headings: 'Costume as sites of kinaesthetic memory', where the costumes can be seen to provide a bridge to the past of Greenham Common; 'Costume as active other', where the costumes' materiality denotes an *otherness*, bringing into question our relationship with our environment and the natural world; and 'Costume as empowering agent', looking at the transformative effect costumes and costume objects had on the ensemble of participants in the final act of the performance.

COSTUME AS KINAESTHETIC SITE OF MEMORY

Greenham was a site-specific performance developed in the summer of 2019, thanks to a Seedbed Commission from 101 Outdoor Arts Centre in Newbury. During our residency at 101, which is situated on the former RAF base on Greenham Common, we delved into the history of the Common itself, specifically the women's peace camp that was active for nineteen years in protest against the nuclear missiles being stored there by the American Army at the height of the Cold War. It so happened that Kate Lane had visited the peace camp as a child, accompanying her mother on one of the many protests.



Figure 1: *Greenham Common, Relic 1*. Photograph by Kate Lane.

Although Kate had little or no memory of the place or the event, her mother's account and its legacy on them as a family was very present in her own memory. It was during these discussions that we became interested in how memories are attached to places, both mythical and historical, and how costume could add to the interplay between memory and landscape. We had previously touched on this in our last production *Trinity* when we moved the performance from a black box theatre studio to a former Grade II listed chapel (Lane 2019). Only here did the costumes give rise to an additional semiotic reading of the environment, particularly among audiences who knew the chapel and had memories tied to the place. This added a layer to the performance, which had been lacking in its former settings. *Greenham* was an opportunity to explore this further. We were interested in how environments can become 'kinaesthetic sites of memory' (Aston and Harris 2006: 107), and whether costume in the context of site-specific performance could contribute as an involuntary memory trigger, a 'Proust's madeline', where 'the visual memory [...] being linked to that taste' (of the madeline) flows into the 'conscious mind' (Proust 2005: 54). We approached the costumes as acts of remembrance drawn from the landscape, not as historical re-enactment, for 'memory attaches itself to sites, history attaches itself to events' (Nora 1989: 22), but as a primal scene which allowed a more aethereal, immaterial and fantastical space to exist.



Figure 2: Greenham Common, Relic 2. Photograph by Kate Lane.

The immersive experience of a performance embedded in a landscape allows what Machon refers to as an (syn)aesthetic reading of the environment, and so the performing body, and, in our case, the costumed body, can become both “‘sight” and “‘site” of performance’, triggering a process of ‘corporeal memory in the immediate response and subsequent processes of recall’ for the observing (and also the performing) body (Machon 2011). Additionally, we wanted to play off Freud’s idea of the uncanny – the ‘puzzle of the uncanny’ being both ‘what was once familiar and then repressed’ (Freud 2003: 152–53). We therefore set out to find a language through the costumed body that would explore this in the context of Greenham Common. The results were three costumes, namely Tyvek, Ghillie and Holt. All three of these use as a base some form or other of full-body suit or overalls, drawing explicitly on a military heritage, projecting unisex or masculine silhouettes onto the landscape, or in the case of the Ghillie camouflage suit, blending into it completely. This feature alone was not what made them embody the memories of Greenham Common. In order to invite a deeper psychological interpretation to these figures, we added elements that disrupted these familiar shapes, rendering them ‘uncanny’ or ‘*unheimlich*’ (Freud 2003: 152–53). As Trimmingham writes in her chapter on the deeply affective power of costume in performance, ‘meaning emerges from contact of body and material form’ (2017: 164). All three of these costumes had some form or other of appendage, the shape and material



Figure 3: *Tyvek*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

of which dictated to the performer how she should stand and move when wearing the costume. Tyvek's plastic flower stems, for example, which provided an unsightly mirror image of the landscape, had to be pushed out in order to stand upright, almost *to attention*. By forcing the performer to push her chest out and remain in tension for long periods of time, the costume pushed the body to become strict, linear, militant. Holt's long red tassels, on the other hand, had to be held suspended from the ground in order for them not to be trampled by the performer's feet, so she had to keep her head at a certain angle and height for them to fall neatly and safely. And finally, the Ghillie costume with its red visor limited the performer's sight, which meant she had to walk keeping a low centre of gravity, giving the costume-form a weight and heaviness as it manoeuvred through the landscape. These three costumes can be interpreted in many ways and would evoke different meanings to different viewers, however, their capacity to re-articulate the body into the specific dynamics of military movement resonated with the specificity of the environment they were in, even if that military movement is now a distant memory of



Figure 4: Tyvek standing. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

that place. The decision to lean into the Freudian idea of the uncanny in order to invite a deeper psychological interpretation of the landscape throughout the performance inspired us to subvert these military bodies with the additional appendages (flowers, red tassels, etc.). And it was these very structures and designs that manipulated the performers' bodies in order to embody the traumas connected to the place and haunt the landscape in the performance. These costumes, therefore, are not merely a symbolic demonstration of an idea, but work as a lived affective experience (Trimingham 2017: 138). Focusing therefore on the performative and narrative qualities of material and form, we explored how costume can re-articulate the body into new dynamics, new breath, new movement and new meaning, or as Donatella Barbieri ascribes to the grotesque costume, 'an expression of protest in the face of real or perceived oppression' (2017: 93).



Figure 5: *Ghillie and missile silos*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

ENVIRONMENT AND ACTIVISM: THE COSTUME AS SIGNIFIER

We wanted to develop a number of costumed bodies that came from the land and addressed the mythological, folkloric aspects of that place. Much like Riitta Ikonen and Karoline Hjorth's work in their series *Eyes as Big as Plates* in 2011, where they playfully explore humans' relationship with the natural world through the personification of nature and Nordic folkloric traditions (Riitta Ikonen 2021), we were interested in the idea of the body's dialogue with a place, the body's impact on and relationship with nature and how costume, by offering alternative realities (and materialities), can be the dominant element in this conversation. The Ghillie suit, for example, named from the *gille dubh* a 'Scottish Gaelic solitary fairy, clothed in leaves and moss, who lurks in the birch woods near Gairloch in the north-west Highlands' (MacKillop 2004), was our very own 'Wilder Mann' of Greenham Common, encapsulating the complex love-hate relationship between man and his environment (Fréger 2012: 244).

We looked into ancient English ritual traditions of costumes that draw on the land or mark seasonal moments in the year such as Strawbear, Jack of the Green and the May Queen (Hannant 2011).

Our Wickers are referential to these traditional costumes, drawing on the wilderness of the countryside, not just as it might have been in ancient times, but a state it is in the process of returning to, as it slowly encroaches on the derelict military base. The costumes constituted twig-like body



Figure 6: Ghillie. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

extensions, including a larger than life May Queen-type crown, composed of dry branches. The rich wicker element was set against austere grey minimalist dresses creating a contrast to echo the juxtaposition of nature with the concrete silos and other architectural relics of the former military base. Tied with black bandages to the wrists and arms of each performer, the twigs vibrated with every movement, and therefore forced the performer to focus on the minute gestural quality of the twigs. The twigs' inherent arid and brittle nature expanded into the body of the performer, encouraging twitchy but delicate movements within it. The body's breath and gaze began to resemble that of a bird, whose movement was repeatedly punctuated by sudden moments of eerie stillness. This transformative power of the material on the body, or, in Diana Coole's words, the 'inter-meshing of



Figure 7: Holt portrait. Film still by Thomas Ellis.



Figure 8: Holt. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

human and nonhuman in co-production' (2013: 3–4) was the basis of the choreography of this scene and a suggestion towards what new materialism might acknowledge as *discursive* as well as agential matter (Schneider 2015). Grouped together under the trees, the dancers' bodies conjured images of a coven. These costumes continued, therefore, to converse with the cultural



Figure 9: *Wickers*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

memories of the landscape, the memories of war and the women in the camps, who were continually referred to as the ‘Greenham witches’ in the press (Slough 1988). Furthermore, in the use of biomaterials, these costumes provided a commentary on the space, contributing to the wider exploration of issues regarding the relationship of body and nature (Pantouvaki 2016a). Through then placing these costumes back in nature, on the common, this reinforced the relationship between the body and its relationship with natural materials.

During our research, we were also inspired by Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* series (1973–80) where she involved her body in ritual acts in the landscape. The image of the body left as a trace in the resulting photographs of her work is a ‘dialogue between the landscape and the female body’ (Jones 1998: 26). Much of Mendieta’s work shows her own body camouflaged in a natural environment, in an act of returning her to nature. Our costume, Tyvek, with its plastic flowers covering the length of the performer’s body, could be seen as a distorted version of a Mendieta silhouette. We began to look at costumes that could envelop the body, nearly obliterating its presence, displacing the human subject from the landscape and locating it instead in ‘an agential landscape of flows, systems and networks’ (Lavery 2016: 7). Thus, we developed two wearable material sculptures in which the human body nearly completely disappears. One consisted of a piece of hand pleated rust-colour fabric; the other was a pebble-textured and shapely full-body sleeve. Through performative



Figure 10: *May Queen as part of Wickers*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

exploration, the dancers began to explore each wearable object, discovering its particular set of rules of movement. One was free-flowing, allowing the dancer to abandon herself to its folds and ripples, the other was stiff and resistant, restricting the movement of the dancer to small vibrations. Once these sculptural costumes were placed in situ, their presence impacted their environment in different ways: on the one hand, when moving, they transformed the landscape into a theatrical scenography – a living, breathing entity, blurring the lines between the real and the artifice, the concrete and the immaterial. On the other, when simply left to be, their otherness, in juxtaposition to the environment, exposed the artifice of the performance.

In the first chapter of her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennet looks at how found objects can become 'vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own' (2010: xvi). During both the R&D and the final performances of *Greenham*, these two objects often remained in situ, where we left them on the Common, as continuous parts of the scenography, even when the performers were on break, or rehearsing in a different location. And although on their own, their materiality was still *in play*, whether it was flowing in the breeze or reflecting the light from the sun, and intervening in the space. Furthermore, they fulfilled what Hans-Thies Lehmann terms 'afformance art', the affirmation of the 'non-performative in the proximity of performance' (2006: 179), and in so doing, demonstrated perhaps how the strengths of performance in the expanded field as ecological intervention lie not in producing what is *real*, but



Figure 11: *Costume as Sculpture on plinth*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

in exposing the fake, 'making the world problematic, multiple and complex' (Lavery 2016: 233).

COSTUME AS EMPOWERING AGENT

The final scene of the performance was a chorus of community volunteers in a slow march across what remains of the airfield's runway. This chorus of local women created a silent powerful image of togetherness through activism and was collectively signified through key costume elements and symbols. They not only embodied an 'image of community' but directly communicated meaning through these costumed interventions whilst performing 'en masse' (Barbieri 2017: 29). All costumes and costume elements used in the performance and outlined above – Wickers, men's utilitarian jumpsuits, and so on – came together in this final moment to construct a rich and complex image.

The spatial relationship between the sculptural costumes acted, in reference to post-dramatic theatre, as the performance text (Lehmann 2006: 85).



Figure 12: *Costume as Sculpture by pond*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

This non-hierarchical approach to key visual signifiers requires the spectator (audience) to have a more holistic reading of the performance. McKinney and Palmer refer to post-dramatic forms as having ‘layered, polysemic and visceral registers of address’ which, therefore, accentuate the ‘interpretive role’ required of the spectator (McKinney and Palmer 2017: 7). Expanding on this, Irwin argues that a ‘site performs as a confluence of human practice and memory, resisting absolute meaning and making sense only in relation to other bodies...’ (Irwin cited in McKinney and Palmer 2017: 113). The chorus created complex semiotics of place, heritage, community and activism through the powerful final image of the women, who, united, entered slowly and held themselves upright, pausing only to turn to the audience and join hands in evocation of the peace camps’ 1982 Embrace the Base Protest, before disappearing off into the sunset.

There were two key costume elements, which united and created a community of the chorus: the colour red and the mirror mask (Figure 13–15). A fortuitous discovery happened during the research and development in the space when a jogger dressed in red ran through the performance landscape. The red against the green, brown and yellow of the natural landscape was a bold, lightning strike of spectacle that drew our attention, and we decided to adopt it as a dramaturgical theme – our very own *fil rouge* – throughout the work.

We drew on the use of red to unify, politicize and/or reference suffering, which has a long history in performances, from Clod Ensemble’s *Red Ladies*, with their ruby stilettos, ink-black trench coats and matching red handbags



Figure 13: *Red line*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

sending up the heritage of Trafalgar Square, London as a site of protest, to Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring*, where the use of red symbolizes human sacrifice, materially embodied in the red voile shift dress, which, initially identifiable with desire, gradually spreads dread among the women as it becomes clear that victimhood is to be forced upon the wearer (Barbieri 2017: 55).

The mirror mask was the second key element of costume for the chorus. Consisting of a mirrored disc placed on the forehead of the wearer and masking almost the entirety of the face (Figure 13), it made the women both seen and unseen. With the spectators' own image reflected in the faces of the performer, the women became unmarked negatives in the space (Phelan 2001). As a collective, working in the field of expanded performance, we are interested in the political aspect of masks, as in some countries, it is forbidden to



Figure 14: Red stop. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

wear masks at political demonstrations (Lotker 2015); so bringing masks into this final moment of the piece seemed appropriate and enforced the idea of costume as a social and political act.

Underneath the masks, the costume armour and the elements in red, the participants wore their own clothes. The spectator's own self-image, therefore, became part of the narrative, literally within the representational frame of the mask but metaphorically in the mufti-dress of the women. The self-image allows the spectator the 'coherent belief in self-authority, assurance, presence' (Phelan 2001: 5), drawing them into the narrative of the performance, witnesses and participants akin.



Figure 15: *Red tears*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

CONCLUSION

Greenham was the first project that saw us experiment with costume in an outdoor public space, giving us the opportunity to explore the fascinating duality of the everyday and the spectacular. Although present in each moment of the performance, from the military costumes and their appendages, to the eye-catching flashes of red against the natural landscape, this duality was most present in the final scene involving the ensemble of participants.

One member of this ensemble was a former Greenham Women's Peace Camp resident who was able to share with us much of her lived experience at the camp, including the songs and the violent evictions at the hands of



Figure 16: *Mirror mask*. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

the police. A couple of her friends and former residents of the camp came to see the final performance of *Greenham*; this was the first time they had all been there together since the time of the peace camp. Seeing their friend on the runway – a forbidden place back in the time of the Peace Camp – taking her space and holding herself like a queen, wearing a wicker crown, was a powerful moment. The costumes for the chorus elevated their bodies out of the everyday, making them sublime and untouchable. And yet, thanks to the mufti dress and the mirrored masks, the audience could also see themselves in these women and through them, as they collectively marched on Greenham Common, reclaiming it for the people and returning it to its former state, a common land.



Figure 17: *Community chorus*. Photograph by Danielle Corbishley.

Greenham was an experiment in using costume, action and participation in a public outdoor space as a means of communicating new ideas and experiences. Reconceptualizing costume in everyday spaces, and in particular a space with a history and heritage such as Greenham Common, gains new conceptual aspects. Whether they explored further the embedded memories of the place, or exposed the inadequacies of performance to resolve our complicated relationship with our environment, our costumes, much like the *Tribes* project in Prague, functioned as immediate visual metaphors when placed in the landscape (Pantouvaki 2016b). There, on the Common, they became more communicative and more performative in direct connection with the public (Pantouvaki 2016b) invigorating the interaction between social agents, artists and audience, and increasing the potential for activism and critical commentary in performance in the expanded field.

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Ceschi + Lane is a collaboration between theatre/performance practitioner Valentina Ceschi and interdisciplinary artist/scenographer Kate Lane. Their practice sits between performance, theatre and visual art. They have been supported and performed with organizations such as Barbican Creative Learning, The Point Eastleigh, Ovalhouse (United Kingdom), Arts Printing House (Lithuania), ACT Festival (Bilbao) and Scenofest, World Stage Design (Taipei). Exhibitions include UK exhibit at PQ15, *Make: Believe* exhibition at the V&A (2015), *Costume at the Turn of the Century*, Moscow (2015) and *MK Calling* at the Milton Keynes Gallery (2015).

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