

# Earthly Elements Through Our Bodies

(Curatorial Essay – Gathering Geographies)

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What influence does the Earth's movements have on how we gather, act, and move through space? Does it shape our creativity? How does it inform how we document and archive? Can weather, time and material resources communicate with us?

Carving out a space for movements, imprints, and textures of anthropologic and environmental research, twelve artists have been invited to present works as a way of Gathering Geographies. The artists come together to invert and reflect on these questions through sculpture, sound, video, photography, writing and dance.

The Earth functions as “a site of construction,”<sup>1</sup> a source of inspiration, and a material library from which we can collect, interpret, and transform. A tension forms as we “bring life to it”<sup>1</sup> for better and worse. The Earth passes the threshold of our bodies, influencing how we create story, history and knowledge. In relinquishing control, what can the practice of art making teach us about the Earth and its vast ecosystem of interactivity?

Through the constructed world of the exhibition, scenarios, communications, and transformations tempt and speculate a coexistence of species and landscapes. Perspectives are tested, vibrations move us, observations are noted, and recycling is initiated. In accumulating these investigations, this essay will break down the grounding ideas behind Gathering Geographies and place the exhibited works in-line with this thinking.

## Perspectives

Digging deeper, to see past the surface, we must realign our perspectives. Throughout history we have seen how ‘nature’ has been altered and manipulated to become ‘unnatural’ and often damaged. Before we go further, let’s anchor the question of “what counts as nature, for whom, and at what costs?”<sup>2</sup> at the base of our thinking.

Gathering Geographies has invited material, geographic, and cultural perspectives to converge, allowing new protagonists to ask, and possibly answer, these questions. The myriad of expressions

1. TVK. (2021) The Earth is an Architecture. Spector Books.  
2. McKean, C. (2018) Landscapes Without Life. Molongo.  
3. Popova, M. (2018) Subjectifying the Universe: Ursula K. Le Guin on Science and Poetry as Complementary Modes of Comprehending and Tending to the Natural World. The Marginalian.

reveals how interpretation and collaboration can shape understanding whilst attempting to avoid objectification or exploitation.<sup>3</sup> In seeking to subvert perspectives, the artists allow non-human ideologies and attitudes to lead the work.

Lisa Lerkenfeldt's practice presents a poetic erosion and crumbling transformation of nature. The apparatus of *A Garden Dissolves into Black Silk* questions our understanding of beauty through sonic and material decomposition. Lerkenfeldt allows us to watch a microscopic example of Earth's materiality — a single blade of grass — fade whilst enclosed within a plastic cassette. Removed from its life source, trapped, it decays.

*A Garden Dissolves into Black Silk* is silent, only alluding to an imagined sound world. The accompanying *Studies with Grass* provide another silent texture, rhythm and tone colour to consider. The material embraces a method of visual sound making, aiding our listening of the silent scores that encompass a speculation of intricate sonic possibilities. The blade of grass has become both the maker and material, aided through Lerkenfeldt's gestures. Filling the silence, Lerkenfeldt's live performance within the gallery on February 19, provides possible answers to the sonic questions posed in her visual works.

Within the exhibition, micro and macro voices exchange with each other in an assemblage of scenes. The scale of these themes offers possibilities to "put forward radically new ways of living, being, seeing, acting and interacting that move beyond those that have led us into this predicament in the first place."<sup>4</sup> The works are open for speculation, consideration and critique. In cultivating a constructed mesh of gestures, there is stillness and time for us to reconfigure how we embrace and interact with our broader community of species and landscapes. Reflection brings the possibility of the next action.

Lydia Trappenberg's contemplative series *Residue* establishes the overwhelming fatigue and climate anxiety felt by individuals in our generation. The photographs document the immediate, often first reactions, of self-realisation of our hand in the climate crisis. The images reveal that it is not "humanity against nature"<sup>5</sup> but rather we are one and the same. The conclusion that, "it is ourselves we are harming in the long run"<sup>5</sup> is formidable.

Our current era of self-awareness as a force "driving global warming and ecological destruction"<sup>6</sup> is both aiding our ability to conceive of new ways of living and presenting itself as an all consuming, impossible task. *Residue* captures this contrast in moments of microscopic organisation. It is in these changes to Earth's patterns and composure that many scientists have received early identifiers of climate change.<sup>7</sup> These exposed narratives of landscapes begin "to enlarge what is possible"<sup>8</sup> if we were to step away from colonised and capitalist mechanisms. Perspectives are being forced to change due to the ever presence of the climate crisis.

## Vibrations

As humans we live "a horizontal existence,"<sup>2</sup> rarely traversing into the Earth's surface. How do we "think from below"<sup>2</sup> and use the knowledge from the Earth that resonates through our bodies to create action. Imagine tremors emitting into our bodies that cause an unconscious moment of realisation — a sudden stop and redirection of where we are heading.

*Sinkhole*, an ongoing collaboration between Arini Byng, Jess Gall and Rebecca Jensen, is made *through* bodies. Interpretation, agency, and perspective all contribute to how the work plays out. The interaction between human bodies and the space they occupy begins to reveal "how our environments may choreograph us."<sup>9</sup> Broadly, *Sinkhole* presents an ecosystem where negotiation and "structural collapse"<sup>9</sup> offers a realignment of the 'world'. In revealing the body as a tool to experience the Earth, communication is redefined in a simulation that sways with balance and compromise.

*Sinkhole* highlights the need for collaboration, acting as a reference for "cross-species coordination."<sup>8</sup> In allowing our perception of spatiality, temporality and interactivity to shift, there is the potential in recognising "living beings as 'persons', that is, protagonists of stories."<sup>8</sup> Together the artists, performers, and audience create a world of stretched thresholds of time, space and limitations.<sup>10</sup>

7. Stone, M. (2019) New plastic pollution formed by fire looks like rocks. National Geographic.

8. Singh, A. (2015) The Mushroom at the End of the World. Princeton University Press.

9. Theodore, Z. (2019). SINKHOLE - A written response.

4. Stevens, L. (2019) Anthropocenic Performance and the Need For 'Deep Dramaturgy'. Performance Research.

5. Trappenberg, L. (2019) Residue, artist statement.

6. Morton, T. (2017) 'A reckoning for our species': the philosopher prophet of the Anthropocene. The Guardian.

In delving into strata we enter into a subconsciousness<sup>2</sup> that might allow us to question our perceptions of the Earth. This refiguring is not about *correcting* a dichotomy of the pristine and human interference — both can exist at once.<sup>11</sup> By changing our perspectives of the Earth we remove the othering of ‘nature’ being “out there”<sup>11</sup> to recognising ourselves as being “in weather.”<sup>12</sup>

My [Mara Schwerdtfeger] string quartet *Movements* continues with this thinking, engaging with the dynamic of individual autonomy within a larger collaboration. Using the French philosopher and sociologist Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis* theory, the piece imitates the “interminable rhythm[s]”<sup>13</sup> of slowness and growth within a string quartet structure.

Through parts that carry a sense of disarray and separation from each other, awareness and “disturbed coordination”<sup>14</sup> is formed in both the performer and listener. The players keep time with their individual breaths, causing repeated sequences to interplay in different arrangements within each iteration. The group may not necessarily play together in the traditional sense but interaction and body rhythms synchronise them. Therefore, the composition is constantly shifting with the sequences becoming both cyclical and linear as frequency and measure are manipulated.

Engaging with the Earth beyond its surface is engaging with time,<sup>1</sup> with history and with inter-species patterns. When we recognise a shared connection with land and sea, time expands and history provides knowledge. Sound allows us to challenge the linear through its durational quality. Sonification can attempt to give voice to those unable to vocalise — but perhaps this gets lost in translation.

For their multiform work *veronica La Sphera*, oceanfloor.group began associating with the serpent — a symbol of rebirth and a creature with a sensitivity to “vibrations and tremblings of the Earth.”<sup>14</sup> In *veronica La Sphera*, video, sound and textiles build a space where systems for new rules and ways of being evolve. Flags, a method of communication, decoration, and pride, provide symbols and actions for their new world. In rejecting the rules associated with traditional flags, they keep the object’s sacredness by acknowledging its history. They state that “you are warmly welcome to introduce and serve any rule or conduct to your flag environment you find important and worth preserving.”<sup>15</sup>

When working as a group, interwoven perspectives allow an abstract thought pattern to emerge. oceanfloor.group’s practice recognises the delay in responding to the Earth as we learn to read and listen to its movements. They embrace this lapse by *allowing* time for experimentation and play. Through movements of waving, wriggling, and uttering, the works reveal a grappling with becoming and transforming, both conceptually and more broadly as a creative process.

oceanfloor.group’s sound pieces, *1657 serpent exe* and *Broken sister*, emerge as explorations into textures and voicing. In correlation, their video work *serpent exe* uses binding and digital elongation to test serpent like movements on a human form.

Their embodiment provides voice and experience that simultaneously documents and speculates. From “thinking of the serpents to think[ing] as a serpent,”<sup>16</sup> an attempt at understanding is achieved using speculation and mythology.

Symbolism and mythology reveal how we have attempted to understand the Earth. They provide narratives that act as an alternative voice to science through storytelling, art, and music. History, mythology, and stories are all intermingled and interchangeable, carrying with them a weight of presence and temporality. They are terms we use to pass on knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

## Observation

When interpreting something so cosmic and grand as the Earth, artists have a major role in transmitting messages of observation and analysis to a wider audience. With so much mystery still lingering around our own being and environments, “spiritual ideas [seep] into science.”<sup>18</sup> The invention of mythology, religion, and spirituality acknowledges our desire to understand. We can use art to set scenes that uproot our positionality with and on the Earth.

Heather Shannon provides a subtle, poetic commentary on living through extreme environments. The solo piano compositions that make up *Midnight Sun* play with the undulating landscape and adaptation to constant sunlight experienced whilst on residency in Ísafjörður, Iceland. As the title

13. Lefebvre, H. (1992) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Bloomsbury.

14. Ronnberg, R. (2010) *Book of Symbols*. Taschen.

15. oceanfloor.group (2021) *Oceanfloor Flag Shop*.

10. Byng, A. Gall, J. Jensen, R. (2018). SINKHOLE, artist statement.

11. Donse, S. (2019) *Landscape as Protagonist*: Foreword. Molongo.

12. Denley, J. (2021) *Jim Denley and Jasmine Guffond: Where and How to Gather* (Audible Edge). Liquid Architecture Podcast.

suggests, the music plays with contradictions, using jagged rhythms and harmonies that then settle into a contemplative stride. Her observation is tracked as musical notation, as feeling, and as individual experience. Taking these compositions to new landscapes, contexts, and confinements becomes parallel to sharing a photograph, a capturing of place, time, and interpretation.

Inviting and valuing non-human science and art into our horizons allows ourselves to confront the “myth of human exceptionalism.”<sup>14</sup> Nina Nowak’s practice challenges the authority of human technology through analysing its representation in image and text. *A Theory of Warming Machines: HypoSmalldog Systems, Liquids and Solids* consists of drawings that reference historic construction plans of power plants. Using poster design tropes and technical drawing styles, the works recognise our strange fascination with bygone era sci-fi speculation. This convoluted lineality of applying past theories to shape our future narratives questions our trust and belief in the greatness of machines. Nowak finds a way to balance the dry, technical text as a new poetic language and in doing so confuses fact and fiction.

*A Theory of Warming Machines* reflects another side to her work, in which she creates intricate hand carved sculptures that balance liveness and material autonomy with human control. By integrating scaffolding, the presentation of *A Theory of Warming Machines* references her sculptural work and provides autonomy and movement to the otherwise inanimate prints. Her references of material, landscape and history are somehow grasped but not confined.

There is an interdependency between art and science. Creativity plays a role in scientific discovery and art can provide an accessible communication of dense scientific ideas. Research manifests as “talking, walking, working, dancing, suffering,”<sup>19</sup> anchored in collaboration, community and place. The transfer of knowledge occurs everyday through a multiplicity of actions.<sup>17</sup>

Mardi Reardon-Smith positions landscapes and species as equal voices in her visual essay *A Love Letter to the North*. Observing connections to land on the Cape York Peninsula in far North Queensland, the film is “equal parts an ode to the people, landscapes, stoic cattle, salt pans, red dirt and bushfire sunsets of the north and to the slow work of ethnographic research.”<sup>20</sup> The “non-narrative” structure opens up a space where storytelling, meditation and interspecies listening intersect. Using cattle and fire as case-studies into how we use and care for Country, these “non-human agents shape and mediate [our] all-too-human relationships.”<sup>20</sup> The work reveals our dependence on landscapes for knowledge and sustenance.<sup>17</sup> The Earth is an archive we carry,<sup>17</sup> constantly passing it through each other in exchanges of words, songs, movements, and makings.

## Recycling

A constant consideration throughout *Gathering Geographies* is the use of the archive — a notion of ‘recycling.’ Giving a platform for works that are iterations, documentation, or ongoing practices rejects both societal and creative expectations placed on makers and considers the environmental impact of constant over productivity. Recycling is a chance for revitalisation and recontextualisation. Even as I write this I am gathering and reiterating other people’s words. In allowing myself to understand these proposals and emphasise my own ideas, I am experimenting with altering their contexts to suggest new interpretations and engagements.

Heavily entrenched with rituals, Marianna Ebersoll’s practice engages with this act of recycling. The materials, the processes, and the locations all hold importance to the outcome. Returning to “clay in its most raw form, as dry mud on the side of the dirt road [Ebersoll] grew up on”<sup>21</sup>, the processes that the material demands from Ebersoll require a contemplation of practice.

For this expanded iteration of *The Harvest*, Ebersoll revisited the initial rituals of practice from 2018, placing the images alongside new photographs, google maps explorations, and shelves built out of the clay studied in the work. The mud itself reminds of a full environment, a single element carrying the story of a complete landscape, memory, history, and atmosphere. Ebersoll’s poetics with clay outlines our constant and intrinsic entanglement with Earth matter.

*Gathering Geographies* aims to go against the expectation of progress that often dictates how we navigate the Earth’s surface. “Dead resources” have the ability to continue “actively altering Earth’s

19. Moton, F. (2018) *Fred Moten’s Radical Critique of the Present*. The New Yorker.  
20. Reardon-Smith, M. (2019) *A Love Letter to the North*, artist statement.  
21. Ebersoll, M. (2021) *The Harvest*, artist statement

16. Coleman, A. (2021) Private email correspondence.  
17. Neale, M. (2020) *Songlines*. Thames & Hudson Australia.  
18. Müller-Westermann, I. (2020) *Hilma af Klint: Artist, Researcher, Medium*. Hatje Cantz Verlag.

climate."<sup>2</sup> Even if we discard and rid ourselves of 'things,' both material and intangible, they return to us constantly growing, evolving, and mutating in some form. These artefacts and beings are never passive.<sup>1</sup>

This challenge to our perception of 'living' provides an openness in our ability to recycle, as seen in Maira Wilkie's *Wasser Musik* in which sourdough is used to bring life to form. Sourdough is a primal example of bacteria, climate, and gesture working together in iterations. Adaption, trust and experimentation are needed. Maira Wilkie's *Wasser Musik* shows how impermanence can be sustaining, functioning as both creative stimulus and literal energy as food.

The Earth *needs* us to begin slowing down, to more actively consider our movements. The act of fermentation demands this time, and thus the material rewards slowness and awareness. Presented on the closing day of the exhibition, the series of sourdough sculptures provides a centrepiece to gather, share and discuss what has taken place and what may happen next after Gathering Geographies.

When allowing artists to come together without fatigue and personal burnout, conversations can keep occurring. Rather than closing off and moving on from ideas that have already begun to affect change, we can review and consider what has already been produced. After all, aren't the artists just reiterating what the Earth has already done?

### Possibilities

Through the exhibited landscape of Gathering Geographies we are offered an opportunity to break our "habitual modes of viewing"<sup>4</sup> that may realign our movements going forward. Objects take on life and landscape to speculate on futures where species, environments and histories intermingle and attune to each other.

Through this polyphonic conversation, Gathering Geographies has attempted to invert perspectives, surfaces and textures and move a little closer to the Earth. In breaking down our perceptions of the Earth, translating vibrations, sharing observations, and initiating recycling as a way of thinking, possibilities of the future are revealed. With reflection and experimentation we have created an archive to guide us on.