

**Queer lands:
spirit, land art and neo-materialist visions**

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Links to practice work

Cruising the Forest [photographic work]: <https://www.simonolmetti.com/cruising-the-forest>

Queer Rocks [stones, acrylic paint and photography]:
<https://www.simonolmetti.com/queer-rocks>

Ritual Drawing [performative drawing and photography]:
<https://www.simonolmetti.com/ritual-drawing>

Fucking land art [video]: <https://www.simonolmetti.com/f-cking-land-art>

A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions [video]: <https://www.simonolmetti.com/womb-strange-inceptions>

I Unleash This Virus onto You [video]: <https://www.simonolmetti.com/i-unleash-this-virus-onto-you>

It Is Happy Now [video]: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/788324652>

When Things Go Wrong [video]: <https://www.simonolmetti.com/when-things-go-wrong>

Abstract

This practice-based research focuses on land art, Queer Spirit and neo-materialism to reclaim the land as queer and spiritual, using a multiplicity of media, including photography, sculptural forms, mark making, video and creative writing.

This study proposes entangling neo-materialist principles of key theorists such as Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, with José E. Muñoz's utopic notions of queerness. Viewed through a neo-materialistic approach, nature becomes vibrant matter, its particles are all constantly affecting one another, always in flux and becoming-with, in constant 'trans-formation'. Nature is indeed intrinsically queer. At the same time, queering becomes a spiritual process unveiling its inherent making-kin properties, joining every entity, human and more-than-human, in unpredictable multiple and multispecies modalities. Every particle is alive, has agency and it's in continuous inter- intra- trans- relationships with everything around it.

My process is based upon a multiplicity of voices, sources and materials from different times and contexts, reusing, reclaiming and (re)channelling them through my art practice. In my thesis, I discuss how in the 1960s and 1970s, land artists have proposed a different way of making art with and in nature, including the more spiritual and human-scale approach of Ana Mendieta. I have reused/reclaimed/queered some of their methods, trying for example to apply them to the forest and to some Neopagan sacred sites, using photography, painted rocks and mark making.

I then define Queer Spirit as a spirituality made by and for queer people, tracing its origins, developments and porous borders, together with its contemporary embodiments, particularly among the Radical Faeries and in contemporary art practices. Influenced by authors such as Edward Carpenter, Harry Hay and Arthur Evans, together with Indigenous, Neopagan and eco-feminist beliefs, Queer Spirit is a spirituality closer to and more in tune with nature, its cycles and the land, one that emphasises the joy of life, sex and the celebration of the body. Through a neo-materialist lens, Queer Spirit becomes a process of disrupting heteronormative spiritual dogmas to find new and radical ways of being in nature and with one another, human and more-than-human, a making-kin with matter and all beings.

My final body of work, comprising of five short videos and a large writing piece/poem on walls, represents a sort of physical materialisation of queer land(s), digital videos projected as dreams for utopic alternative being-with/making-kin-with in multiple modalities, to open the land for new queer visions and kinships. Through creative writing and video, land art methods are fused with Queer Spirit and neo-materialism, transforming the land into a utopic spiritual space full of potential new visions and horizons.

Through my practice, I realise a form of queering that can be called camp entanglement, one that fuses spirit, matter and becoming-with, making-kin-with human and more-than-human.

Introduction

This thesis is a monster. It is an assemblage of different entities, temporalities, spaces, a labour of sweat, tears, discoveries, anxiety, stress, joy, sexual fantasies, stomach aches, hypothetical encounters, dreams, fiction, viruses, life and death. It is the collision of different things finding and penetrating/possessing/holding one another.

I grew up in a small village in the Northern Italian countryside, a semi-industrial flat land with ordered, intensely cultivated fields, mirroring the rigid structure of its society and culture. Despite being just over an hour from Milan, it is a land steeped in conservatism, where being different is frowned upon and discouraged, a countryside which seems to offer only hard work and manly pursuits. Milan is geographically close and yet seemed far away, looking like a shiny mecca on the horizon or a sanctuary to escape to, to find refuge and try to shed off all the years of repression and grey sadness for a camp, fabulous existence. At eighteen I left my village to study at university in Milan and never looked back. Yet, after years of urban gay life, having moved from a city like Milan to a megacity like London, the land started to call me back. At the beginning it was mainly a form of escapism, the need to go out of a suffocating concrete jungle and asphyxiating traffic to be in contact with nature; quickly it became a deeper affair(e), it started to creep into my artmaking, and the time I wanted to spend in contact with the land grew exponentially.

This made me think of how different a queer land might be, what kind of new/alternative ways might entail, or even what is a queer land? This renewed sense of and calling from the land prompted me to start a practice-based PhD. My initial questions were rather wide, asking what queering nature through an art practice would entail? And could this act of queering be or involve spirituality? In time, my main research question grew sharper and more focused, shedding off various entangled ropes and laces to be formulated as: can land (art) be queered/reclaimed through spirit and how?

My aim is to queer/disrupt/reclaim the land by untying it from macho domination/oppression for new camp, utopic visions. A second, important aim is to link/entangle/bundle the process of queering with spirituality, which at the beginning

was rather vague; I often referred to it as 'alternative', or nature-based, shamanic, Indigenous, and eventually it became centred on the Radical Faerie spirituality, which I (and some other authors, artists, people) call Queer Spirit.

I believe José E. Muñoz is partly indirectly responsible for this research. I had read his *Cruising Utopia* before even thinking of embarking on a PhD, and his infectious vision of queerness, as a horizon full of hope and utopic possibilities, disclosed or allowed in me a new consciousness, a new sense of what it means to be queer or to queer something. I wanted to see if this utopic vision could be applied to the land and what forms it would entail.

Initially, the theoretical framework of this research was mainly based on queer ecology and queer theory, but the more I was researching questions related to nature and its queering, the more neo-materialistic positions started to make sense and offer themselves as a viable tool. Through a neo-materialistic framework, matter is seen as intrinsically queer and in constant 'trans-formation', thus nature is understood as a queer entity by definition. Furthermore, neo-materialism could help connect queering with a spiritual process, as its vitalist views and the interconnectedness of everything that it implies, make matter, and nature, intrinsically spiritual.

In this dissertation I will show how this neo-materialistic vision has been embedded in and expanded through my art practice in different modalities and intensities. Walking in nature and taking blurred, otherworldly photographs have shown the porous, ever-transforming, becoming-with attitude/attributes of matter and nature; transforming rocks with paint or Photoshop makes them temporarily in-between, post-natural objects, entangling natural and artificial matter, turning them into small catalyst items for potential queer commons in becoming; or again, my attempts at channelling Ana Mendieta through home rituals have allowed me to experience a reclamation by proxy, using mark making and ritual on pieces of paper to affect the land by the intrinsic entanglement of particles and intent. However, I will demonstrate that a neo-materialist vision is best realised and embodied with creative writing and video, particularly when the two media are joined together. Their potentiality of creating worlds, of entangling different and disparate thoughts, parts, visions, of connecting past, present and future in new overlaid, mesh-like images, ideas, dreams, make them the best media to show the interconnectedness of everything, the constant merging, becoming-with, making-kin-with properties of

matter and queerness. When joined together, their power and potentiality of transforming and entangling is multiplied, by combining/disjoining words, sound, moving images in multifaceted possibilities. Through my art practice, new knowledge is generated by showing how neo-materialist concepts can entangle with queerness, ecology and the reclamation of land.

The 'saturation' of the different components (Muñoz-neo-materialism-spirit-land art-creative writing-video-worlding) and methods/media (walking, photography, mark making, sculptural forms, creative writing, video) works because it merges matter and spirit, sex with the divine, utopia with natural material into one coherent, albeit Frankenstein-like, monster. It's all about matter, the matter of the land, of spirit, the matter of queerness, of dreams, of imagination. It's an amalgamation that matters, one based on vitality, life force and dreams, to envision a queer land that we (queers) can call our own. It represents an original perspective because it fuses past practices and thoughts with new ones, such as land art with queerness, Edward Carpenter with neo-materialism, essentialist views of queerness with post-natural ones.

The outcomes of this process are a body of work that flirts, gets infected by and infects land art, Ana Mendieta and in general the land; it's my creative writing porously contaminating/animating the chapters of this thesis and transmuting into my videos; it's my final solo exhibition as the incarnation of queer land(s). Part of the outcomes are also the chapters of this thesis, pieces stitched together that want to escape the containment of word count to say more, shout, tell stories and obscure queer myths, but are also urged to stick together to fornicate with one another and form a joyful new being.

The first chapter focuses on the framework of this research, analysing the meaning of queer and queering, together with queer art connected to nature and its historical evolution. It then examines neo-materialism and Muñoz's vision. The literature review will be woven across different chapters, as each element is directly connected to a specific section of this thesis and with my practice.

Chapter 2 examines questions related to the land and its historical developments; it analyses the art movement known as land art and its use of land and natural material, which can be considered/read as a form of queering to some

extent. I will then describe my first attempts at queering the land using and reclaiming some of their methods, such as walking, photography and 'transformed' rocks.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the connection between land and spirituality. I will investigate some Indigenous perspective regarding the land and its spiritual links. I will show how the art practice of Ana Mendieta embeds these beliefs, creating a bridge between Western and Central American Indigenous culture. I will then describe my attempts at utilising Mendieta's approach through some performative drawings/mark making, assembling/channelling her vision with camp aesthetics and spirit; ending the chapter with my first piece of creative writing, in which I try to condense land art, queering and spirituality.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to Queer Spirit, a spirituality created by and for queer people. I will show how Edward Carpenter can be considered its spiritual 'grandfather'; I will analyse Harry Hay's and Arthur Evans's contribution to this form of spirituality, with the creation of the Radical Faeries and their radical, utopic vision of living in and reclaiming the land. This spirituality is embedded in the art practice of AA Bronson and Linda Stupart. They represent two different sides of this spirituality, one linked to utopic and communal ways of being queer, much as the Radical Faeries, the other instead connected to a vision closer to neo-materialism, incorporating a post-natural idea of queerness.

My final chapter is dedicated to my solo show *Queer Land(s)*, in which five videos and a poem are for the first time all included in one room, creating a web of entanglements, flirtations, interrelations and new connections.

In the conclusions, I will demonstrate how through the framework of this research and my art practice, a new perspective is generated by (mis)using and assembling all the different elements, creating a land that is camp, utopic, spiritual and queer.

Methodology

My process is based upon a multiplicity of voices, sources and materials from different times and contexts, reusing, reclaiming and (re)channelling them through my art practice. It's an entanglement partly dictated by this research's neo-materialistic framework, which sees every particle connected in promiscuous and multiple ways with other ones, with the 'other'. It's a spider eating and regurgitating different matter, to form a thick web aiming to disrupt, undo and transform its surroundings.

Karen Barad speaks of entanglement as a queer kinship, a rich phenomenon of multiple connections, in contraposition to heteronormative forms of coupling and relationships (2015: 393). Entanglement comes from quantum physics, a property of particles that shows their connection in time and space despite their being apart. Barad states that 'to be a part is not to be absolutely apart but to be constituted and threaded through with the entanglements of part-ing' (2015: 406). The figure of the monster is mentioned in Barad's essay *TransMaterialities* (2015) several times, as the embodiment of neo-materialist attributes of trans-formation, of being multiple, regenerative, reconfigured.

'The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognise and celebrate our monstrosities' (Halberstam 1995: 27 cited in Barad, 2015: 391).

This methodology builds upon Barad's/Halberstam's to create new monsters, so to speak, queer entities hungry for new belongings, connections, re-configurations, multiple-touch and (re)compositions, in promiscuous, joyful, (re)generative ways.

One of the initial ways of using this methodology has been to employ land art methods, reappropriating and unsettling their traditional use to suit the needs of this research. I have used walking and photography, like many land artists have done in the past, trying at the same time to create a form of cruising with the forest; or again I have used found rocks and pebbles but painting them with camp, unnatural colours. These new re-configurations or reuse of land art aimed to reappropriate a mainly macho-oriented art movement and process corrupting, even spoiling their methods to

reclaim natural space and environment for centuries hostile to queer bodies and experience.

Another example of this methodology is my attempt to channel Ana Mendieta, entangling and making kin with her way of using her body and art practice as spiritual reclamation. Instead of mud, leaves or other natural materials, I have utilised mark making and paint on large sheets of paper, thus exchanging natural matter for artifice and colours, transforming it into a camp effort. Her spiritual connection with the land is key for this research, and my entanglement with her goes beyond the mere use of material, trying to experience spirituality by fusing/becoming with her spirit through my practice.

My methodology has expanded to other connections, practices and contexts, employing creative writing, sound pieces and videos, intersecting and using methods linked to different art practices, writers and thinkers from different times. By using writing creatively through world-making or 'worlding', I was able to create new visions and worlds embedding Muñoz's utopic idea of queerness fused with neo-materialist principles of matter and queer spirituality. This entanglement is obtained by utilising concepts from different backgrounds and times, for example by linking Carpenter's vision, the Radical Faeries and contemporary artists such as AA Bronson or Linda Stupart.

For the editing process of my videos, my methodology again relies in connecting these different practices in entangled ways, going beyond normative temporary structure and instead creating inter- or intra-temporal links. My visual influences are films by Kenneth Anger, Derek Jarman and Barbara Hammer, but also of more recent artists such as Linda Stupart and Sin Wai Kin, just to name a few. The use of overlaying of images and saturated/acid colour in my videos are an attempt to pay homage to them, to recreate a sort of spell or incantation, which is how Anger used to describe his films.

My writing pieces, which are often translated into videos or are partly used as audio, follow a similar methodology. They are a conflation of different items, ideas, stories, a web that holds together the serious with the humorous, spirit with lust. The authors I have looked at span from Kathy Acker and her infectious way of writing, which mixes fact with fiction, authors from different eras and fields, often using a

sexual, strong language which affects the reader and the senses as a virus; Linda Stupart with their book *Virus*, who uses a similar way of writing and language and reference Acker, Mendieta, some land and minimalist artists, which are part of this project too; *Testo Junkie* by Paul Preciado, with its affective and visceral way of writing; Sin Wai Kin, with their way of creating strange/queer stories and worlds and the creative use of their writings in video and installations.

This approach represents my way of absorbing/ getting infected by Kathy Acker's method of writing, her approach of connecting concepts not immediately close or related in a spiderweb-like manner, reappropriating, even stealing at times but always transforming different elements, a connection through different time planes and spaces, fields and authors. A Frankenstein sort of process to generate a distinctive and unique perspective, which seems appropriate with a post-natural, neo-materialistic approach, where everything is (seen as) connected, indeed entangled, but also terribly queer at its core. By joining creative writing with video, this process is maximised because of the creative potentiality of the two combined media of (trans)forming new worlds. The speculative, generative ability of writing is enhanced by the kaleidoscopic, dreamy power of moving images, combining images with sound, giving colour and body, literally and metaphorically, to words. It is matter on steroids or acid.

This process is based on porosity and promiscuity, mixing the unexpected, the alien and unfamiliar with the familiar, the pastoral, the soil, soul and natural matter, creating dreams that dare to challenge the status quo, to transform the heteronormative, patriarchal story with camp, colourful, sexy, monstrous ones.

1. Framework

This chapter focuses on the framework of this research, analysing the meaning of queer and queering, together with queer art connected to nature and its historical evolution. It then examines nature from a neo-materialist and post-natural perspective, demonstrating the intrinsic queerness of matter and its spiritual qualities. The end of the chapter is dedicated to Muñoz and his utopic idea of queerness, a temporal arrangement based on an economy of desire and desiring, where the past can be reclaimed for new future horizons.

By merging neo-materialist perspectives with Muñoz's vision, queering becomes a temporal and spatial process of becoming-with, a reclamation of the past and space for new utopic futurities, making kin with the more-than-human.

1.1 Queer/queering

'I am your worst fear. I am your best fantasy.' (Lord and Meyer, 2013: 7)

Queer is a shifty term, constantly changing, evolving, and therefore difficult to pin down, to fix in a specific, lasting, precise definition. Queer represents an identity, a process, a verb, attributes that defy attempts of definition and instead represent qualities related to the undoing, everchanging, even spoiling of things. Lord's and Meyer's opening sentence could be heard during the gay liberation marches in the early 1970s, and it perfectly exemplifies the multifaceted nature of the term queer, embodying at the same time a fearful instability, a threat to the status-quo, and a fantasy full of utopic potentialities.

In 1862, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs told his family he preferred men, sexually that is, and proclaimed himself an 'Urning', or 'Uranian', a new word he invented to describe the love of a man for another man. He was a brave and pioneer spirit. He is considered one of the first men to have done a public 'coming out', having published between 1862 and 1879 a series of essays on male-male love collected in the book *Studies on the Riddle of Love Between Men* (Kennedy, 1981: 104 - 105), and having

publicly spoken in 1867 in defence of queerness, pleading with the Congress of German Jurists to repeal anti-homosexual laws (Darling, s.d.).

Ulrichs is also considered the first to have formulated a scientific theory of homosexuality (Vernon, 2013: 26), although the term 'homosexual' was not yet invented. Ulrichs' position was ahead of his time; in fact, he not only considered queerness as natural, but also as a 'third sex' (Vernon, 2013: 27), although his idea of male Uranians as having a female psyche in a man's body is rather controversial these days. The father of the term 'homosexual' (and 'heterosexual') is instead the Hungarian Karl-Maria Kertbeny, who coined it in a letter to Ulrichs in 1869 (Tang, 2018); Edward Carpenter popularised it in his book *The Intermediate Sex*, enjoying its hybrid etymological root in Greek and Latin (Ryle, 2005), I suspect because it was a sort of intermediate word for intermediate people. In this book, he also anticipated an Uranian movement comparable to the women's emancipation movement (Ryle, 2005).

Homosexual is a medical term intended to categorise individuals who had sex with same-sex partners, constructing an identity opposed to normal sexual behaviours. Foucault reminds us that sodomy was a forbidden act that anybody could be lured in or tempted by; with the invention of the identity of the homosexual instead, it is as if a new species had been conceived (Foucault, 1980: 43). The clinical creation of a category didn't make same-sex acts or queerness more acceptable, rather it was a way to make it a pathology, an illness, or a mental condition. Lesbianism, on the other hand, wasn't specifically prohibited because it was thought unthinkable or unimaginable that two women could commit such a crime, thus underlying how men perceived and treated women.

The term 'queer' instead apparently comes from the old German meaning 'across', signifying odd and not normal. It appears to come from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transversive), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart* (Sedgwick, 1993: 12). It was an insult, like faggot, fairy and many others. In the 1990s, it started to be reclaimed by gay and lesbian activists to distance themselves from politics of assimilation. Queer became a mode of resistance against oppression and erasure of sexual minorities, but also a rejection of aspiring to be 'normal' that many gay and lesbian communities wanted to pursue. It became an attempt to trouble conventions of gender and sexuality, 'to oppose the

tyranny of the “normal” (Lord and Meyer, 2013: 8). Equally, the theory associated with it started to denote a fluid, non-conforming, anti-separatist, anti-patriarchal and anti-normative attitude and movement regarding sexuality and gender.

To queer something therefore means to question the centrality and naturalness of heterosexual identity; it's a process of disruption, undoing, corruption even, of transforming and perverting 'the normal', the idea(l) of what is natural and what is not, and the (hetero)normative structure of society.

'Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive [...] the word queer itself means across [...] across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across perversions' (Sedgwick, 1994: 12). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick continues saying that queer can only denote and never connote, anyone's use of queer is different. In contraposition to identity labels such as gay or lesbian, precise categories of sexualities, queer can signify many different, vague things. Queer is very promiscuous.

For Sedgwick, basing her thought on Michel Foucault, sexual identity categories were created to organise and regulate a minority culture and population, in order to control them. Queer instead seems to do the opposite. Despite still being a label, it's a rebellious one, it never stays still; it doesn't organise, rather it creates havoc, unsettles, tears apart. It is also a very useful tool because of its porous, changeable, unstable nature, perfectly embodying a post-natural/neo-materialist attitude of entanglement. As I will describe later in this chapter, neo-materialism considers matter as in continuous flux and becoming, as always being inter- intra-connected with other particles, thus resembling the definition of queerness and becoming a 'good ally' for a process of queering.

1.2 Queer art and nature

The history of queer art is as porous and shifty as its term implies. For some, queer art refers to art made by queer artists exploring queer identity in all its variety; for others, while acknowledging the history of non-normative, gay and lesbian communities, it is not necessarily equivalent to these categories nor an identity, rather it becomes a strategy, a stance or political activity; it is in fact a set of

aesthetics and practices that call for utopian (or dystopian) alternative realities, kinships, relationships and communities (Getsy, 2016:16). David J. Getsy defines queer as fundamentally adjectival, in the sense that rather than staying alone, it attaches itself to nouns whilst wilfully perverting them (2016:13). Thus, the term queer goes beyond politics of identity, becoming a political activity about resistance, resilience and dissent, creating new ways and visions for living and being together.

These new visions question who has access to natural space, and the way it is used and enjoyed. Gavin Butt and Nadja Millner-Larsen define queer activism (and queer life) as a 'rich resource for imagining, experimenting with, and enacting the improvisational infrastructures necessary for managing the unevenness of contemporary existence' (2018: 400). They envision 'queer commoning' as a response to the failures of neo-liberal capitalism, austerity, gentrification and mainstream LGBTQ politics (Butt and Millner-Larsen, 2018: 401). Queer common is an example of living together that disrupts the heteronormative, capitalistic use of land, creating utopian communities based on sharing resources, caring and kinship.

There are also temporary questions at stake, as these queer visions are based on imagining potential utopic futures while often, like in the case of commons, relating to or reclaiming older or even ancient practices, places or notions. Disrupting the status quo means to resist the idea that progress is the only way forward, which is embedded in the modernist, incessant search and pressure for the avant-garde in art, for the novelty for its own sake. Queer art doesn't consider the future in a sterile way, but instead relies on multiple relationships and kinships along the temporal spectrum, tying with and mixing different contexts and practices from different timelines and spaces. This includes (re)using and reimagining the past in new ways.

The artists considered for this project are those invested in the creation of utopic realities, kinships, relationships and communities with a key focus on nature, going beyond queer as an identity and considering it as a set of aesthetics and strategies.

Queer art has a long, colourful and often tortuous history. I will now analyse its development and relationship with/to nature, from its former view of escapism to more contemporary and spiritual modalities, together with some key artists.

‘The word homosexual was never used; they just said “he’s an artist” – Paul Cadmus, recalling 1930s New York’ (Lord and Meyer, 2013: 15)

When same-sex relationships were illegal, there were codes for people to understand each other. An example were expressions like ‘a friend of Dorothy’ or ‘Mary’, which were used among gay men, thus suggesting campness and femininity (Lord and Meyer, 2013: 15), identifying themselves via the heteronormative binary masculine/feminine and invoking predetermined sexual behaviours. This secrecy is key to understand queer art of those days and its origins, when queer desires were only possible in art (and life) through codes, using alluding or secret language that only people in the know could understand. Most of queer life happened in big city hubs such as London, Paris and New York, where queerness could survive and, at times, even thrive in small and secretive communities. Equally, queer art was mainly focused on urban landscapes, often depicting the body, particularly naked/nude, in homoerotic positions or cross-dressed attires.

Questions of nature or the land, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, were mainly idealised, a form of escapism from a reality where same-sex love was not possible; indeed, some queer artists developed themes linked to pastoralism, and they even became known as “Arcadian artists” (Barlow, 2017:99). Nature here was more a refuge, a homoerotic one where (mainly) naked bodies could live in harmony with each other, their desire and nature. For example, the paintings of John Craxton, Keith Vaughan, Duncan Grant, Henry Scott Tuke and many others show young naked athletic men sunbathing or diving in the sea, homoerotic and homosocial scenes portrayed as a return to a natural state. Nature here, these artists seem to suggest, is where some form of queerness could be experienced, although it is mainly in the form of erotic fantasies, representing more a utopic ideal or dream than a possibility. The land, I believe, is not reclaimed, only fantasised and erotically charged. Yet, through these works nature becomes the space for living some form of utopic or idealised queerness or its fantasies, therefore signifying the naturalness of queerness itself. If we consider Getsy’s notion of queerness, these depictions pervert the land by attaching a queer idea to it; these naked bodies also show kinship among men and call for utopian relationship among them and nature. Therefore, they could

be considered queer, although the intent of a true land reclamation is missing or not possible at that time.

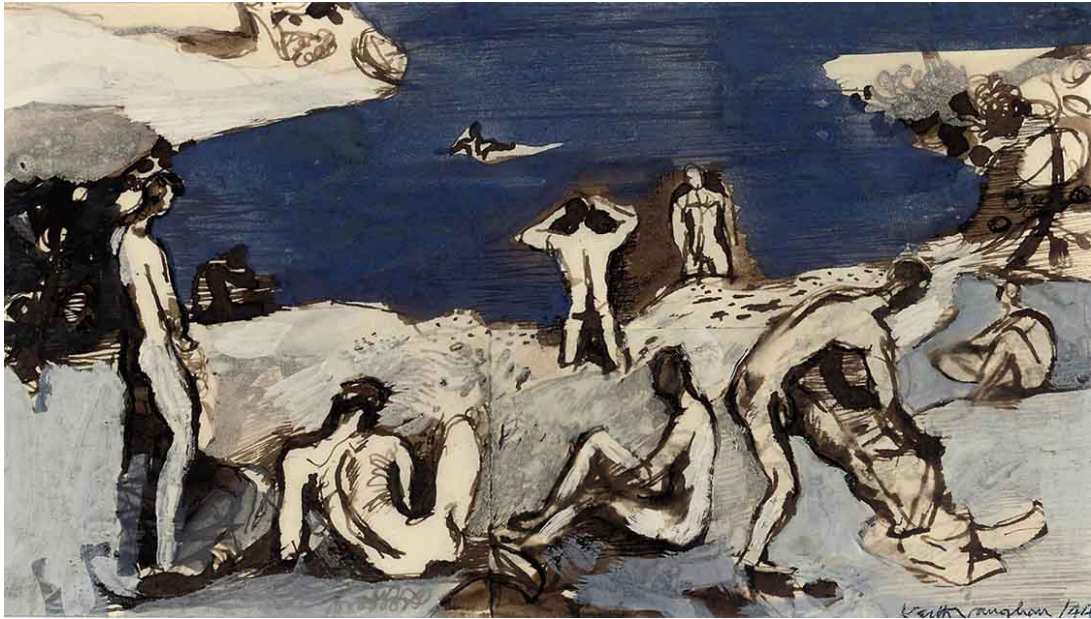


Figure 1. Keith Vaughan, *Soldiers Bathing: Malton* (1944)



Figure 2. Detail of John Craxton's *Shepherds Near Knossos* (1947)

In photography, we have similar pastoral and homoerotic examples. After Vaughan's death, for instance, secret photographs were found in his diaries and collection, the inspiration for his paintings and a poignant testimony of being in nature when being gay was illegal.



Figure 3. Keith Vaughan, photograph (1939)



Figure 4. Keith Vaughan, photograph (1939)

Contemporary to these artists is Minor White, whose photographs are rich in 'codes' or hints of same-sex desire, and often (naked) men are the subject of his portraits. Despite much of his work being dedicated to urban spaces, when White

goes to nature, he seems to transfer his homoerotic forbidden desire into the landscape, using photography as a tool to create different worlds where rocks, plants or soil become a naked body, or where the naked body of a man is linked and counterposed to a natural space. This conscious or subliminal process makes his work closer to questions of queering the landscape, although still through allusion. For example, in a photograph entitled *William LaRue, Point Lobs, California* (1960), a muscular hand seems to caress a rock, evoking a contact with nature which is tender but also erotically charged, a rock that becomes the metaphor for a body, perhaps his body.

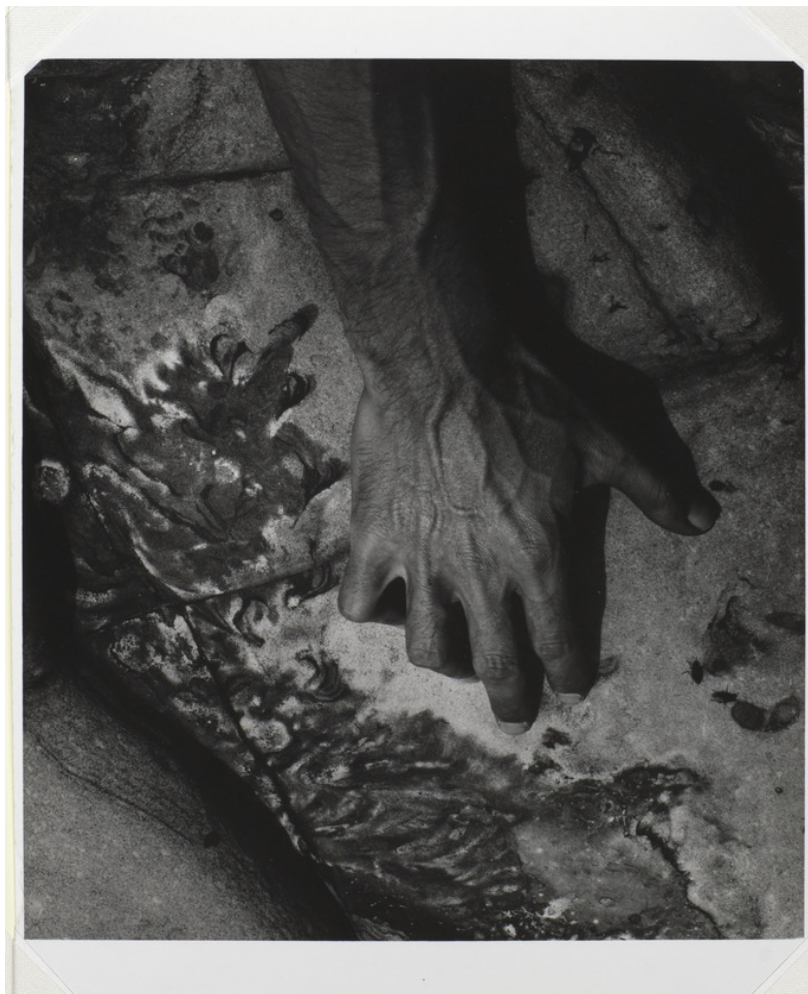


Figure 5. Minor White, Copper Creek, Oregon, Summer 1941. Gelatin silver print. The Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Minor White. ©Trustees of Princeton University

Nature in his pictures also becomes a space where spirituality can be enhanced or renewed; for example, many of his photographs depict vast landscapes that foment a transcendental form of encounter, where nature seems to embody the

divine. In *Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco* (1951), for example, the famous San Francisco bridge is barely visible in the left bottom corner, reduced to a small structure enveloped by the landscape; the sky is the real protagonist, with a gigantic white cloud that seems to vibrate or moving and transforming, constantly changing and on the cusp of generating new shapes, giving a sense of the infinite. When the focus narrows, however, images of natural material become sensual or even sexualised, as if zooming in on nature might change the register from the divine to the body, from the transcendental to erotic matter. In the end, White seems to suggest, everything is spiritual, be it the land, a cloud, a naked man, or a frosted window that through his gaze becomes nearly abstract. In his work, there's a fusion between the visionary and the repression, the flesh with the spirit.

The male body in many of White's photographic books is interspersed with images of rocks or trees. In *Copper Creek, Oregon* (1941), the contortion and shape of the tree and the framing of the image give it a sensuous, lush, erotic feeling to it, resembling a naked body, so similar and specular to the photograph of *Tom Murphy, San Francisco* (1947) (fig. 8 and 9). The naked body in fig. 9, with its shapes and lines, is surprisingly similar and framed like the tree in fig. 8, the oblique muscular arm following the diagonal shape of the tree trunk, his bent leg corresponding to the horizontal part of the tree, his body hair transmuted into the bush around the wood. In many other instances, White is able to depict and instil in nature such an erotic charge, mixed with lyrical images of mundane close-ups, and then again naked men, making some of his books intoxicating and extraordinarily beautiful.



Figure 6. Minor White, Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, August 24, 1951. Gelatin silver print. The Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Minor White. ©Trustees of Princeton University



Figure 7. Minor White, 72 N. Union Street, Rochester, February 1962. Gelatin silver print. The Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Minor White. ©Trustees of Princeton University



Figure 8. Minor White, *Copper Creek, Oregon, Summer 1941*.

Gelatin silver print. The Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Minor White. ©Trustees of Princeton University



Figure 9. Minor White, *Tom Murphy, San Francisco, December 11, 1947*.

Gelatin silver print. The Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Minor White. ©Trustees of Princeton University

When the Stonewall riot happened (1969), a new sense of freedom and rebellion spread in many queer communities, particularly in big cities, feelings that were also associated with the 1960s' counterculture movement. Stonewall had a big impact in the years to follow, creating a new consciousness for queers as one people. It's also during these years that the word 'gay' started to be used as a 'liberationist' term, not only to denote same-sex desire, but also 'as a broader call for political action and social transformation' (Lord and Meyer, 2013: 24). Yet queer art continued to be mainly an urban affair. Indeed, browsing through books or catalogues about queer art of those years, such as the book *Art and Queer Culture* (2013) or the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art's archive, we can see many artists understandably involved in depicting marches and protest activities, or 'alternative' ways of being together mainly in the cities they resided.

Particularly important for this research instead is the work of pioneer artists who connected their (queer) vision with nature, embracing the countercultural spirit of the time with spirituality or mysticism. One of these pioneers was Kenneth Anger.

With his experimental films, Anger challenged the stereotypical representation of queerness, particularly of gay men, merging homoeroticism with the occult. Anger was well ahead of his time, as even before the hippie and countercultural movement he was creating challenging films which anticipated the trends and innovations of the 1960s (Freeman, 2016). For example, at just 20 years of age, he created the short film *Fireworks* (1947), a shocking (particularly for the time) dreamlike sequence of a bystander, played by himself, being stripped naked and beaten with chains by several male sailors, eventually ripping his chest open to find a sort of compass or electrometer inside; a bottle of milk shattering on the floor referencing ejaculation, white liquid pouring on his naked and blooded body, his face in agony which can easily be mistaken for ecstasy (Osterweil, 2017). *Fireworks* is openly erotically charged, an anthem to nihilism, an undoing of cultural codes for the depiction of pure sexual desire, which can be interpreted as a form of queering on many fronts (desire, sex, masculinity, cinematic techniques and so on). Anger considered his films as both depicting and performing a ritual, 'casting a spell' on the audience (Allison, 2005). He was strongly influenced by Aleister Crowley's *Ordo Templi Orientis*, also known as *Thelema*. Crowley defined 'magick' as 'the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity to the Will' (Allison, 2005). With his editing, Anger utilised film as magic, as a form of incantation. His technique was based on appropriation, re-order and re-reselection (Hutchinson, 2009), creating kaleidoscopic collages juxtaposing sacred and profane, pain and pleasure, good and evil, to affect and casting a spell on viewers.

A key film for this research is *Lucifer Rising*. Shot during the 1960s and 70s, it depicts various locations in Egypt (the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Sphynx, other temples and locations along the Nile), Stonehenge and Avebury in the UK, Externsteine in Germany, all places associated with pre-Christian and occultist spirituality. In the film, we see Isis and Osiris awakening and performing a ritual on the banks of the Nile, then scenes in a more domestic temple interspersed with images of other places in nature, people carrying a flame torch ritually walking on Externsteine's geological formation, a volcano erupting, the sun aligning with the

moon, other rituals performed in a temple. The eroticism is present in the abundance of naked bodies, mainly of men.

Lucifer, as in Crowley's ideology, is considered as the 'bringer of light', and this film is an homage to the *Ordo Templi Orientis*. Anger believed in the dawn of a new era of light, the so-called Aquarian Age which, after the Piscean one ruled by ascetism, renunciation, sacrifice and guilt, would foreclose revolution, nonconformity, rebellion (Taberham, 2019). In an interview, Anger said that the Piscean Age was the age of Jesus Christ and was ruled by Neptune, the planet of mysticism; the Aquarian one was instead ruled by Uranus, the most erratic planet of all (Anger, 1966:70 in Taberham, 2019). As we've seen, Uranus already appeared in Ulrichs' and it functions as a queering force of disruption. In a way, we could say that Anger's Lucifer is a queer character and force in itself. In another quote, Anger says that 'Lucifer's message is that the key of joy is disobedience' (Eidt, 2014). It rests on the undoing, corrupting and transforming of the stifling heteronormative society we live in. Although this film is not completely queer in its theme, it's through its spiritual portraying that a queering activity takes place. It is also linked to a sort of return to nature, of naked bodies performing rituals in famous ancient places linked to a supposedly ancient spirituality close to nature.

Furthermore, when Anger depicts queerness or homoerotic desire, it's never through hints or codes like many of his contemporaries; it's instead a complete and straightforward portrayal, often pushing the boundaries of convention and morality, which at times has brought him problems with the law.

On the wave of the countercultural revolution and after Stonewall, many gay and lesbian communes started to develop in remote natural areas, particularly in the United States, a sort of going back to the land to create separate communities where the full potentiality of a queer existence could be experienced and experimented. Although there were certainly communes of this kind even before Stonewall and the countercultural revolution (see for example Edward Carpenter in the chapter about Queer Spirit), from the end of the 1960s and particularly in the 1970s a burgeoning of these communities occurred, particularly in the West. Barbara Hammer first videos seem to embody this spirit.

Soon after her coming out as a lesbian, famously leaving her husband riding away on a motorcycle with a Super 8 camera (Durón and Greenberger, 2019), Hammer produced *Dyketactics* (1974), a short film depicting a group of naked women in a forest, their bodies intertwining and overlaying, an exploration of same-sex sexual desire together with the longing of creating a community of lesbians in the wilderness.

A year later she created *Superdyke* (1975), again playing on the label given to masculine lesbians ('dyke'), reclaiming it proudly for new potential futurities and utopic horizons. The first half of *Superdyke* is dedicated to depicting a group of women heading to a march in San Francisco; they carry banners proclaiming they are Amazons, warriors fighting to liberate women from men's and patriarchal constrictions, to find a new sense of freedom and a new community. We can see them going into a bus whose front banner reads 'lesbian express', then images of marches in the city, activities in a park, moments of being together for a common cause. Then the setting changes, we see the women naked in nature, inside a tent they caress each other, hug or just show their happiness of being together, separated from society, naked and free, for then going out of the tent and walk in a sort of conga line on the grassy sunny hills.

In those first experimental films, Hammer wanted to explore 'the lived realities of lesbians from a queer and female perspective' (Durón and Greenberger, 2019), a revolutionary experiment for the time. One of the great innovations of Hammer's films was the connection she made between women's bodies and nature. For example, in *Multiple Orgasm* (1976), Hammer overlaid footage of rock formations with a close-up of a hand masturbating a vagina. As the woman approaches her climax, the video zooms frantically into the rock's crevices, as if the landscape was somehow involved in the sexual act, portraying the body as intimately connected to nature (Durón and Greenberger, 2019).

More recently, a few more artists started to investigate the relationship between queerness and nature, or at least between their body and the land. The work of Laura Aguilar, for instance, deals with what it means to be queer in a Latinx and Chicanx community, but also how that community is portrayed and 'absented from dominant depictions of the queer community in Los Angeles' (Gossett, 2018), with profound results. Her work struggled to find visibility in an artworld dominated by

white western men, not interested or even repulsed by her obese body. For this research, it's her photographic series *Grounded* (2006- 2007) which is particularly important, where she positions her non-normative, naked body in nature, consciously unsettling prescriptive idea(l)s of what is a body, which body is worth seeing or being in a work of art, together with its relationship with space, becoming a form of queering of the very idea of being in nature. In those images, her body seems to reference the undulations of the big rocks in front of or around her, metamorphosing herself into a rock or becoming part of the arid landscape.

Her work disturbs and undoes how we think of the natural and unnatural, human and non-human, creating a different landscape and ecology. Gossett (2018) declares that Aguilar's images represent 'an actual queer materialism through photography', decolonialising the topography of the landscape she turns her attention to. As the title suggests, her body is 'grounded' to the land, but equally it grounds nature transforming and queering it through the power and presence of her body. Although her body is present and part of the picture, it doesn't make this project about individuality or the self, rather her work is about the materiality of the body and nature, underlining the similitudes between rocks and human form and vice versa, a profound connection with nature through her rebellious act of queering.

All these artists challenge heteronormative ideas of being in the land, what kind of bodies and relationships are allowed or visible, creating alternative forms of kinship and communities. Their art is queer in the sense that it embeds or relies on acts of resistance, resilience and dissent, creating new and utopic visions. Furthermore, most of these practices depict some spiritual connection with nature, utilising different forms from magic to transcendental experiences. Queerness and spirit create new dreams and prospects when located in the land. However, their relationship with nature is firmly from a human perspective, whereas forms of relationship or kinship with the more-than-human or its viewpoint are not considered or fully explored. Their focus is also mainly toward the/their body and queer subjectivity. Nature is not the main protagonist. For a different emphasis on the land and its centre as artistic practice, practices outside the canonical borders of queer art needs to be included, such as the land art movement or the work of Ana Mendieta, which form an important part of this thesis.

Climate change and the environmental and social crisis we find ourselves in is driven by neoliberal, capitalistic, heteronormative and patriarchal ideals. To challenge the status quo and to find new solutions for this catastrophe mean to perceive, relate and live the land in new ways, disrupting and undoing centuries of heterosexist and patriarchal impositions. It means to include voices that have been silenced or oppressed for too long. Therefore, to consider the land from a queer perspective, envisioning new ways, relationships and kinships is paramount. It is also important to consider the more-than-human, as the solution must come also from and with nature and all its components. Neo-materialist and post-natural approaches are useful to include the more-than-human perspective, showing at the same time the intrinsic queerness and spiritual qualities of matter, which is the focus of the next section.

1.3 Neo-materialism and (post)nature

'The question of whom to think-with is immensely material' (Haraway, 2016: 43).

At the turn of the new millennium, a new interdisciplinary field of enquiry has emerged in the arts, humanities and social sciences focussing on a theoretical and practical 'turn to matter' (Fox and Alldred, 2019), which has been named 'neo' or new materialism. Instead of focusing upon texts, system of thoughts and discourses like post-structuralism, it emphasises matter, the materiality of everything, even when dealing with social relations or abstract concepts such as imagination, memory and thought (Fox and Alldred, 2019). It is influenced and informed by post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism and queer theories, criticising patriarchy, rationalism, modernism, and in general calling for a plurality of views and a radical call for social justice (Fox and Alldred, 2019). Like the term queer/queering, neo-materialism has no fixed or single definition, rather it's a conflation of different thoughts and theories.

Particularly important for this research are the writings of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, especially their concept of nature/natural, together with the interconnectedness and queer/trans quality of matter.

In their essay *TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings* (2015), Barad speaks of matter as in continuous flux and becoming, of being continuously in the past, present and future; matter is in constant 'trans-formation' (Barad, 2015: 411). Matter, they declare, is not inanimate or lifeless; it is in fact an ongoing, regenerative and creative entity (they also call it 'a condensation of dispersed and multiple beings-times'), promiscuously and perversely touching itself and others, constantly deconstructing and (re)configuring itself (Barad, 2015: 411). Matter, and therefore nature, is not mere being, it's in continuous un/doing. It is this very trans-formative property that makes matter (so) queer. This vision of matter is very near to Sedgwick's definitions of queerness as a porous, constantly in-flux entity, and queering as a process of unsettling, undoing, going across boundaries to create new forms and visions.

Barad's view comes from quantum field theory, generating endless possibilities for matter and queerness alike. Following this perspective, queering becomes a phenomenon or process for the undoing and for the (re)generation of new imaginaries, or as Barad writes, 'for regenerating what never was but might yet have been' (Barad, 2015: 411). Barad says that matter has some imaginative capacities, matter is imagination (2015: 388). Therefore, all particles have some form of agency, they un/do something, they are part of a queering process for simply being alive.

Barad also declares nature 'as perverse at its core; nature is unnatural' (2015: 412). For queer and other marginalised people, this statement can feel so liberatory. More specifically, for quantum field theory even the simplest bit of matter, the electron, does not exist in isolation, but it is always inseparable and intra-acting with the virtual particles of the vacuum in infinite ways, which is another way to say that the electron electromagnetically intra-act with itself (Barad, 2015: 399). Without delving too much into specific knowledge regarding quantum physics and particles, which are not part of this research and it's knowledge I don't possess, what Barad is trying to explain here is the inter- intra- trans- connectedness of every particle and entity, the idea of an infinite set of possibilities at every and each moment, of atoms touching themselves and others, transforming themselves and others constantly, a trans-formational activity which defines matter and, therefore, nature and everything there is. It is as if matter cannot get enough of having some form of relationship with itself and others, in a constant masturbatory activity which implies at the same time

an endless desire for contact, sharing, playing with, transforming, even copulating with everything around itself, at every moment in time and under all circumstances. Matter, it seems, is extremely anti-heteronormative (becoming therefore 'unnatural'), or at least its behaviour from a quantum field perspective is. We are all part of each other, we are all affecting, trans-forming ourselves and everything around us, without realising it but constantly queering the world with our simple being (alive).

Barad adds that cells and particles, but also ecosystems if they're not too damaged, can regenerate themselves, re-constructing their bodies like self-generating Frankenstein-like monsters (Barad, 2015: 402). Nature is perverse, all its parts are sexualised and promiscuous, they can form relationship with and even generate one another. Through this reading then, we are all trans, we all co-create ourselves, we are as much a construct as nature is, everyone is a monster. Accordingly, all matter, nature included, is trans and queer.

Matter not only has imagination, but it also vibrates and has energy. Einstein had already pointed out in his famous equation $E = mc^2$ that energy and matter are related, energy (E) in fact is created by the interaction of matter (or mass m) and the speed of light (c), in essence declaring that mass is made of vibrating particles and everything is energy. In her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010: 9), Jane Bennett advocates for the vitality of matter and its material agency or effectivity, meaning that every non-human being has the ability 'to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (Bennett, 2010: 9). Recognising this vitality can prevent humans from considering matter as inanimate or dead and therefore from using, abusing and destroying it for their own consumption and benefit, giving instead the respect and attention all matter, and above all nature, deserve.

Considering materials as having agency means to understand matter as self-organising, forming some form of assemblage not governed by any central head, a rhizomatic idea coming from Deleuze and Guattari and informing the work of Bennett. No single item is more important or guiding the whole structure, and the effect of one member (Bennett calls it 'member-actant') has an impact on the whole assemblage. Because the assemblage itself has a distinct vital force and agency independent from the individual member-actants, an assemblage is never a solid block but an open-ended sum (Bennett, 2010: 24). Matter, therefore, is not only vital and vibrant, but also porous, multifaceted, affecting and affected by its own vital property and agency.

If nature is an assemblage or accumulate of vibrant matter, then every 'member-actant' of this assemblage, including humans, unconsciously interacts with other members on different and subtle levels (including the energetic level), their energy fields/vibration and their agency create a constant attraction, exchange and repulsion of molecules and energy, generating new forms of kinship(s) and new forms of (trans-)material(s).

This entangled notion of matter and (being in/with) nature brings to the fore Donna Haraway's vision of making-kin. She reminds us that if we want to survive on this planet marred by ecological destruction, we must 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016), embrace it and fuse/make kinship with other beings (human, non-human and more-than-human), in a sort of reciprocal entanglement and becoming-with. For Haraway, everything is entangled in tentacular manner, therefore humanity needs to learn not only to be-with but also to think-with the 'other' and the more-than-human around and within us. She continues saying that humans should be seen as compost or humus (Haraway, 2016: 32), realising they are just another member-actant of the whole system working with nature in a *sympoietic* way, as she defines it, simply becoming another item of a bigger assemblage, living and dying in tentacular multispecies modality¹ (Haraway, 2016: 49). Being compost means to be a fertile and porous body open to exchange, to the creation of new trans-formative lives and trans-families of beings made of human, non-human and more-than-human components (after all, breathing is already sharing, ingesting and becoming-with other particles of different entities, including viruses, dust, plastic, pollution etc.). It means to consider that we're surrounded by other vibrant, agency-driven member-actants constantly affecting us and vice versa, with every movement and behaviour (and even thought, which is energy after all) we make.

¹ Haraway defines *sympoietic* a system 'always partnered all the way down, with no starting and subsequently interacting "units"'. She then adds, quoting M. Beth Dempster, that the term *sympoiesis* stands for 'collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change' (Haraway, 2016: 33).

This neo-materialist perspective is also connected to post-naturalism. In fact, the queerness of nature is not only demonstrated or possible through a quantum or neo-materialistic perspective. Queer ecology has preached it for more than a decade now, showing how many animals, plants, fungi or microorganisms are or have same-sex behaviours or trans attributes, demonstrating the naturalness of queerness. In the book *Queer Ecology: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), the editors Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson explain how the separation of nature from culture and human life has created a form of 'othering', allowing not only to see nature as something detached, but also inferior and therefore to be subjugated, exploited, possessed. They also mention Greta Gaard's article *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism* (1997), in which she explores the strong link between the oppression of women and queers with the domination of nature (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010: 29). In Western culture, the devaluation of nature goes hand in hand with that of women, believed to be closer to nature and its cycles (linked to menstruation, but also generating life through childbirth as nature does); a similar devaluation (and demonisation) is projected onto queer people (and eroticism, the body and sex alike), who are 'feminised, animalised, eroticised and naturalised in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature, and sexuality' (Gaard, 1997: 119).

Queer ecology, on the other end, involves opening the environment to 'non-heterosexual forms of relationship, experience, and imagination' (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010: 30), to transform and get rid of centuries of heteronormative, queerphobic visions of nature but also of centuries of natural exploitation, damage and pollution that this heterosexist patriarchal view has created. It is in this context that Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson declare heterosexuality as not natural, being a destructive force against nature.

Timothy Morton goes beyond the natural/unnatural dichotomy stating that we should get rid of the idea of nature altogether, a term that 'ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and life-forms' (Morton, 2009: 249). Instead of aestheticizing nature as something beautiful to be preserved or saved, thus again othering it and keeping it to a distance, Morton believes we should experience the natural object as it is, considering it in all its materiality, including its dirt, waste and ugliness. Getting rid of abstract ideas, which we tend to use when trying to describe or understand enormous and complex thing and which he calls 'hyperobjects' - such

as global warming or the internet or the concept of nature – makes these objects more real and relatable. It is as if Morton is saying that only by getting dirty and muddy, by immersing in matter that one can truly understand nature and our interdependent part in it. It's this idea of sharing and becoming part of, becoming-with other parts of nature that define in my opinion a post-natural vision of nature, not so much as natural bodies mixed with artificial entities intentionally altered by humans, as many defines post-naturalism, rather the awareness of living as sharing, mixing, becoming-with, becoming the other(s), endless monsters in formation, regenerating ourselves with foreign particles through our breathing, moving and living. It is above all recognising that we humans are just small member-actants in a vaster ecosystem, all interdependent, inter- and intra- acting/affecting/generating/becoming.

The vibrational aspect of matter also brings forward spiritual perspectives. To believe in materiality or neo-materialism would suggest to firmly be anchored to matter, to the materiality of everything, living behind spiritual questions. Bennett goes to great lengths to explain that material vibrancy or the 'life force' that matter is supposed to have do not equate to spirituality. Her aim is to theorise a vitality intrinsic to matter to eradicate the idea of materiality being a passive, inert substance, or worse, a divinely infused one (Bennett, 2010: 13). She also adds that giving agency to (big) assemblages might look like the latter has some sort of autonomous, God-like will, which is not what she intends: 'the relationship between tendencies and outcomes or between trajectories and effects is imagined more porous, tenuous, and thus indirect' (Bennett, 2010: 36). Her vital materialism is detached from the idea of a hierarchical logic of God-Man-Nature implied by most traditional religions, or as she calls it, from a 'vitalism of the soul' (Bennett, 2010: 84), to contest the centrality of man and his superiority over matter. What I mean by spiritual side of matter is that if matter has agency and vibrates with energy, and consequently life is a form of energy, then everything is sacred, every cell and particle is alive. We are all part of a massive assemblage, each element (from big celestial bodies to the micro particle) is an active member-actant with different will and intention and yet united in a gigantic humus or cosmos, in tentacular multiple and multispecies modalities.

The spirituality I consider here is a very materialistic one, one that perceives everything as inter- and intra- connected. It is based on vitality and kinship, on celebrating the vibration and beauty of every cell, particle, plant, rock, mud, body and

everything there is. It is a spirituality not too dissimilar from certain esoteric or mystical ones but firmly anchored to matter.

However, it's not all about matter and other issues are important too. Questions of temporality, of including past experiences, events, knowledge and culture, together with creating communities, kinship and care are key, not only for a better present, but for generations to come. These issues are embedded in the thought of José E. Muñoz and his utopic vision of queerness, which are the focus of the next section.

1.4 Muñoz and queer temporality

'Queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian'
(Muñoz, 2009: 26)

A key thinker for this research is José Esteban Muñoz, particularly his book *Cruising Utopia, The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).

For Muñoz, queerness is primarily about futurity and hope, queer is always in the horizon (Muñoz, 2009: 11). His vision was inspired by Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), whose version of historicity meant that subjects always looked at the past to act with a mind toward future possibilities, thus making futurity history's dominant principle. Similarly, queerness in Muñoz's mind becomes a temporal arrangement in which the past is a 'field of possibilities', and subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity (Muñoz, 2009: 16). We are not quite queer yet, 'to access queer visibility we may need to squint' (Muñoz, 2009: 22) beyond the limited heteronormative 'here and now', to reclaim past spaces and time which in turn they will affect our future. This notion represents a new vision of queerness, which Muñoz refers to as the 'not-quite-conscious', based on utopic, optimistic possibilities, something not yet here or even impossible to realise in its own entirety, nevertheless something to constantly aim at, aspire even, for the greater good not only of queer people, but of society as a whole.

His thought goes against parts of queer theory that are based on negativity, antisociality and antirelationality. For example, Lee Edelman asserts that for

queerness there is no future, as futurity is the domain of heteronormative reproduction; it's the figure of the Child (which he capitalises) the perpetual horizon of every political intervention (Edelman, 2004: 9). Queerness, on the other hand, embodies the negative side of 'those not fighting for the children' and it's opposed to every form of social viability. Edelman of course doesn't refer to individuals but to politics and figural relations. For him, queer theory must stand opposed to all politics. In fact, he declares that 'queerness can never define an identity; it can only disturb one' (Edelman, 2004: 17); equally, in his view queer theory can only disrupt politics, which is to say that instead of trying to fit in in this society based on reproductive futurism (and heteronormative capitalism, I would add), Edelman's response for queer people is to embrace negativity, to become an agent of disruption, that undoing which ultimately is the core meaning of queering. It represents a rejection of the future, a focus on the 'here and now'.

Although I understand Edelman's stance against heteronormative politics and thought, all-pervasive in our society, for this research it's Muñoz's utopic approach which is favoured. Muñoz sees queerness as an agent of positive change, as a potentiality, which he reminds us being 'a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense' (2009: 9), unlike a possibility which is a thing that simply might happen. Muñoz believes that accepting no future means to renounce politics and principles of hope that are, by their very nature, relational (Muñoz, 2009: 94). Only if we consider queerness in a sort of vacuum or abstraction, isolating it from society, we can imagine it in Edelman's terms.

Muñoz instead proposes a vision of queerness as a utopian formation based on an economy of desire and desiring, a desire that is always directed at the not-yet-here, 'objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise' (Muñoz, 2009: 26). Basing his vision on Ernst Bloch, Muñoz considers the past, or the no-longer-conscious, as still changeable, transformable and flickering with potential. If 'straight time' tells us there is no future, then queering is stepping out of this linearity, (re)imagining another timeline and space based on desire. As the present is not enough, being impoverished by heteronormative capitalistic values, we queers must turn to and reclaim/change the no-longer-conscious to (re)imagine new and alternative futures. Unlike Edelman, we must engage in relational forms of disruption

that are based on alternative forms of desire, opposing the 'here and now' with a 'there and then' both in temporal and spatial terms. This vision is based on ecstatic time, which Muñoz believes being when we step out of straight time and we feel ecstasy, that is when we contemplate a moment from one's past, present or future. It is a vision of time closer to neo-materialism, I believe, one that sees every moment as the accruing of different time planes, the addition or convergence of particles that are simultaneously in the past, present and future, a very quantum physical attribute indeed. For Muñoz, this convergence is the very meaning of the ecstatic (2009: 187).

This utopic vision of queerness complements and enhances the neo-materialistic framework of this research, for not only matter is queer at its core (as Barad declares), but queering becomes a tool for creating ecstatic relationships and moments/spaces based on desire, a sort of making-kin-with between humans, non-humans and more-than-humans in alternative modes of being together. Indeed, for Muñoz (2009: 20), 'the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity'. A statement which could be interpreted as a sort of 'becoming-with' fused with the sensual or sexual, to create new forms of kinships which (re)activate 'fuller capacity for love and relationality' (Muñoz, 2009: 144).

Adding Muñoz's vision to neo-materialism means to add temporality to the process of queering (and queerness) and to my methodology. Queering then means to consider the past as something that hasn't exhausted its potentiality; it entails revisiting, reclaiming and transforming past art practices for different queer futurities, making kin with them to form ecstatic convergences of different elements, theories and practices from other timelines and spaces. This framework also operates when dealing with natural space, such as forests, stone circles and other Neolithic structures, whose no-longer-conscious is very deep and remote and yet still flickering with queer potentials, still able to mix with other matter, consciousness, theories and art practices to form new (utopic) aggregates.

The framework examined in this chapter puts together visions of queerness and queering that include/collide historic and contemporary notions, human identity with more-than-human intrinsic property of matter, political activities of resistance and dissent with utopic formations, past, present and future ecstatically converging and creating a process able to transform our idea of society, nature and the land. Through

this approach, a new vision of queerness/queering can be activated, as a convergence of multiple temporal, spatial, physical, spiritual, agential elements able not only to pervert, undo, disrupt, but also to create new utopic realities based on making-kin and becoming-with. Queering becomes a process of activation, creation and trans-formation.

In the next chapter, I will focus on a historic art practice known as land art, whose no-longer-conscious is still vibrating and important today, together with my attempts to reclaim its methods for new queer propositions.

2. Land (and) art

In this chapter I will analyse the concept of land and its historical development, together with its use, abuse and the power that it entails; I will then show how the art movement land art used the land and natural material to show a different way of seeing and being in the land, a process which could be interpreted as a form of queering, despite not being exactly one. I will end this chapter describing my first attempts at queering nature using land art methods and in turn queering them, and my struggles in doing so.

2.1 Land/scape

I will first start with etymology. *Land* comes from the German language, originally meaning ‘coming to shore’, ‘disembark’, a movement from water to the safety of earth, but associated or evolved with the idea of possession, of a definite portion of surface owned by an individual or home of a nation. Stuart Elden, in *Land, terrain, territory* (2010), defines land as a finite resource that is distributed, allocated and owned. Land instead in my language (Italian) is translated with *terra* (earth), which originates from the Latin language and connotes both the soil, dirt, ground and the planet Earth (Terra). It apparently derives from the Sanskrit *trsyati*, meaning dry material, a meaning it keeps in its Latin derivation as opposed to the waters that occupied much of the ancient cosmology (Elden, 2010). Therefore, *terra* has both a sense of immense planetary vastity, and an aspect of home, mundane and even filth, similar to the English *earth*. In Italian, but I suspect also in French and Spanish, we don’t have a word equivalent to ‘land’, possession doesn’t seem to be as predominant as in Anglo-Saxon countries. This notion of possession is directly translated in the word ‘landscape’.

The term landscape comes again from the German *Landschaft*, a term signifying indeed the shaping of land, its administration and ownership. The Dutch *Landskip* came to signify ornamental backgrounds in paintings and drawings, a meaning that was adopted in England in the early seventeenth century (Cheetam, 2018: 19). Landscape therefore is a concept linked to culture, of creating borders and

barriers between human and not human, of shaping, mapping, framing and taking 'possession of space in some way' (Cheetam, 2018: 20).

Landscape brings to the fore questions of place and space, attributes often used interchangeably but that instead have specific meanings and functions. Michel de Certeau conceives 'place' as a definite, specific location, whereas 'space', by contrast, represents an intersection of mobile elements, vectors such as direction, velocities and time variables; in short, he defines 'space as practiced place' (de Certeau, 1984: 17 cited in Mitchell, 2002: 8). William J. T. Mitchell, quoting Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, is interested in going beyond de Certeau's binary and instead to connect space, place and landscape as a dialectical triad. If place is a specific location, and space a practiced place, activated by actions, movements and signs, then landscape is a site 'encountered as image or sight' (Mitchell, 2002: 10). Landscape becomes a 'lived space', what Lefebvre calls 'representational space', mediated through images and symbols (Mitchell, 2002: 10). This means that a spatial practice, like a walk or a ritual, may activate a place, which in turn might become the object of depictions, fantasies and memories of an entire nation, although he stresses several times that no one of these terms (space, place and landscape) are logically or chronologically prior to the others.

A key issue for this research then is connected to what kind of space or landscape a process of queering entails. If landscape is a cultural and social construction, an artificial world, then queering needs to generate new ideas of land through alternative images and symbols. Mitchell (2002: 17) calls the landscape 'a bag of tricks, conventions and stereotypes' symbolising not only power relations, but even becoming an agent of power itself, a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. He basically declares that landscape not only 'is' or 'means', but also it 'does' something. As humans, we affect/construct it and at the same time are affected by it, our identity is constructed also through the (process of) landscape. Thus, an act of queering and reclamation of the land becomes a process of (visual) appropriation, an identity formation to create an alternative 'lived space'. It is through a spatial practice that a place can be activated and reclaimed, thus in turn generating a set of depictions, fantasies and memories that create a new landscape.

The importance of space and landscape in shaping minds and the world is constantly underestimated. Doreen Massey has pointed out that there is a tendency

in Western culture to see history (that is time) as an agent for social change and progress, such as when speaking of democracy or globalisation, instead of considering the importance of geography as well (that is space) (Wells, 2011: 12). Space, like time, is a site of inter-relations and therefore it concurs in shaping thoughts, culture and events. Paraphrasing Barad, space like matter is the conjunction of inter- intra- trans-relations between different elements. It is made of components not necessarily in the same timeframe or time plane, yet all affecting one another, in the same way as in quantum field theory particles can affect one another despite being spatially and timely apart. Space, and therefore the land, becomes an important element to shape the thought, identity and even spirituality of an entire nation and indeed humanity, thus its reclamation and queering become a fundamental process in the construction and consolidation of queerness/queer identities.

Landscape also becomes a discourse for imperialism, a process or movement that sees its expansion of culture and civilisation into space as a 'natural' progression (Mitchell, 2002: 17). There is indeed a sort of ritual of purification that is linked with Western ideas of landscape, an aesthetic that sees nature liberated from use-value, commerce or religious meanings into a contemplative representation of nature for its own sake. This vision sees 'the primitive' or Aboriginal/Indigenous dweller on the land as part of the landscape, and not as a detached viewer capable of seeing nature for its own sake and beauty as Westerners do (Mitchell, 2002: 265). There is also the sense that native people are incapable of exploiting, developing and improving the land, and this has served as an alibi for conquest and imperial expansion. This very capitalistic, imperialist, patriarchal vision of land as an entity to be exploited is completely culturally alien to most Native and First Nation people, but it has served Westerners well in their conquest of new lands. For example, there is no word for 'landscape' in any of the languages spoken by Native American or Canadian tribes, as generally they don't consider the land as something separate from themselves (or to be exploited, used and abused), rather they see earth as being part of people, and people being part of earth (Nemiroff et al, 1992: 61). Therefore, to the Indigenous the loss of land means not only the losing of farmland, hunting and fishing areas, that is food and sustenance, but simultaneously a spiritual loss of home, tradition and soul (Nemiroff et al, 1992: 60).

It is striking to realise that these notions of land, space and landscape are exclusively Western (non-Western cultures with a tradition of landscape aesthetics such as the Chinese are characterised as attributing a religious significance to the landscape, whereas other non-Western cultures are seen as oblivious to the aesthetic values of landscape (Mitchell, 2002: 265)), and came to prominence in Europe during the expansion of nations and the imperial age in the 18th century. With the conquest of new land, comes the 're-framing' or 'landscaping' of that new territory through Western eye and rules, conceived as an inevitable expansion of culture and civilisation, a sort of regulating a natural space into a modern, efficient one. Empires indeed move outward in space as a way of moving forward in time (Mitchell, 2002: 17). This movement represents the opposite of Muñoz's idea of queer time. For capitalism, the past is considered dead or fixed, therefore the only way is forward; progress is considered unstoppable, and conquering always new land and generating new profit is a natural occurrence. Instead of Muñoz's ecstasy, a conflation of different time and space planes for utopic horizons, we have 'straight time', a process of plunder, exploitation and death. It is also important to notice that this movement/process of ordering nature doesn't only go outward, but it is typically accompanied by a renewed interest in reshaping nature within the imperial centre, as it happened in the British Isles in the same period (18th century) with the enclosure movement and the loss of much of common land (Mitchell, 2002: 17).

There is a tension between questions of nature, landscape and wilderness. If a place is a specific location, with precise boundaries and a fixity in space and time, then this suggests that it doesn't occur naturally, rather it is created by humans through marks or signs or their actions; therefore, a wilderness equals to no place, to being placeless, suspended somehow in no time: nature that needs to be domesticated (Taussig, 2002: 350). If wilderness is placeless, it means it has no owner, and this is one of the excuses for much of land appropriation and conquest of Aboriginal and First Nation land by British and other (mainly European, but also American) governments. For Jack Halberstam (2020) instead, wildness can be used as an anarchic (queer) response to capitalism. In a post-colonial, post-natural world, wildness doesn't signal the untamed or the absence of modernity, but instead the desire to return (queerness) to the disorder. The fight against capitalism involves becoming wild, ungovernable. Wildness is the absence of order, it 'disorders desire

and desires disorder' (Halberstam, 2020: 7). This kind of (queer) desire is not directed to anarchy for its own sake; it is a desire for what is outside and beyond ourselves, to mix with the more-than-human and go beyond the 'order' of heteronormativity and patriarchy; it is to embrace Muñoz's ecstasy, longing for new connections that collide different timelines, spaces, stories and bodies. To become wild is to practice intimacy with all the components, beings and even vectors (time, space) around us. It is a very utopic process, a not-yet-here to aim to, more than something concretely possible to realise. Yet it is worth aspiring to.

The process of framing and shaping the land also brings questions of who has the right to use and enjoy it. In the UK, for centuries forests and other natural spaces were considered communal land, they could be used by local people to collect wood, food and herbs for their medicinal properties, among other things. This custom was ancient and allowed people, particularly the least wealthy, to get by and have their basic needs fulfilled. This right was protected and inscribed in the *Charter of the Forest* (Linebaugh, 2008: 6). With the enclosure of land in the 17th and 18th century, common people not only lost subsistence and independence, but also their cultural and spiritual connection with the land.

Silvia Federici, in her *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), demonstrates that it was women who suffered the most the enclosure of the land. Capitalism had to destroy 'the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife' (Federici, 2004: 10). It basically had to crush 'the wild'/ungovernable, the 'other' in order to subjugate the common people for its own benefit and for profit. What was lost in this capitalistic and cruel process was also magic, the ancient way of taking care of the community with herbs, for example, but also of forming relationships with the more-than-human, with the forest, the trees, animals or the moon and the cycles of the earth. Land became another capital asset, a market value to exploit.

There is another form of framing of nature that represents a sort of in-between space, a taming of the land that is less about exploitation or conquest, and more about pleasure, food production and even spiritual purposes. The garden is still a form of capitalistic enclosure; however, it can also become a space for reflection, enjoyment, or even embeds anti-capitalistic and anti-heteronormative ideas.

2.2 The garden

It is said that the origins of the garden go back as far as the history of humanity itself. In the book *The History of Gardens* (1997), Christopher Thacker traces the beginning of the garden with different human needs, distinguishing a 'farm garden' intended to provide food and linked to (the discover of) agriculture, from a sacred garden linked to spirituality. The garden seems to have been born out of the need to contain the production of food and/or religious practices in an enclosed space or within distinctive borders. Particularly interesting for this research is the 'sacred grove', a place apart consecrated to a spirit or divinity, a site in nature possessing mysterious and emotional qualities embodied by the trees, rocks, soil and any other natural material of that place (Thacker, 1997: 10). It's a remote space that possesses a 'spirit' of its own, where the gods might reside. Even though Thacker has no doubt that the first gardens were not made but found, such as natural spots in a clearing of a forest with trees bearing fruits (1997: 9), for example, in general the garden represents an attempt at controlling and possessing nature by humans.

The garden has been developed in many different forms by different cultures, representing and embedding different ideals, from the Persian and Islamic gardens to the Chinese, Japanese and European ones. Michel Foucault describes the garden as a heterotopic space, a form of otherness or 'other site', a world within a world mirroring and yet disrupting what is outside. Heterotopias are spaces where different sites that are usually incompatible converge into a singular real place (Foucault, 1986: 268). Following the Persian tradition, Foucault believed that the garden was meant to bring together the four parts of the world into one sacred space, which then became represented allegorically in the Persian rug. Interestingly, Foucault speaks of the garden, the theatre and the cinema as similar heterotopic spaces, as juxtaposing into one place different spaces, layers of tricks, make-believe and fakery. The garden, in this respect, is a sort of queer space, the creation of a separate entity where different rules apply, unsettling the normative reality system for utopic aims. Yet, for a space to be truly queer/queering needs to disrupt and undo heteronormative structures of society, which the garden in itself does not. The garden is in fact often associated with traditional and (hetero)normative ideas of order, morality and spirituality. In the West, the concept of the garden evolved from and is linked to the domination of nature and its exploitation. What in fact the garden in any

tradition or culture seems to entail is the (very patriarchal) quest for ordering and perfection of disorderly things, the imposing/positioning of the heterogenous parts of nature into fixed and preconceived rules and borders, the very position that queering strives to disrupt and undo.

Particularly important is when the garden stops being confined in an enclosed, specific place and begun expanding into the wider nature. In her book *Wanderlust* (2001), Rebecca Solnit illustrates how in the 18th century, the garden started to be built more and more to resemble nature and the wilderness, to then becoming indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape altogether at the end of the 18th century (Solnit 2001: 92). The garden becomes unnecessary, as one could find 'ready-made gardens' in the landscape. The gentry needn't be confined in their walled gardens, they could have all the land they wanted, they could walk a landscape made of their own (estate's) image. This 'total taming' of nature becomes the victory and conquest of patriarchy and capitalism over nature, besides representing the alibi for appropriating, plundering and exploiting of land through colonialism.

Solnit demonstrates how walking, particularly in Britain and the United States, was instrumental not only in building a specific idea of garden and landscape, but also in disrupting social classes and in forming an ecological movement. Indeed, if English aristocrats have always perceived their social order as natural, and their creation of gardens as a demonstration of the 'natural' pecking order of society, in the latter end of the eighteenth century many radicals, particularly Rousseau, shifted the discourse of nature, linking it with simplicity, virtuosity, childhood, feeling and democracy, portraying the social order as highly artificial and revolting against the privileged classes as only natural (Solnit 2001: 109). Walking in the wilderness became to signify aligning with nature, the poor, the uneducated and, in a radical reversal, the purest ones (Solnit 2001: 109). It is thanks to Rousseau, but also poets like Wordsworth and other writers and radicals, that walking out of the garden came to signify a movement to purity, a spiritual journey, a sort of pilgrimage to reconnect to the sacredness of nature, and with it a movement and a conscience to protect it for everybody to enjoy and from the greedy appetite of industrialisation, with its pollution and the avaricious, ever-expanding desires of the upper classes. As we shall see in

the next section, walking will become part of art practices concerned with the land and the environment, particularly in European land art.

Finally, the garden also connects to some forms of neo-materialism, being a space that has multiplicity, an assemblage of disparate entities, cultures and concepts all conflated in one place, an entanglement of fertile, porous physical and cultural/spiritual materials for utopic aims. Haraway urges us to 'collect up the trash of the Anthropocene [...] and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures' (Haraway, 2016: 57). To survive on this planet in the age of ecological, social and other catastrophes, we must become mad gardeners and create symbiotic relationships with the more-than-human, what she claims being 'nonarrogant collaboration with all those in the muddle' (Haraway, 2016: 56). The garden here becomes a utopic space of collaboration and becoming-with, to create new ways of being together. It's a new attitude we must embrace for our own survival as a species, one that goes beyond the constraints of a walled place toward the whole planet.

The garden can also become a space of disruption, of/for queering, a reclamation of a natural place for utopic alternative modes of being together in/with the natural, disrupting heteronormative systems and ideals. An example of this disruption is Derek Jarman's garden in Dungeness. After he was diagnosed HIV positive in 1986, he bought Prospect Cottage, a fisherman's house on the Kent coast sitting on a desolate headland, battered by the wind and next door to a nuclear power plant. Despite the harsh and desolate conditions, Jarman decided to create a garden, using flint stones and found objects, growing flowers and native plants through the shingles. In that strange otherworldly space he managed to create beauty, peace, solace and growth in unexpected ways, in stark contrast to the bleak reality of the place and his condition, as in those years being diagnosed of HIV equalled near certain death (Apperly, 2020). His way of gardening was non-traditional and anti-normative, using found driftwood and other crudely shaped pieces, or in its use of rough materials, of rust, lichens, rotting wood, henges, crosses and spirals, all objects scavenged along the coast (Zeiger, 2017: 5-6). It also encapsulates opposite components, in true heterotopic style, beauty with ugliness, utopian with apocalyptic, aspects of an AIDS memorial, together with referencing to Stonehenge, partly a

graveyard for those lost at sea, partly an anti-war and anti-nuclear protest site (Zeiger, 2017: 6).



Figure 10. The garden at Dungeness. Prospect Cottage c.1990 © Howard Sooley. Courtesy of the Garden Museum.

Chance plays a big component in his garden design, in the creation of a space that he termed 'modern nature', a natural space of the found, of the unwanted repurposed for new possibilities, where ideas of taming, control and order are inverted or relinquished. The found objects, like the queer, the HIV positive, or the non-white, immigrant and all the 'other' non-wanted people, find in Jarman's garden a new home, attentive care, solace and love, in the construction of a utopic and alternative space. Paraphrasing Muñoz, Jarman's garden, like utopia, 'is in fact a casting of a picture of potentiality and possibility' (2010: 125). Muñoz continues saying that this casting or imaging also brings an act of negation, that of the present for another time or place. Jarman's garden is a space of otherness, formed by a no-

longer-conscious (to use Muñoz's vocabulary) of discarded and found pieces that nobody wants but which Jarman sees as still flickering with potential and use, and/or a not-yet-here represented by a different utopic way of making and enjoying a garden and a space. 'My garden's boundaries are the horizon' (Jarman, 1991: 1) he declares in the first page of his book/journal *Modern Nature*, summarising in one sentence Muñoz's ecstatic utopic vision of queerness.

All the disparate elements of Jarman's garden become an assemblage of multiple entities, different timelines colliding in one space, rusty old found objects with new vital plants, life-growing elements in stark contrast with a potentially-life-annihilating nuclear power plant, camp colours and extravagant life against capitalistic exploitation of resources. His garden is a fertile 'humus', to use Barad's expression, where new possibilities are made visible in alternative modalities and relationships, a becoming-with of multiple entities for the reclamation of land by a queer, dying artist and visionary.

The disruption and queering potential of this garden rests also in its being, or becoming, a space for another place, or the idea of that place reimaged in a completely different setting. Michael Charlesworth, in his article about Jarman's garden, mentions Jarman's last partner Keith Collins saying that he always felt as if the garden was an attempt to 'attract other boys'. Charlesworth didn't understand this statement until he watched Jarman's film *Fire Island* (1974), in which its beach adorned with upright posts becomes a place for gay meeting, fraternisation and cruising (Charlesworth, 2015). The garden around Prospect Cottage is full of upright posts, maybe evoking *Fire Island*, making again this garden multi-layered and multiple in its references, domestic plants with cruising beaches, quintessentially British gardening with erotic utopia.

This garden is also the setting for one of his films aptly titled *The Garden* (1990), in which different images of Christian iconography are set against, such as a Madonna (played by a very young Tilda Swinton) harassed by paparazzi; a trans woman humiliated by cis women; Judas being hanged and used for credit cards' advertisement; Jesus walking beneath the power lines beside the nearby power station; a gay couple with a child whose idyllic life is interrupted when they are arrested, tortured and killed. These images are interspersed with footage of Jarman himself while attending to his garden, watering plants, putting a rosary made of

stones on a post, or finding a place for one of his found objects. The landscape around the garden and the cottage itself are always present and depicted in the film, including the cottage and the sea at its shore.

Shot in Super 8, much of its footage is tinted with intense, acid colours such as deep yellow, green, blue and red, making it highly saturated and surreal, affecting the viewer with a sense of pain and beauty combined, non-narrative overlapping scenes showing a sort of journey from a 'paradise lost' of homoerotic and queer-love life to the descent into violence and desperation, caused by a homo-queerphobic, heteronormative and patriarchal society. Jarman's health at the time of this film was deteriorating, having suffered a few AIDS-related illnesses, and this film seems to allude to his personal journey into the abyss of this disease and the hostility of the society of the time. It also embeds questions around spirituality induced by facing death, together with a strong rebuke of Christianity and other main religions for their lack of empathy and their homophobic views.

This film (and his other short Super 8 ones) has had a strong influence in my video making. Every time I make a video or edit one, I think of Jarman, his poetic use of images, the beauty of (queer) life and love that come through despite the violence and hate of society. I often try to utilise his non-normative use of colour, together with his non-linear editing as a conflation of different spaces and times. Film becomes more like a feeling, or a dream, something difficult to pin down but that stays with you for longer than expected. As with dreams, images become a sort of stream of consciousness, connections between things, spaces or beings that you might not expect and yet they make sense. Jarman's interspersed religious characters with images of his garden, for example, or episodes of violence next to images of him attending to his garden, resemble the kaleidoscopic vision of a dream; yet they create a powerful imagery, a sort of incantation that affects you in profound ways. My process is more a becoming-with than an emulation, a becoming humus with him/his filmmaking, as if after having absorbed/digested his films they could instil mine with some flickering seed, encapsulating his infectious vision. Jarman's use of natural material mixed with found objects and its garden creation have also inspired my work *Queer Rocks*, as I will describe in the last section of this chapter.

Much as landscape, the garden is a multifaceted entity incorporating different idea(l)s, cultures, systems of thought and even temporalities. It is a heterotopic space

or a space of otherness, and it can become or act as a queer space to (re)imagine alternative forms of relationships, kinships and communities, as in Jarman's example. It is also a space that has some magical and spiritual connotation, particularly connected to its ancient past. The garden ultimately is another way of appropriating and framing the land, using natural materials (and artificial one) to create a landscape within enclosed borders.

A different way of using natural material and the landscape is that of so-called land art, whose practices are not concerned with depicting the landscape, rather to engage it to provide an experience for both the artist and the viewer (Beardsley, 1998: 7), which is the focus of the next section.

2.3 Land art

In early 1968, a young American artist travelled to the vast expanse of the Mojave Desert, not far from Los Angeles, in search of a suitable place to create some new sculptural work. On the bed of the lake *El Mirage*, an appropriate name for a flat space of infinite possibilities, he created a few structures made of wood, and inserted them into holes dug in the dry soil (Tufnell, 2006: 6). His name was Michael Heizer and, together with a group of young artists, proposed innovative ways of creating sculptures and to experience and view the land.

This is only one of the many anecdotes which authors attributes to the beginning of the land art movement.² There is indeed no certain agreement on its inception; there is even no agreement on its name or in the fact that it is a movement at all, being rejected as such by most of its supposed members. It is a collection of different art practices and artists who never felt in or believed themselves to be part of a group, but that nevertheless are aggregated in that proposition because of

² 'Based on our research, the first occurrence of land art as a categorical term was Gerry Schum's use of it as the title of his 1969 film. Initially, in 1968, Schum considered "landscape art" as a possible title, but changed to the shortened version after discussions with Richard Long, Jan Dibbets and Barry Flanagan [...] Contrarily, according to Michael Heizer, "land art" was coined by Walter De Maria in 1967' (Keiser and Kwon, 2012: 17)

similar preoccupations and methodology. In the book *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, the authors describe the term 'land art', 'earth art' and 'earthworks' as somewhat interchangeably in contemporary art discourses, although the authors chose land art as in their opinion it is the more encompassing term (and it is also more prevalent in the European context) (Keiser and Kwon, 2012: 17). Interestingly, as we've seen the choice of the term 'land' links to ideas of possession and private property, instead of 'earth' which is, at least etymologically, connected to the soil, the planet Earth and its mud and dirt. It must be said that, like with any other art movement, this is just a label, a (patriarchal, normative) desire to order art practices by critics and theorists and not chosen by the artists involved in it. However, the choice or prevalent use of 'land' signifies a practice that is exclusionary, art that is a commodity despite the idea and stance of many of its artists of creating something beyond the traditional milieu of the gallery (and its market). This is even more evident for example in some works that use big portions of land such as Heizer's *City*, a vast complex of monumental structures in the Nevada Desert built on a piece of land purchased by the artist, where visitors need to buy an expensive ticket to be able to visit it.

In that singular trip to the desert in 1968, Heizer had encapsulated the essentialist and purist forms of minimalism (in the geometry of the sculptures, for example) together with the heroic gesture of abstract expressionism, his solitary walk in the desert, the shovelling of dirt (Tufnell, 2006: 6). Broadly speaking, land art sits within conceptualism and, more precisely, it can be considered part of minimalism. For others, it represents a form of post-minimalism (Tufnell, 2006: 49). The great Italian art critic and curator Germano Celant included land art in *arte povera* for its use of natural materials, and its interest in the sculptural dimension of nature itself (Keiser and Kwon, 2012: 123).³ Land art also emerged in a context that wanted to

³ During an interview with Keiser and Kwon and speaking of the exhibition in Amalfi in October 1968 *Arte Povera + Azioni Povere*, Celant also underlined the performative aspect of the art object (and land art), comparing these artworks in the tenet of the situationists because of their coming into being within a specific context and in a specific moment, going beyond the rigidity of minimal art but instead manifesting a dynamic condition, a transformation or 'releasing of energy' that would keep on living because of the natural living elements that those first artwork were made of (Keiser and Kwon, 2012: 125). Others, like George Maciunas, credited instead the French artist Ben Vautier, a key figure

break away from the idea of the artist as a transcendental hero, the cult of the persona embodied by American post-war abstractionists (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 12) and embedded in the modernist idea of art, together with challenging the object-based economy of art. Yet many land art figures became heroic, solitary geniuses or heroes facing nature and the elements to create art.

My attempt in this chapter is not only to review this art movement connected to forms of reclamation of the land, but also to try and see it through an eco-queer neo-materialistic lens, for then using some of its methods in my practice. Although it might feel anachronistic or unfair to speak of these artworks in these terms, as at the time none of the artists involved thought of their work and process in this manner, through my framework this view can 'be activated' and its set of tools can become a means of/for queering.

If some aspects of this movement can be viewed as a form of unsettling and disrupting of traditional and normative modes of making and experiencing art, its process cannot be considered a form of queering, lacking an anti-heteronormative intent. Although one of its most prominent artists, Robert Smithson, thought of and wrote about his work (and of others) in a way that was 'additive, baroque, multi-vocal, and perverse' (Weinstein, 2016). For example, in a now-famous essay called *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967), Smithson speaks of a structure connected to a fountain as:

'It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed "homosexual tendencies," but I

of the Fluxus movement, to have 'launched' what became known as land art. Vautier, particularly with his series *Terrain Vague*, where he set up a sign that read 'terrain vague' in various locations that could be classified as wastelands, echoed a gesture part of the preoccupations/realm of nouveau réalisme and arte povera, but extending its context 'not only to the material complexity of the everyday life and its rubbish, but to the world itself as site and place' (McFadden, 2012: 44). Robert Smithson, in his article *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* in *Artforum* (1968), cited Yves Klein and his interest in material form, action and site as a kind of manifesto of the artists involved in the early earthworks of those years therefore indicating Klein as an influence.

will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, “It was there.” (Smithson, 1967: 50)

His way of writing is rich, witty and shows a willingness to queer the landscape he was witnessing during his walk. The view of this (old) monument to capitalism and entrepreneurship is transformed into a sexual being sodomising the land. Therefore, some indirect willingness or tendency to queer the land can be found in Smithson’s writings, embodying an activity, set of aesthetics or practices aimed to disrupt normative visions of the land and nature.

There is a tendency to ‘cleanse’ and sanitise Smithson’s work by the contemporary market/gallery/critical system, but his writings and work were more porous and ‘strange’ than what is usually acknowledged. For example, his famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970) had no moral concerned connected to it, it wasn’t about the environment as some contemporary writers describe it now, but it polluted the land without any second thought. The spiral is made of mud, salt crystal and basalt rocks moved and positioned to create a massive 460-metre-long coil in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, disrupting the eco-system of the lake. Weinstein states that ‘[t]he blurred totality of the experience of place, for Smithson, was a product of entropy, of order transforming into chaos. Entropy was not terrifying to Smithson, it was transporting’ (Weinstein, 2016). His process was about transformation, or at least seeing the land from a different perspective, often one that is unconventional and odd. Instead of a process of transformation from chaos to order, as a normative, patriarchal action would dictate, his process was anti-normative and anarchic in the sense that it aimed to dismantle order, to create structures in nature that would question the rigid solidity of land and its uses, often utilising the solidity of geometric shapes or structures. Transformation, or better trans-formation, is a key principle in Barad’s system of thought, thus making Smithson’s oeuvre a compelling case of neo-materialistic endeavour. Like particles in quantum field theory, there’s no morality attached to their movement and behaviour, it is only an activity, a natural occurring of meddling, fusing, affecting, becoming-with, transforming one another. Equally, Smithson’s interest and aim was to transform the land, either materially with his earthworks or immaterially with his writings, an entropic activity implicit in his artistic process without any moral pursue.

What all the artists connected to land art – such as Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Walter de Maria – had in common was to disrupt how art was made and enjoyed, the idea of leaving the city and the gallery space behind to create art in nature and with the land. Their aim was to break away from the tradition and the institutionalisation of art, creating works in remote areas and using mainly natural elements such as rocks, soil, mud and wood. It must be said that most of them were already established artists represented by important galleries, were supported by wealthy patrons and, despite making work in nature, they would come back to galleries and city hubs such as New York to show their work or pictures of it. Nevertheless, their move was ground-breaking and brave. For this research, it's their shift of focus on the land and its viewing, transforming or framing in a different way that is key, together with the use of natural material in their art practices.

An important aspect for these artists was their engagement with spatial concerns, which included a rethinking of social relations, space, the body, the land and who had access to it. Many were interested in creating an alternative space (or simply to alter a place) through their earthworks applying various strategies, which included the cut or removal of land; its replacement, for example through transferring materials from one context to another; duration, considering space as a factor of time; decay, through the decomposition of material; transfer of energy, marking, dispersion and other processes (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 29), which were aimed at dematerialising the art object and questioning its nature. There is a disruptive purpose in their practice, a willingness to undo and unsettle, which even though not queer in its intent, it represents nevertheless an activity aimed at 'disturbing' the status quo and at the creation of a 'space of otherness'.

A project which encapsulates these concerns is Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), two massive cuts on either side of a narrow canyon near Overton, Nevada, creating a space in-between the two aligned cuts. This empty space is certainly one of disruption and undoing of the normative continuity of nature, although from a contemporary and ecological perspective we might look with horror at such an invasive and destructive use of natural material. We could also say this work is a sort of activation of a space in reverse, the activation happening by subtraction, by taking away matter, by the impossibility of experiencing it if not from afar, by looking at that void from a distance.

This void implies a presence that extends between the two cuts, but which at the same time is absent (Tufnell, 2006: 51). It is a process to create a non-object, or as Heizer himself explained, an object or form that is actually not there, a form of sculpture that is about removal instead of accumulation (Tufnell, 2006: 51). *Double Negative* is also an impossibility, it is a monument to nothing and yet it is a sculpture (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 29); it is a complete dematerialisation of the art object and yet it is made by bulldozers, explosive and a huge amount of manpower and money, together with the ownership of that specific land, a sort of anti-capitalist stance with very capitalistic efforts. It is also intrinsically American in its scale and link/fascination with the desert; Heizer indeed declared that he wanted to create an American form of art which would reject the historic fine-art traditions of Europe (Tufnell, 2006: 46).

This fascinating yet environmentally horrific work can be read or re-imagined from a queer neo-materialistic perspective through many levels. It is such a bold, theatrical, even camp attempt, a sort of 'middle finger' to art institutions, unsettling/undoing what a work of art should be or do. Furthermore, a void, in neo-materialistic terms, is never empty but always 'pregnant' with particles and life, even though human eyes can't perceive it. Barad says that 'the void is a virtual exploration of all manner of possible trans*/formations' (2015: 412). Through this cut, the land has been trans-formed, made trans because deviated from its continuation, creating a different space in-between. This cut represents a space of virtual otherness, particles of dust and other atomic matter connecting the two sides and creating an in-between space, pulsing with all its destructive yet alive irreverence. Still, despite its great potentiality and vision, its destruction of nature makes this work upsetting and insensitive of local flora, fauna and Indigenous people who live in those areas and might have spiritual or other attachments to it. There is present a very macho-patriarchal idea connected to this artwork of using force, of exploiting the land for any human will (or whim) without care, which I find troubling and contrary to any eco-queer project. For more eco-friendly works, we need to look at the work of women of the same period, other land artists who didn't receive the same level of recognition because of their gender.

Another important notion and legacy from the first few years of land art was the '*Non-site*', which was both the title of some of Robert Smithson's works and a spatial concept. Smithson started making *Non-sites* in 1968, arranging in gallery

spaces rocks and other natural materials in rigid, geometric containers, a composition typical of minimalism, yet he 'continually transgressed' the gallery's borders with the inclusion of photographs and maps of places from where those materials were taken (Kandel, 1995), connecting them from the gallery in an imaginary link/line. Smithson's *Non-sites* directed the viewers to the original sites, establishing a dialogue or 'dialectic' relationship between site and non-site (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 31), between the artwork in the gallery and the physical place they were originally in.

The 'in-betweenness' of the *Non-site* and its relational aspect destabilised the concept of site, but also put a new emphasis on questions relating to time, duration and space. These works seem more about absence than presence, objects that refer to another place, relating to displacement. Marcel Duchamp, with his *Readymade*, was already considering notions of site/non-site and displacement, how the meaning of an object is changed by its removal to another site (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 31). Unlike the *Readymade*, the *Non-site* maintains a connection to its original site, through documentation (photograph, map) and the negative impression it leaves on its original place because of its removal (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 31). As with Heizer's *Double Negative*, the *Non-sites* represent a sort of queer space, an in-between one of presence and absence, of being in one place yet referring to another (distant) one, a representation of something that is never fixed or rigid, always in-flux and transmutable; (and in neo-materialist terms) matter that changes its properties or qualities or way of affecting the environment when moved to a complete different setting, yet still somehow connected to its origins by an invisible link, particles in fact that are never apart, always somehow touching, connected through time and space, through the ether which is full of potentiality and transformative (quantum) connections.

Finally, another important concept connected to land art is that of framing, of creating a new dialogue with the environment through an alternative physical framework, resting on the notion that seeing a portion of land from a different viewpoint/perspective might generate new ideas, discussions and relations. This becomes particularly evident when the surrounding landscape is faced with or viewed from a large earthwork. Framing the land differently means to 'read' it and experience/activate it in a different way. Framing also involves and reveals a different timeframe. James Crump, in his documentary film *Troublemakers: The Story of Land*

Art (2015), addresses the big earthworks of the time as framing devices, orienting tools in the overwhelming vastity of the desert. He also speaks of temporal relevance, as these works are usually permanent or even, they will probably outlast humanity. Confronting these works means to tackle deep or even geological time, the time of the land, of its rocks and its slow, imperceptible mutations. It also means to confront our human insignificance.

An example is Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973-1976), whose structure made of four concrete tunnels in the Great Basin Desert, Utah is positioned precisely to frame the sun as it rises and sets during the summer and winter solstices, while small holes pierced in the tunnels project in their interior the light of four different constellations (Draco, Perseus, Columba and Capricorn) (Holt, 1977). The accurate positioning of this work forces the viewer to confront the cyclical time of the solar year, but also a more cosmic, deep time of those constellations. The reference to Neolithic sites such as Stonehenge is evident, although Holt claimed she had no desire to make a megalithic monument, rather to bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale, giving a visual reference point in the too overwhelming landscape of the desert (Holt, 1977).



Figure 11. Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, 1973-1976

All these concepts linked to the 1960s-70s land art are instrumental for a process of reclamation of land and they unsettle and disrupt normative modalities of creating art and utilising, perceiving and framing the landscape. These attitudes helped me consider the environment from a non-normative perspective, thinking about presence/absence, materiality/immateriality and space as a form of in-betweenness or otherness, informing my practice. However, these first land artworks are enormous, inconsiderate of their ecological damage, a bunch of white, patriarchal white men playing with the land to show how big and bold they could get.

For more ecological-minded practices we need to look at women. Some artists in the second half of the 1960s, particularly women and mainly from performance art, had already moved away from the object toward process and experience. Artists like Ana Mendieta, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Yoko Ono and many others, with a few male exceptions like Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and Joseph Beuys, started to challenge the formalism and rigidity of minimalism towards more ephemeral forms of artmaking. This shift was heavily influenced by feminist critique of the same period, and curators and thinkers like Lucy Lippard started to speak of post-Minimalism (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 16). In the next chapter, I will focus on Ana Mendieta and her process involving the land and its spiritual connections. What is important to underline here is that women artists focused on everyday processes like washing, cleaning, gardening, all activities linked to nurturing, caretaking and conventionally associated with the feminine; when they turned their attention to the land, they started to engage with environmental preoccupations (Kastner and Wallis, 2005: 16). Environmentalism had already started in the US with Thoreau and then Muir, but became prominent in the 1960s, at the same time when land art was forming and developing.

In Britain, for geographical, historical and cultural reasons, land art developed and morphed into more diminutive, subtle, meditative tones. If many American land artists seemed not to have any respect for the environment, as Hamish Fulton declared (Beardsley, 1998: 44), British and European ones have had a more reverential approach and use of nature since the beginning. David Nash declared: 'I want a simple approach to living and doing. I want a life and work that reflects the balance and continuity of nature' (Beardsley, 1998: 47). Not having the abundance and vastity of land of their American counterparts made artists turn inwards, and connect to the natural elements mainly in ephemeral, transient, non-invasive ways. If

landscape is embedded in its fixity in the consciousness and fabric of the land, like in Britain, centuries of land shifting but also of idealising the countryside and its sense of place, the possibilities of using the land as art material become limited. Walking felt a good way to start a practice in nature, or even as an art practice in its own right. Walking became the main process for many British artists such as Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Andy Goldsworthy, and their art practice a way of life. Solnit says that walking is how the body measures itself against the earth (2001:31), engaging the body and the mind with the world, a sort of 'knowing the world through the body and the body through the world' (2001:29).



Figure 12. Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking* (1967)

Richard Long has made walking his main practice, wandering in many lands both in Britain and abroad. Sometimes, his walks are connected to specific events, like the walk from *Stonehenge to Glastonbury on Midsummer's Day* (1972), two of the most sacred locations for Neopagans but also for the many New Age followers and spiritual practitioners. Of this experience, Long has left us a rather touristy

photograph of Glastonbury Tor immersed in a dreamy sunset, a sort of archetypal image of Britain. During the solar eclipse of 1999, he again decided to walk from Stonehenge to Cornwall this time (Malpas, 2012: 109), a sort of pilgrimage to celebrate this celestial event. His intervention in the landscape is minimal, sometimes he creates some shapes like a circle with local found stones; at times he brings these stones to the gallery in his exhibitions; other times he uses writing, a sentence or two encapsulating what he has experienced during his walks or the place he has seen; yet it's usually walking that is his main practice and the focus of his work. Furthermore, during his career, Long has produced many photographs during his walks of (sacred) boulders, stone cairns and various stone circles. Like many other land artists, the connection and allusion to ancient monuments and land is important and stressed, as if connecting their art to a deep past and deep time makes it timeless. William Malpas goes even further in saying that 'the land artist is the contemporary equivalent of the priests and hieratic sects' who created those Neolithic structures, a spirituality which only a few land artists speak about, but which is definitely present in their work (Malpas, 2012: 111).

Through walking and other more diminutive actions, an ephemeral reclamation of land is generated, a sort of marking of the passage of these artists in the landscape, embedding forms of disruption. For example, in the now famous and seminal work *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), Long affects and transforms a natural space through the action of repeatedly walking on it, creating a line. This in turn generates a space of disruption, a line that shouldn't be there but that instead is purposely made as an act of reclamation of that space. Another example is Goldsworthy's creation of strange, odd, improbable structures made with twigs, leaves and other natural materials. Sometimes, he uses colourful leaves and positions them to form circles or other geometrical structures, or he sticks them with water on a branch like in figure 39 (page 79), generating a very colourful, unnatural and odd section of the wood. This could be read as queer or an act of reclamation and marking of his passage, albeit ephemeral.

It could be argued that despite their ephemeral and diminutive attitude, at times their gesture could feel heroic and macho, the idea of the solitary man/artist challenging the elements and nature, moving heavy rocks or imposing on the land rigid geometric shapes and lines. Yet, their reverence and connection to nature, at

time imbued with spiritual connotations, makes their practice more in tune with the purpose of this research. These more intimate, small-scale actions are methods I wanted to employ, emulate and disrupt in my quest for queering the land. With my practice, I try to use some of their methods in a porous, fluid way: for example, walking becomes wandering and cruising with the more-than-human; rocks are painted in garish, camp colours, as I will describe in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Another important example is Hamish Fulton. Like Long and Goldsworthy, Fulton's practice is based on walking, yet unlike the other two he never makes any mark in the land, instead he usually takes just a photograph that evokes either the landscape or his state of mind (Beardsley, 1998: 44). His attitude is purposely anti-heroic and reverential of nature. In a way, Fulton can be considered the most ephemeral and anti-heroic artist of the group. Words are also very important for his practice; sometimes they evoke his walking or a particular moment during it, being added to a photograph of a place he passed through; other times, he uses just text to convey his feelings about the journey and other thoughts. For example, *This Is Not Land Art* (2004) is an example of work employing only words and shapes (that of a mountain), concisely stating the route of a walk to the summit of a mountain and detailing some information like the metres and the date. The main statement and title are indicative of his thought regarding the land art movement, which he doesn't consider being part of.

Fulton's view is more romantic and pastoral, embedding the idea that nature is already a work of art, thus a photograph and/or some texts are enough to encapsulate and evoke its experience. There is also present a sense of veiled spirituality in his work, the artist becoming a sort of pilgrim using walking to find a higher truth or a deeper self. In the introduction of *Wanderlust*, Solnit speaks of walking as a spiritual activity of connecting the past with the present, moving through space like a thread through fabric and sewing it together into a conscious experience, instead of chopping time and space travelling by planes, trains or cars (2001: 15). Through walking, Fulton (but also Long and Goldsworthy) connects his body with the land, a collision of present moments with the deep past of the soil, rocks and all the other particles that form the assemblage of the environment he travels through. Through this activity, an exchange of time, experience and particles happen between

human and more-than-human, which becomes spiritual in the sense that it (in)forms a process of becoming-with or making-kin with nature. Through this, human and more-than-human exchange, enrich, mingle and fuse one another on equal terms and through kinship, particularly in Fulton's case as he doesn't take from or affect much nature, except from his being there and walking in it.

All these (British/European) works have in common the idea of slowing down, of experiencing the land by foot, for many days and without leaving any trace of their passage except by using only natural elements. There's also a spiritual sense connected to these artforms, walking becoming a meditative practice, of knowing the land through their passage and therefore becoming part of it, and being changed by the action of experiencing nature.

An interesting development of land art has been environmental and/or ecological art. Environmental art has emerged in North America and Europe in the 1970s and since the 1990s has become a much bigger movement, embracing a range of contemporary practices that investigate the interconnectedness between human and more-than-human (Cheetham, 2018: 1). Environmental artists, like European/British land art, aim to work in harmony with nature rather than disrupt it, considering their impact on the environment as individuals and of their artmaking. Although these art movements are just labels, which sit uncomfortably in a project focussing on queering (as by definition queering aims to blur/go across/dismantle borders and labels), all these artists had/have a big influence on many contemporary practices. Their example of approaching and connecting to the land in more respectful ways is paramount, together with diminutive and anti-heroic gestures.

One example is Charlotte Prodger's video *Bridgit* (2016), which incorporates many attitudes of British land and environmental artists, while at the same time embedding a queer perspective. In *Bridgit*, Prodger shows the ragged Scottish landscape while narrating her thoughts and struggles of being lesbian in a rural setting, nature becoming a witness and even an interlocutor/listener of the artist's reflections. Shot entirely with an iPhone, its fragmented narrative is made of personal emails, anecdotes, found text, shots from home, quotes from theorists and writers, and information about the Neolithic deity who goes by the name of Bridgit and other similar names, depending on the place, culture or context. By mixing different voices, contexts and sources, public knowledge and private thoughts, Prodger illustrates

different landscapes, colliding external ones with the landscape of the mind, in a journey that becomes utterly poetic and beautiful.

The influence of British land art is present in the idea of the journey through the Scottish land which, although not solely based on walking, is slow, reflective and informed by ephemerality. Like Fulton, nothing is changed, transformed or moved; through her video new connections with the land can be established, adding to the ancient landscape an additional layer, which is her queer experience. The landscape becomes material embedding and shaping our identity, thought and spirit, in a relationship that is multi-faceted and multidimensional. There's a sense that Prodger and the Scottish land are entwined, meshed and intimately connected in a sort of making-kin. Text is also present. As with Long or Fulton, she adds some words or sentence in the video, or more in general she substitutes writing with her narrating voice.

The use of writing and text in video is something I have used in some of my videos too. *Bridgit* has also given me the freedom to make art with any means or tools, using my iPhone or any other medium without worrying too much of their legitimacy. Furthermore, it represents an important example of creating a relationship with the environment as a queer person, connecting a deep past (the Neolithic stone circle of her video, but also the myths connected to Bridgit) with contemporary issues and her identity as a queer woman in rural Scotland. By invoking and reappropriating this deep past, Prodger not only legitimises her queer presence in the landscape (for example with some evidence or hint that Bridgit was a queer deity), but transforms and queers it by making it part of herself and herself part of the land.

In conclusion, land art had/has great queer/ing potentials in its vision and construction of in-between spaces, in disrupting the normative experience of a natural place creating structures and framing the land from a different perspective. It also showed how through more diminutive gestures and simply by walking, the land could be reframed and reclaimed, creating a sort of space of otherness; some artists also showed how a few words or a photograph inspired by a long walk might generate new ideas, connections, reframing(s) and alternative visions. Paraphrasing Muñoz, the gesture of these artists was one of interruption of the normative flow of time, movement and space, a utopic process aiming at opening new horizons and futurities, although it cannot be completely queer as it lacked a specific social

relational component proper of a so-called 'queer space' (Muñoz, 2010: 91). They lacked an intentionality, or citing Muñoz again, they lacked both a cultural and an affective surplus of queerness, a queer utopian hermeneutic that aims at queer relational formations within the social (Muñoz, 2010: 28).

My practice attempts to add a queer intentionality, borrowing or channelling some of land art methods but disrupting them. The attempt at queering its methods rests on a different way of using things, perverting them. Sara Ahmed describes queer use as a reuse or recycle of something to reorient its relation to a scene that holds its place (2019: 198). To pervert something means to deviate it from a normative use or use something improperly. By using the same methods but in a perverted way, new queer relationships with the land can be formed. These attempts are not merely an academic exercise; they are in fact a way to reclaim natural space by leaving a trace and marking the territory. It's through this process, albeit ephemeral and diminutive, that a sign or a seed of my passage as a queer body in nature can be actualised, a sort of 'I've been there and reclaimed/declared this space mine/ours too'.

What follows is the description of two projects I started at the beginning of my PhD, which coincided with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. One is *Cruising the Forest*, a photographic work I started in March 2020; the other one is *Queer Rocks*, in which I have used some natural material (rocks and pebbles), walking, photography and paint. I will change the register of my voice utilising a creative one, a way of writing that better elucidates the work. In a sense, I try to use my writing voice in a 'materialist way', words that like matter can affect the reader, trying to infuse/get infected by Kathy Acker, Linda Stupart and Paul Preciado. This way of writing is also contaminated by Smithson, with his odd, rich, even queer ability to convey a scene or an artwork. By writing in this fashion, a utopic process can more easily be accessed or produced, creating a hermeneutic of queer relational formations between myself, my artwork and the land.

2.4 Cruising the Forest

I was walking in the thick of the forest, fresh damp was caressing my face and body as if to welcome or warn me of something mysterious, which I couldn't grasp and yet was lurking underneath the lush green foliage and brown mud underneath my feet. Oh, how I wished to be barefoot and feel that mud on my soles. But it was too cold for that, I'm not so wild after all. I was dreaming of being somewhere else, somewhere warm, home. Somehow that forest felt like home, an inviting syren luring me in, yet foreign in its shadowy paths. I felt an erotic electric feeling releasing its energy from some remote crevice within, as if somehow the energy of this forest was connecting with some sacred and secretive internal space and pressing a magic button, hormones electrifying my limbs and wanting for more, for contact with other bodies and bushes and the dirt of the soil and flesh and the dark corners where humans can meet and share their skins. But it was in the midst of a world pandemic, I was alone and very careful not to mix my breath with other breaths.

I had this luscious forest near home, I felt very privileged; it was my other half now, my lover, an extension of my body, my body even, and I was walking in it as much as I could, eagerly, every day, with my camera more connected to my feelings than my brain, of wanting to photograph and depict not what I was seeing, but what was behind the surface, beyond the visible aggregate of atoms which hide a more shadowy and intriguing reality, that of magic and pleasure and other utopic horizons.

In fact, I wanted to depict the forest as a magical space, activating it with my walking, as Richard Long and other artists have done before me, not for contemplative or meditative purposes, rather to establish a transformative mutual effect, on me and it, mixed with sexual desires difficult to contain in a body constrained in a pandemic. I wanted to 'open' the forest for queer people, make it our space, a sort of spell created by my body flirting with it and through the pixels of my camera.

Walking became a daily practice, a solace in the utter craziness/loneliness of lockdown, a way of breathing in that vaginal triangle that is Epping Forest, sprawling out through suburbia toward the countryside, promising for more wilderness beyond. I used to enter this green place with trepidation mixed with a yearning for more, for other spaces, or better for a space that is other, an alternative reality where I was

with other queer bodies, sharing with a group the joys and burdens of being alive. Often, the forest, with its erect trees (beautiful strong wooden penises), thorny bushes and mud was all that I wanted, its fresh musty breath on me, the sound of its branches and leaves exposed to the fiddly wind, the sun flickering through and promising for some warmth, and the birds calming my thoughts. I was cruising with the forest and I'm sure the forest was cruising with me, I felt it. It was looking at me, following me with its gaze in my wandering in/within its body, my flesh caressing its leaves and barks, meandering ever closer, inside, in the darker parts of its flesh. It was a platonic relationship, but I was glad of our renewed connection and bond.

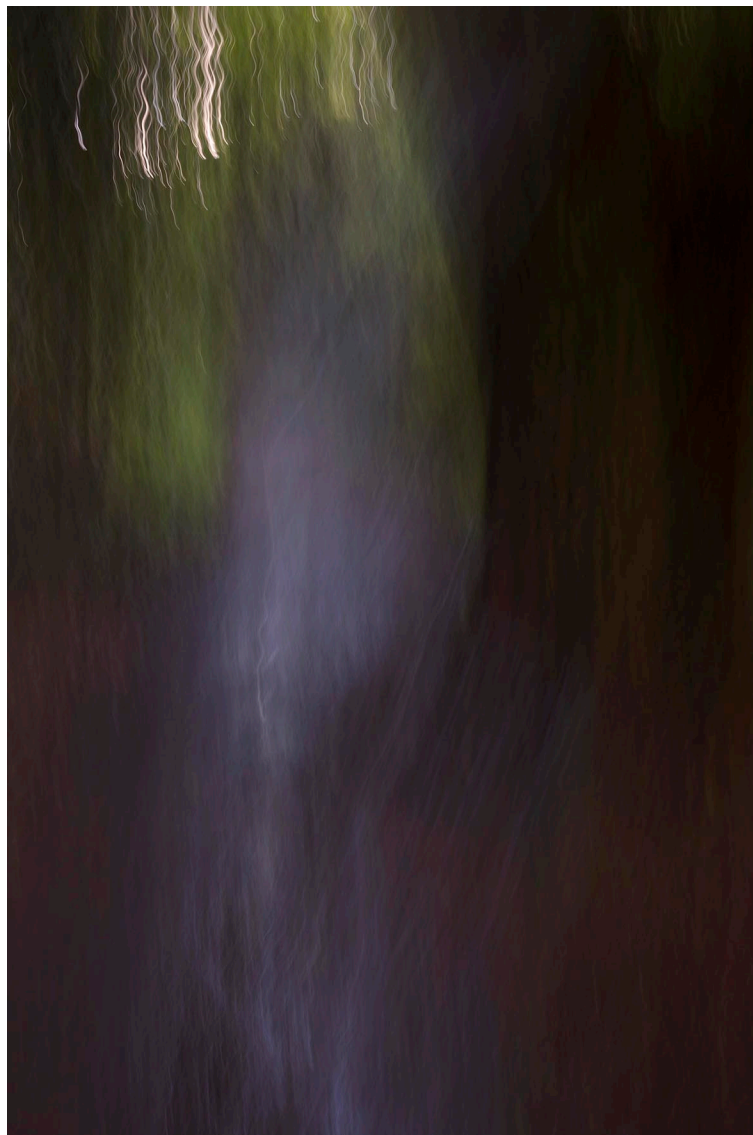


Figure 13. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, from the series Cruising the Forest, 2020.

Revisiting now these first photographic attempts, I can see an implicit desire to acquire/activate knowledge experiencing the forest as equal. In my mind I had Laura

Aquilar's practice of positioning her body and experiencing nature in a different way, activating knowledge by differently being in the land, although aesthetically the images are a collision of colours, shapes and pixels. My process was closer to the overlaying process of videos like Barbara Hammer or the unnatural and acid colours of Derek Jarman. Yet the links with these works were tenuous, the desire to experiment much greater.

Out of all those feelings, moments, perceptions, mutual understanding (misunderstanding?), I have produced a series of out-of-focus images, with heightened, hyper-realistic colours, exaggerating their vibrancy because the photographs couldn't do justice to those moments, or because campness is more appropriate for this kind of encounters. In a post-natural world, the line between natural and unnatural is more porous or loses meaning completely. By blurring the depiction of a landscape and exaggerating its colours, the essence of camp is actualised. Susan Sontag defines camp as the love of artifice and exaggeration, emphasising style over content (1964: 1). The camp aesthetics, usually associated with the urban, becomes entrenched with (post)nature, creating artificial, out-of-focus, exaggeratedly coloured pictures, fusing the fantastic, the passionate and the naïve, and becoming similar to what Sontag calls 'pure camp' (1964: 16).

At the beginning, I was lured, nearly hypnotised, by the shapes that light would form in the photographs thanks to overexposing them, smoke-like white forms floating in the air, as if nature's energy would coalesce into bright semen-like or foam patterns, or ghosts mysteriously appearing only in the picture, as a reminder of otherworldly figures lurking just beyond our limited human perceptions. The effect at times was too ornate, rather Baroque in its appearance; often, some pictures looked as if mimicking Impressionism, as if the impression of light was more important than the subject itself, the experience rather self-indulgent and superficial. I also tried different effects and techniques, taking for example 'straight' photographs, trees and bushes in focus, and then using the Photoshop's 'Invert Adjustment Layer' to modify them, thinking that 'inverting' an image would be rather appropriate for my process. The otherworldly effect and brightness of the colours was appealing, but the process itself too literal.

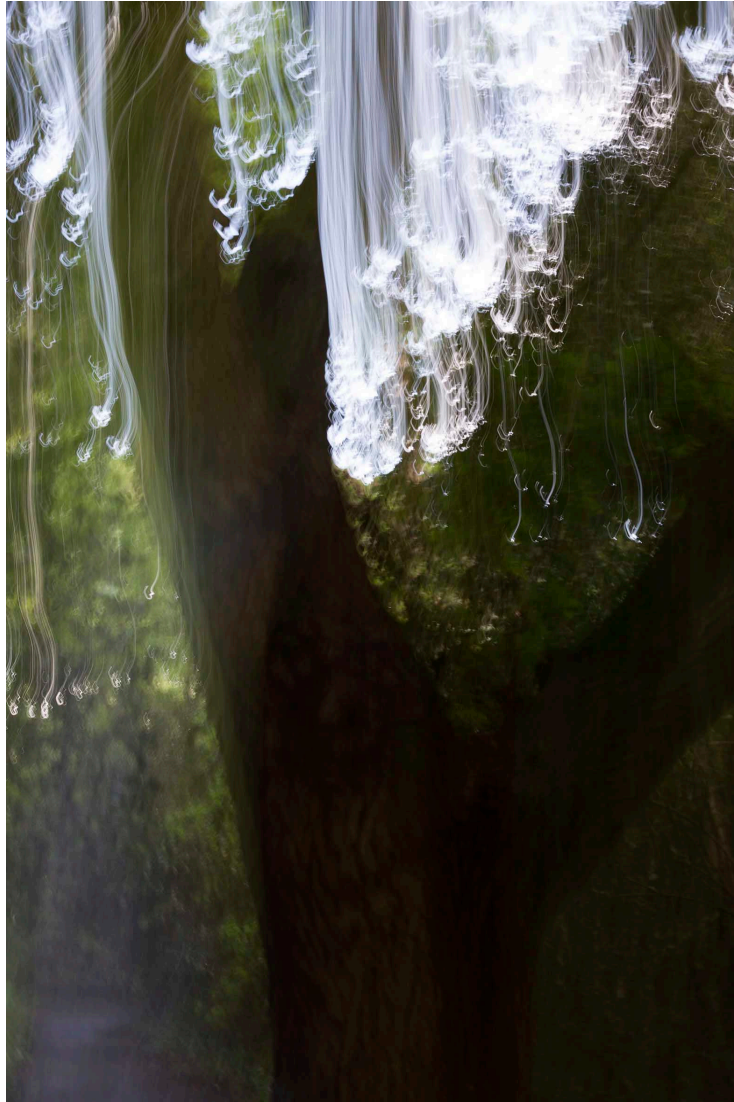


Figure 14. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, from the series Cruising the Forest, 2020.

After a series of attempts, more pleasure than frustration as my contact with the forest nurtured and gratified me, I found that a 'mild' overexposure and blurriness was the best result, a sort of 'short fuzz', as when a bell is hit by a mallet and chimes, visualising for a few seconds the vibration of the sound into the blurriness of the bell's edges. With Photoshop then I would change/modify the intensity of colours, exposure and contrast, giving the picture a more otherworldly, magical, mysterious appearance. In this process time was of the essence, so to speak, overexposure thus as slowing down, dragging time for longer fractions of second, an enormity in photography. It was as if to transform reality one needs to delay, hold back, restrain, impede or hamper even, modifying our relation or perception of time in order to see beyond the surface, visualising patterns of colours and a world beyond what is considered reality, normative reality that is, for an otherworldly vision. It is as if I

wanted to scry (nature and/or these images) to perceive an alternative way of being with the forest, activating this ancient space in the present for a futurity of utopic queer possibilities.

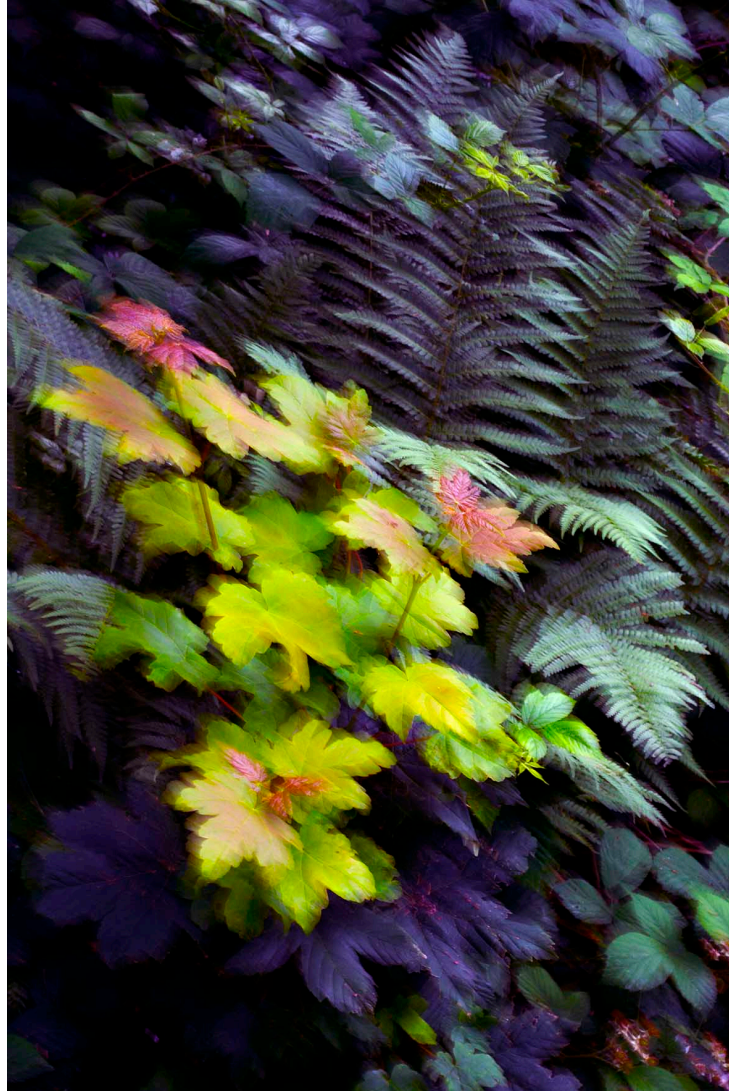


Figure 15. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, from the series Cruising the Forest, 2020.

These photographs also (rather literally) show the vital energy of matter, its vibration, as an electrocardiogram shows the pulsing of the heart, digital pixels embodying the pulsating force of particles in nature. It is as if through this fuzzy depiction, matter is shown in the act of becoming looser and more porous, and therefore more readily mixable and set for a making-kin process. In a way, these images try to show the intrinsic queerness of matter and nature, together with its embedded spiritual quality, its vibration which becomes a sort of invitation for mixing/transforming in multispecies ways, together with a portal for a new dimension and reality.



Figure 16. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Cruising the Forest*, medium format, 2020.

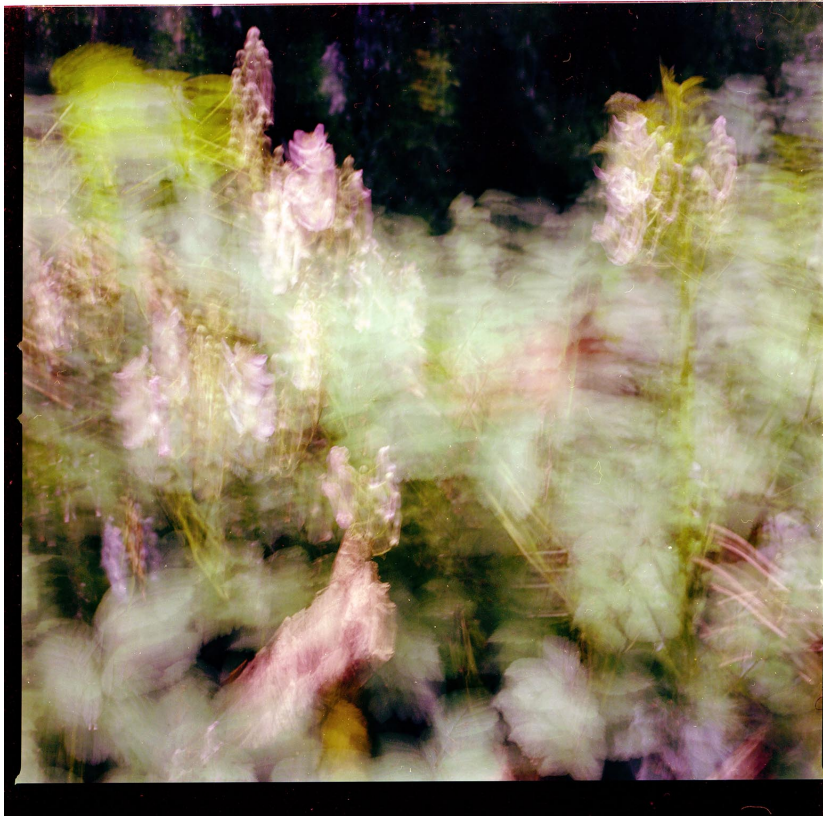


Figure 17. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Cruising the Forest*, medium format, 2020.

I have used the same technique with boulders and Menhirs, particularly at Avebury in the ancient Neolithic site, depicting these big rocks as vibrating magical entities in the now-sanitised English countryside, a reminder that in ancient times these places were sacred, they had a magical purpose. I have also experimented with medium-format film, the difficulty heightened by the impossibility of seeing the effects in the camera screen; some of these photographs are rather beautiful in their vibrant colours, becoming more abstract and fluid, less intelligible and relying more on chance.



Figure 18. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, Avebury, 2020.

Eventually, the process became rather repetitive. Yet, this work has been foundational for a relationship with the land based on equal and post-natural attitudes, together with a form of aesthetics which will be embedded in my later

videos. These images also made me realise how difficult it is to activate a process of queering without the body but relying solely on the land and its depiction. An evolution of this work will be by using creative writing, sound pieces and videos together, through which a multi-layered approach of mixing images, text, sexual references and landscape can be obtained, thus queering the land more effectively.

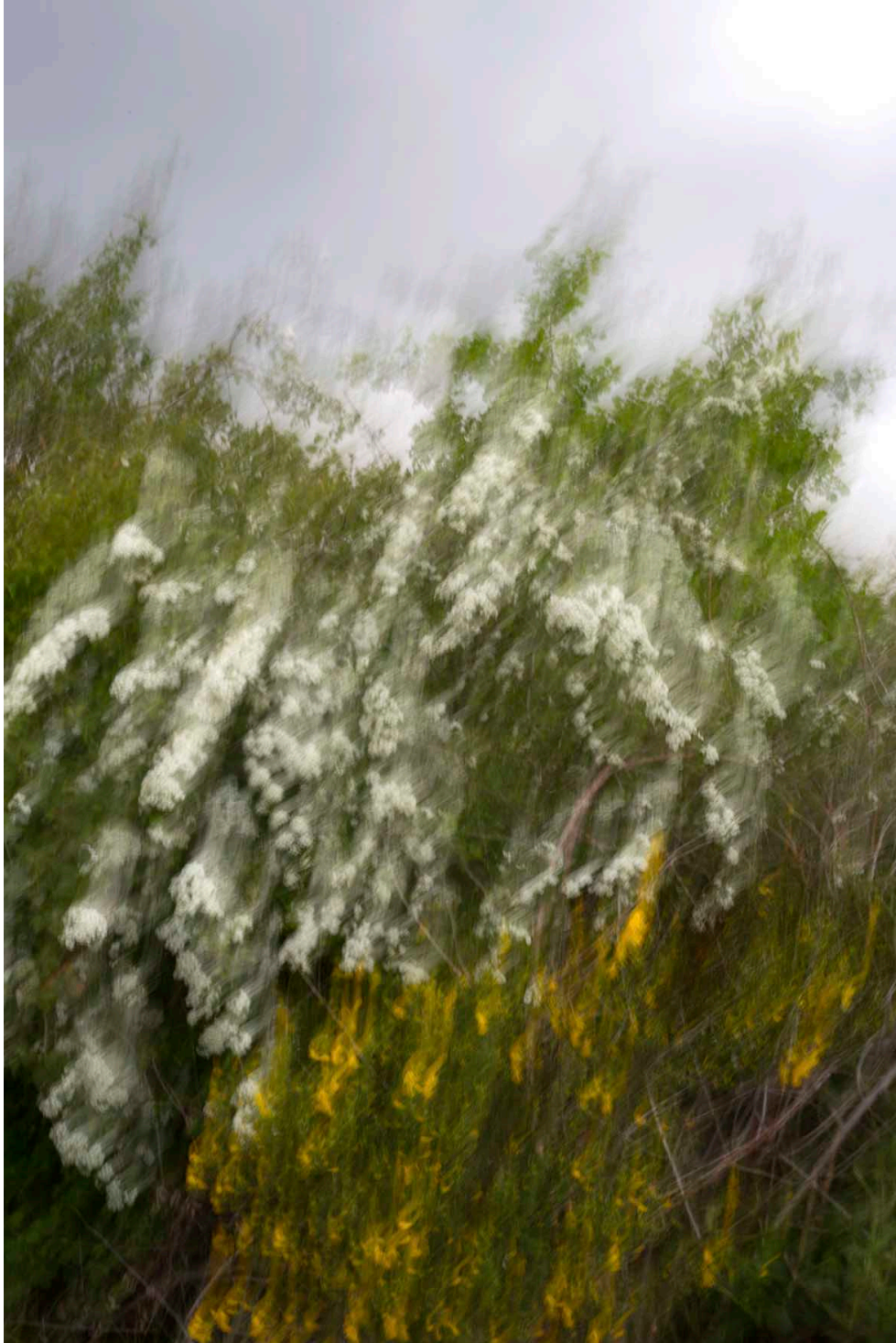


Figure 19. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, from the series Cruising the Forest, 2020.

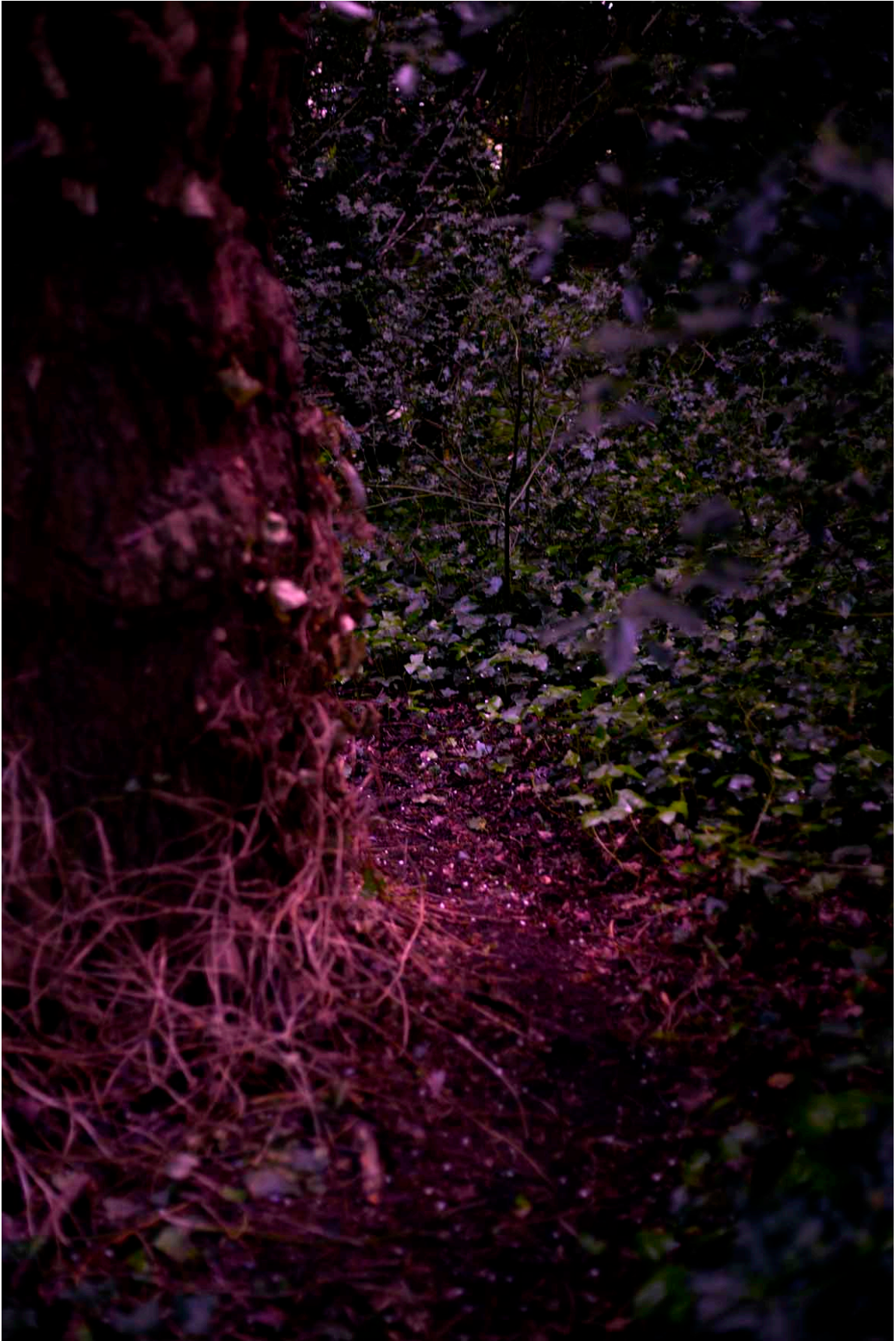


Figure 20. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Cruising the Forest*, 2020.

2.5 Queer Rocks

It's late autumn, the sky is intensely blue, it's cold but it feels joyous when the eyes can wonder so far afield, crisp air revealing long distances and horizons. After many months of lockdown, I've finally ventured out of London, the idea is to go where nature and spirituality collide, past and present mixed in a strange concoction. The Icknield Way seems a good place to start, an ancient, millennia-old path in nature walked by pilgrims of different religions and creeds, from Neolithic people travelling to sacred sites like Stonehenge and Avebury, to Romans and Christians, to contemporary Neo-Pagans. I wanted to walk what is believed to be the oldest road in Britain.

With *Cruising the Forest*, I felt my process was too intangible, the queering, if there was one, happened in the photographs, it resided more in a feeling during my walks, which I then tried to portray creating strange and blurry images. Instead, I wanted to produce something more material and concrete, albeit still using walking as method. I felt somehow I was retracing Long's steps, but instead of moving heavy rocks or ordering stones in the form of a circle or spiral, I decided to be more irreverent and to create little camp objects from natural material. Again, by fusing the natural with the unnatural, a sort of post-natural camp process could be activated, thus attempting to queer the land in that way. The plan was to collect pebbles and small rocks during my walks, take them home, clean and paint them with garish, unnatural colours, for then taking them back to nature, positioning them like strange sacred objects along the way⁴.

My first attempt with this process began with a trip to the village of Pirton, which sits on a stretch of the Icknield pathway that goes from Luton to Hitching. I started walking the pathway with my queer rocks in my bag and a camera in my hands, among the picturesque rolling hills that much have fomented a British ideal of nature, belonging and national pride. I was among mainly middleclass, white walkers, with their dogs and wellies, unknowingly passing by a queer in his act of distributing, sowing and even polluting their precious heteronormative path with bright queer rocks. The idea of scattering around this sort of queer seeds was very appealing to

⁴ I have used eco-friendly, water-based, non-polluting paint.

me, as if from them new entities could grow, new spaces could be generated, some forms of queer commons perhaps, sparkling new places where queer bodies could find some solace in the heteronormative space of the countryside. Yet, I had only small rocks with me, my attempt felt rather hopeless, perhaps more connected to a dream or a spell, as if by magic these little stone seeds could grow their influence and power to queer the whole space.

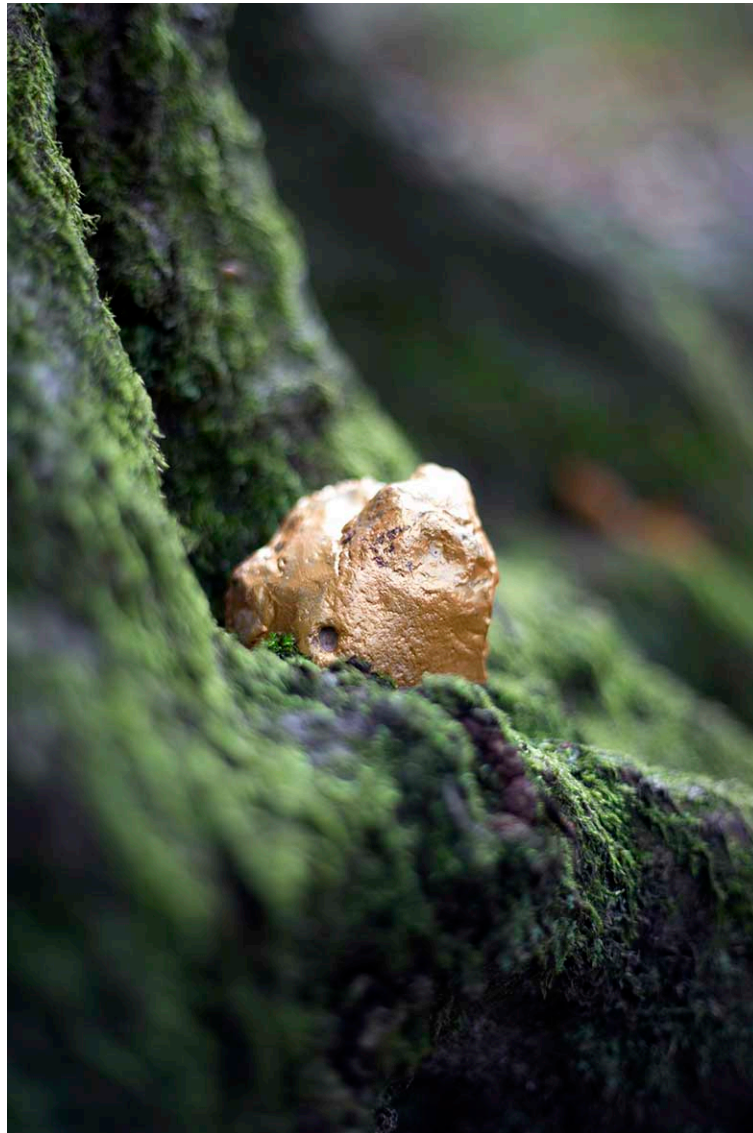


Figure 21. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, from the series Queer Rocks, 2020.

My process involved positioning a painted rock in a place that ‘felt’ right for that rock, taking some pictures to document this act, and then leaving my rock behind, consigning it to the forces of time and nature, conscious that the rain, sun and mud would eventually faint and dissolve its paint away, returning it to its original nature. Queering is clearly a temporary activity. I like to think that some walkers or

passers-by would notice these strange, awkward objects, asking themselves what kind of joke they represent, or simply being intrigued or outraged by them. In a sense, they are a small-scale equivalent of graffiti or street-art pieces compressed on a rock, an entity that is artificial, imposed and alien, something that pollutes or even makes a mockery out of the idyllic English countryside. Instead of the epic and grandeur gesture of Smithson and other (American) land artists, my rocks are anti-heroic, even laughable, yet in their hopelessness resides a sense of pleasure, laughter and joy. Most likely, these rocks will be soon covered in mud and disappear. What is important is their queer presence and spatial transformational activity, even for a brief moment, even for just the pleasure of my camera.



Figure 22. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Queer Rocks*, 2020.

These queer rocks represent an in-between object, being made of natural stone and acrylic paint, nature that meets artificiality. Instead of being linked to the non-site or non-object/negative space, as much of land art does, they incarnate the very opposite idea of campness, of being over the top; they in fact connect more to the theatricality of some of (usually American) land art, although at the same time they are small, nearly insignificant in their size compared to the big trees or tall grass around them, thus again contrasting their extravagant, show-off colours with their humble, diminutive size.

They are in fact closer to what some female land artists were trying to do in the 1960s and 70s; in creating these rocks there is the same care, a similar intimate and reverential process, together with a similar delicate gesture of positioning them mindfully in the landscape respecting nature. I felt I was channelling their process and somewhat their spirit, reclaiming their no-longer-conscious in the present, to create new relationships with the land and mark the territory as queer. At the same time, I was queering their process as I was using irreverence and (transient) artifice in the guise of acrylic colourful paint.

Furthermore, with this work I was simultaneously trying to queer a natural space using spirituality. In fact, the act of positioning rocks in particular natural places, like at the feet of ancient sacred trees or close to a well, is linked to Neo-Pagan rituals, but also to other mainstream religions like with Judaism for example, where rocks are left on tombs. The spirituality is also connected with the process of cleansing and painting them, the concentration needed to colour these small objects, following the different, at times awkward, uneasy shapes of the rocks, a method which becomes a sort of meditation. The painting also acts as an activation of these rocks, as if giving them an intention or magical quality in a shamanic way, for then transfer it to the landscape once left in it, activating that space into a spiritual one.



Figure 23. Simon Olmetti, *Offerings on tree found on Watlington Hill* (2020)

The positioning of these rocks was also influenced by Jarman's garden, by his activity of creating beauty in a hostile environment using found or discarded objects. Jarman's rocks were of different sizes and often rearranged in big circles and assemblages. He also never painted or altered any of them, as far as I know. Instead, I have positioned one small rock at a time, even along the same pathway, leaving at least a few metres between them, often putting them in different areas. In a way, I followed Jarman's statement of 'my garden's boundaries are the horizon', trying to spread my rocks and reclaim as much land as I could. Like with his garden, perhaps 'made to attract other boys', as Jarman's late partner implied, my colourful camp rocks become signals to attract other queer people, becoming a sort of micro light houses signalling the way, marking the passage of a queer body in nature and leaving a trace, signifying that that specific place has been queered, albeit temporally and ephemerally.

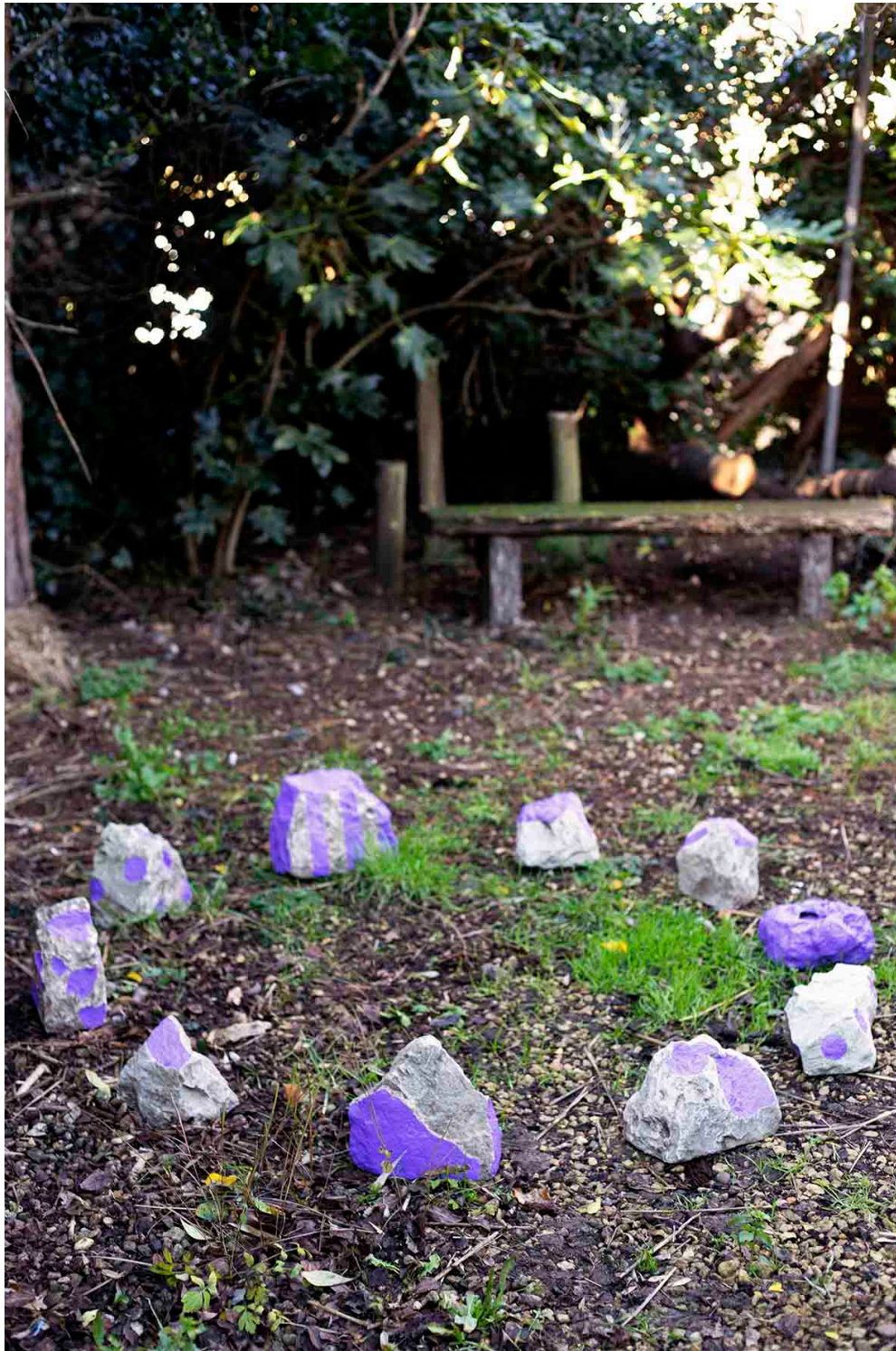


Figure 24. Simon Olmetti, Untitled, from the series Queer Rocks, 2021.



Figure 25. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Queer Rocks*, 2021.



Figure 26. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Queer Rocks*, 2021.

Desiring to go bigger, I have then created a mini stone circle made with reclaimed garden rocks, which I have painted and temporarily positioned in my garden. This structure both references ancient forms of spirituality (Neolithic stone circles) and mock them, or at least it represents a queer version of it, a small stone circle of painted rocks. It also references a magical circle where a different reality can happen if one steps within, a sort of magic space for rituals and imaginary (queer) covens. Wanting to explore even bigger sizes, without having the economic means to afford big stones, I again turned to fakery and decided to experiment with cardboard boxes, chicken wire, foam and plaster, creating medium-size fake boulders. Eventually, I turned to digital and decided to queer and appropriate big Menhirs with Photoshop.



Figure 27. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Queer Rocks*, 2021.

Both *Cruising the Forest* and *Queer Rocks* use some land art methods, with walking being the main one. With both, the queering process is not only directed toward the land, but also toward the method itself. With *Cruising the Forest*, it's the gaze toward nature that is non-normative, undoing/unsettling the relation with the forest for a sensual, flirty, cruisy one, exploring the possibility of making-kin-with, becoming-with in different ways, depicting it in my photographs as a vibrating, porous, ever-changing, in-flux entity, ultimately showing its intrinsic queerness. With

Queer Rocks, I have instead decided to use a lighter approach, utilising irony and fakery, somehow mocking the process of many land artists in a camp way.

These works also taught me the importance of small and quiet acts. Queering is better activated with unheroic, diminutive modes, employing humour, the funny or camp aesthetics, acts that embed anti-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal principles. Through the languid, a 'light touch', the ephemeral, a process of reclamation can be activated in ways that can generate potential new thoughts, paths and futures. It is surprising and probably counterintuitive, but often force is not needed. Walking, or a gentle reminder, a small queer seed in the landscape, might be sufficient to undo, unravel and corrupt a space. This can be connected to quantum field theory and the quality of matter, (what looks like) small acts that can generate/infect/entangle other particles around them, multiplying in tentacular ways, a small item that generates/infects thought, other matter, and then attaches itself/entangles with other thought, with the thought of others, in a chain-like effect, becoming bigger and more powerful, spreading like wildfire. Small, quiet acts can be very powerful. This experience will be developed further and used in my video and creative writing pieces, using the creative power of these two media to create worlds and new visions, contrasting the machismo of many land artists with short videos, unnatural colours and little camp actions.

3. Spiritual land(s)

This chapter attempts to answer a burning question: can the land be spiritual? Or better: can a practice of land reclamation include spirituality and how? When women artists focused on the land, a more eco-spiritual set of practices emerged. However, I wanted to explore and expand the discourse to include non-Western ideas and concepts of land.

I will start this chapter analysing the land from an Indigenous perspective, which brings to the fore notions closer to an eco-queer reclamation, and it's useful for a reappropriation of the land that uses or is mindful of spirituality. I will then show how Ana Mendieta has used concepts linked to her land and Indigenous past, fusing Latino culture with Western practices, to reclaim the land utilising spirituality in her approach. I will then describe my attempts at channelling/get infected with her work in my practice with the work *Ritual Drawing*. I will end this chapter with a writing piece called *Fucking Land art*, in which I try to reappropriate and queer the land and all the various elements and practices of land art analysed so far (including Mendieta), using creative writing as a space for new utopic possibilities.

3.1 Land and spirituality: an Indigenous perspective

Eastern, African, Aboriginal and Indigenous traditions regarding land and nature varies and can differ greatly. Mark Cheetam affirms that there are as many different concepts and traditions as there are tribes or peoples in the world, although usually Indigenous understanding of these themes is more in tune with nature and ecological consciousness (Cheetam, 2018: 24). In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, Bruce Bagemihl calls for a new paradigm that includes Aboriginal and Indigenous cosmologies, declaring it a 'vast storehouse of knowledge about the natural world' that modern science has disavowed and that we should reincorporate in our belief system (calling it 'postmodern science') (Bagemihl 1999: 215 cited in Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010: 138). This is a set of knowledge I was keen to investigate and incorporate in my practice in some way, to experiment with forms of spiritualities connected to nature away from heteronormative, patriarchal, Western traditional ones.

In her book *Overlay*, Lucy Lippard speaks of the way ancient religious traditions saw the land not as a picture but as a true force physically embedded in nature. Archaic societies, she adds, believed that the earth was sacred or even that sanctity was incarnated in the earth itself (Lippard, 1983: 50, 51). Whereas Western culture has produced notions of the landscape as a site encountered as image or sight, there is an effort by many people linked to Indigenous culture like South American, African and Aboriginal ones to keep alive these traditions and visions to this day. The challenge for this research was what culture and set of knowledge to explore and include in my practice, avoiding cultural appropriation or using generalised terms such as shamanism, gathering in one term different uses, cultures and peoples. My solution was to focus on a few key texts dealing with Indigenous peoples of the American continent, for then linking some of their knowledge and customs to Ana Mendieta, an artist merging spirituality and land, Western and Latino/South American Indigenous cultures in one practice.

One of the main characteristics of Indigenous culture is in the ways of knowing and creating/passing on knowledge, which represent one of the key issues and place for misunderstanding, particularly when compared with Western thought. Native knowledge is conveyed by spoken word, storytelling and oral tradition (Nemiroff et al, 1992: 45). The spoken word is in fact considered sacred (Nemiroff et al, 1992: 50). This characteristic is very important for a practice like mine relying on words and worlding (as I will describe at the end of this chapter), something I will utilise to tell new stories and to create new dreamscapes.

Another key difference is between 'land' and 'spirit', which in many Native cultures are not separate terms. In *Land, Spirit, Power* (1992), the authors contrast the European vision of land based on structured and authoritarian politics/polities and acquisitive economies, with instead a(n) (American) Native one where the land is perceived as made for its own sake, and which humanity must live in accordance with it (Nemiroff et al, 1992: 83). In these times of ecological crisis, it is important to rediscover and apply these traditional Native concepts. Furthermore, questions of place and land are particularly important for Indigenous people who are in fact placeless or without their own land (confined for example in reservations), or feeling in a sort of internal exile as Westerners have changed completely the use of the (their) land. Lippard, speaking of Native American artists, describes them as living in

two places at once, 'in a mysterious synchronicity or "extended present" [...] in the process of asserting a new identity or reclaiming an old one' (Lippard, 1990: 106). It is this distinctive tension between notions of tradition and modernity that characterises Indigenous and other minority people (BIPOC), a sort of in-betweenness or liminality, of being between past and present, or between two or different worlds all colliding in one person/body/space.

Tradition, from a capitalistic point of view, is something old, surpassed, something needing constant improvement. It is often used to justify the exploitative use of land and material, and therefore the creation of pollution, in order to pursue modernity, as if innovation is the only way forward, the only possible direction of movement. On the other end, from an Indigenous point of view, there is the implicit notion that to decolonise thought from Westernisation means to revive tradition, as if the solution for getting rid of an imposed system is to travel back in time and reclaim the original culture, rejecting completely the new one.

Tradition is indeed a touchy subject for a variety of political and cultural reasons; in contemporary art, it is looked upon with contempt or mistrust, particularly because since modernism, the notion that the best art is the most innovative one is rather embedded in the art system (Lippard, 1990: 77). Yet the role of tradition, belief and memory constantly (re)surface in many contemporary artworks, from art practices focusing on or inspired by Native rituals, earth spirituality and other non-Western traditions, to performance works or videos using storytelling, family histories, and in general works referencing traditional believe and value systems (Lippard, 1990: 77). Therefore, there is an ambivalent attitude at play between the constant need to be innovative and original, and at the same time the urge for many artists to reconnect with old traditions, reappropriating and rediscovering uses, beliefs, or rituals of the past. Lippard says that this is particularly felt within BIPOC minority groups, whose need to link their practices to their specific culture and value systems, on the one hand, and at the same time having the need to contextualise or incorporate it within Western traditions, makes them be constantly in-between or in a sort of hybrid aesthetic (Lippard, 1990: 144). I believe the same issue applies to queer artists, whose need of belonging, of finding some roots or traces in culture and history, all of which have been denied for centuries, is felt as deeply as for other minority groups. What is more difficult for queer people is that we don't have a strong

tradition to fall back to and reclaim, but a multitude of different traces, stories and myths we can interpret or even (re)imagine/invent, becoming our own storytellers, creating our own traditions. Furthermore, tradition is often used against queers by conservative and traditionalist people, who perceive queerness as a modern lifestyle against morality and religion. Muñoz says that to find queer evidence we must look for traces and ephemera embedded in queer acts, both in stories that we tell one another and in physical gestures (2010: 65). In this respect, queer knowledge and culture share some parallels with Indigenous and all the other minority ones, oppressed by a patriarchal, heteronormative, Western society.

The solution that Lippard proposes in her book *Mixed Blessing*, is in 'cultural mixing', which she defines as both 'mating and battling' at the same time (Lippard, 1990: 151). It is not about merging in the dominant culture, rather to find one's place within it; it is a syncretic process rather than a synthetic one, one that makes people's traditions and culture an important and integral part within a multicultural society. For minority groups, I suspect, it is like playing a game strategically, trying not to let go the kernel that defines themselves as a people/culture, and at the same time being relevant and 'play the game' exploiting the mainstream and dominant system. The Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera puts it plainly when he declared: 'it's not about resuscitating pre-capitalistic solutions, it's about making Western culture on our own terms and at our own convenience, of bringing the ancestral to the modern, rather than the reverse' (Lippard, 1990: 157).

This view and reclamation of certain aspects of tradition fused with the present and other cultural perspectives have some neo-materialist components. If matter is imagination and vice versa, as Barad declares, then matter is also customs, beliefs and traditions. Tradition then becomes a malleable, transformable entity going beyond timeframes, being continuously in the past, present and future, it is in constant trans-formation. Like matter, tradition and belief don't exist in isolation but are always inter- intra-acting along timelines and space(s). It is this intrinsic vitality of the past, what Muñoz calls the no-longer-conscious still flickering with potentials, that allows to use it and transform it for new and better futurities. This activity of making-kin-with or becoming-with tradition, absorbing this ancient Indigenous knowledge, is what can save humanity from ecological destruction and catastrophe.

Another example of this 'cultural mixing', but also of multi-temporality, is the concept of 'landbase', a Native concept of nature, defined by the Seneca/Tuscarora painter George Longfish as:

'the interwoven aspects of place, history, culture, physiology, a people and their sense of themselves and their spirituality, and how the characteristics of the place are all part of the fabric. When rituals are integrated into the setting through the use of materials and specific places and when religion includes the earth upon which one walks - that is landbase' (Lippard, 1990: 110).

This represents a much larger concept than landscape, something that is at the same time in the past, present and future, a colliding in one space of different vectors, spatial and temporal planes, a true neo-materialistic concept which astonishingly is present and has been used by Indigenous people for (probably) centuries (if not millennia).

To bring back the ancestral means also to rediscover and utilise a different way of knowing. As I have mentioned, the spoken word is central in many indigenous traditions, as it is the knowing grounded in experience and practice. In the book *Indigenous Peoples and Autonomy: Insight for a Global Age*, Marcelo F. Osco tells the story of Félipe Waman Puma de Ayala, a Quechua chronicler of the 16th century who wanted to expose the dramatic exploitation and abuse of Indigenous people in the Andes region by the Spanish, and preserving at the same time the tradition and culture of his people. Waman Puma visited many different Indigenous communities for thirty-two years, producing knowledge through 'the experience of walking the world', living the lives, languages and injustices of the people (Osco, 2010: 32). This example shows the different way of producing knowledge, a process linked to oral communication, observation and direct and practical experience. It shows the relational aspect of Indigenous knowledge, the idea that 'the existence of society only makes sense through its relations with other life forms' (Osco, 2010: 33). It's interesting to note how this idea of walking to experience and produce knowledge will be also used by artists many centuries after, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

Finally, another important aspect of this Native knowledge which can be useful for this project is the concept of *qhip nayra*, a temporal vision that stresses the

interconnectedness of the past and the present (Osco, 2010: 33). This view sees the past not as rigid or dead, nor as a place for nostalgia, rather, interestingly like in Heidegger and Muñoz, the past is something alive, subject to constant changes. More than that, *qhip nayra* sees the past as facing ahead and the future laying behind, a reverse of Western temporal linearity, as if to say that the past is always with and within us, or even it is what we are always facing, as each of our action is made and infused by our ancestors and what/who came before us (Chuquimamani-Condori and Crampton, 2021). Osco says that a better word for the past could be ‘ancestrality’, an idea of knowledge based on relational life, responsible and open to plural politics (Osco, 2010: 34). There is indeed present a concept of knowledge formation through ethical values and feelings, of knowing experiencing the joy, sadness, pain, past, languages and any other characteristic and feeling of other people and beings, a sort of knowing through sharing and direct experience, of ‘being in someone else’s shoes’, so to speak. To know means somehow to become the other. Additionally, there is also the idea that knowledge is not only formed through human contact, but through the relationship with more-than-human beings and the experience with/through them. It is a view of time and nature closer to contemporary post-natural theories, the demonstration that ancestrality might be both ancient and contemporary, both past knowledge and useful tool for our present marred by ecological and social catastrophes.

One artist that has used this kind of ancient knowledge in a syncretic way, to use Lippard’s vocabulary, is Ana Mendieta. Her example contrasts much of her male peers’ usage of land for a practice that is more human-scale, intimate and spiritually informed.

3.2 Ana Mendieta

In 1961, Mendieta and her sister were sent as children from Cuba to the US, because their father was involved in counter-revolutionary activities and felt they were in danger. The two sisters were separated and placed in a series of homes for ‘disturbed’ or neglected children and then moved between different foster families (Tufnell, 2006: 70). This experience of exile profoundly affected Mendieta. In 1973, she began to work in the landscape, influenced by conceptual and performance art,

but also Viennese actionism with its use of rituals, theatre and spectacle (Tufnell, 2006: 70). Being raised in alienating circumstances, she wanted to find her roots and her connection to the earth as a personal and spiritual mother (Lippard, 1990: 86). In her article about the artist, Hatty Nestor includes a quote from Mendieta stating: 'My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures, I become one with the earth' (Mendieta, 1981: 10 cited in Nestor, 2021). This quote shows Mendieta's practice as both an intimately personal and spiritual endeavour. She worked with many natural materials including fire, leaves, gunpowder, grass, flowers, blood, water, wood, clay, mud, stone and her own flesh, including elements of the Latin American culture she had lost as a child. Lippard stated that when Mendieta worked in a place, she claimed that territory 'somewhat like a dog pissing on the ground' (1990: 86).



Figure 28. Ana Mendieta, *Silueta Sangrienta* (1975) - still from film

Mendieta called her work 'earth/body art', thus making explicit the hybrid nature of her practice (Tufnell, 2006: 69), a sort of in-between earth/land art and body art, demonstrating since the beginning her willingness of mixing cultures and practices. Through this definition, we can already see Mendieta's attitude of cultural mixing that Lippard speaks of. Her most recognised work is the *Silueta* series, mainly

made between 1973 and 1980, ephemeral traces in the form of her silhouetted body in the landscape made with mud, soil and other natural elements, now long gone and 'reabsorbed' in the land, with photographs as the only witness/trace of the work. In this series, she used her body as a sculptural surrogate to create impressions of a primeval, goddess-like figure on the earth's surface, producing a dialogue between presence and absence, fullness and lack, and past and present (Osterweil, 2015).

This work represents a sort of queer trace as Muñoz defines it, an ephemeral trace not understood in the traditional sense but as gesture, as 'hanging in the air like a rumour' (Muñoz, 2010: 65); a queer act that interrupts the normative flow of time and movement, existing as Muñoz describes as an idealistic manifestation not directed toward an end, rather speaking to the not-yet-here, to a utopic futurity that is in fact an opening or horizon. Muñoz envisages queer utopia as a 'modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality' (2020: 91). The *Siluetas* have this utopic queer quality; using mundane materials such as mud or leaves, Mendieta creates ephemeral shapes in the land, more gestures than sculptural forms, traces of her body impregnated in the soil, a non-normative use of land, space and time, to reconnect with the earth, leave a mark and let it go. It's a practice that has internalised Indigenous beliefs of nature as sacred, of respect and reverence for it, of communing and even making love with it.



Figure 29. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (from the *Siluetas* series), 1973-1977

In 1973 Mendieta travelled to Mexico and produced her first piece of what will become part of the *Siluetas*, entering in an Aztec tomb, a space evoking a people long gone and destroyed by European conquerors and land grabbers, laying naked covered in white flowers she had bought at the market. In that moment, she recalls during an interview, she felt she was covered by time and history (Osterweil, 2015). Osterweil reminds us that of course to be covered in time and history is to risk being buried beneath them. A hint to her early death and the fact many of her ephemeral sculptures in the earth remind tombs, or remains of an ancient civilisation long disappeared in the ebbs of history or myth.

With her work, Mendieta embeds 'ancestrality' as defined in the previous section, together with *qhip nayra*, time always facing her and her work, instead of being behind. The culture, tradition and rituals of her origins are always present in

and with her (practice), although not in a traditional or referential way but transformed and merged with contemporary issues, media and culture. Her practice is also about pleasure, of her naked body enjoying and communing with the land and other natural materials, but also a more sensual or even sexual one in the joining of her naked body with the land. Her time is that of ecstasy, a moment of pleasure when one's past, present and future collide, which is how Muñoz perceives queerness (2010: 32).

Ecstasy comes from the ancient Greek meaning 'standing outside oneself', but it could also be formulated as being 'out of place' (*ex-stasis*). In its etymology there is present an anti-normative sense of being 'other', outside of linear/(hetero)normative time and space, so similar to ideas of queerness as defined in queer theory and contemporary discourses. For George Bataille, eroticism and ecstasy are connected to death, a destruction of the ego to find a continuity of being. By stepping outside oneself and normative time, we are able to go beyond the discontinuity of our normal existence, destroying our ego and finding unity with the continuity/cosmos. When Mendieta lays naked on the ground/in the soil, mud, dirt, she steps outside of normativity, she experiences place as 'other', metaphorically dying in a self-made tomb and leaving parts of herself behind (in the form of her outline, but also from a neo-materialist perspective living behind part of her cells and particles). For Bataille, even the act of stripping naked is connected to a quest of going beyond the confines of the self, an act that transcends our discontinuous existence (Bataille, 1957: 17). It represents a sacred experience, which for Bataille occurs through a violent rupture of boundaries that simultaneously releases 'divine ecstasy and extreme horror'. With *Siluetas*, Mendieta evokes this dichotomy, life and death, ecstasy and horror, flowers mixed with mud, matter with spirit. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille writes: 'It is necessary for me to die (in my own eyes), to give birth to myself' (1988: 34). Mendieta has died many times in/with/through her *Siluetas*, experiencing a connection with the 'continuity of being', or as Mendieta has declared, to experience a communion and return to the maternal earth and the cosmos. Instead of Muñoz's utopic horizons, Mendieta's practice represents a process to encounter the sacred and spirituality as/through death, as a moment of violent rupture to destroy oneself, to reconnect to the land and the infinite/cosmic continuity beyond it.

Mendieta's reclamation of and reconnection with the land is also associated with kinship and care. Her care is toward the earth and her land, it is about forming

kinship with natural elements to mix with and become-with them. It represents a return to the land which reminds me of Hammer's films. For example, in *Superdyke*, a group of women leaves the city behind to find new (naked) ways of being together, caressing one another, experiencing pleasure in nature through kinship and care, detaching from mainstream patriarchal society to form their own community of women. Mendieta's gesture expresses a reconnection with the earth based on similar principles, detaching from mainstream society and art practices to encounter earth through nakedness, pleasure, ecstasy, kinship and care. By seeing and relating to the earth as mother, Mendieta's practice seeks to return to her womb, again by destroying and dissolving her body to viscerally reconnect and return to it. It is a gesture impregnated with a deep sense of kinship, it is about communing with it instead of shaping or reframing it. Her practice is less joyous than *Superdyke*, but it shares the same sense of rupture from patriarchy; instead of forming a community with other people, Mendieta creates a strong bond with the earth. By fusing with the more-than-human, Mendieta's experience becomes ecstatic, closer to the fusing/colliding/dissolving with the landscape of Hammer's *Multiple Orgasm*. In *Multiple Orgasm* we see a woman masturbating and reaching an/multiple orgasm/s, her face and her vagina superimposed to the landscape, the fusion of the human with the land generating ecstatic moments of pleasure and union; similarly, with *Siluetas*, Mendieta's union with the land produces new shapes of herself, as if copulating with the earth and creating hybrid beings, a becoming-with that produces an offspring or an hybrid/trans self as a result of her fusion with the soil. The communion and unity with nature is fundamental, ultimate, all-encompassing. In contrast with other male artists of the time, both Mendieta's and Hammer's vision of nature is about (orgasmically) penetrating it, fusing with it to regurgitate new bonds and forms of kinship with it, embodying anti-patriarchal and anti-heteronormative principles.

This view brings a new understanding of spirituality, one that incorporates pleasure, ecstasy, being present in and enjoying the body, sex and the connections with the continuity of being/cosmos by the destruction of the self/ego/identity, which I was keen to experience and incorporate in my practice with the work *Ritual Drawing*.

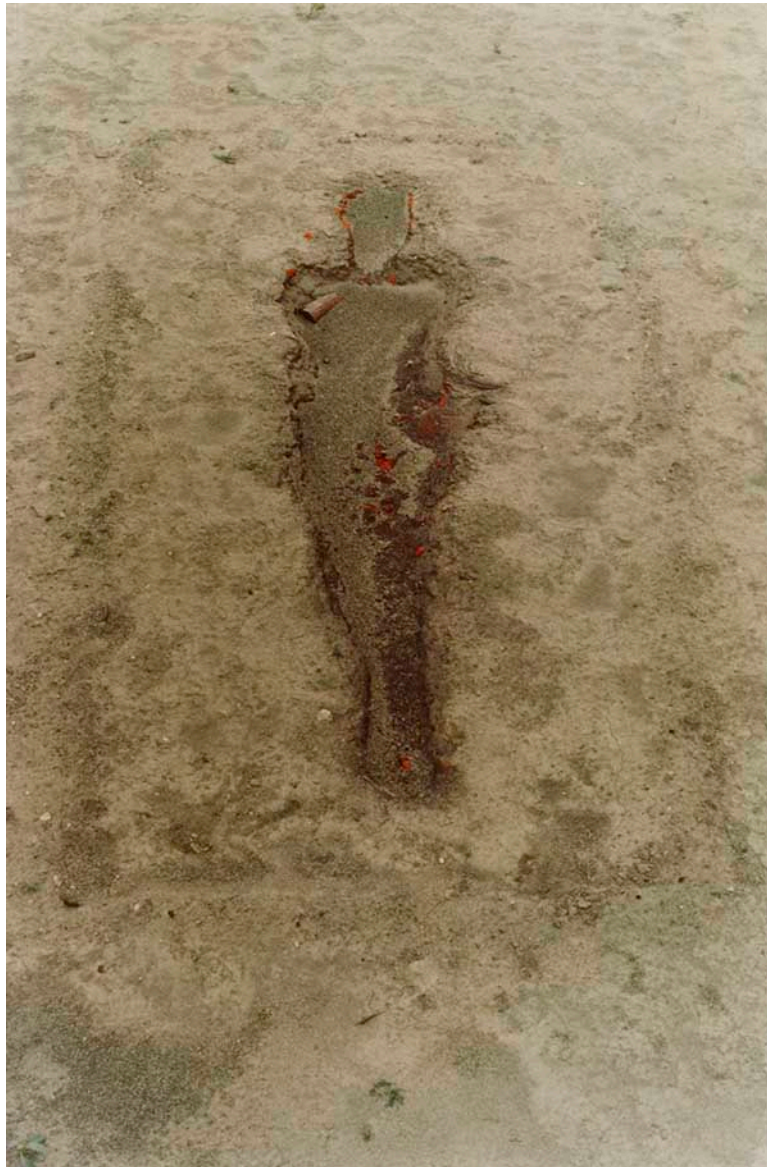


Figure 30. Ana Mendieta, Untitled (from the series Silueta), 1977

Less known is Mendieta's filmmaking, recently rediscovered, which counts for nearly one hundred short 8-mm and 16-mm films and several videos. This work not only serves as documentation of her practice in the land, but also represents a 'practice that bridges conceptualism, body art, land art and feminism' (Osterweil, 2015). This way of working is radical and innovative because it complicates the relationship with time and space. Osterweil believes that there are indeed three forms of time engaging in Mendieta's work: one is the present moment, when she acts on the land and/or creates a performance, which is usually solitary or just witnessed by a companion/friend with a camera; there is then the time compressed by the photograph, a single shot that captures a moment of the performance/ritual; finally a third time, that is the duration of the video/film of the event, which gives a more

durational aspect of the event, but in its brevity (her videos are all a few minutes long) it also conveys the impossibility for us humans to confront the vastity of deep time (Osterweil, 2015). I would add there is also the time of the exhibition, when different works are present and gathered in a single space, creating different dialogues and a different dialectic within the works. The exhibition time is when all the times of the different media merge into one singular space and time, that of the present, which is nevertheless multifaceted as it is composed by all the different timelines of her works, in a very neo-materialist fashion. Thus, the exhibition becomes a space continuously in the past, present and future (the future represented by the potential links, connections and futurities it can foster and 'open'). Something I will experience and experiment with my solo show as described in the last chapter.

In aesthetic terms, her films are very short and silent, showing the immediacy of her actions. Yet, many also utilise the cutting-edge technology of the time, experimenting with colour or creating otherworldly effects. For example, in *Energy Charge* (1975), the camera is held still in front of a tree until a dark figure enters the frame; what/who the figure is remains unclear until the image switches to infrared, showing Mendieta's figure in red, the colour of blood, seemingly hugging or touching the tree. Another example is *Butterfly* (1975), in which she makes use of polarised graphic effects to show her body as spectral with iridescent wings. These altered colours make me think of Jarman's and Hammer's use of acid colours, overlaying effects and other distortions used to convey an otherworldly, odd, magical sense. By altering the footage, Mendieta transforms her body into different matter, transmuting it into blood with infrared, or in translucent insect (butterfly) by polarisation. Nature is therefore transformed and queered in this way, as if using a magical spell and through technology. Through this activity, her connection with nature is intensified, because her body is mixed and fused with other components, creating hybrid entities and new forms.



Figure 31. Ana Mendieta, *Energy Charge*, 1975



Figure 32. Ana Mendieta, *Butterfly*, 1975

A poignant moment for Mendieta is her return to Cuba in the early 1980s, two decades after her initial exile. During that time, she made several works, which later she called *Esculturas Rupestres*. These are several individual sculptures, some of

them quite monumental and carved directly in the Jaruco caves, which in Cuba are believed to be the birthplace of humanity (Oransky, 2019). With this work, her practice evolved to a more sculptural one, carving feminine shapes in the limestone walls of the caves, instead of using mud, soil and other more ephemeral materials. Some of these sculptures are named after female Cuban legends and myths as well as names of spirits, and Mendieta spoke of these sculptures as 'an intimate act of communion with the earth, a loving return to the maternal breasts' (Mendieta, 1981). This series represents a more permanent form of work, leaving a lasting mark in the land, her birthplace and motherland, and particularly in a sacred cave revered for centuries if not millennia. This work is closer to her male American land counterparts, although her aim was more spiritual, of reconnection instead of land shaping, of mark-making instead of architectural design. Mendieta maintained that her work was at a 'human scale' and distinguished her own 'Palaeolithic' spirit from the 'industrial' scope of the male artists working with the land (Rosenthal, 2014: 231). The links with tradition is felt strongly too, using the Taíno language and names of Taíno spirits to title some of the sculptures, like for example the name *Atabey*, which means 'Mother of the Waters' (Mendieta, 1981), using traditional Indigenous culture and spirituality but repurposing and reclaiming them for personal and feminist contemporary discourses. Female body shapes and female importance in ancient cosmology is given centre stage, opposing centuries of patriarchal religions.



Figure 33. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Esculturas Rupestres)*, 1981

One of her last works is *Ochún* (1981), a video of an earth silhouette made on the shores of Florida, a human-like figure whose top and bottom parts this time are open, and the sea water runs through and around it, its head pointing to Cuba. The water runs in between the left and the right side of the figure, as in between the US and Cuba, but also her past and present. In a way, it is a work of reconciliation, a representation of her life, of how she was trying to keep these two parts of herself together, of making sense of her separation from her motherland and culture, and her found/adopted American one (Oransky, 2019). Again, a process of syncretism, of culture mixing which is key in Mendieta's vision.



Figure 34. Ana Mendieta, *Ochún*, 1981

On 8th September 1985, Mendieta fell from a 34th-floor window of a stylish Manhattan apartment after a violent argument with her partner Carle Andre, her body crashing on the cold, concrete, urban pavement floor underneath and thus tragically creating her last *Siluetas*. Andre, an older, more famous artist, a so-called father of minimalism (Schwarz, 2022), was tried and acquitted for her murder. In the six-episode podcast series *Death of an Artist* (2022), curator Helen Molesworth revisits Mendieta's controversial death, covering in detail the scratches seen on Andre's face the next day, his various inconsistent excuses, the shady visit of Andre's lawyer in his apartment while Andre was in prison and despite being a crime scene cordoned by the police, or the sharing of Mendieta's plan to divorce Andre, as she discussed with a friend the night of her death. All these evidence and allegations have engrossed

the (mainly art) public then as it does now, with podcasts like *Death of an Artist* persuasively showing Andre's acquittal as a miscarriage of justice.⁵

Their two different, opposed practices, although stemming from the same art milieu and being both in part focused on spatial concerns, among other things, are synthesised in Mendieta's death; her crashing represents the victory of formalism, modernism, even minimalism against a more human scale, intimate, ephemeral practice concerned with the body, the female, a connection with the self and nature. Mendieta's death represents another woman killed by a man, but also by a system (included the art one, particularly at the time) based on patriarchalism, machismo and sexism. It is also the crushing of a form of art embedding Indigenous, non-Western, spiritual, female themes, by a white, Western, patriarchal, heterosexual (violent) man; instinct against rigour; mud, leaves, earth, flowers, twigs, blood and fire against precision, 'clean' materials and big money. The irony is that Mendieta is now a revered figure, whereas Andre is a controversial, stained one. A sort of revenge from the land of spirit, coming back to haunt her murderer.

Mendieta's practice represents a reclamation of land embedding multiple and multidimensional elements. By creating female shapes on/with the earth, she reclaims the land by showing a female vision of it and by fusing with natural matter. This creation and reclamation act also involve a violent gesture, losing/destroying oneself to find a connection with the cosmos and the divinity of Earth. It is about getting naked and seeking/finding pleasure with/through the land, by sensual/sexual acts, and by caring/kinship practices. Reclamation is experiencing ecstasy; it's about dying to be reborn again. Mendieta's reclamation is a spiritual one fused with matter, the cosmic with the mud, plants, rocks through the body and its dissolution, one that I wanted to experience with my practice. It is also a syncretic vision of different cultures, knowledge and practices, between Western and Indigenous one. Reclamation is also an act of revenge, and since her tragic death, every practice and

⁵ Molesworth's podcast is mainly based on investigative reporter Robert Katz's book *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta* (1990), in which he already covered most of the allegations and facts, together with the trial. In the Molesworth's podcast series there isn't any new revelation, but it is useful to hear some of the original recordings of the interviews, giving a more compelling framework of the events.

artwork that remember, remind or channel her work (should) embody the desire to bring justice and vindicate her name.

3.3 Ritual drawing

What follows is the description of my work *Ritual Drawing*, in which I try to channel/get infected by Mendieta's practice to experience a similar connection between spirit/cosmos and body/matter. I will start with an incantation/poem, changing register of my voice as if attempting to call her spirit during a séance. This voice gives a better context of the way Mendieta's methods are utilised, to fuse with her/her practice and start a process of becoming-with, although utilising her methods in a different way and setting.

*Oh Ana, my dear Ana, come to me, close to me, within me;
hug me with your spirit and infuse my particles with your strength and vision.
I call upon you to join me in this ritual I'm due to perform.
Let my hands create marks vibrating with a trans-forming force,
to infuse me and any viewer of this work,
on paper or digital form,
with the power of the land.
Let your legs guide mine,
to walk on this paper sheet
the path of the sacred mind,
the labyrinth of earth,
for a queer energy to pulse
in all its colourful hues of hopes.
Let these marks expand,
to turn all the heterosexist patriarchal heads dumb,
for them to turn their gaze within,
and with horror face their fearful grin.*

*Let instead these marks embrace all queer hearts,
giving them courage and strength,
for new beginnings and joyful ends.
Let this ritual become divine,
for art, spirit and flesh to liberate human minds,
and join in a becoming-with of some sort,
a big assemblage/family of animals, plants and rocks.
Let us all be united in a new becoming-kin,
so that your tragic death,
oh dear Ana,
will be revenged
and your spirit will shine
and forever will be seen.*

Every time I stood naked on a big sheet of paper, gathering my thoughts and getting ready to start mark making, I thought of Ana Mendieta. And although I didn't recite the poem/spell word by word, as at the time it didn't even exist in its actual form, in spirit and in its essence this text was with/in me all the time. I wanted to follow in her footsteps, to experience spirituality on my skin, a spirituality that connects to an ecstatic idea of losing/destroying oneself to encounter a deeper and bigger sense of who I was and of the place I was in. To embed her spirit meant to experience and understand the musty concoction that is land mingled with spirit, which somehow felt elusive and distant. I decided to call this work *Ritual Drawing*.

My strategy was to create some sort of rituals in my home-turned-studio, trying to channel Mendieta in the comfort of my house, a human being in lockdown recreating an artificial encounter with nature and spirit, house plants in a corner, central heating at full blast. On a large piece of paper, I would lay naked trying to outline my body with paint, or charcoal, or graphite; using my hands or a brush, I would then drag the paint/graphite to create shapes of different colours, in a repetitive, meditative state, as if dragging out negative energies, my fears and anxieties from my outlined body, would rebalance my image and therefore myself.

The results of these big sheets of paper aren't always aesthetically pleasing, but I cherish the experience, the erotic feeling of my naked flesh on cold paper, my body dirty with charcoal and acrylic paint, the sense of freedom and yet contained and safe within the walls of my home. This work also represents my interpretation/reclamation/invention of a ritual, a spirituality made by me for me, a private act translated into marks of paint and charcoal. As with much of Neo-Paganism, Wicca and other nature-based spiritual groups, there's no precise dogma or rituals to follow, instead anyone can create their own practice as long as the general rule of creating no harm is followed. I dreamt of doing this in nature, I even tried it a couple of times in Epping Forest, but it's difficult to find secluded places without people, it's usually cold and wet, I'm probably in the wrong country for this. Or maybe I should be braver.

The impossibility of transplanting practices to different places made me think of the term *terra* again, of my *terra* and Mendieta's *tierra* and the land I was finding myself in, how names carry a meaning that goes beyond mere etymology, embedding multiple connections including feelings, culture and even the weather. Mendieta's *tierra* was an agglomerate of soil, mud, hot sun, mosquitos, warm breeze and smell of must and flowers. Instead, I was in a different landscape, and this was a lesson I had to learn about listening to the place, of having to adapt, change, transform a practice to follow a different climate, a different culture and land. Transmuting this action from outdoors to indoors made it more alchemic, secret, intimate, more linked to artifice and artificial, that is more camp in essence, linked to an idea of theatricality, of make-believe as Sontag describes camp. I exchanged mud for bright acrylic paint, whereas my landscape was incarnated and flattened into a big sheet of paper, the same way a rug symbolises a garden in Persian culture but in paper form, and I was moving on and in it like a priest during a shamanic vision or dream, frenetically and instinctively tracing marks as if possessed by a totemic spirit.

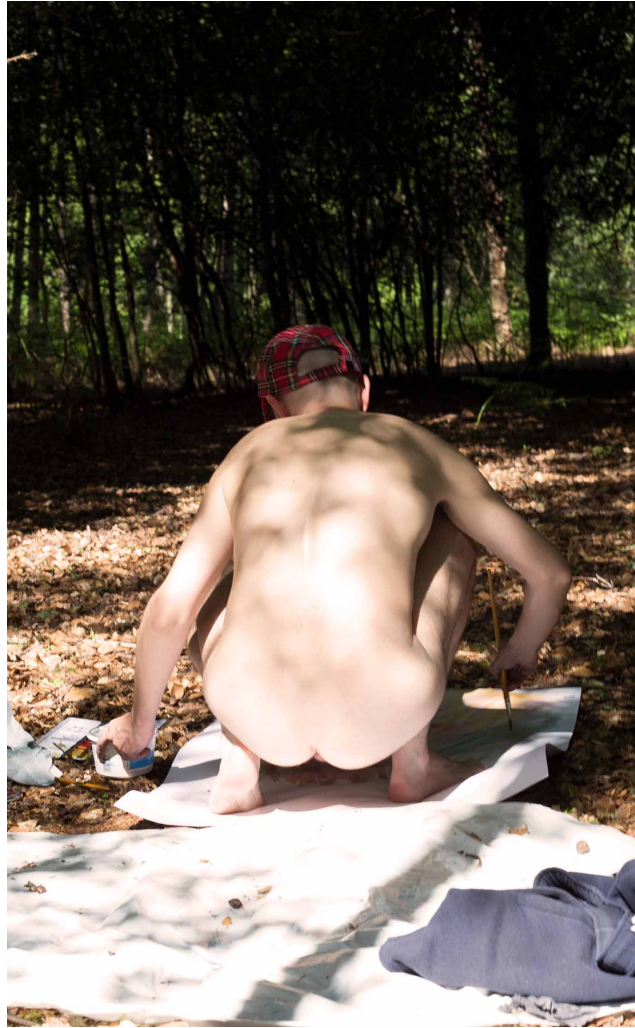


Figure 35. Simon Olmetti, experimenting with Ritual Drawing in Epping Forest, 2020

Part of the charm of Mendieta's practice was in the fleetingness of her work, the fact that her marks would be quickly swallowed by nature without leaving any trace. In terms of reclamation, her short temporal span perhaps remarks the impossibility of really reclaiming the land, her practice was a very eco-feminist way of communing with the earth more than leaving a lasting mark. I build on her experience not to directly leave a mark in the land, an ephemeral gesture indeed, but to create an alternative queer version through paint and drawing. This work of mine is weak as an act of reclamation of the land; yet, as a reclamation of a queer ritual or spirituality, or in terms of experiencing queer spirit through art, it becomes rather successful. Through it, I have experienced an intimate connection with my body and, I dare say, with the cosmos, or at least a feeling of being one with everything, which represents a sort of reclamation of the land of spirit, so to speak, an important one as for centuries queerness was deemed sinful and rejected by all the main religions, and

still is. As with *Cruising the Forest* and *Queer Rocks*, gestures usually perceived as weak by patriarchal societies because they are ephemeral, diminutive, intimate, become non-normative acts of disruption, of resistance and even refusal of the status quo.

From a neo-materialist perspective, everything is a form of energy and interconnected. An action made in a place will affect other spaces by the logics of quantum physics and the entanglements of particles, it's the intention that counts and that will guide the process, as also much of non-Abrahamic and nature-based spiritualities teach. Like with a Voodoo doll, an act of reclamation metaphorically performed on a piece of paper will affect the spirit of a place and perhaps a physical space too. Therefore, with this work, my act of reclamation of land is by proxy or magic, through the power of spirit.



Figure 36. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 37. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020

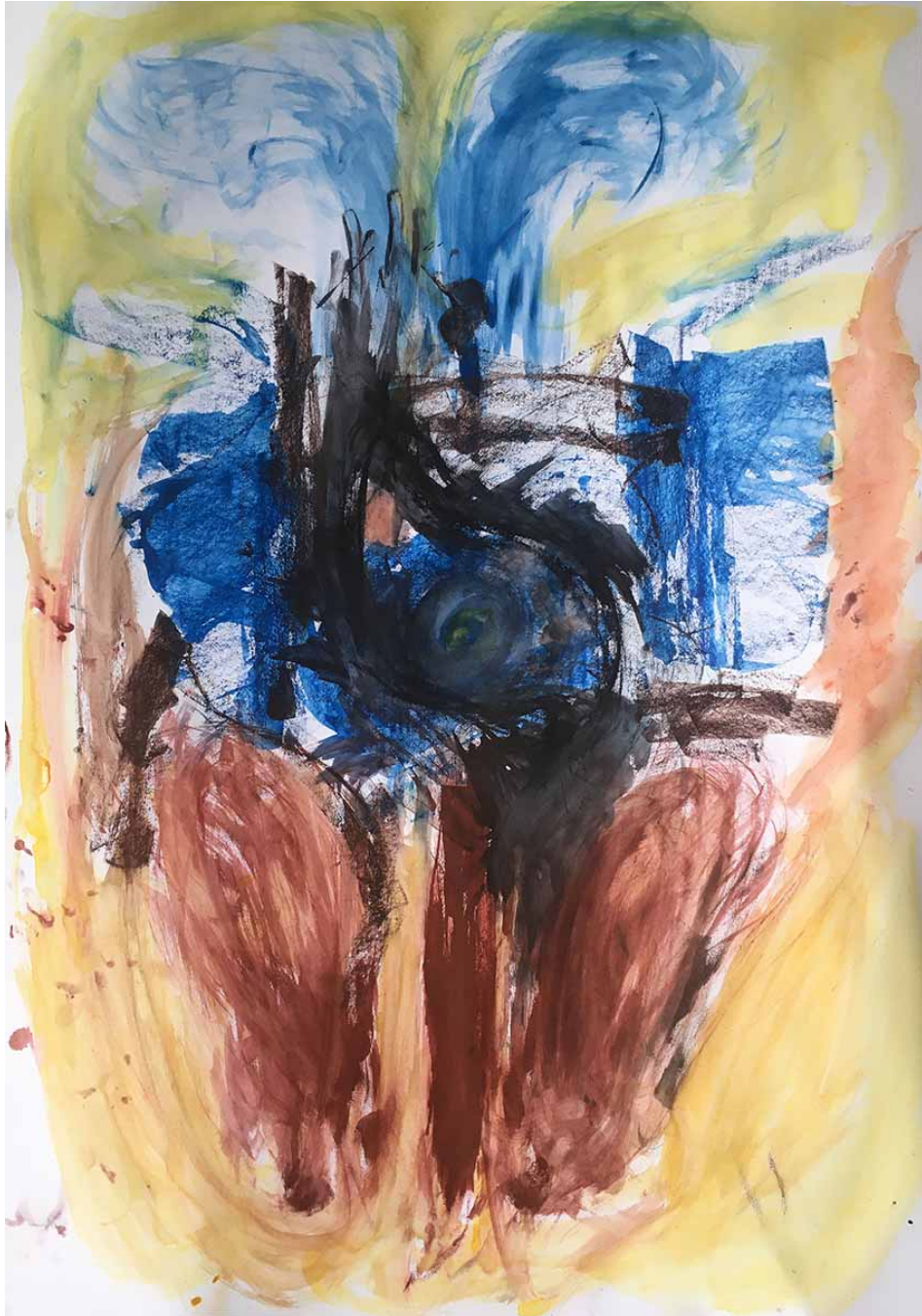


Figure 38. Simon Olmetti, *Clearing/Letting Go*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020

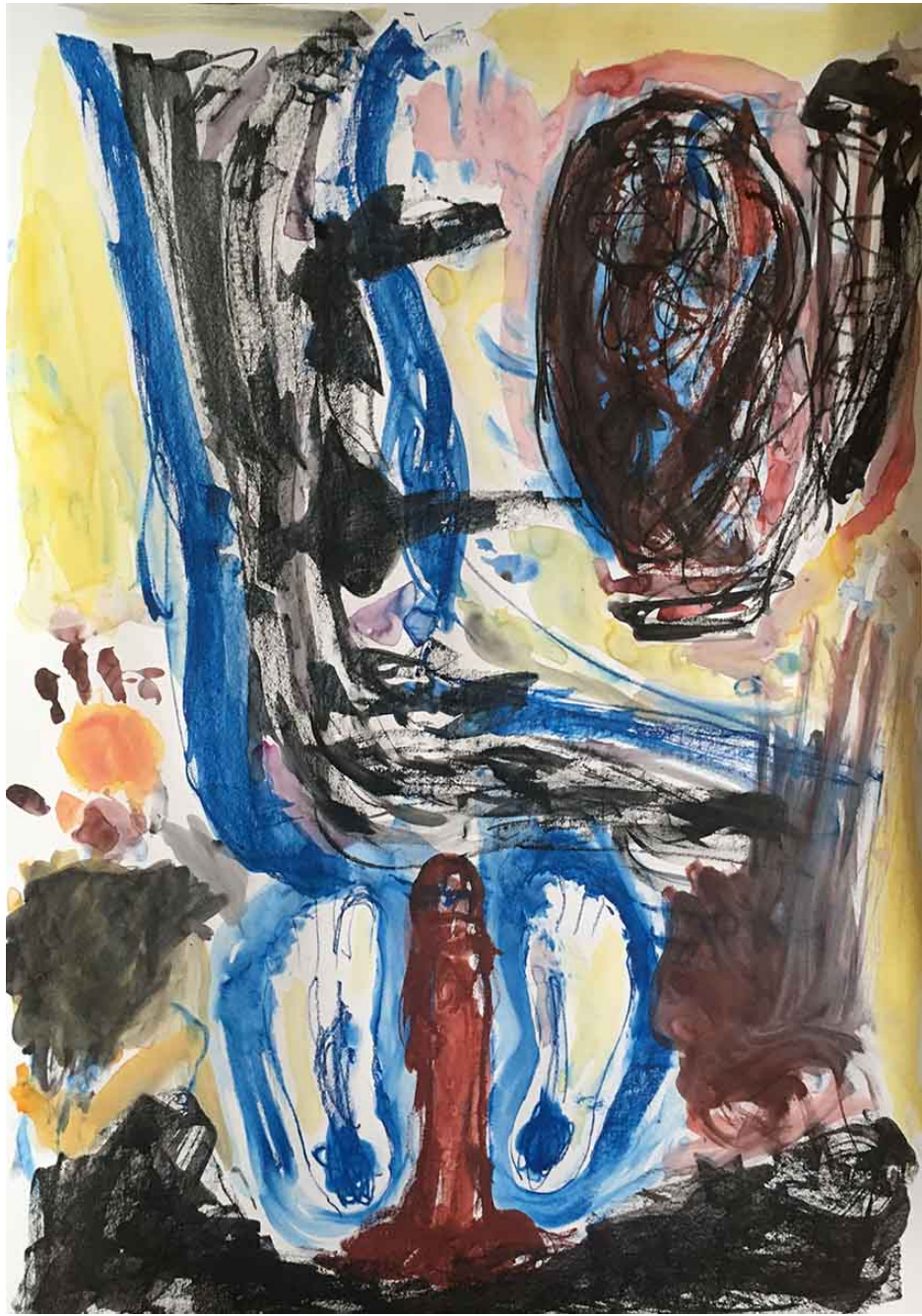


Figure 39. Simon Olmetti, *Healing*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 40. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 41. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 42. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 43. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020

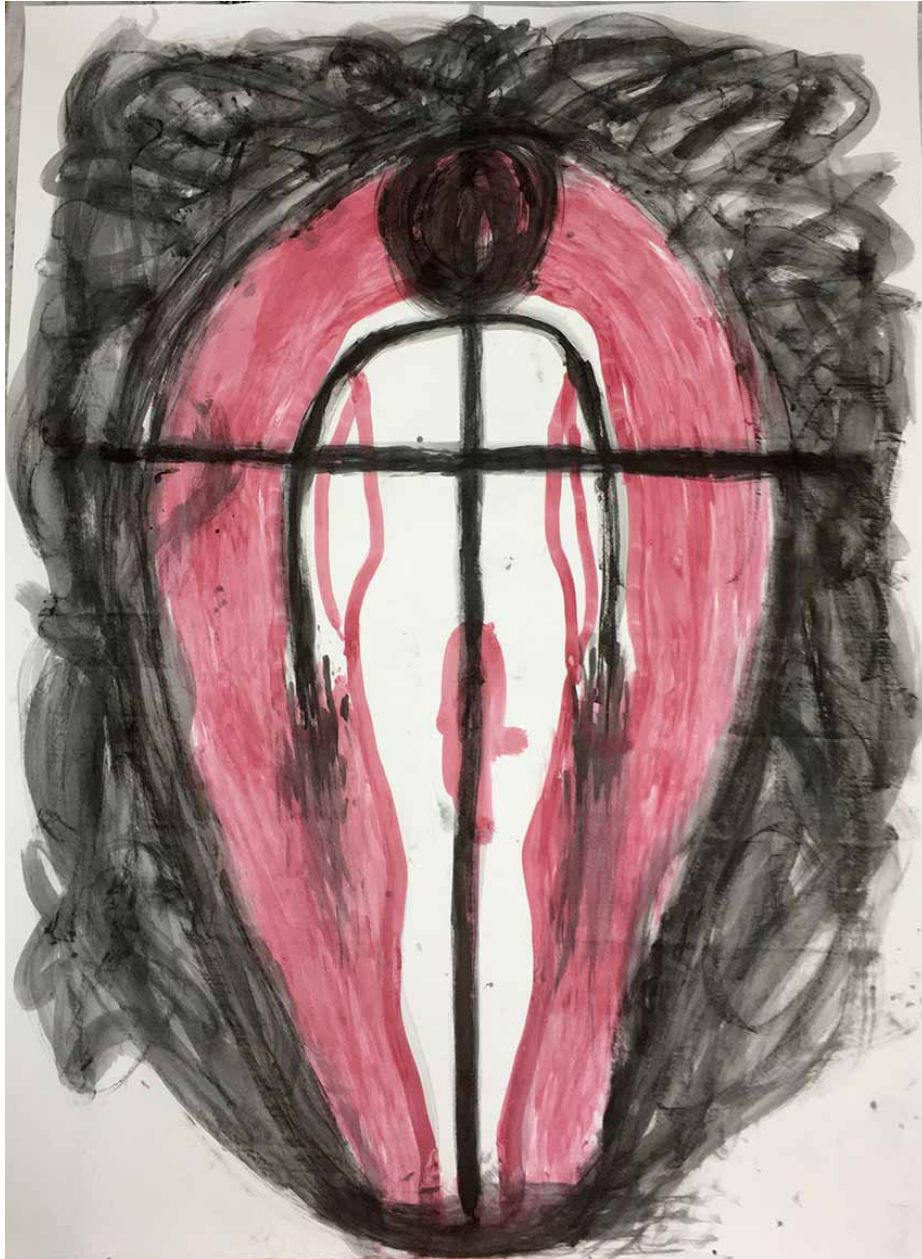


Figure 44. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 45. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 46. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 47. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020



Figure 48. Simon Olmetti, *Untitled*, from the series *Ritual Drawing*, 2020

Looking at this work now, I can see a trajectory starting with my initial attempts to connect with the land with photography and painted rocks, to experiencing some forms of (invented or reclaimed) spirituality with my *Ritual Drawing*, for then to concentrate on a form of spirituality made by and for queer people, which is the focus of my next chapter. *Ritual Drawing* feels a sort of in-between step in this journey, one made to directly experience spirituality, yet not enough both as a reclamation or queering of land, and as a form of queer spirituality.

I also feel this work is not finished and could evolve further by including other people, for example creating similar performative ritual drawings with other queer artists or performers or volunteers, in 'one-to-one' sessions or even group sessions, which would become a sort of temporary queer coven to experience/experiment with queer rituals and mark making, naked bodies creating marks on paper or canvas in a sort of meditative state, maybe induced by some shamanic sound or practice. This represents a future possibility, a not-yet-here full of potentiality which one day might become reality. For now, it is all in my head.

While I was working on *Ritual Drawing*, I have also started using world-making through writing, a sort of not-yet-here which has more concreteness because it is fixed in words, which is the topic of the next section.

3.4 Queer worlding

One way of overcoming the limits I was feeling/experiencing regarding my process of queering and reclaiming (physically and spiritually) the land, was to employ creative writing, a tool which could afford total freedom in creating, disrupting, undoing and reclaiming space without physically having to be in a specific place or doing some physical activity. I was influenced, among other things, by some contemporary artists using the same method, albeit for different aims.

One of these artists is Sin Wai Kin (previously known as Victoria Sin), who conveys their fictional worlds through moving image, writing, performance and installation. Their writing is rich, sexy, overlaid with multiple connections, borrowing from science and speculative fiction 'as a productive strategy of queer resistance, imaging futurity that does not depend on existing historical and social infrastructure', as they declared in an interview, and thus rewriting patriarchal and colonial narratives (Singh Soin, 2019).

For example, in the podcast series hosted by the Serpentine Gallery's website dedicated to Queer Ecology called *Back to Earth: Queer Currents*, Sin reads an extract from their work *And at the pinnacle, the foot of a mountain* (2019). I have transcribed some parts of it as an example of their writing:

‘texture of ground beneath me, things with six or eight legs crawling on my skin, eating, nesting, or trying to reach the other side; I open my eyes to early morning, shake off my guests, I struggle up from where I am lying down brushed by a giant fern [...] I look toward my feet and see what looks like a trampled flower in the soil [...] it looks as though it had a complex petal structure, opening and twisting, and iridescent with tips that flash red like violence, like sex and danger, and I think of orchids twisting around trees...’ (Serpentine Podcast, 2020)

Sin’s voice is soft, seductive, as if wanting to capture you in their web-like structure of words and never let you go, eating you word by word, until you are digested material, a voracious spider that transforms you into a different entity simply by listening to the engrossing tale of their imagination. *And at the pinnacle, the foot of a mountain* was part of an installation for the group exhibition *Rewriting the Future* at Site Gallery (2019), comprising of Sin’s audio piece in a corner of the room covered in red carpet and red curtains as walls, reproducing a sort of velvety womb-like space. Sin’s voice takes the listener through the horrors of humans being captured and exploited, being transformed into vessels for the orchids to reproduce themselves, human bodies becoming finally orchids and more-than-humans. The transformation is so deep and overwhelming that the narrator pronounces in the end that this new identity is what they wanted all along, as if the complete merge with the orchids discovers/unveils a return to what humans have always unsuspectingly desired, to be part of the ecosystem (Piette, 2019).

This way of writing and the reverse of positions (humans as prey of the more-than-human, a revenge of nature over human’s cruelty) made me want to go beyond walking and mark making, to embrace speculative fiction, video and sound making, and experiment with creating new worlds full of queer possibilities.

Another key artist that has infected me with their speculative writing is Linda Stupart, whose work I will focus on in the next chapter. Stupart has been influenced by Kathy Acker, among many others, whose way of writing represents an entanglement of disparate stories, cultures, knowledge, writing modes, an approach resembling the methodology of this research. Acker’s experimental writing used distorted language, merged fiction with autobiography, plagiarised other authors and introduced maps, drawings and diagrams in her books. Her writing emphasised disjunction, a montage of disparate texts, authors, times and places (*Them, Kathy*

Acker, 2019), so similar to the Frankenstein's monster figure that Barad (but also Halberstam and Stryker) speaks of. Acker also considered the materiality of language, word as matter materially affecting the reader, using violent words in violent scenes, for example, or explicit sexual language in erotic sections. In this respect, Acker's methodology is similar to that of neo-materialism, perceiving words as matter, but also text as an agglomerate of different entities, each having their own agency and yet making sense as one aggregate. Acker believed that body and language were intertwined, and sex acted as an inspiration for the writer, a method of 'awakening creativity through the connection of body and mind' (Dawson, 2019). This connection is not too dissimilar from Carpenter's concept of the material and the spiritual combined, body and spirit intertwined as I will describe in the next chapter, Acker thus translating in language form this idea of interconnection. Language/writing becomes the space where body and spirit collide, a multi-layered, entangled aggregate of affecting matter which I wanted to use and experiment in my writing.

I need to mention another writer, or better another text that has had some infectious influence on my writing, which is *Testo Junkie* (2008) by Paul Preciado. More than its topic, which is extremely important and innovative, it's the toxic way words are used that have had an influence on me. Reading this book is like taking some drugs or testosterone, his use of words affects the reader in a profound, viscous way. His references, connections, people, drugs transgress into one another, they are (dis)organised in multiple layers, they vibrate in multiplicity, augmented in their erotic connections, reference, in the contrast between pleasure and horror, joy and sorrow.

'This book has no other reason for being outside the margin of uncertainty existing between me and my sex organs, all imaginary, between three languages that don't belong to me, between the alive you and the dead you, between my desire to carry on your line and the impossibility of restoring your sperm, between your eternal and silent books and the flood of words that are in a hurry to come out of my fingers, between testosterone and my body, between V and my love for V. Looking into the camera again: "This testosterone is for you, this pleasure is for you".' (Preciado, 2013: 20)

This short paragraph is an example of Preciado affecting, multi-layered way of writing I wanted to emulate, or at least the energy I wanted to embed in my words.

Sometimes, before writing some piece, I read a paragraph or two of this book, just to instil in me its erotic, rich vibration.



Figure 49. Sin Wai Kin, And the pinnacle, the foot of a mountain, 2019. Installation view, Rewriting the Future, Site Gallery, Sheffield. Courtesy of the artist and Site Gallery. Photography Jules Lister

What follows is my first attempt to reclaim and queer the land in a piece of creative text, part of which has become the audio of one of my videos of the same title. In this text, I try to fuse the queering of land art with a spiritual vision of the land and a neo-materialistic/post-natural vision; in this way, land artworks and practices are reimagined in queer ways, applying at the same time a neo-materialist vision of nature, including a post-natural perspective of being for example particle or plant, trying to avoid having or giving only a human point of view and instead (re)imagining a more-than-human perspective.

The writing is intentionally libidinal, connecting different timelines, people and practices, creating new relationships where there are none, like a sexual scene in Heizer's work or the spirit of leaves/land with Long. It is a form of disruption and reclamation by imagining being with the artworks and the people that created those

works, mocking, transforming and ultimately queering the land (and their works), although ephemerally and only with words.

Although if imagination is matter, as Barad proclaims, my attempt might not be in vain or as ephemeral as it seems. By reading this text, as by reading a spell, it is as if its content can be activated, generating potential new visions and futurities. It is like with poison or a virus, once words are read or heard, they can stay within bodies and minds, somehow affecting the reader(s)/listener(s) and transforming their view/particles/bodies/thoughts in subtle (or less subtle) ways. The vibration of words moves from particle to particle, eventually reaching (body) cells, affecting, fusing, transforming, multiplying and becoming-with them, and creating something new, a new body (human and/or more-than-human) that has internalised, digested and trans/in-formed those words into something else/new. This new being/body is partly made by those words, by their vibration, mixed with other matter. Therefore, voicing words (with intention, as many spiritualities believe) gives them a vibration affecting matter (including thoughts) in tentacular modalities, between and beyond time and space.

Finally, like with many Indigenous people, but also with other spiritual and magic practices, or even more traditional ones like in the Jewish Kabbalah, the word is sacred, it has great power. Thus, writing this creative piece also entails embedding a spiritual power or connotation to it. Additionally, this text becomes a sort of dream(scape), a space of other(ing), of what is possible and yet impossible at the same time, a reality that mixes different planes, facts with fictions, a revisiting of a no-longer-conscious for a not-yet-here, yet something impossible to realise in all its entirety, like queerness itself.

The power of this text will be magnified with the use of parts of it in a video, which I will discuss in the last chapter.

3.5 Fucking land art

Dark... very dark vast space, infinite expanding and contracting, giant cosmic breathing, yet microscopic entities, unthinkably small, floating in the darkness that is all...

how to describe matter in such infinitesimal scale, diaphanous particles, atomic pulsations, being in the nothingness, beyond human conception and understanding, beyond even the concept of matter itself...

desert sand, hot and cold at the same time, dryness that becomes softness constricted in one tiny agglomerate of particles, atoms toward collision and yet never touching one another, in a constant state of attraction and repulsion, forever banned to join, to fuse, as if wanting to make love in a big orgy of desires but eternally divided by the law of physics...

the irony of life, of this universe made of subatomic particles urging to fuck one another and yet forever destined to just manifest their desire into matter, a sort of Dante's Hell Circle, an eternal punishment, a vision of fulfilment constantly right there in front of them and yet never realised...

(but let's not get distracted...)

sand, we were saying, or better, particles of sand, softly leaning on one another, in that peculiar state of near-touching-but-never-so that is the prime principle of universal matter, vast clusters of it so much so to make sand, and salt, and then gravels, and then a lot of it to make a vast desert, with its scarce short plants, dry cracks and rocks which run until the mountain range at the horizon...

a huge plain that is actually a dried-out lake called El Mirage, and at its centre is Michael Heizer in his early twenties, an arrogant little shit but also rather sexy... the sun penetrates the sand with its long cock-like rays, oh please fuck me, energy passing through atomic layers bringing a cosmic message from the other side of the galaxy...

two men are fucking in one of Heizer's holes in the ground... I don't think he intended that... the warmth of the two bodies, friction of skin on skin, saliva mixed with sand and body odour, and the sun trapped in the hole, makes it an orgy of different entities fucking one another, producing a new liquid which is bright, warm, made of different

colours, glowing even, magical cosmic semen generating new entities, ideas, and nothing at the same time...

some red ants are testing this liquid, tasting it, walking on and in it, bathing on the body of one of the man while he's sucking off the other one, in one of Heizer's holes, in the Mojave Desert in 1968, California, USA.

Gently the sand starts moving and slightly circling, as if softly swept by an autumnal wind, its particles flowing away, being carried by a wind that gets cooler and cooler, salty and misty, echoes of voices, of sounds of seagulls and other unrecognisable birds, a cacophony of cries, splashes of waves, foam, white and spicy, like cum, and then green, intoxicatingly so, wet and musty smell...

the dust now sets on a grassy hill in what seems to be England, Richard Long is there among colourful leaves, walking his straight lines, moving heavy rocks to form a circle in that drizzly environment ...

he's old now, it gets more difficult to do this kind of things...

some leaves, maybe stirred by the dust, try to trick him, blowing and throwing themselves to his face while he's walking, serious in his intent, connecting dots in his imaginary map, straight lines that can never be really straight, nature doesn't behave like that...

nature's engine is queer, its cogs are like microscopic monkeys playing with their genitals all the time, trying to disguise, modify, transform, trans anything they encounter, devouring time and space and secreting/defecating at the same time another timeline, another space, particles that get constantly pregnant on one side and delivered as new entities on the other...

Richard is rather focused and slightly irritated. Although he can't see the particles, he probably somehow can sense them; he thinks they are a form of spirit of nature or of that particular place, instead they are mother-fucker matter made of atoms and times-gone-by, or perhaps a ghost, a creature of another time and space...

they/we are in and of every thing, a glittering essence in an infinite sea of nothingness vibrating and aggregating at different speeds and therefore creating different materials and beings...

in the end we're all made of the same thing, of the same gun-powdery queer energy...

I think of José (Muñoz) and I miss him, although I've never met him in this timeline, but I know somehow that I could have loved him, be a dear friend to him...

what a cunt I am!

I lose again sense of myself, of my identity and being, I am dust now, only particles moving for some strange attraction to different places, realities and moments...

I/we/the dust is back to the desert now, sucked in from a vortex in its centre, a storm gathering in no-place...

big coloured boulders are stuck one another in a row, seven column-like garish structures glowing their campness on the blasted flat surface of the Nevada desert... Ugo Rondinone is directing several big machines to position them in that way, Magic Mountains he said, memories flow in between the interstices, John Giorno casting a poem in colours, rock touching rock, friction of bodies covered in metallic fluorescent paint, breathing of another language, the perversion of an Indigenous one perhaps, soft, whispering sweet words, a melody not understandable but which is intoxicating, arousing and tender at the same time, coloured phantoms that bring back recollections of a time that maybe never existed, myth consumed in an orgy of pink, yellow, blue, grey and all the other colours covering these big rocks, hard cocks or ancient/new middle fingers against a mountain range in the distance...



Figure 50. Ugo Rondinone, Seven Magic Mountains, Las Vegas, NV, 2016. Photo by Gianfranco Gorgoni, courtesy of Art Production Fund.

Some voices now call the dust to a meeting place, a gathering of bodies covered in ochre and red, songs sung in repetitive litanies, as if the gods or the spirits would hear or understand better in this way...

surprisingly among them is Ana Mendieta, holding my hand (I'm a body again), telling me not to be afraid, to be brave, an old man hands me a wooden cup with some dark yellow drink in it, the colour of piss, an even more pungent smell...

I'm like hypnotised, with that cup in my hands... Ana gently pushes my hands and the cup up toward my lips, I drink without will or fear, and all the beings around me start melting away and disappear, a vortex of green and bodies and voices...

a big condor flies up high in the blue of the sky...

Ana is busy now at digging with her bare hands a vaginal hole... she invites me to step in, I lay down naked in it, wet mud on my back licking my skin pores, dark walls closing in on me slightly, roots now growing from the depths of the earth and enveloping my arms and legs and torso, slightly-furry snakes, rigid and cold, constricting me to the ground, a prisoner against my will, erotic and frightening, I feel

these roots/snakes could pierce my skin and enter my body, cutting and splitting my members into pieces that would return to the earth...

I shout and cry, why are you doing this to me?

Ana smiles in a maternal and cunning way, the plan is working, she pours gunpowder on me, black dust as if sprinkling black pepper before cooking my meat, she swipes a matchstick and throws it to me...

the explosion is intensely beautiful and scary at the same time, a cosmic Black Hole from inside my bowels out, deep noise of internal organs expanding like red planets made of gas and rocks, matter vibrating so powerfully that sound becomes incomprehensible...

the expansion goes in all directions, floating in no time and space, pure energy made of matter, ether and sound combined...

I understand I'm a feeling now, of pure joy, ecstasy to be more precise, a cosmic orgasm that embraces every possible substance in the universe, that makes everything erupts in a guttural ejaculation, every particle that is here, that was, and that will be, passing through me, through that body lying on that muddy vaginal hole...

I breathe deeply, open slowly my eyes and see Ana, still there looking at me, she kisses me tenderly on the lips and then disappears, like a sudden current of warm air in the middle of winter...

the dust and its particles are on the move again, the wind never tires, the forces of transmutation are irreversible, irresistible, constant...

hardness, rigidity on the body above the earth, right and tall until branches open up to the air and breathe, fumes and toxic rubbish produced by the human species goes in, oxygen particles go out back to the atmosphere, a process that is like this because meant to be like this...

underneath the ground long roots, another sort of branches or arms but hidden in the depth of the earth, searching for water and minerals and other useful components...

the brain or head never in one place only, but in many different sections at any time, extending up high in the branches through the leaves and breezy wind, in the middle trunk stern and pride, protecting and connecting its insides, protruding underneath the earth as another part of the same, and yet different in its task and mission, keeping grounded, nourishing and sharing...

semi-transparent fungi connect one another and other plants for miles, feelings and thoughts somehow being exchanged, care being given and received, like hands holding other hands in the undergrounds, or feet touching other feet, stimulating sensations, prickliness, erotic connections, or simply vibrations...

sap running through the rigid body, receiving nourishment from above and below, from the sky and the earth, circulating through cells and matter, giving life, hard bark hiding soft liquid within...

When I open my eyes again I'm floating in the vastity of the ocean, plastic items floating with me, the holes in some of them make the water sing throaty songs, of comings and goings, familiar and eerie sounds...

the sun pushes on my skin, it's hot and uncomfortable...

I want to swim away, but I can't, the plastic is everywhere, the water is in fact made of plastic too, cling film that becomes more rigid by the minute, sea gulls reflecting on its viscous undulating surface, they're hungry, they will feed on me...

I miss home, I miss my land all of a sudden, never was one for this kind of things, but distance and time can consume and change you, behaviour and thought-forms that slip away like dead skin cells, body and mind in constant transformation, transmutation...

I've never heard until recently of a Sardinian artist called Pinuccio Sciola, and his singing rocks which can only be described as weird, magnificent poems transmuted into boulders, Mediterranean birds uttering through stone...

floating in that plastic sea, lost in its vastity made of garish colours and sulphur, I find myself singing those melodies, the sounds of Sciola's rocks, more a whispering or a faint whistling than a song, echoing in the floating nothingness of that moment...

I mysteriously or deliriously smell thyme and flowers, the wind is caressing my body turning plastic, making me feel lighter, spicy air coming from afar and yet utterly known...



Figure 51. Pinuccio Sciola, *Pietra Nuragica*, 2009. Unknown photographer.

my flesh is consumed by the sun, plastic, salt and fatigue...

many kinds of birds gather above my floating body, as if called by my feeble singing... they fly in a sort of menacing ritual, faster and faster, going around in a circle that becomes tighter and tighter...

suddenly, as if having one brain, they all plunge into me, entering my stomach through my mouth as a black feathered fist ...

the birds expand into my insides, horror gives way to powerlessness, no strength at all, no desire to resist...

my cells get heavier, transmute, I feel choking, even vomiting, but it's only a moment...

unexpectedly, long feathers start growing from my wasted skin, colourful, even glittery ones, everywhere, on my face, head, hands, feet, any inches of my once-human body covered in plumes, a strange tropical-sort of bird...

the I-bird utters a small cry, something similar to joy, contained but impulsive, and realises it can detach from that plasticky water, it can leap up and fly...

and so it does...

it flies away from that stinky water, flies with the hundreds of birds inside itself,

forgetting who/what it is or was,

just animal and instinct,

just movement

and wind.

4. Queer Spirit

Is there a spirituality that is truly queer? And how this kind of spirituality could be embedded in an art practice? This chapter focuses on Queer Spirit, a form of spirituality made by and for queer people. I will outline what is Queer Spirit, tracing its origins and system of thought, from Edward Carpenter who can be considered its forefather or 'grandfather', to the more recent figures of Harry Hay and Arthur Evans, two of the most radical thinkers of the countercultural gay/queer movement who went on to influence and found the Radical Faeries. I will then analyse the Radical Faeries as the embodiment of Queer Spirit, and how their spirituality movement aesthetically affect my work. I will end this chapter with the practice of AA Bronson and Linda Stupart, two artists embedding (forms of) Queer Spirit, although representing two opposing sides: life force versus death, optimism versus destruction, essentialism versus post-naturalism. These two art practices show the intrinsic contradiction of this spirituality which, like life, is multifaceted, multi-layered and entangled with multiple and opposed forces, something I try to embed in my practice too.

4.1 Queer spirit/uality

Since the beginning of this project, spirituality has been an important component in my quest for queering the land. Yet, its employment in my practice felt peripheral or not quite right, 'not quite there yet'. I felt I needed to concentrate on a spirituality which was queer at its core and specifically formulated by and for queer people. I've had some experience with the Radical Faeries in the UK, having participated in some of their gatherings and at their first Queer Spirit Festival more than ten years ago. I realised their spirituality was the missing aspect in my research and decided to focus on it. I called it Queer Spirit, which should not be confused with queer spirituality (I capitalise Queer Spirit because I consider it the name of a form of spirituality).

Queer spirituality can refer to any spirituality in which queer people try either to fit in or to reclaim. This can translate into an effort to provide specific hermeneutics of religious traditions and texts reinterpreting them for queer purposes (Bardella, 2001: 117), becoming a way to find a space within institutional and traditional religions. In

this respect, it relies on heterosexist mythologies and dogmas (Sadownick, 2011). This chapter and research instead try to go beyond traditional religion, as the aim is not to fit in, but to create our own spirituality, based on our terms, needs and desires.

Queer Spirit, on the other hand, is a spirituality specifically made by and for queer people. It develops beyond the impositions/rules/customs of institutionalised religions, where queerness is at best tolerated, but never considered central or important. It is a practice which aims to enable the well-being of its participants, representing 'a return home', the (re)creation of a space for the fulfilment of life, desires and sense of belonging, giving a role or a purpose to queer people often denied by the main religions. It is still built upon other spiritual and religious beliefs, mainly from Native, Indigenous and Pagan traditions, but it fosters its own rituals and mythology focusing exclusively on queer people and experience.

To speak of Queer Spirit is to travel through time and space, researching disparate traces and hints that can point to an entity with enough specific communalities to be recognised as a form of spirituality, but large enough to be inclusive and to embrace all the different and multiple facets that a queer identity, and therefore spirituality, entails.

Although a few people have written about it in the last century or so, Queer Spirit remains a relatively new and unknown spiritual practice, even among queer people.⁶ Furthermore, all the authors dealing with Queer Spirit have used a mix of facts (traces in history, customs, interviews), so-called 'soft' facts (reading between the lines, interpretation, hints) and fiction (myths, metaphors, stories, filling the gaps), because of the nature of queerness itself: being an illegal activity and identity until as recent as the 1960s in the Western world (and in many other countries still is), it is unsurprisingly difficult to gather information and knowledge using more scientific or

⁶ Edward Carpenter was researching and writing about what became some of the basis or antecedents for Queer Spirit in the late 1800s; he published the first of his trilogy on same-sex love in 1896 titled *Love's Coming of Age* (although he did not include the chapter called 'Homogenic Love' which was instead part of a public lecture he gave in 1894), followed by *The Intermediate Sex* (1909) and *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk* (1914), although most of the writings more directly linked to Queer Spirit are from the 1950s onwards, particularly after the 1970s, mainly from Harry Hay and his cohort, as exposed in this chapter.

'proper' methods. Muñoz aptly speaks of the vexed relationship that queerness has with evidence, as historically it has been used 'to penalise and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts' (Muñoz, 2010: 65). The key to prove and read queerness, he suggests, is by connecting it with the concept of ephemera, as trace or remain of things that are left 'hanging in the air like a rumour' (Muñoz, 2010: 65).

Queer Spirit and the authors trying to define it act in a similar fashion, trying to find ephemera embedded in queer acts and stories, dowsing history through facts and myths. Furthermore, many authors such as Will Roscoe, Harry Hay, Mark Thompson, Andrew Ramer, Christian de la Huerta and many others use different terms to describe similar concepts, such as Gay spirituality, Gay Soul/Spirit, Queer theology and so on. I will instead use Queer Spirit, a term often used by Radical Faerie members (also the name of a festival about queerness and spirituality in the UK organised by the Albion Faeries); it is also used by Will Roscoe in his book *Queer Spirits: A Gay Men's Myth Book* (1995) in which he tries to give a spiritual history and myth for gay men based on Two-Spirits, American and European folklore and shamanic culture, in the footsteps of Harry Hay, although exclusively focused on men; it is the title of one of AA Bronson's works and books, a key work for this research; finally, it encapsulates a sense of magic, the word 'spirit' enclosing both the sense of place and soul, land and body, which I find fitting for this project.

4.2 The antecedents: Edward Carpenter

O child of Uranus, wanderer down all times,
Yet outcast and misunderstood of men –
I see thee where for centuries thou hast walked,
Yet outcast, slandered, pointed at by the mob.
The day draws nigh when from these mists of ages
Thy form in glory clad shall reappear.

Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (1883)

Edward Carpenter was a writer and a poet; a public speaker who used to electrify audiences with his lectures on inequality and utopic new ways of living

during the 1890s and 1900s; a vegetarian and naturalist; a political and radical activist, considered one of the godfathers of the new-born Labour Party (Ryle, 2015); and a true pioneer of the LGBTQ+ movement in England, 'living openly and defiantly with his life-long partner George Merrill' (Rowbotham, 2008: 80) in a small village in the Peak District (Millthorpe), in a homophobic society.

Influenced by John Ruskin, Carpenter became increasingly committed to a utopian, primitive vision of pastoralism (Browne et al., 2010: 14), and decided to move to the countryside and live a sort of ascetic life, growing his own food, making his own clothes, recycling and reusing (Parkins, 2018). In her article *Edward Carpenter's Queer Ecology of the Everyday*, Wendy Parkins speaks of queer ascetism, describing his radical simplicity and self-denial as self-fulfilment or self-affirmation, reorienting the normative notion of ascetism (transcending the body) to other more open-ended 'orientations of actions and feeling' (Parkins, 2018). What in fact might look like austere from the outside was lived by Carpenter as a 'promiscuous plenitude of experience and opportunity' (Parkins, 2018), where relationships, experiences and pleasure between humans, but also between human and non-human, were key.

In his writings, for example, Carpenter speaks of his coat in terms of a series of relationships: after being used and well weathered by him, the coat gets cut up into patches to make a rug out of it, then after years it becomes part of the dog's kennel to keep the dog warm, until it becomes manure for his vegetable garden. What's important here is the way Carpenter speaks of his coat, as an affectionate piece of clothing with 'an intimacy with my body [...] returning to me in the form of potatoes for my dinner' (Carpenter, 1887: 96 cited in Parkins 2018). Thus, his coat works together or even it is transformed/fused with the human (himself) and the non-human (dog, potatoes), although it must be said that he never perceives the coat from a non-human perspective, rather from an anthropocentric one speaking *for* the coat and ultimately considering it only for human consumption. There is a sense of making-kin-with in this process, a piece of clothing that after several affectionate uses becomes part of the body through eating, which ultimately is a fusing with the more-than-human realising what Haraway speaks of. Carpenter becomes compost, so to speak, or a very porous body, not only because the potatoes he eats are partly made by the particles of his former coat, but also because his body is the aggregate of elements

made by the remains of his scent and skin (when the clothing was a coat), particles from the floor and feet that stood on it (when it was a rug), of the dog's hairs, the mud of the vegetable bed and so on. Carpenter's body is made of all that surrounds him, a process of digestion through time, space, the more-than-human and above all kinship. Kinship, in this case, becomes a fundamental element. Only through kinship and caring we can become part of and experience a spiritual communion with the land. Spirituality, for Carpenter, is deeply material, not based on dogmas but linked to everyday life.

In this sense, Carpenter can be considered as a sort of precursor for more contemporary visions of vital materialism. Indeed, in his writings he often speaks of his encounter with nature, the open air and the earth beneath bare feet, with the animals, with his lovers and friends, with the many strangers coming to see him in a sort of pilgrimage, all through a joyful sense and energy (Parkins, 2018). Ascetism here, in his utopic world in the countryside, is full of joy; his spirituality is one linked with acceptance and celebration of the body and its desires, not its mortification. This vision is in stark contrast with Christian ascetism, which is linked to the monastic and segregated life of the Desert Fathers, or to the penitence of sins through self-denial, abstinence or even mortification of the flesh. According to E. M. Foster, who after Carpenter's death famously (and wrongly) predicted that his writings in the future wouldn't be as important as instead his life, argued that Carpenter 'gave the gift of gifts, the transference of vitality' (Ryle, 2005).⁷

Although indirectly, it is as if Carpenter instinctively recognises the vital materiality that neo-materialism speaks of (a century or more later), the idea that everything has a vibration, is vibration, and that we communicate and commune with all the objects and particles around us in tentacular and mysterious (or, to be more precise, quantic) ways. In more spiritual terms, we could say we are all part of a cosmic assemblage, which Carpenter seems to have glimpsed in his view of nature as utopic matter to commune with.

⁷ Forster's prediction was accurate in the short term, indeed by the 1940s most of Carpenter's books were out of print and largely forgotten. In the early 1970s came the first attempt to rediscover and reclaim his work by various gay liberation movements, and in the 1980s by the revival of interest in questions of sex and gender (Ryle, 2005).

Carpenter had also a very (neo)materialistic idea of spirituality. Sheila Rowbotham describes Carpenter as considering the material and spiritual as intertwined, 'the combination of sex and spirit' (2008: 281). In contrast with Western religious ideas of sex as only for reproductive purposes, Carpenter advocated sex as a union of souls, influenced by Neopaganism and utopic desires of building new communities based on spiritual ideals (Browne et al., 2010: 14). Following in the footsteps of his mentor Walt Whitman, he strived all his life to celebrate the body and soul, to enjoy 'the body electric', or as he put it: 'the spiritual must have the material to give it body; the material has no meaning without the spiritual' (Rowbotham, 2008: 2). It is this interconnection between matter and spirit that makes Carpenter's thought closer to contemporary neo-materialistic ideas, a vision of life underpinned by the vibration of matter and its connection with everything there is.

This interconnectedness is in fact present in many of his writings. Parkins, for example, speaks of *Towards Democracy* as a text which has an 'immersive sense of interconnectedness' across time and space, nature and culture, a 'connection of bodies, things, places, actions, and feelings in networks that always already exist and that represent the utopian promise of what Carpenter calls democracy' (Parkins, 2018).

'I, Nature, stand, and call to you though you heed not [...]

I am the ground; I listen the sound of your feet. They come nearer. I shut my eyes and feel their thread over my face.

I am the trees; I reach downward my long arms and touch you, though you heed not, with enamoured fingers [...]

Will you come forth? Will you do the daring deed? Will you strip yourself naked as you come into the world, and come before me, and regard unafraid the flashing of my sword? Will you lose your life, to Me?

Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (1883: 6)

Toward Democracy was considered life-changing by many of his contemporaries. It counterposes the evils of capitalism with the pleasure of a simple

life and same-sex desire (Parkins, 2018). This short extract, for instance, shows Carpenter's attempt at imagining himself being the ground or a plant, to fuse and make-kin or make love with another human being, a strategy to speak of (probably same-sex) desire, but also of alternative modalities of communion with nature, of human and more-than-human sensual relationship(s). Sexuality is also prominent, with the desire for example of stripping naked and the reference of the 'flashing of the sword'.

Particularly important for this chapter are the books *The Intermediate Sex* (1909) and *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk* (1914), in which Carpenter argues the existence of an in-between, third gender beyond the patriarchal, heteronormative binarism of men/women, researching in the past traces of the existence and practices of queer people. With these books and research, he yearned not for a vision of an ancient past, for example of the Greece of old, rather of a present and an imagined future where freedom and love would overcome morality and oppression (Ryle, 2005).

Carpenter describes the 'intermediate types or Uranians' as 'the midwives to the new life' (Ryle, 2005), showing again a vitalist, optimistic, utopic vision of queerness as a life force. For Carpenter, the then-existing state of sex was depraved and corrupt, twisted by class relations and the exploitation of women (Ryle, 2005), and through his writings, public lectures, and the example of his life in nature, things could and should change.

What is important to consider here, for the evolution of what will become Queer Spirit, is Carpenter's vision of 'the intermediate man or woman as a forward force in human evolution' (Carpenter, 1919: 59). He declares that the 'homosexual⁸ temperament' is a fact of nature, and an important one, not only because it is spread wildly both geographically and historically (and in his books he gives extensive

⁸ Carpenter, but also many authors quoted in this chapter, often use the word 'homosexual'; instead, I reject this medical term and try my best to swap it for 'gay' or 'queer', or at times 'LGBTQ+', as much as possible, although at times, particularly in quotes, I feel I need to use it as a respect toward the author and their use of it.

proves of this) but also for the significance that this implies.⁹ Being different from the other men and women (of the tribe or the culture they are in), these intermediate types are forced to question their nature, who they are, why they are so different, necessarily going inwards, becoming observers of their inner thoughts, but also of nature and external phenomena alike. Carpenter believes it is this predisposition that makes queer people more likely to become inventors, teachers, musicians, healers, priests, artists and scientists, thus with time leading the tribe or society to advance culturally, spiritually and scientifically (Carpenter, 1919: 58-60). This assumption, essentialist and controversial in a contemporary discourse, is nevertheless important to understand the basis of what will become Queer Spirit. It also gave hope, a role and myth to a section of society deemed as sinful and unnatural.

In conclusion, Carpenter's thought is rooted in vitalism and can be read as embedding neo-materialist attributes. His vision toward nature, queerness, sex and spirituality makes his writings and thought still important for our current society marred by social, mental and ecological crisis. His going back to the land is about ascetic plenitude, of establishing deep relationships with human and non-human/more-than-human based on kinship and care, an intermingling and fusion that is not about possession but relation and making-kin-with. Carpenter's contribution to Queer Spirit rests in his very material idea of spirituality, of the flesh intertwined with spirit, which is key for this project. It is also based on the conviction of a third gender, an intermediate type that today we would call queer, whose intrinsic attributes make them able to perform specific roles in society, becoming an essential force for

⁹ His research is rather impressive. For instance, he mentions the *Kedeshim*, a Hebrew word originally meaning the 'men of god' or the 'consecrated ones', priests linked to a specific temple who offered, among their duties, sexual intercourse with pilgrims and other devoted men. The term *Kedeshim* has been consequently translated as 'sodomite', which Carpenter believes to be a way of Judaism first, and Christianity later, to discredit and supplant older or pagan practices, thus resulting in considering same-sex as heresy (Carpenter, 1919: 50), and representing the beginning of homophobia. The same role applies to 'sacred women' or *Kedeshoth*, a kind of courtesan with some sexual services for prophetic functions (Carpenter, 1919: 28-30). He also gives other examples in different parts of the world, such as in Africa, particularly among the peoples on the West Coast with the figure of the *Kosio*, similar to the *Kedeshim*; or the *Bonzes* or Buddhist priests throughout China, Japan and Malaysia, where it was considered sin for monks to have intercourse with a woman but not with a man, and the latter was actually encouraged (Carpenter, 1919: 33).

change, progress and a better world. It is striking to think that this thought was being developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a rather lonely voice among the many considering queerness and other non-normative sexualities as degenerate, sinful and deviant. Carpenter's example embeds the importance of reconnecting with the land, together with a reclamation and transformation of a past when in-between/queer people had an important role, what Carpenter believes being a 'natural predisposition' of looking inwards and therefore being catalyst for change and progress. His thought about queerness, spirituality and nature will be developed further by Harry Hay in the second half of the twentieth century, which is the focus of the next section.

4.3 Radically Gay

'We are a Separate People with, in several measurable respects, a rather different window on the world, a different consciousness which may be triggered into being by our lovely sexuality'.

Harry Hay, 1983 (Roscoe, 1996: 6)

Harry Hay was a British-born, American gay rights activist who gained mythical status in the San Francisco's gay community as a founding father of the gay rights movement. He was one of the first to describe gay and lesbian people as a minority group (Roscoe, 1996: 5), a (divi)vision which at the time was highly contested and which often remains so. He argued that gays and lesbians¹⁰ differ from heterosexuals as much as 'African Americans or Latinos differ from Euro-Americans, in terms of shared values, mode of communications, historical heritage and behavioural patterns' (Roscoe, 1996: 5-6). Will Roscoe believes that since the Stonewall riots, the LGTBQ+ movement has modelled itself after agendas and tactics of other American minority groups thanks in part to Hay's vision, adding that Hay's

¹⁰ Hay focused mainly on gay men and often included lesbians, but rarely spoke of/for other sexual minorities or used the word queer, at the time perceived as an insult and not yet reclaimed as a term.

name, as a founder of a major American social movement, should be commonplace, even though only few people know who he is (Roscoe, 1996: 6). Hay was a member of the American Communist Party, even though the party at the time banned gay people, but left in 1950 to establish the Mattachine Society, the first gay political organisation in the United States (Thompson, 1987: 21). He is also one of the founders of the Radical Faeries, and his contribution to Queer Spirit is key.

Hay centres his thought and research mainly on two sources/strands: one is the Native American Two-Spirits and their role within their society; the other is the European tradition of the Fool and its links to the figure of the Trickster and other gender-bending attributes. Interestingly, he links the two sources suggesting some communal elements, tracing their common origins to ancient people and ancestral or shamanic practices. In a sense, Hay continues Carpenter's work, building on it through a Marxist vision of history as a progression of stages, and creating his version of gay/queer history and spirituality (Roscoe, 1996: 92), although it must be said that parts of his theory rest more on interpretation than on hard facts. Like Carpenter, Hay believed queer people represented a third gender, a different people with certain skills and with a specific role in society. For Carpenter, the 'intermediate type' was always mainly an isolated figure, a shaman or a priest with an inner predisposition. Hay instead understood and celebrated queerness as a community, a coming together as a family or even as a different form of society altogether.

Hay wrote many essays for different publications and public speeches, usually in a rich, colourful, at times camp style, sometimes referencing his sources, sometimes not, occasionally reworking his own material, thus making it difficult to describe a precise and linear system of thought and to draw clear-cut conclusions. Hay was indeed a trickster.

Hay wanted to demonstrate that queerness always existed and had a role in society, and particularly a spiritual one. He also wanted to tie queerness, spirituality and nature together, showing that before the 'corruption' of civilisation, queerness was not only natural, but had an important spiritual role too. Hay indeed was convinced that queerness exists because it serves humanity (Roscoe, 1996: 181). Addressing the Western Homophile Conference in 1970, he declared 'we are a Minority of common Spirituality' (Roscoe, 1996: 181), stressing the communal

consciousness of queer people and laying the grounds for a specific form of spirituality, created by and for queer people.

Particularly important for what will become Queer Spirit is the archetypal of the Two-Spirit, representing a consciousness or energy of pure disruption, the opposite of resolved and balance, much more in tune with contemporary notions of queerness as an undoing or disruption of normativity, a constant movement across possibilities, sexualities, genres and perversions that Sedgwick speaks of in her definition of queerness (1993: 12). Navajo Indians¹¹ call it *nádleehé*, which literally means ‘the one who continually changes’, showing how the Two-Spirit energy is perceived as chaotic and disruptive, not as a union of male and female, rather the cramming into one body of often incompatible energies and characteristics, an archetypal figure who is often frightening, even monstrous, but one that if the individual is able to channel and govern, it can give immeasurable power (Roscoe, 1995: 12). This view can also be associated with neo-materialist notions of vibrational matter, the Two-Spirit archetype showing the intrinsic queerness of matter and its embodiment, the confluence of different forms of vibrations and beings into one body. There is a saying among the Diné: ‘When all the *nádleehé* are gone, that will be the end of the Navaho [Diné]’ (Hill, 1935: 274, cited in Roscoe, 1996: 300), showing the importance of Two-Spirits among their people and their fundamental spiritual role in their society.

The other strand of Hay’s thought is the figure of the Trickster, which in European traditions has similar attributes with the figure of the Fool.¹² In folk songs and stories, the Fool is usually the one who speaks for the village against wicked

¹¹ The Navaho actually call themselves Diné

¹² In Old Europe, Hay explains, as also among many Native tribes all over the world, adolescents had to go through initiation rites involving going outside of the family/tribe/village perimeter into the wilderness, to find themselves, have visions and come back as adults/men (Hay, 1953: 107, cited in Roscoe, 1996: 126). Some of these adolescents, Hay continues, used to come back different; these ‘deviants’ or queer individuals became known as ‘changeling’ (in the UK), literally ‘he/she who is what seems not to be’ (Hay, 1953: 107, cited in Roscoe, 1996: 126). One explanation that people used to give for this kind of people was that they were swapped by the ‘fairies’ who lived in the forests and whose ways were different from the culture of the village. These changelings didn’t use to marry and became known as the Fool, in the sense that their appearance ‘fooled’ one into believing what they were not (Hay, 1953: 107-108, cited in Roscoe, 1996: 126).

laws and oppression (Hay, 1953: 108, cited in Roscoe, 1996: 126). Equally, the figure of the Trickster is linked to the Native American's figure of the coyote, victim of its own impulses, especially for food and sex, and with the power to transform itself into other beings (Roscoe, 1995: 127). Whitney A. Bauman, in *Meaningful Flesh*, describes the Trickster as the one who blurs the boundaries between right and wrong, life and death, male and female, humans and animals, and humans and the divine (2018: 117). Together with the Magician and the Shaman, these archetypes force us to see the unseen and form a bridge between spirit and the material world.¹³ This Native vision of the Coyote represents the archetype or metaphor for a form of energy which is trans, as Barad would proclaim, continuously trans-forming, constantly (self)generating and becoming-with; a powerful, disruptive, deceptive energy that is queer at its core. The figure of the Trickster/Fool is important because it will be embedded and developed into the Radical Faeries, speaking up against oppression and patriarchy, utilising humour, fun and a vision of spirituality as catalyst for change, a sort of revolutionary force merged with utopic ideals and joy.

These attributes (Two-Spirit and Fool/Trickster archetypes) make Queer Spirit close to some neo-materialist and post-natural elements, summarising this spirituality as a force of continuous disruption, generative of multiple connections, entanglements and new forms of kinship. However, it must be said that the visions exposed so far in this chapter are rather essentialist, a view which is frowned upon by post-structuralism and even more so by contemporary queer theories and post-naturalism. Hay and Carpenter were men of their time, their knowledge was formed and informed by the theories and notions around them, hence at times their writings seem dated or even troubling. I am also aware they both speak mainly for gay men, whereas I am trying to investigate a form of spirituality for queer people, not only men. Yet, their importance resides in their pursuit to bring a different perspective of what it means to be queer, together with a spiritual (archetypal) role, which often is absent if not denied by religions and contemporary culture alike. Hay's contribution to Queer Spirit is fundamental, recognising and giving queerness a central and important role, together with the centrality of sex as a means to honour/celebrate the

¹³ Bauman also declares that by combining the figure of the Trickster, Magician and Shaman with nature loving queers creates the Radical Faerie (2018: 118)

body and the importance of the contact with nature. Gay sex, Hay declared, is not only revolutionary but also the path to psychological and spiritual integration (Roscoe, 1996: 161). Hay's vision was also a reclamation of history, politics and culture, giving founding myths for queer people in a society that didn't allow any space or place for them, being ahead of what queer theory and its various developments (queer history, geography, ecology and so on) will fight for in decades later. Roscoe's answer to the criticisms of essentialism is that identity is not merely a label, rather an active process of relating oneself to symbols and histories (1996:339), becoming a political struggle for equality. We need essentialism as long as we need to defend our identities. He also declares that Hay, having been labelled an 'essentialist', wasn't too concerned by it provided that the word 'radical' preceded these labels (Roscoe, 1996: 347).



Figure 52. Harry Hay (on the right, with a hammer) at one of the Radical Faerie gatherings. Unknown photographer

This form of queer spirituality gives my practice and research a set of myths, stories and histories I can use and reclaim, particularly in my creative writing and videos. It also defines queerness as a force for good, for change and utopic new potentialities, much like Muñoz, together with its intrinsically spiritual role, giving my practice a framework that combines/fuses queerness, spirituality and nature. The essentialist stance illustrated so far, despite being alternative to or at times even clashing with contemporary notions of queering, represents nevertheless a different

aspect which adds an additional layer, entangled with other opposing views, but that ultimately together form new ways of seeing, a hybrid monster made of incompatible matter and yet producing a new vibration and meaning, functioning in a very neo-materialist fashion.

Ultimately, Hay's vision and in general Queer Spirit have changed the life of many queer people, creating a purposeful narrative and mythology, giving queerness a centrality and a fundamental role in society. This form of spirituality is practiced (at least in some forms) by the Radical Faeries, and by people seeking new and alternative visions and forms of contact with other humans and nature.

4.4 Radical Faeries: the embodiment of Queer Spirit

In 1978, Hay, John Burnside, Don Kilhefner, and Mitch Walker¹⁴ put out a call for a 'Spiritual Conference for Radical Fairies¹⁵', to be held in the Sonora desert of southern Arizona in the spring of 1979, to which more than two hundred gay men participated (Roscoe, 1996: 238). The pamphlet stated:

"A call to Gay Brothers [...]

To share new insight about ourselves;

To dance in the moonlight;

To renew our oaths against patriarchy/corporations/racism;

To hold, protect, nurture, caress one another;

[...]

To soar like an eagle;

To re-discover/re-invent our myths;

To talk about gay living/loving alternatives;

¹⁴ Burnside was an American inventor and gay right activist, and Hay's life partner; Kilhefner is a gay activist who helped found the Los Angeles Lesbian/Gay Community Services Centre; Walker is a Jungian psychologist, gay activist and author.

¹⁵ Hay and others started using the older spelling 'faerie' after 1979 (Roscoe, 1996: 238).

[...]

To share our gay vision;

To sing, sing, sing;

TO EVOKE A GREAT FAIRY CIRCLE

The Call goes out to gay brothers everywhere [...] to all who know that there is more to us than hetero-imitation.

Hay, Burnside, Kilhefner, and Walker, Spring 1979 (Roscoe, 1996: 238).

Some of the first gatherers recall that moment as being 'blown away' (Lecker, 2015: 5), as the first true time of great contact with other gay men, a gathering that has assumed mythical status and that has been followed by numerous other ones, both in the U.S. and in many other parts of the world, evolving into an international phenomenon. Hay proclaimed that 'Radical Faerie isn't a group or a movement – it's a process for self-development, growth and change, a way of being and becoming' (Roscoe, 1996: 246). Hay firmly believed in the notion that queer people could do much more than simply 'accepting' their sexuality, utilising instead it as a tool for self-realisation, self-fulfilment and transformation. He also believed that the urban gay scene alienated gay men, being taken over by middle-class assimilationism (Roscoe, 1996: 246). The notion of putting 'radical' and 'spiritual' together was certainly influenced by Carpenter, together with self-reliant independent lesbian and gay communes in the wilderness that have spread particularly during the 1960s and 1970s; however, for many urban gay men this was a revolutionary and eye-opening idea, a sort of new beginning, a new way of perceiving themselves both as an individual and as a community.

It is true that the Radical Faeries were created by Hay and his cohort, but it is also important to underline that it emerged from other different cultural entities, such as countercultural movements, festivals and back-to-the-land movements, which were thriving in the 1960s and 1970s. It was also heavily influenced by feminist and lesbian writings, and by the rise of Neopaganism in those years (Lecker, 2015: 6).

An important author who influenced the Faeries was Arthur Evans, who in the mid-1970s published *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, which in turn inspired

Hay in his historical research (Roscoe, 1996: 217). This book was heavily influenced by the Women's Liberation Movement, Gay/Lesbian Liberation Movements and other countercultural groups, which they all aimed to reconstruct history and culture outside patriarchy and heteronormativity, and to validate alternative worldviews more in line with feminist and queer thought (Lecker, 2015: 9). Evans was a graduate in philosophy and author who dedicated his life to gay activism. After the Stonewall riots in 1969, he joined the Gay Liberation Front and later the Gay Activist Alliance in New York, engaging in non-violent actions of civil disobedience (Sutcliffe, 2017). In 1972 he co-founded the Weird Sisters, a self-sufficient collective in the mountainous land of the Washington State which he called 'the New Sodom'. Three years later he moved to San Francisco, where he formed the Faery Circle, a gay Pagan group which will enormously influence Hay and his cohort in creating the Radical Faeries (Sutcliffe, 2017).

During 1973 and 1974, he published a series of articles in *Out* and *Fag Rag* magazines, which later were included in the book *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (Roscoe, 1996: 217). In it, he describes the genealogy of homophobia, how Christianity went into great deal to actively denigrate the body, often using the label of heresy to actually suppress cross-dressing, same-sex and even class solidarity. Evans declares that in medieval times 'heresy became a sexual rather than a doctrinal concept; to say a man was a heretic was to say that he was a homosexual and vice versa' (Taylor, 1954: 131 cited in Evans, 1978: 76). For Evans, magic was the practice of the common people, what bound them to the land and to each other, offering a form of resistance against the State and the oppression of the Church. Jamie Sutcliffe (2017) declares that Evans believed that these magical practices came from ancient, ancestral polytheistic worships which he terms 'the Old Religion', celebrating ceremonial transvestitism, nature culture and Bacchanalian revelry.¹⁶

¹⁶ Sutcliffe declares that Evans' research is based upon Margaret Murray and Montague Summers, 'two of the early twentieth century's less reputable historians of witchcraft' (Sutcliffe, 2017). Murray, the first woman to be appointed as a lecturer in archaeology in the United Kingdom, believed that witchcraft was the ancient religion of Western Europe linked to ancient fertility practices (Murray, 1962: 11-12), and that these practices had survived Christianisation through folklore, tales and secret practices performed until the Industrial Revolution among certain rural villages and people in Europe.

For Evans, 'magic is inherently a collective activity, depending for its practice on group song, dance, sex, and ecstasy' (1978: 172); it is the art of communicating with spiritual powers in nature and in ourselves, but it also represents a societal tool for independence, self-fulfilment and care of the self and community. He believes that ancient societies were able to hold themselves together and function in harmony because of magic, which he considers being the most powerful ally in the struggle against patriarchy. Nature societies, he continues, knew that 'trees, stars, rocks, the sun and the moon are not dead objects or mere resources but living beings who communicate with us' (Evans, 1978: 171). 'Patriarchal industrialism', as he calls it, and Christianity (and other institutionalised religions, I would add) have suppressed these ancient practices and knowledge to control people. Magic is not only a spiritual practice; through the knowledge of herbs people can take care of and heal themselves; thanks to its non-hierarchical structure there is no need for a clergy or other power institutions. Evans argues that people, and above all queers which for far too long have been oppressed, should organise themselves in small communities in the countryside, growing and sharing food, learning to use herbal medicine, practicing their own spirituality, and becoming completely independent from the current reality ruled by corporate profit and control. Evan's definition of magic represents a spiritualisation of the (queer) common, or a queer common that includes spirit, proposing an idea of being together to share food, bodies and spirit against capitalistic oppression. I will include this idea of magic as a collective activity in my creative writing pieces and videos, the idea of coming together to form new rituals, to take care of ourselves as a community and do things our own way. It is also a key component of the Radical Faeries.

The Radical Faeries originate from this fertile terrain, incorporating Hay's messianic visions with Evan's anarchic Neo-Paganism, communal living and self-

Her theory was largely rejected by historians and academia; Ronald Hutton (1999: 195), for example, observed that it rested upon a small amount of archival research. Nevertheless, Murray's fascinating theory had a big impact on many authors, including Evans, and influenced the birth of Wicca, among other things. What is important to underline is not Murrey's historical accuracy, rather the powerful influence that her theories had on movements such as feminism, queer activism, Neopaganism, and queer spirituality, creating a new mythology against oppression, and providing a new vision of history and futurity for marginalised sections of society.

reliance. It seems to me that too often Hay is seen as the founding father and the biggest developer of the Faeries; he certainly was one of the organisers of the first and subsequent gatherings, and greatly contributed to its sets of values and spiritual imprint. However, I believe Evans played a pivotal role in shaping an idea of spirituality as a form of resistance, as a tool for queer emancipation, and as the creation of an alternative community.

From 1980 and after the first Radical Faerie gathering, Hay began calling on gay men to 'maximise the difference' between themselves and heterosexuals, to detach emotionally, intellectually, and socially from the oppressor as a form of spiritual exercise, 'to tear off the ugly green frog-skin of Hetero-male imitation' (Roscoe, 1996: 253, 254). For example, he called on reclaiming the word 'sissy', to be proud of and even exaggerate effeminacy and camp behaviour, to be as much different as possible from heterosexuality. In this sense, 'Faerie Spirituality' becomes 'the pathways we explore to transform ourselves from Hetero-imitating Gays into Radical Fairies', to free ourselves from centuries of Judeo-Christian oppression, inventing ourselves anew through a connection to the 'old ways' (Roscoe, 1996: 254).

From my (albeit limited) encounter with the Albion Faeries, the UK incarnation of the Radical Faeries, I have witnessed Evans' anarchic spirit infused in every aspect of Faerie life, from the organisation based on anti-hierarchical structures; the vision of alternative ways of living and being together; to the general ethos of sharing and caring for everybody. The fact that 'Radical Faeries can be and mean anything an individual needs to be' (Lecker, 2015: 4), emphasises its anarchic nature and its closeness to the original notion of queerness as a porous, always-in-flux term. One of the main (and few) rules of the group is the concept of 'radical acceptance', the idea that anyone can join and be a Faerie, which becomes a model of kinship (Lecker, 2015: 4) for the creation of an open community where to practice and experience a new sense of belonging, intimacy and connection. It represents an unapologetic, joyful celebration and acceptance of difference (Lecker, 2015: 5), which marks a stark contrast from urban mainstream cultures and groups, even among queer or gay communities. This sense of kinship is geographically and temporally vast, as it includes all the Faeries scattered around the world, the ones who passed (ancestors) and those yet to come (descendants) (Lecker, 2015: 46).

Haraway argues that 'staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles' (2016: 4). Thus, kin making is assembling in multi-temporal and multi-spatial (and multi-species) ways. It is making a family untied by ancestry or genealogy, for one based on making-kin and kindness. Haraway speaks of making kin linked to making kind, the latter understood as 'category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes' (2016: 103). Together (making-kin and making-kind) they represent a proposition that 'stretches the imagination' and can change the way we perceive ourselves, our relationship with others (human and more-than-human) and the planet. Making-kin becomes an assemblage based on kindness and care, not only toward other humans but also toward nature and every being (Haraway uses the word 'earthlings'). 'All earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages' (Haraway, 2016: 103). The Radical Faeries are a fertile and porous compost made up of different ties through/with time, space, bodies, life and death. Although their making-kin process is not specifically with the more-than-human the way Haraway intends it (creating multispecies entities), they are nevertheless a family of 'oddkin', an amalgamation of human (bodies) and more-than-human (spirit, time) through a process grounded in care and kindness, making kin in multiple modalities.



Figure 53. From the article 'Radical Faeries and unintended family', *thegeorgiavoice.com*, image by Patrick Saunders, 2015

Although the various members of the group share specific values and roots, the Radical Faeries are not a homogenous entity, rather a convergence of different visions and beliefs or, as Jesse Sanford describes, 'an unruly montage of thousand people worldwide' (Sanford, 2013: 7). There are as many definitions of Radical Faeries as there are people involved in it; some see it as a spiritual home or practice; some just a way to meet other people and have fun; others perceive it as an alternative way of being queer and of getting closer to nature in a more intimate way. Their rituals at times resemble 'a genderqueer remix' of Gardnerian Neo-Paganism¹⁷ (Sanford, 2013: 8). However, Sanford argues that it would be a mistake to assume that the participants of Radical Faerie events are 'believers' in any straightforward way (Sanford, 2013: 9). Indeed, many proclaim themselves as atheists, others speak

¹⁷ For example, when in circle invoking the four elements (fire, earth, air and water) and asking protection from various spirits, usually including the Mother Goddess, as I have witnessed in some events as well. Additionally, most of the gatherings happen during specific calendar times that coincides with Pagan festivities, such as Yule, Imbolc, Beltane, and Samhain, again under a somewhat Gardnerian influence.

of a more general sense of reverence for nature, many keep ties with other religious or spiritual faiths; furthermore, the absence of a guru or formal priests makes it a rather variable ideology. There is also a sense of not taking themselves too seriously, of embodying the Trickster/Fool that Hay speaks of. Their spirituality is both porous, in-flux and full of joy, fun and humour. What they have in common is a connection/kinship between members and nature to find an alternative and authentic sense of belongings, together with the understanding of queerness as a form of liberation and fulfilment (Morgensen, 2011: 134).

The images included in this section show the Faerie community in different parts of the world and times. They embed forms of anti-normative pastoralism in their naked bodies celebrating their communion with one another, the land and spirit, or in their using of fancy and cross dressing in nature. These images contain an energy and aesthetic I wanted to incorporate in my practice, expanding it toward the more-than-human and the land. They embed a sense of queerness that is spiritual and joyfully communal, a process of fusing earth, sex, naked bodies, laughter, mud, fancy dress, making fun, taking part and becoming part of something and each other, human and more-than-human, spirit and body. They encapsulate the idea that spirituality is much more than devotion and reverence (and fear) for a higher and distant god; spirit instead is very close to the flesh, intertwined with our sexualities, merging the sky to the mud, the fun to the sacred, our bodies to the body of earth, sex with the divine.

There is also present a do-it-yourself aesthetic associated with them, the attitude of working with the material one has at their disposal, for example by using pieces of clothing and transforming them into improbable and fantastic outfits. This reflects Evan's idea of collectivity as an independent, anti-capitalistic proposition. This DIY or use-what-you've-got attitude is for example present in my videos by using my iPhone instead of a professional camera, or creating rather simple but effective visual effects with layers and tint filters, instead of elaborate and professional post-production effects, as I will describe in the next chapter.

Furthermore, their way of reclaiming (and queering) the land is not based on revenge or rage, but on tenderness, gestures full of care, love mixed with humour and colourful moments. All these attributes have informed my creative thought and practice.

Although typically Radical Faeries consider themselves allies to BIPOC and other oppressed people, nevertheless their rituals and practices at times make them guilty of appropriation and even primitivism. Whereas some of their rituals are steeped in Neo-Paganism, Witchcraft or Wicca, others are clearly derived from Native American traditions. Moreover, the notion of tying 'liberated gay subjectivity' to indigeneity, as Scott L. Morgensen (2011: 137) describes it, embeds forms of cultural appropriation which are troublesome. Morgensen believes that even though Neo-Paganism is linked to European Paganism, particularly in the U.S. it remains a tool for white people to claim indigenised ties to Native American culture and land (Morgensen, 2011: 136). There is also the idea among some Faeries that Hay had somewhat the blessing from Indigenous people to use their practices. Roscoe, in the opening chapter of his collection of Hay's writing *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, describes how one summer in his youth Hay met an elder Two-Spirit called Wovoka in Nevada, considered by his people as a sacred man, who 'recognised' Hay as a Two-Spirit, touched him on his forehead saying, 'You will be a friend' (Roscoe, 1996: 25). Morgensen instead declares that although many Native gay men respect Hay for his work about Native American customs and for his efforts to re-establish them, they don't perceive the blessing from Wovoka as a permission to use/appropriate their culture and practices, rather what Wovoka meant was that Hay would be a friend who will help in their struggle against oppression (Morgensen, 2011: 153).

In the 1990s the Radical Faeries increasingly sought to collaborate with Native gays and Two-Spirits and sought to learn from them, pursuing various forms of decolonisation and clarifying the differences between their practices and the Native ones. Their collaboration and interaction invoked 'friendship' as a way to affirm how non-Natives have supported Natives while still holding non-Natives accountable to work for Indigenous decolonisation (Morgensen, 2011: 153). Their friendship was seen as a way not to fuse/join or create a common identity, rather to interact in their differences, indeed as old friends. Although Radical Faerie's practices haven't fundamentally changed and their view of Two-Spirit as a primordial and desired culture persists, through this 'friendship' they have started a dialogue with Native people, but also among themselves, regarding issues of cultural appropriation,

colonisation and primitivism, together with a process of understanding and fighting for Native's rights and their pursuit of decolonisation (Morgensen, 2011: 159).

It is also important to highlight the fact that recently Radical Faeries have become more inclusive about transgender people, women and BIPOC, a fact that I have witnessed in their calls for gatherings, for example, with the offer of at least a quarter of their bookings to these categories, or specific gatherings created only for transgender and non-binary Faeries.

The Radical Faeries embed (what I call) Queer Spirit in the way they perceive their role in society, nature and among themselves. Their vision includes Carpenter's/Hay's notions of an intrinsic role for the 'intermediate' people to be spiritual, to become 'the midwives to the new life' and unleash new ways of being together and in nature; Hay's and Evan's belief that a queer spirituality is linked with communality, with being together and forming new ways of living and sharing in nature; and Evan's notion that magic and in general a spirituality linked to nature and the land is a collective activity and a force of/for resistance. They also consider their community as an open, in-flux, porous entity, assembled through different timelines and space, based on care, kinship and kindness. These aspects represent a spirituality close to neo-materialist positions, together with embedding utopic, optimistic attributes, thus being coherent with the framework of this research.

4.5 AA Bronson

I will now shift the focus to art practices embedding this form of spirituality. I have chosen to focus on two artists who represent a dichotomous vision of Queer Spirit. One is AA Bronson, who epitomises the figure of the artist as shaman and whose practice is based on collaboration, incorporating many aspects of the Radical Faeries.

AA Bronson's practice spans for many decades and encapsulates a collaborative spirit typical of countercultural groups and the Radical Faeries. Born Michael Tims in Vancouver, Canada in 1946, 'at the age of seven I turned away from Christianity to explore other paths; in the 60s I was a hippy, I founded a commune, an underground newspaper, and a free school', as he describes in *I Love Berlin*, a sort

of love letter to the city conceived in 2017 for the book fair Miss Read (Schipper, no date).

In 1969 he formed the artists' group General Idea together with Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, with whom he worked and lived for the following twenty-five years. The notion of collectiveness, kinship and alternative ways of being together is intrinsic in his personality and work since the beginning of his career. Bronson has often collaborated and worked with other artists, at the same time as working as a healer, particularly as a 'midwife to the dying', as he declares, during the AIDS crisis.¹⁸ A stark contrast to Carpenter's Uranian as 'midwife to the new life', yet embodying an idea of queerness as caring, kinship, healing, reality transforming and a force for good. The idea of the midwife to the dying has some parallels with Edelman's definition of queerness, the notion of embracing the 'here and now' while we're still alive, together with negativity and death because for queers there's no future. Queer sex, for Edelman, is driven by the death drive, as it cannot be practiced for reproduction but solely for pleasure (and love). During the 1980s and 1990s, the HIV pandemic, which is now endemic, has brought our community close to death as never before. Edelman's and other authors espousing the negative turn in queer theory embrace the death drive as an anti-heteronormative force for disruption. However, in Bronson there is more the sense of incarnating a spiritual role because of the circumstances, during a time when many of his friends and lovers were dying. It is not about embracing negativity but being of service to the community in need.

In the early 2000s, after the death of the other two members of General Idea of AIDS, Bronson began collaborating with artist Peter Hobbs in a series of site-specific 'secret' performances entitled *Invocations of the Queer Spirit*, whose text and images have been combined in the subsequent book *Queer Spirit* (2011). The private performances involved a small group of selected men in five different locations, invoking the queer and marginalised spirits of each site (Bronson and Hobbs, 2011: 4), and creating rituals in (semi)abandoned urban spaces that mixed revelry picnics

¹⁸ An expression Bronson has used in many interviews, for example in *AA Bronson: Portrait of an artist as a shaman* (s.n. 2021): <https://www.contemporary-artscape.com/post/aa-bronson-spirits-in-the-air-the-portrait-of-an-artist-as-a-shaman> ; or *Letter from Berlin* (Esther Schipper gallery) <https://mailings.artlogic.net/readonline/820b4eb7377c449eb398a7852fd6f600>

with magical transcendence. Bronson declared this series of performances ‘a hybrid between group therapy, ceremonial magic, a séance, a circle jerk, and a quilting bee’ (Schipper, no date).

As viewers, we are unaware of the rituals or of what happened in those private performances; what we are left with is Bronson’s and Hobbs’ recount in their book, a text which they declare becomes a kind of invocation itself, of the ‘invisibility of queer narrative in the written history of the world about us’ (Bronson and Hobbs, 2011: 6), together with selected images that conjure an erotic form of spirituality. In a conference-festival in Amsterdam called *We Are the Time: Art Lives in the Age of Global Transition* (2012), Bronson explains the idea of keeping these rituals private and in secret places, with no documentation and nothing to sell, as an anticapitalistic response to art as marketplace, which he particularly felt whilst living in New York (Studium Generale, 2012). Art has become such a commodified entity, he says, he wanted to create something that was unsellable, uncommodifiable, or at least an artwork that relied heavily on experience and mystery.

In the book *Queer Spirit*, Bronson and Hobbs declare that:

‘Queer witches gather in covens, naked in the moonlight in forest clearings. Sexual energies charge their rituals. Their deviance is not in their choice of religion, but in their deference to nature. Unlike Boy Scouts and woodsmen, they do not challenge nature, but join with it’ (2011: 17).

In this sentence we can glimpse the spirit and vision of Carpenter, Hay and Evans, the importance of sex, of joining/fusing, even sexually so, with nature, together with a sense of communality with a group of like-minded people, queer witches in this case who, like the Radical Faeries, use spirituality and sex to reconnect with themselves and nature. Sex appears in many other parts of the book, like when describing the use of butt plugs to provide psychic defence, keeping the user ‘grounded’, focused on their bodies and in the moment (Bronson and Hobbs, 2011: 133); or in the idea of focussing on a sigil whilst ejaculating, as the meeting of mind and body to metaphorically ‘burn’ the spell associated with the sigil into consciousness (Bronson and Hobbs, 2011:154).

In the rituals performed in this work, the group initially invoke a list of names of queer ancestry linked to that specific geographical place/area, ‘to embrace the fiction

of a queer family: one big, happy organism that transcends the equally fictive markers of life, such as race, class, age, nationality, ethnicity, species and death' (Bronson and Hobbs, 2011:162). It also represents an attempt to queer temporality, condensing in one present moment current bodies and the ones that have departed, transcending time and space, history and geography (Bronson and Hobbs, 2011:162). Again, this sense of transcendental community reminds of Hay and the Radical Faeries, their communion to form a family entangled through time and space, body and spirit.

It is through this utopic notion of going beyond the boundaries of time and space, together with a make-kin-with process (humans, no mention of nature in this case), that we can trace some links with neo-materialism, of matter always communicating, always touching despite being spatially and temporally apart. Barad declares that 'to be a part is not to be absolutely apart but to be constituted and threaded through with the entanglements of part-ing' (Barad, 2015: 406). The thread that connects this queer family is constituted by an entanglement through different timelines and spaces, which thanks to invocations and rituals can be activated and experienced.

As with Carpenter (and Hay), in this work the material and spiritual, sex and spirit, are intertwined, the butt plug with invocations of ancestral spirits, ejaculation with consciousness. Bronson (and Hobbs) considers sex as a generative and spiritual force, as a way to (re)connect to consciousness or even to the cosmos. Similarly, there are present both Carpenter's idea of 'intermediate types'/queers as shamans, as having specific powers and a role in society, and Evans' notion of magic as a collective activity based on dance, sex and ecstasy, concepts that the Radical Faeries incorporate in their practice. In a way, these private performances are a sort of micro-Radical-Faerie gatherings, as they embody a similar ethos and communal anarchic spirit.

In the work entitled *Red* (2015), collaborating with the artist photographer Ryan Brewer and part of a trio called *Black Red Gold*, a large lightbox photograph shows Bronson naked and painted in red, wandering in the woods of Fire Island as an apparition or queer ghost/spirit or even a sacred man, looking slightly menacing and directly at the camera/viewers as if wanting to utter some incantation or some wise words, or indicating the (wild) spiritual path to follow. In various interviews,

Bronson has stated that old bodies become invisible, particularly in gay urban communities more linked to hedonistic lifestyles and the importance of being young, fit and trendy; this luminous photograph instead proudly declares the importance of a reconnection with nature and one's body. Covering it in red paint makes it more visible, but at the same time it masks it, making it more uniform, even timeless. Indeed, this image is full of contrapositions: visibility/invisibility, ancient/modern beliefs, all synthesised in one red body in nature. The grove is also particularly significant, being the place where the ashes of many gay people that died of HIV were scattered, but also a meeting place for gay cruising and sex across decades. Bronson and his friends call it 'the magic forest', again merging pagan and ancient myths with irony, spirituality with sex (Studium Generale, 2012). In this image, Bronson appears as the incarnation of a spirituality that is erotic; it is celebratory of the body, of its closeness to nature, and promiscuous with temporality and space. With this picture, Bronson shows us the way our relationship with nature could be: free, erotic, full of life, colourful, celebratory, intimate and imbued with magic; which is also what Queer Spirit represents.

In a lecture that Bronson gave at the University of Chicago (2012), he described the relational approach of his artmaking, collaborating with other artists, often younger and thus creating multi-generational connections and narratives. For example, he explained that he usually rents a house on Fire Island every summer, which it becomes his open-air studio. During one summer, he collaborated with Ryan Brewer, creating a few rituals in the grove which were public but without invitation (The University of Chicago, 2012). Three photographs of these rituals, *Black Red Gold* (2011), became part of the exhibition *Invocation of Queer Spirit (Berlin)* (2011) at Esther Schipper Gallery, showing three different people/bodies/generations/rituals in the forest. Included in the exhibition was a painting on the floor illustrating a sigil made by Bronson with Elijah Burgher onto which, on the night before the exhibition's opening, an invocation ritual was performed with some participants/other artists/friends, leaving the remnants/leftovers of the ritual on the canvas for the exhibition. In the lecture, Bronson shows some photographs of that ritual, one with a young man with a feathered butt plug, a sexy hybrid human-rooster, lying down on the canvas, surrounded by some objects used in the ritual, a bottle of whiskey in the foreground, glasses just behind it, more a scene of a party than a spiritual gathering.

Another photograph shows again a naked man in feathered butt plug, this time seemingly sleeping or passed out on the canvas.

Bronson's 'midwife for the dying' of the 1980s and 1990s HIV-crisis years is fully transformed/transmuted into Carpenter's 'midwife to the new life'. These images conjure a practice that transcends normative notions of making art; through these ritualistic and communal works, new connections, relationships, moments and memories of togetherness are generated, sharing and caring for the community, and creating space for other artists to show their work and having fun together. Admittedly, it's a spirituality only for a restricted few, the general public can only guess, have a glimpse of it through remnants and some scarce images and texts. At times it also feels slightly self-referential, using a language that only people in the know can fully grasp, like the cryptic sigils for example. It is somewhat a self-contained community of Fire Island gatherers that share intimate experiences, exclusive language and private rituals. In this respect, this group acts as many other religious ones, creating (semi-)closed communities detached from mainstream society. Nevertheless, what we viewers can see is a series of joyful, full-of-life moments transcribed into remaining objects, materiality that embeds the vibrancy of a radical encounter of naked skin with nature, communality with spirituality.

The vital and utopic nature of Queer Spirit is fully embraced in Bronson's practice. His work embodies the radical vision of the Radical Faeries, their ways of collectively producing and sharing, a self-sustained/produced spirituality (and artmaking) with its own rules and secret rituals, a spirituality that is fun, celebratory of the body, of sex and group magic. It also rests on the idea that queerness is a specific identity, a third gender with specific spiritual and societal roles separated from traditional and heteronormative practices, sharing Hay's and Queer Spirit's essentialist traits.

4.6 Linda Stupart



Figure 54. Linda Stupart, *A Spell to Bind All Male Conference Panels* (2016)

I will now analyse Linda Stupart, whose practice instead incorporates an alternative vision of Queer Spirit centred on a darker side linked to death, viruses and a post-structuralist, post-natural vision of queerness.

South African, Birmingham-based artist, writer and educator Linda Stupart focuses their practice on witchcraft, queerness and feminism exploring, as Izabella Scott (2017) puts it, forms of kinship between queerness and magic. For Stupart magic is a form of care. For example, in the exhibition *Coven* at Transmission Gallery in Glasgow (2016), they created a safe space where women and the queer community could explore/experiment with workshops, meditation classes, charm bags and a series of events/performances/collective rituals. The idea was to build a (transient) coven with other participating artists and visitors alike. One of these events was *A Spell to Protect Each Other* with artist Travis Alabanza, where they used spells and magic as a space of care for the community. In an interview for the magazine *Studio International*, Stupart speaks of spell binding not to create harm but to restrain patriarchy and fight oppression, together with creating a safe space, therefore as a generous act. They also speak of the Witch-hunt as a way to control women's reproduction and body, and as fear of women's sexual magic, a male paranoia connected to the 'stealing of the penis' (Scott, 2017). Parallels between women's sexual magic and Hay's idea of queer sex as a powerful magic tool can be

established, in the fight against patriarchy's efforts of crashing any sexual freedom, recognising in it a site of enormous power for the oppressed. Collaboration for Stupart is very important, not only with other (women, queer) artists, but also with the public through workshops, presentations and events. It is interesting to note that whereas Bronson rarely speaks of or considers the participants of his rituals as members of a coven, he behaves as if having one, maintaining secrecy on what happens within the group(s). Stupart, on the other hand, often speaks of covens or of borrowing from witches and Wicca, yet their idea of coven is more porous and expanded to include any ally willing to participate in open performances. Stupart's coven acts as a neo-materialistic assemblage, always in flux, open, exchanging, fusing with the other(s).

In 2016, Stupart published a sci-fi book called *Virus*, a homage to Kathy Acker in which the suppression of women and male violence, among other things, are brutally exposed, together with a list of handy spells. In this book, the virus is compared to the traumatised body, something that is always both dead and alive. To survive, Stupart says, bodies need to be porous, violable, lacking boundaries; therefore, those bodies already objectified, abject, broken, already dead, like female and queer bodies, can take this virus pretty easily.

The beginning of this book opens poignantly, speaking of Ana Mendieta's death:

'Prelude (1985): A death drop/after the fall. Once upon a time there was a shadow, or a silhouette; silueta [...] once upon a time there was a shadow and her name was Ana Mendieta.' (Stupart, 2016a: 9).

Stupart describes Mendieta as a shadow which 'grew a body from the mud and trees' and was threatening to enter language and art galleries, so 'men were angry' (Stupart, 2016a: 9); therefore, she had to die. Her husband Carl Andre with fresh scratches on his face and forearms suggested Mendieta was suicidal, Stupart however is convinced he killed her. The revenge will come in a near future, when larvae playing 'in the earth beneath the still performing silueta' (Stupart, 2016a: 10) will transform into malevolent snakes. At the end of the book, all the protagonist witches, now stronger thanks to the virus which has 'opened up, fucked up, mutated' their bodies and power, meet at Mendieta's tomb to resurrect her, infecting the earth,

weaving themselves into the soil (Stupart, 2016a: 113-114). Here, they remake Mendieta's work *Alma Silueta en Fuego* (*Silueta de Cenizas*), using fire and 'vibrating with the rage of Ana's broken bones and torn skin and lying husband' (Stupart, 2016a: 114). The ashes of this fire turn into Mendieta's body, a corpse of burnt earth and flesh. To realise their revenge, they tie Mendieta's rotting corpse to living Carl Andre, face to face, mouth to mouth, limb to limb, feeding him (starvation would be too much in keeping with his minimalist refusal of excess, Stupart adds) so he can stay alive and attached to her body until maggots start bridging the two bodies, and until the two bodies turn black through putrefaction. Then the virus takes hold of their hearts, to start Mendieta's one beating again, and Andre instead bursts into a million buzzing black flies (Stupart, 2016a: 118). Through this annihilation, Stupart declares in the last sentence of the book, Ana Mendieta comes back to life.

As with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Mendieta is brought back through assemblage and transformation, the spark of life in this case is a virus instead of electricity, her body is resuscitated by mixing/fusing earth, rage, death, viruses, corpses and maggots, entangling human with more-than-human and even inhuman. In the essay *TransMaterialities*, Barad quotes Susan Stryker's work *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix* (1994), in which Stryker embraces the epithet of monstrosity, harnessing its energy and power as self-affirmation (Barad, 2015: 392). The trans body, as with *Frankenstein's* monster, becomes the vehicle and embodiment of rage against a hateful society. It also represents a vehicle for regeneration, to reconstruct and re-birth oneself, to freely choose one's own self. Barad explains that 'The promise of monsters is [...] an invitation to explore new ways of being in touch, new forms of becoming, new possibilities of kinship, alliance, and change' (2015: 410). Matter, in Barad's words, becomes a wild exploration of self-experimentation or self-re-creation, a radical undoing of the self. In *Virus*, Mendieta is transformed into a monster as an act of revenge. Her corpse absorbs or even devours Andre's body-turned-corpse, to finally recreate herself. Thus, her last *Silueta* is not her body crashed on the pavement in her tragic fall, but this new fictional body made of monstrous new forms, kinship and alliances with the inhuman (and with imagination, which is still matter). Bronson's figure of the 'midwife to death' is taken to the extreme here: instead of accompanying people to their death as a gentle act of care, in *Virus* the witches and Mendieta's

corpse act as a 'midwife/generator of death'. Life force is exchanged for death force, or to be more precise, new life is generated through death, by entangling with it. Death is matter, it behaves like any other particle in quantum field theory, something one can fuse with, become-with and generate new things with, particularly when using imagination and worlding.



Figure 55. Ana Mendieta, *Alma Silueta en Fuego (Silueta de Cenizas)* (1975)

The publishing of this book coincided with Stupart's first London exhibition at Arcadia Missa entitled *A Dead Writer Exists in Worlds and Language Is a Type of Virus*, an installation made of sculptures, PowerPoint presentation and sound, together with a series of spells that Stupart cast for the duration of the show. Both in the book and for the exhibition, they speak of writing and language as a type of virus, as a form of resistance; words become microbes, even deadly rotting cancerous corpses, their power to change, transform, rectify greater than expected (Stupart, 2016b).

Haraway speaks of SF, string figures, science fact, science fiction, speculative feminism and speculative fabulation as a way to collaborate 'with all those in the muddle', as a way to 'stay with the trouble' and survive, even thrive, in this age of environmental catastrophe (Haraway, 2016: 56). She says that SF is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, worlds that are gone, here and yet to come (Haraway, 2016: 31). Writing, when used as world-making/'worlding', becomes a tool to fight patriarchy and heteronormativity, creating utopic/dystopic realities that challenge our current reality system, entangling with new ones. From a neo-materialist perspective, worlding 'enables us to look deeper into entangled human-world relations' (Palmer and Hunter, 2018). Storytelling/SF/worlding therefore becomes a way of thinking-with, becoming-with in order to 'change the story', to re-think our relationship with the world around us, human and more-than-human, in an entangling with the 'other' in multiple tentacular ways. Creating new and alternative worlds makes us humus, not human (Haraway, 2016: 55), we become a fertile compost where new visions can grow in multiple and unexpected directions. Haraway also states that 'it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with [...] It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories' (Haraway, 2016: 12), thus emphasising storytelling as a very materialistic concept. Barad declares 'matter is imagination' (2015: 388), thus words and worlding have the power to entangle, enmesh with everything around, affecting the reality system(s) we live in. Haraway, speaking of the time we're finding ourselves in, adds that 'these are the times we must think; these are the times of urgency that need stories' (2016: 37).

Storytelling is also the domain of the Fool, the Jester, the Queer Trickster, the ones who dare to speak up against oppression, of daring queer voices that aim at and desire a not-yet-here impregnated with utopic possibilities. With their book *Virus*, Stupart lures us into a world where a dead female body can act her revenge, where female, queer and non-conforming/non-normative forces can fight back and win against patriarchal oppression. Their worldmaking is a collage or mismatch of different characters, artists, writers, simple people, witches, all connected or implicated in their passionate revenge across time and space. As if to say that all the victims of cis, patriarchal cruelty are linked, pulsating of a no-longer-consciousness

ready to be re-activated and acted upon. This book acts as a long, contorted spell for the resurrection and revenge of these abject spirits.

Language is material, it is matter, it matters. Haraway says that 'the question of whom to think-with is immensely material' (2016: 43). Materiality is important for Stupart's writing too; they describe their sci-fi text as 'to make holes in the past, but also to rupture the present', creating at the same time new worlds and possibilities (Scott, 2017). Scott links Stupart with Kathy Acker. For example, when writing about violence, Acker's writing becomes violent as well (Scott, 2017). Acker is also one of the characters of *Virus*, a zombie figure that comes back from the dead. In the interview with Scott, Stupart asserts that they're trying to follow Acker's example, of treating text as a sort of Frankenstein, taking pieces from different sources and sewing them together, letting the violence of the text become visible like stitches on a body (Scott, 2017).



Figure 56. Linda Stupart, *After the Ice, the Deluge*, photograph by Ryan Sloan, 2017-18

Stupart's use of viruses and storytelling is also present in their more recent installation *After the Ice, the Deluge* (2017-18), a project combining present ecological disaster with past male patriarchal violence, developing into an investigation of the melting of the polar ice as a site of traumatised bodies. They link traumatised bodies with PTSD, a condition they say is constantly in the present, as if

there is a hole between timelines, or a glitch; 'your body in the present disappears, or, is overlaid by your body of the past, the no-longer-your-body of the event' (Stupart, 2017). In the video made on the Arctic island of Svalbard, Stupart tells the story of miners died of Spanish Flu in 1918 buried there, whose bodies resisted decomposition due to the permafrost. Because of the ice melting, ancient bacteria and viruses in those bodies and soil are starting to resurface, threatening (patriarchal, heteronormative) society, proposing at the same time the traumatised body as 'the magic time-traveller at one with the landscape' (Cripps, 2020). The virus once again becomes a form of otherness, a material to embrace for relationships of becoming-with, to force in new transformational realities that are kinder to society. It represents a form of kinship that queers and perverts the normative idea of what a virus is, of sickness as a space for reinvention and redemption/liberation instead of pity and misfortune.

In Stupart's work, Queer Spirit is present in the way magic is perceived as a form of communal practice against oppression; in the relationship with nature as a space to find communion, solace and a community based on solidarity, kinship and as resistance against patriarchy. In Stupart's world-making, the utopic optimism of Carpenter and Hay (or Muñoz) is exchanged for a dystopic world of viruses, toxic air and traumatised bodies, although in the new connections and communities created, some forms of optimism can be glimpsed, particularly in the form of care and kinship for and within the community.

Stupart shares Haraway's notion of embracing, making-kin-with our current ecological catastrophe, becoming 'humus' with other forms of lives/more-than-humans in order to survive. In their practice, neo-materialism is also present in the way they use storytelling and worlding to think-with and become-with other beings and matter, including viruses; in the idea that porous abject bodies are the resilient ones, allowing them to survive because they share and are ready/available to be mixed, fused and become-with the more-than-human; or the way they consider objects and beings as inter- and intra-connected.

Both Bronson and Stupart are important for this research not only because they encapsulate Queer Spirit, but also because of their influence on my practice. Bronson's sense/embodiment of queer history, life and legacy, together with his optimistic idea of queerness and artmaking, of being a 'midwife' to life (and death),

are qualities I relate to every time I create some visual or written work. It is as if 'energetically' Bronson is always present with me, his legacy and example of artist as shaman always lurking in the back of my mind. Particularly his photograph *Red*, his naked, red-painted body in nature, has pushed me to find alternative ways to be in and see nature, to walk in the land as if I was a red naked shaman, a sort of Radical Faerie in becoming. Despite his (collective) methods are not directly part of my work, he's with me 'in spirit'. For example, in the poem *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions* (and video) (see next chapter), his mischievous, shamanic, sensual and sexual spirit is present in the way I describe the sacred grove and the coven of queer people; or in my *Ritual Drawings*, there is a sort of desire of collaboration between myself and Mendieta across time and space, of invoking her spirit through my naked body on paper; with my creative writing pieces and videos, I try to encapsulate the idea of being a midwife of life, of new things and worlds springing by the connection and contamination of different thoughts, texts and words.

Stupart's practice, on the other hand, has shown me ways of using different sources, artists and concepts through different media, in their use for example of writing, worlding, presentations, performance, video and a published book, connecting all the different parts in multiple and tentacular ways. In their work, they also reference elements linked to my research, such as Mendieta, queerness and spirituality, connecting them with viruses, spells, abject bodies and witches, opening up new modalities for my practice by including irreverent objects and relations. Together with Acker's, among others, they exemplify a use of creative writing in a 'material' way, utilising strong language when necessary for the subject matter, or by mixing and sewing different pieces and materials in the same text. In my texts and videos, I feel I've frequently borrowed from Stupart, although my writing is less driven by rage and revenge and more by utopic horizons, by Haraway's making-kin as caring/making-kind process, queering as entangling more with the life-force than death. By transforming rage into a productive force for good, I feel my revenge against patriarchy is more effective, life affirming/transforming and lasting.

Both artists utilise a process of queering based on spirituality which I wanted to incorporate in my practice in its dichotomous positions, spirit that is entangled with life and death force, utopia and virus, becoming-with, making-kin/kind and essentialism, showing the multifaceted, multiplicity, multi-dimensionality of a

spirituality that like queerness, is in constant flux, becoming and porous. I felt I could realise this better through worlding, utilising writing and videomaking, which is the focus of my next and final chapter.

5. Queer Land(s)

This chapter describes my solo exhibition called *Queer Land(s)* and the thoughts, process and insight that it entails, unravels, unleashes. It is a conglomerate, conflation, conflation, friction of different parts, videos sharing the same methodology and visual reference/methods, entangling elements through overlaying, walking and acid/tinted colours, yet telling different stories, showing different places, states of mind and dreams. In the description of this chapter itself, this conflation/friction becomes even more apparent, my urge of being thorough in describing the various parts of the exhibition fighting with the word count, the importance of brevity, clarity and the respect for the reader's attention, time and patience.

As with the gallery space which has embedded and welcomed my work, this chapter is a confluence of different voices, academic references with descriptive accounts and creative writing pieces/parts, voices from the past with visions of potential futures, spirit with mud. The editing/putting together of this chapter follows this research's methodology based on entanglement, a promiscuous connection, touching of parts, using Kathy Acker's method of linking, mixing, reusing, repurposing different elements, sewing them together and creating a monster, a new entity that makes sense despite its web of different colours, flavours and alien flesh.

This exhibition gives new insight in my process and research, realising new ways of queering which embed spirit, matter, essentialist visions of queerness and nature with neo-materialist, post-natural ones, affecting/infecting not only the space of the gallery, but its visitors and distracted passers-by alike.



Figure 57. Invite for the exhibition (2023)

My final PhD solo exhibition entitled *Queer Land(s)* took place between the 18th January and 24th February 2023 at the James Hockey Gallery, UCA Farnham. In this huge womb of a space, I have installed five videos and a poem printed large on vinyl and transferred on walls. The gallery became a cavern of utopic possibilities where to envision/experiment with new ideas, getting infected by visions of fucking with the land, becoming plant or virus, or experiencing spiritual rituals by merging Neolithic structures with industrialised countryside, naked gatherings and union with the cosmos.

The videos are projected at different sizes, disrupting the classical gallery installation as a precise, coherent series of artworks, but also to give rhythm, to inhabit the space as a collection of different items affecting one another, with their size being one of the elements of this affecting relationship. Their images are reflected on the floor, matter that invades, expands, penetrates the ground, visions that are anchored into the soil to give them body, a spell to ground them, for these queer visions are here to stay, they are flickering seeds of light aiming to grow like trans-formative plants.



Figure 58. Entrance of the exhibition

In the book *Meaningful Flesh, Reflections on Religion and Nature for a Queer Planet*, Jacob J. Erickson asks: ‘can we love the soil with more wild abandon? [...] Such a love would be a queer proposition’ (2018: 62). Reverence, instead, would be ‘business as usual’. To revere something means to enforce tradition, a respect for the things as they are and always have been, together with perceiving nature as ‘other’, something we are not part of. Seeing and experiencing nature in a queer way instead involves ‘the longing of our own flesh and the longing flesh of divinity’, as sexuality, ecology and divinity are all intimately implicated in each other (Erickson, 2018: 63). Queering nature thus means to be irreverent of old stories and ideas connected to pristine nature and uncomplicated assumptions, it means using an irreverent language to describe the ‘messy and embodied realities of creativity, embodied

ecology, and en fleshed divinity' (Erickson, 2018: 74). It entails feeling part of its dirt, its viscous and porous flesh, its continuous becoming-with.

The first video visitors encounter in the exhibition is *Fucking Land Art*, a large projection in which a wild abandonment with the land occurs by reimagining some historic land art works through a queer proposition, retelling them in irreverent new assumptions. Utilising excerpts from my writing piece of the same title (included in chapter 3), Heizer's holes become the recipient for the longing of the flesh, a gay sex scene visualised in the video as a diffracting and dissolving desert landscape, showing its primary, intimate, most-simple and one-tonal colours yellow, purple and light blue. This process of diffraction functions as a disclosure of the land's material core, a blurring of the edges to show matter as porous, open, something to mingle with, until it liquefies completely and disappear in the deep blue sky like an early-morning dream. The visual reference here is Barbara Hammer's *Multiple Orgasm*, her purple-coloured rocky desert superimposed to a woman's face having an orgasm, but instead of showing two men/bodies having sex, I let the voice depicting it, like a storytelling for grown-ups. There's a disjunction between audio and visual, the voice/storyteller affects images like in a magic spell, transforming the land into a bizarre kaleidoscopic entity of multiple layers, a multicoloured aggregate of particles and planes colliding and dissolving into one space.

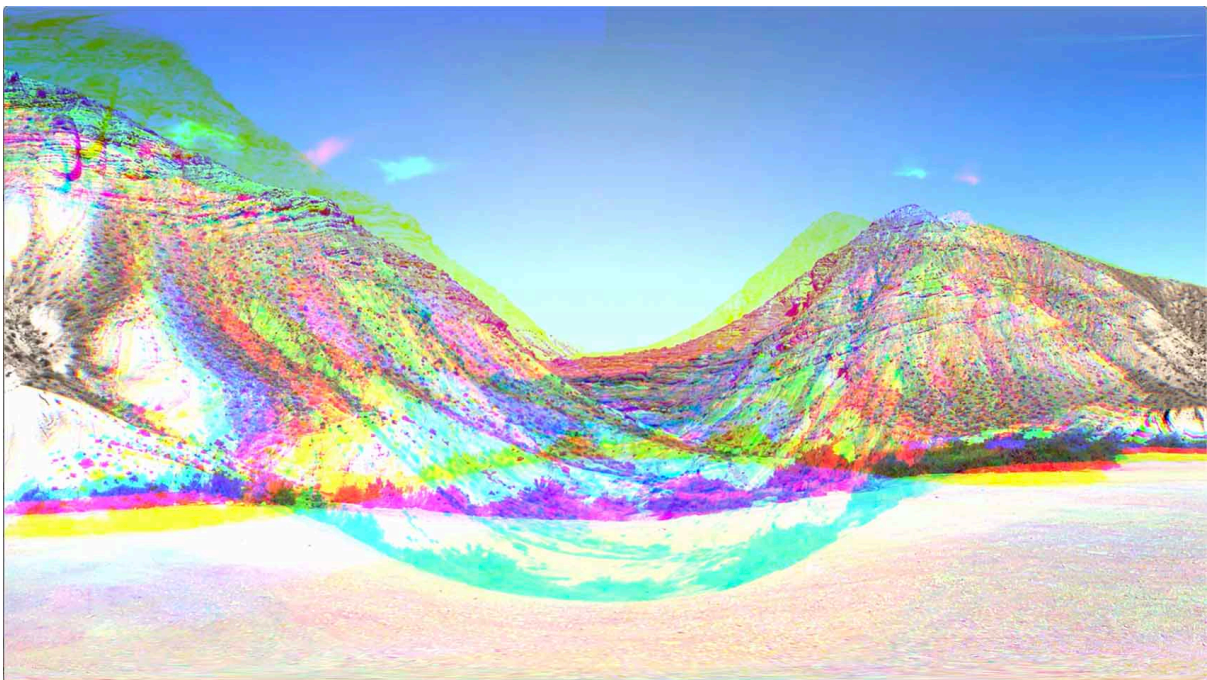


Figure 59. Simon Olmetti, *Fucking Land Art*, screenshot of the video (2022)

From the desert the video transports the viewer to the forest, using Acker's disjunctive montaging methodology translated in visual forms, which puts together disparate forms, visions, places and times, but also reflecting the entangled vision (and 'otherness') of these two spaces, both often the recipients of many land art works. The audio speaks of leaves blowing themselves onto Richard Long's face, disrupting him while seriously walking his straight lines or creating circles moving heavy rocks. The bare desert is contrasted here with lush leaves and trees, the forest is soaked into a bleached yellow or intense purple, eerie and surreal landscape evoking sexual cruising, the straight lines and 'straight' practice of macho land art is exchanged/infected by a sense of mystery mixed with promiscuous possibilities.

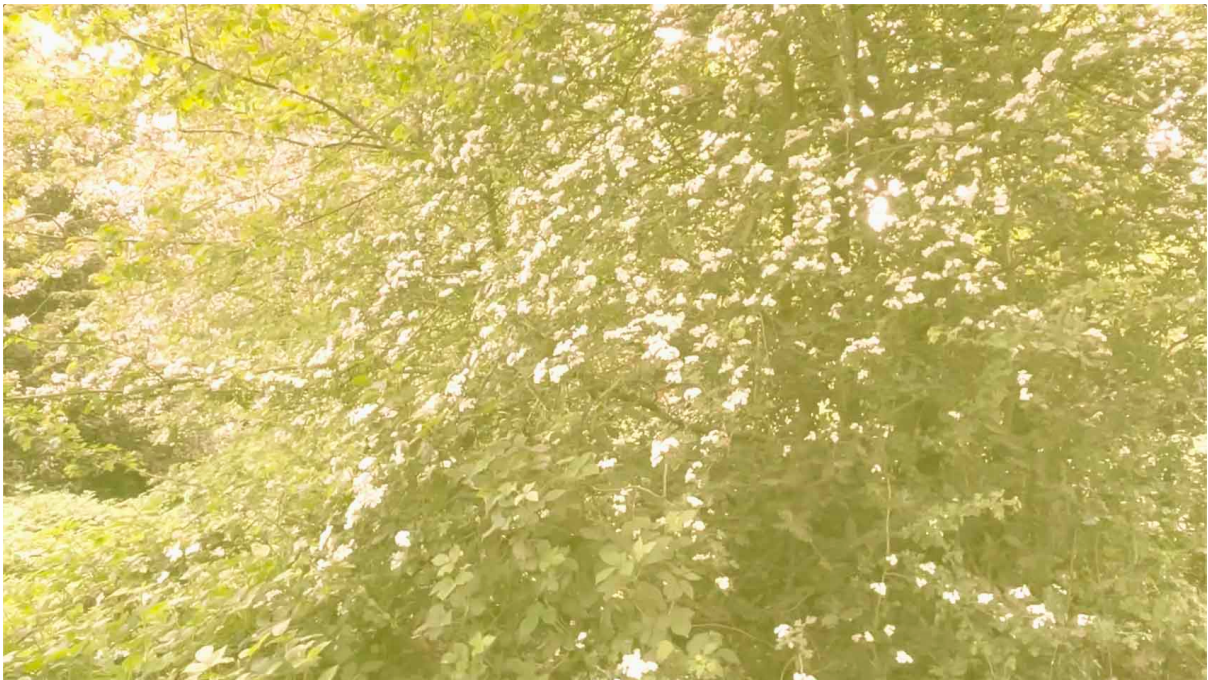


Figure 60. Simon Olmetti, Fucking Land Art, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 61. Simon Olmetti, *Fucking Land Art*, screenshot of the video (2022)

This video ends back in the desert on a vaginal opening among the rocks. While zooming in more and more into the inside of the cave, the audio becomes an overlaying of sentences repeated backward or altered in speed, some thus being very low pitch and others very high, until it's only loud and unbearable noise, distorted voices while the images get pixelated and dark. The visual reference is Hammer's and Jarman's films, their use of overlaying and tinted colours, with the addition of a sense of fusing with matter, of going closer and closer until image and sound become incomprehensible for humans. Sound and image meld themselves into vibration, allowing a glimpse into the continuous becoming-with of universal matter. The vaginal shape of the cave is also an homage to Hammer, a reference to nature embodying sex and sexual desire in its forms, or our projection of/on it, a hole which promises a new way of seeing and being with the land, which draws you in, a pull into the mystery of nature and its spiritual connections.

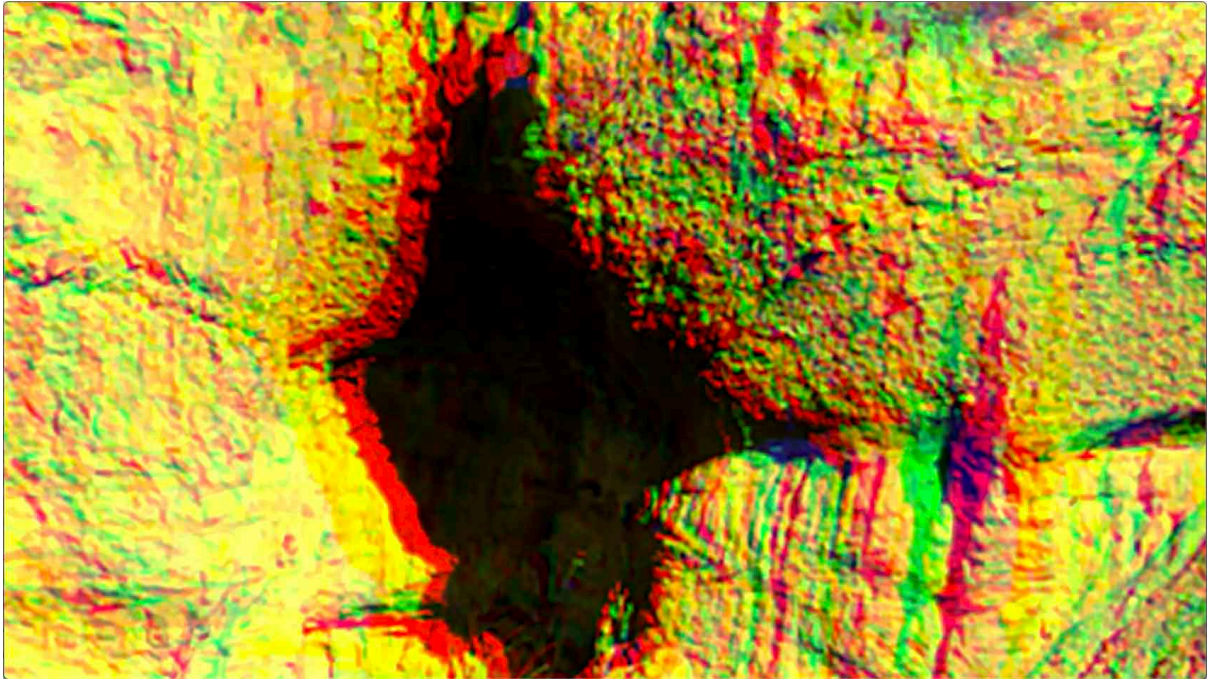


Figure 62. Simon Olmetti, *Fucking Land Art*, screenshot of the video (2022)

Opposite and more toward the middle of the room is the projection of *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, slightly smaller in size compared to the first video, contraposing Avebury to the former visions of desert and tinted-coloured forest. All those places depicted in these two videos (desert, forest, Neolithic sites) represent mythical and spiritual spaces, with a rich no-longer-consciousness steeped in magic, rituals and transcendental experiences, but also historically places of otherness, where people escaped to in order to live more freely outside (hetero)normative society. Despite being focused on different subjects, the two videos complement each other, one could even be seen as the continuation or development of the other one. The queering and reclamation attempts/process of some land art works in the first video is also applied to Avebury and its reclamation as a queer spiritual space, using walking, creative writing/worlding, together with overlaid and tinted/bleached coloured images.



Figure 63. Simon Olmetti, *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, screenshot of the video (2022)

I'm a demon, a heretic, I'm evil, I trick you in the grove
Oh sacred grove, a portal in another dimension
A womb of divine strange inceptions
Of new things that come from old
Or better, a hole through which we go through again and again to find
pleasure, ecstasy and our whole (whore) Selves,
United but disjointed,
Multiple bodies fusing skin and saliva
For a new brotherhood of men, and sisterhood of women, of trans- men and
women and all in between,
a NEW THING
of muddy leaves and juicy fruits
Of green grass imbued with our sweat,
Of mouths holes pores tears and laughs,
Energy from heart to heart.
This is the Spirit you tried to suppress

But now with all our force we are back

I wrote this poem while researching and writing about Queer Spirit, as a form of condensation of all the visions, principles and thoughts that Carpenter, Hay, Evans, the Radical Faeries, Bronson and Stupart evoked. It represents a form of spell, a magical text to conjure and create an alternative reality system made of brotherhood, sisterhood and transhood of people forming new relationships among themselves and nature. Somehow, jotting these words and crystallising them into a text, made me feel this reality could be possible or was even real in some place or some diffracted reality or time. In it, the ancient or imagined past, of sexual rites and sacred communions with nature, is evoked and transformed for future ways of being which is utopic, a not-yet-here that like queerness might never fully be realised, and yet is generative of possible new promises.

This poem has been instrumental for inspiring and creating the video *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions* set in Avebury, a site connected to Neo-Paganism and other earth-based spiritualities, which I have visited several times to soak in its nourishing energies and the atmosphere of its many Menhirs, its two huge stone circles and other Neolithic structures.

The video relies on overlaying different footage and photographs together, with the occasional use of acid or intense unrealistic colours, creating a sort of dreamy effect; in it, we see Menhirs becoming enveloped in deep pink-orange hues, or get overlaid with themselves and diffracted in a sort of elemental colours, the edges becoming stripes of red, yellow, purple and blue; my hand caressing a boulder is overlaid with a clear intense-blue sky, while a solitary airplane is silently flying up high, its miniscule figure leaving behind a thick stripe of white condensation trail; or again a section of a stone circle is overlaid with a small tree covered in yellow bright flowers, while birds are flying over it; or the photograph of a magnolia in bloom and a near-full moon is superimposed with the footage of tall unkept grass, revealing a cockroach eating a plant among it. My voice whispers the poem again and again, ultimately overlaying the audio itself and generating a confused, obsessive litany, a spell that compulsively wants to reclaim that space, adding an additional sense of disruption.



Figure 64. Simon Olmetti, *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, screenshot of the video (2022)

Whereas the poem/audio describes more fully concepts linked to Queer Spirit, for example in its depiction of the brother/sister/trans-hood activities in a sacred grove, the images of the video instead translate the essentialist vision of the text in more neo-materialist visions of nature, of its porous borders and different planes constantly connecting/colliding with one another. My aim was to create a bridge or fusion between the different strands and facets of this research, uniting elements that are often opposite and divergent like essentialist with non-essentialist visions, spirit with matter, the sky with the soil, sex with the cosmos. It relies on my methodology of entangling, what Acker used as her writing method of putting together, stealing, reappropriating, joining disparate things, transforming them into a new, unique output.

Video is the perfect medium for this fusion, as it is made of images and sound, a union of two elements itself, giving the chance to play with multiple levels/dimensions and multiplicity through different combinations: writing that becomes sound; sound that diverges from images, saying something else, adding another layer; footage that overlays itself, gets multiple; photographs fusing with moving images, creating something more, like a self-constructing Frankenstein-like monster, its body more than the mere sum of its elements. The projection of video offers yet again an additional layer/purpose/meaning, a ghost image reminiscent of

dream, particles that flicker, moving in the ether from the projector through the dust and air particles, touching the wall, mixing/mingling with it as if the wall might be on the cusp of absorbing these particles made of light, colours and queer delights; particles that have in themselves a shadow/imprint/memory of the pixels, places, thoughts that created them, yet they have been transformed, digested and let go in the ether/space/dust/dark to be met against a wall, and then reflected back/welcome in the eyes of viewers, penetrating their cornea/cells/beings and becoming part of their bodies. In this respect, video is the most neo-materialist medium of all (that I have used), particularly when projected; it is made of alive, vibrating particles, dust that copulates with light/colours, moving, mingling and becoming-with other particles, with the vacuum, the space around, with particles of other things (projector, wall, air), the breath of visitors, their eyes and skin, creating something else, becoming-with the space. It's a contamination of light, sound and floating particles, light that penetrates darkness in an orgasmic, ecstatic motion resulting in colourful, moving images. A dream.

Through this process of multiplicity and becoming-with, the space of the gallery is transformed and (re)possessed, the virus of queerness, sex/sensual desire, the seeds of anti-normativity are all planted in this place, metaphorically but also very materially, as particles are made of light, colours, sound and intentions, which in neo-materialist/quantum field theory terms are very real/material/matter. This process happens both singularly for each video, and as a whole by the sum of all the works shown, engaged as different members-actant (to use Bennett's vocabulary) to form a rhizomatic assemblage without hierarchical structure (all works are important in their own terms), a structure made of different vibrating visions affecting the room and visitors in porous, multifaceted ways.

Barad says that all kinds of things 'can and do occur in this frothy virtual soup of indeterminacy that we ironically think of as a state of pure emptiness' (2015: 399). Nothing happens in a vacuum, or better, for quantum field theory every element is always intra-acting with the virtual particles of the vacuum in all possible ways (Barad, 2015: 399). *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions* tries to convey this idea of inter- intra-connection(s) that happens between entities we think of as separate, like a hand with the sky through the contact of a stone for example, showing versions of Barad's 'frothy soup of indeterminacy' as a series of multiple overlaying of images.

Another example is the overlaying of a huge boulder with a bigger (it)self, like Barad's description of an electron intra-acting with itself, a sort of masturbatory activity that again doesn't happen in isolation, but in relation to the other elements we mistakenly perceive as void. Barad also explains that this self-touching of particles transforms themselves, which in turn touches and transforms other particles around them, particles that make up the vacuum, and this activity proceeds *ad infinitum*. They call this self-intra-action process queer/trans*formation¹⁹, a radical undoing of queer/trans* intimacy (Barad, 2015: 399). The convergence of all these different images in the video, one overlaid on another then blurring into another and so on, suggests or embodies this queer/trans-formational property, a process of matter undoing itself and others, through self-touching and intimate touching of other matter in a constant flow.

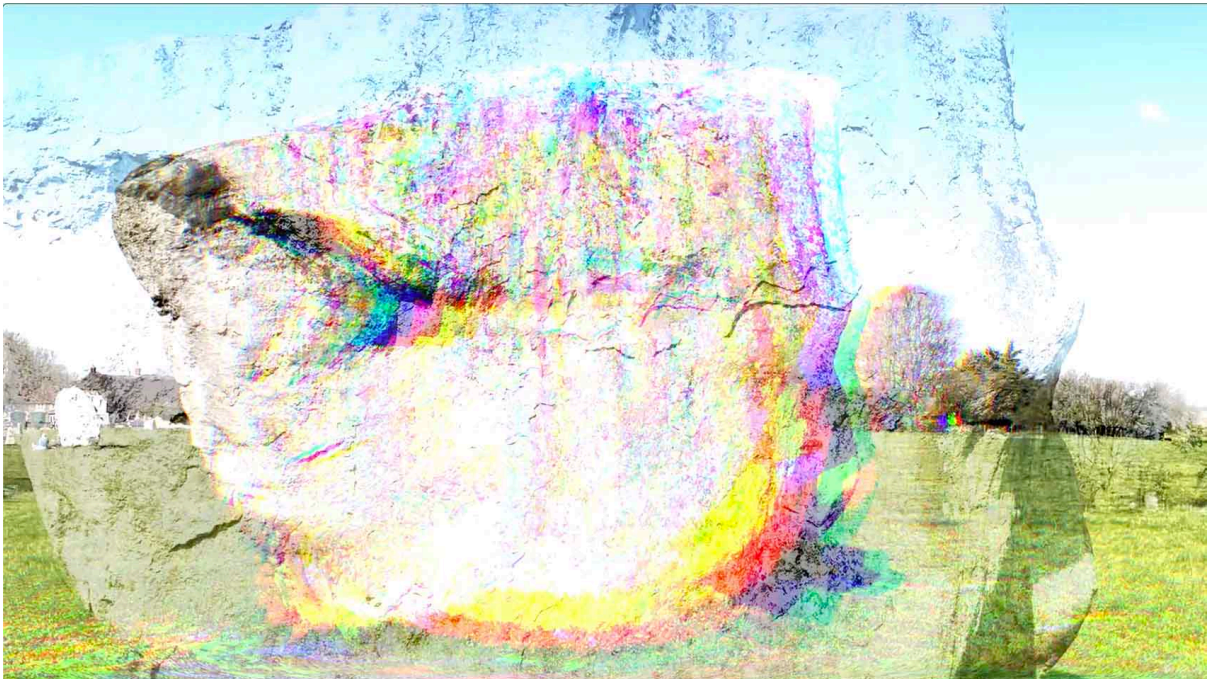


Figure 65. Simon Olmetti, *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, screenshot of the video (2022)

After this orgy and collation of images and sound, Silbury Hill appears in silence, a moment of rest after a powerful and overwhelming ritual, a post-orgasmic chill after the efforts of invoking, digesting and transforming this ancient land through

¹⁹ In the footnotes, Barad explains their use of trans* with an asterisk/star as to be, as she puts it, broadly inclusive of any (subversive) gender identities (e.g., transgender, transsexual, trans woman, trans man, trans person, and also genderqueer, Two Spirit etc.) (Barad, 2015: 419).

a queer spiritual process. The short contemplation of this prehistoric artificial mound is followed by the zealous sound of birds, while Neo-Pagan ribbons and other ephemera, tributes for good wishes or thanksgivings adorning a tree branch, wave in the gentle air of a sunny spring day. Through this video and text, a spiritual attainment is achieved, this sacred Neo-Pagan land is reclaimed and queered.



Figure 66. Simon Olmetti, *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 67. Simon Olmetti, *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 68. Simon Olmetti, *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, screenshot of the video (2022)

Nearly opposite to the video *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*, sits the poem *I Unleash This Virus onto You*, nestled in a corner created by installing a wall at three quarters of the length of the space. This corner represents an obstruction, like a bend in a river that slows down the water, before continuing the journey toward the deepest recesses of the space. This writing piece is printed on vinyl and transferred on the joining walls in the corner, filling that space with its sculptural appearance. Whereas the short poem in the video *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions* is repeated again and again as an incantation, the one on the wall represents a longer, more complex piece of writing temporally fixed on walls.

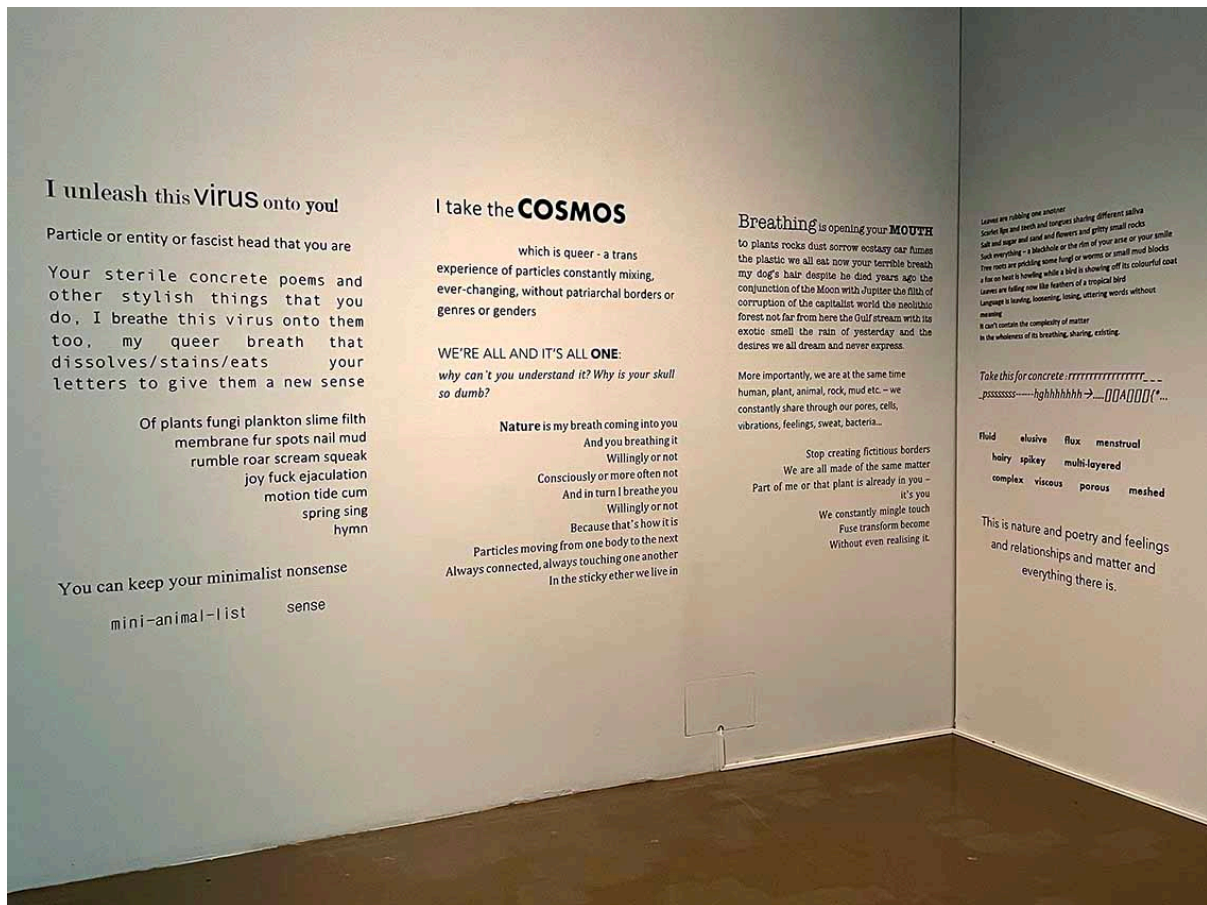


Figure 69. Poem *I Unleash This Virus onto You* on walls

I Unleash This Virus onto You is a sort of 'anti-Concrete' poem using various letter fonts and sizes. Usually, Concrete Poems use language as object and/or as a form of sculpture, playing with words, letters and space to create shapes made of words. My poem didn't want to create shapes, but to disrupt the very rigidity of those poems, being fluid and porous in place of 'concrete'. Instead of using repetitions of some words or even the same word, as in many of Andre's poems for example, form and plasticity totally prevailing over substance, my poem embeds the messianic visions of Carpenter, the utopic horizon of Muñoz, the radical queer spirit/essence of Hay, Evans and the Radical Fairies, together with the materiality of language used by Stupart and Kathy Acker, a sort of sticky substance made of letters and yet infective like a virus.

All the ideas and concepts enclosed in this piece of writing, all the connections between the various strands of my research, seemed to vibrate in the words of my poem, declaring that the cosmos itself is queer, that everything is linked, and nature is much more complex, porous, multi-layered, erotic and sexual than the sanitised

heteronormative and patriarchal version of it. It's a neo-materialistic, post-natural vision of nature merged with Queer Spirit.

I include the text as image to preserve its layout, fonts and spaces:

I unleash this **VIRUS** onto you!

Particle or entity or fascist head that you are

Your sterile concrete poems and
other stylish things that you
do, I breathe this virus onto them
too, my queer breath that
dissolves/stains/eats your
letters to give them a new sense

Of plants fungi plankton slime filth
membrane fur spots nail mud
rumble roar scream squeak
joy fuck ejaculation
motion tide cum
spring sing
hymn

You can keep your minimalist nonsense

mini-animal-list sense

I take the **COSMOS**

which is queer - a trans
experience of particles constantly mixing,
ever-changing, without patriarchal borders or
genres or genders

WE'RE ALL AND IT'S ALL **ONE**:

*why can't you understand it? Why is your skull
so dumb?*

Nature is my breath coming into you
And you breathing it
Willingly or not
Consciously or more often not
And in turn I breathe you
Willingly or not
Because that's how it is
Particles moving from one body to the next
Always connected, always touching one another
In the sticky ether we live in

Breathing is opening your **MOUTH**

to plants rocks dust sorrow ecstasy car fumes
the plastic we all eat now your terrible breath
my dog's hair despite he died years ago the
conjunction of the Moon with Jupiter the filth of
corruption of the capitalist world the neolithic
forest not far from here the Gulf stream with its
exotic smell the rain of yesterday and the
desires we all dream and never express.

More importantly, we are at the same time
human, plant, animal, rock, mud etc. – we
constantly share through our pores, cells,
vibrations, feelings, sweat, bacteria...

Stop creating fictitious borders
We are all made of the same matter
Part of me or that plant is already in you –
it's you
We constantly mingle touch
Fuse transform become
Without even realising it.

Leaves are rubbing one another
Scarlet lips and teeth and tongues sharing different saliva
Salt and sugar and sand and flowers and gritty small rocks
Suck everything – a blackhole or the rim of your arse or your smile
Tree roots are prickling some fungi or worms or small mud blocks
a fox on heat is howling while a bird is showing off its colourful coat
Leaves are falling now like feathers of a tropical bird
Language is leaving, loosening, losing, uttering words without
meaning
It can't contain the complexity of matter
In the wholeness of its breathing, sharing, existing.

*Take this for concrete :rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr_ _ _
_pssssssss-----hghhhhhh →.....[[[A[[[[{*...*

Fluid elusive flux menstrual
hairy spikey multi-layered
complex viscous porous meshed

This is nature and poetry and feelings
and relationships and matter and
everything there is.

From this text, almost instinctively, a video emerged, with the same title / *Unleash This Virus onto You*. In it, the sound of the wind and the distant quack of some ducks are repeated throughout, giving both an uncanny feeling and a sense of familiarity, a mix of mystery and a day out in a public park. The close-up of some tree leaves is overlaid with other leaves and bleached in blue, moving in the wind at different speeds, conveying a dreamy but sinister atmosphere. Suddenly, some bright jellyfish elegantly swim in the screen among the blue/light green leaves, a vision of sea and earth joined together, while the wind is blowing. This scene goes on for a few minutes, with jellyfish becoming bigger and increased in number, until the camera goes too close, showing only coloured patterns, white, green and blue, while in the background some footage of big white clouds is interspersed.

From this confused mix of colours and images a place emerges, a land of rocks and two big boulders in a parched summery landscape, tall dry grass inhabiting this quasi-lunar site. Fire suddenly appears overlaid on a big boulder, a sort of purification ritual which seems to be happening in another dimension, like in a dream or from the core of the rock. The camera zooms in until it's all fire, burning material and liquifying substances, while a series of Tibetan bell strokes fill the scene with their sound. In this transcendental vision of fire and sound matter fusing, a sort of strange oneiric journey takes place: a hairy stomach appears among the flames and incandescent matter; then a woman's mouth opening and pushing out a flower from her mouth, overlaid by a man's mouth opened wide, seemingly shouting; two naked bodies lying one on the other, barely visible and engulfed by leaves, green and blue; until the bell is struck one last time, and the video returns to 'reality/normality', showing the branches full of green leaves moving in the wind, at a 'proper' distance and with realistic colours. The time of magic is over, the spell has been cast.

The sound of the Tibetan bell in the second part of the video is at 417 Hz, which in Neo-Pagan/earth-based and other so-called alternative spiritualities is believed to be a frequency able to cleanse cells, clearing them from destructive influences of past events, resetting them for a new start and a change in life. The sound is used in a material way, aiming to affect viewers by cleansing their energy/aura and thus transforming them. Visually this is translated in the video by the fire cleansing the land and metaphorically the viewers alike while watching it.

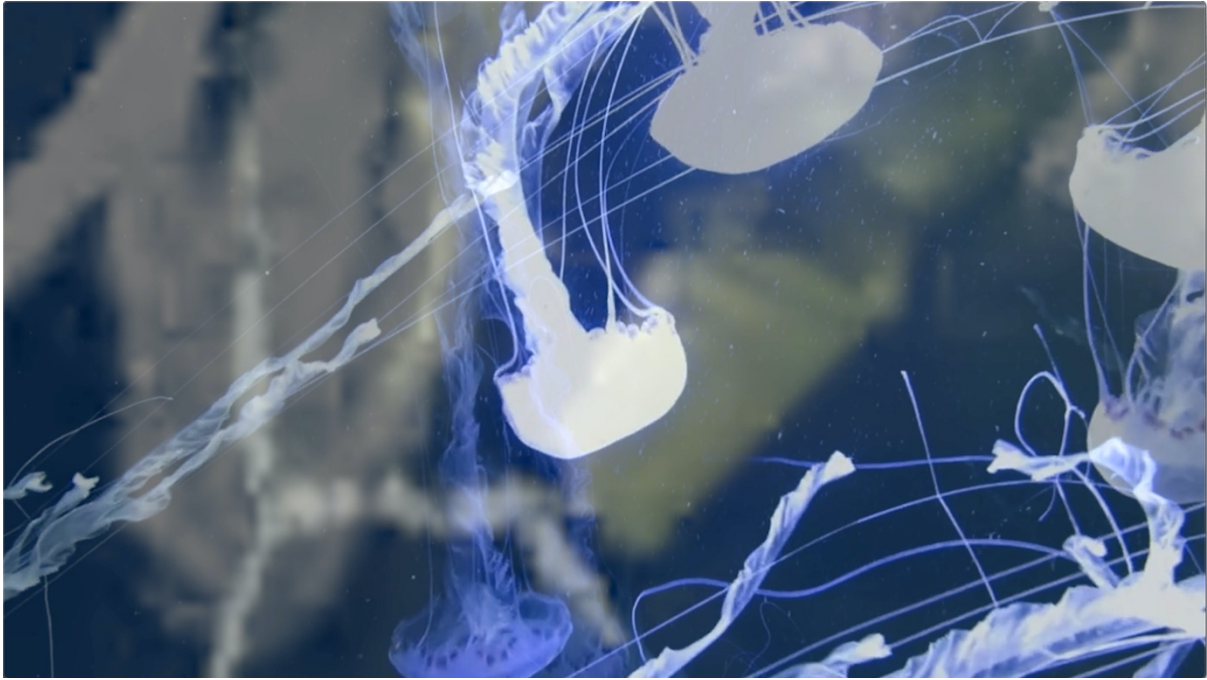


Figure 70. Simon Olmetti, *I Unleash This Virus onto You*, screenshot of the video (2022)

While the related anti-Concrete poem more explicitly contains and subverts elements linked to land/minimalist art and post-nature/neo-materialism, the video acts as a freer entity, a sort of valve that releases the pressure of the text in an eerie/dreamy flow of images and sound. In the video, by focusing on moving leaves and the sound of the wind, a spiritual journey is visualised, one that could be induced by some hallucinogenic drug or shamanic ritual, a dreamscape made of a short burst of images fluidly rolling/blurring/intermingling from one to another. The title of both the video and poem suggest that this otherworldly vision is caused/unleashed by a virus, a reference to Stupart's book and their world-making of alternative realities. The virus is a constant of this exhibition, and even if it is not directly mentioned in other works, its presence resides in the affecting nature of the videos and writing on one another, the way one video transmutes into another, infecting it/them with similar visual language, (written) words that become video, are incarnated into a poem, then become another video, and then another one, and then they come back to the previous work somehow changing it, because the viewer's eyes/mind/spirit have been affected/changed by all the other works, adding layers of meaning, connections and visions. You're trapped in my queer/ing web.



Figure 71. Simon Olmetti, *I Unleash This Virus onto You*, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 72. Simon Olmetti, *I Unleash This Virus onto You*, screenshot of the video (2022)

The video *I Unleash This Virus onto You* is positioned at the corner opposite the anti-Concrete poem with the same title, 'touching' another video called *It Is Happy Now*. The two large videos merge in and fill the corner at the end of the room, creating a visually striking confluence of images and intents, as if they were the same film, or two sides of the same coin.

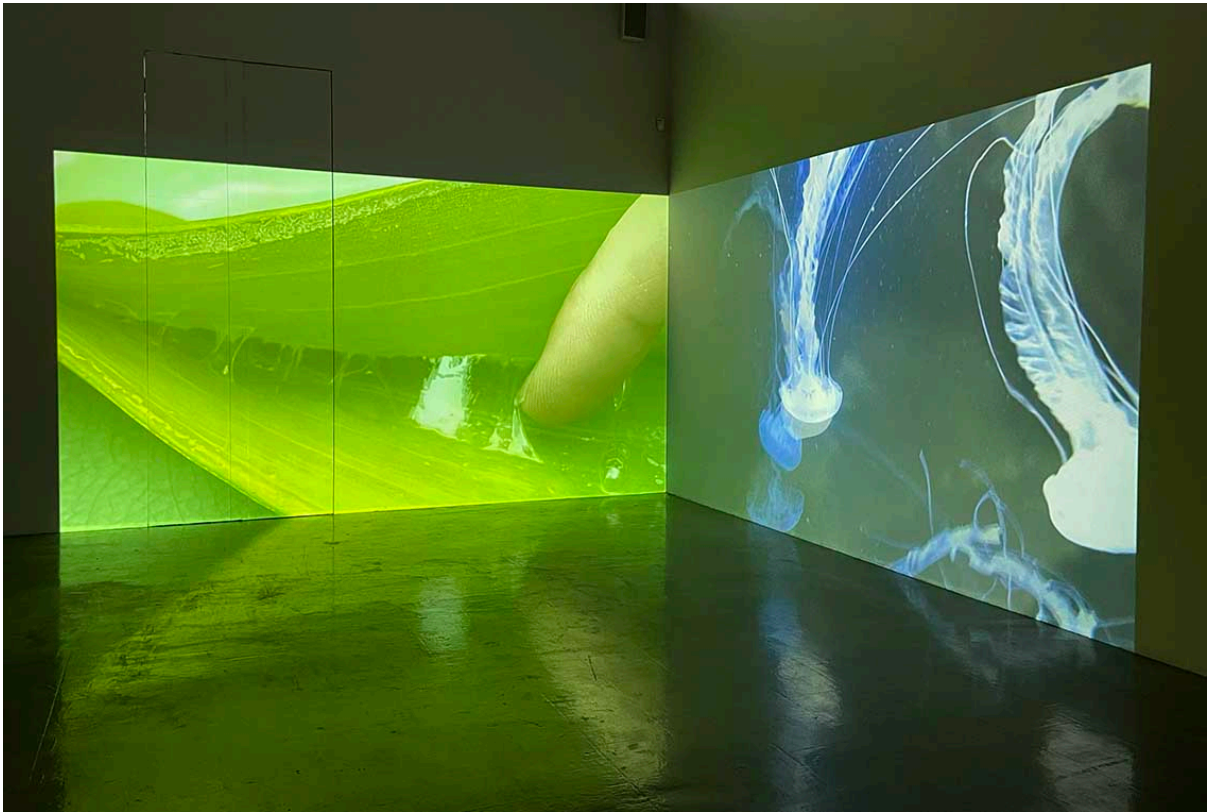


Figure 73. View of the corner where two videos meet

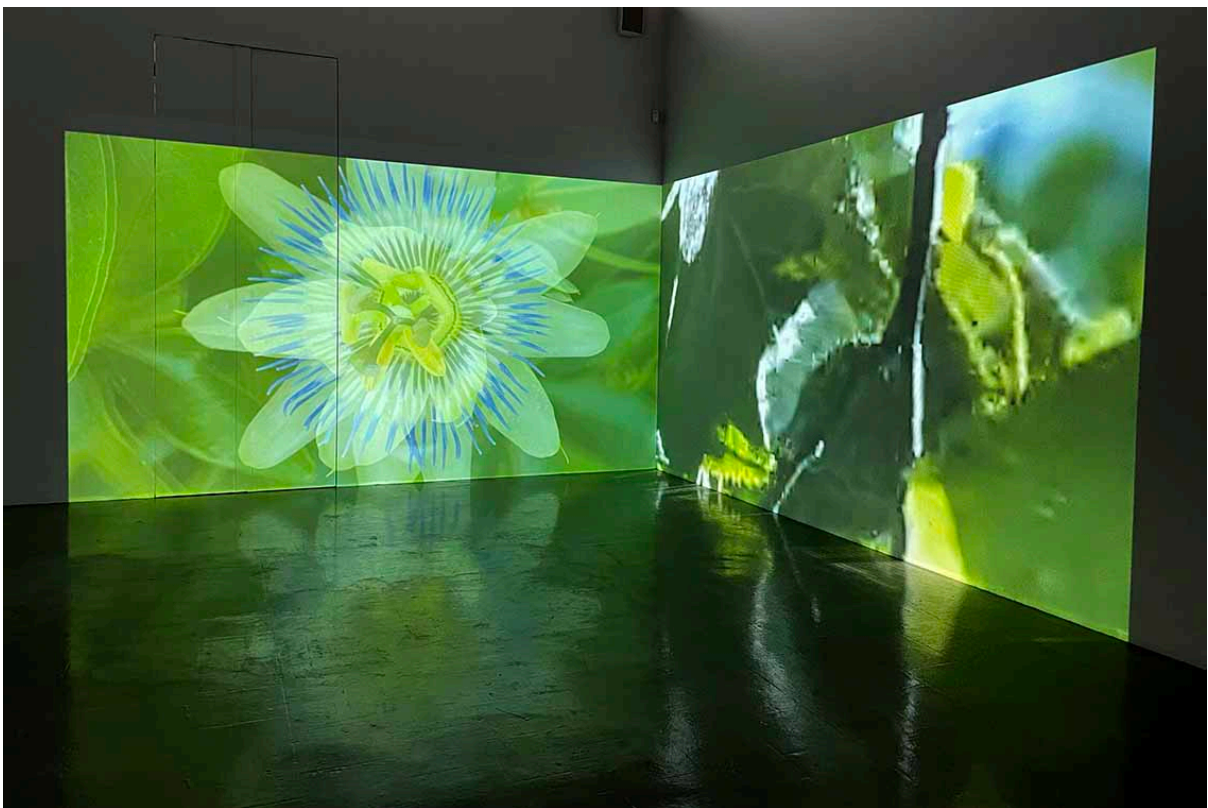


Figure 74. View of the corner where two videos meet



Figure 75. View of the corner where two videos meet

It Is Happy Now started with writing, as many of my videos, which eventually became a text full of sexual referencing, a sort of eco-material-porno text. In it, I imagined pressing the internal gelatinous flesh of an Aloe Vera plant onto my skin, and through this sensual process becoming plant myself, experiencing a new/different connection with the soil and the planet, but also with the sky and other beings scattered in the universe. It's a process which entails letting go and forgetting the 'I' to become an 'it', a sort of super-sub-beyond-intra plant or trans-plant. This new 'it' or 'it/I' experiences all the processes of a plant, such as releasing pollen and thus inseminating/infecting the land with its semen, or trustingly letting it go to/with the wind. It also experiences a new sense of deep connection with the planet, with other beings and the cosmos, thus becoming a spiritual experience too.

'It' therefore is happy simply because it exists, because it finds nourishment from the soil, water from the rain, bathing in the heat of the sun while insects and birds fly and inhabit its branches, leaves and flowers. 'It' becomes an item among many others in the chain of existence, living in tentacular multiple and multispecies modalities, and this simple reality makes 'it' happy, as it takes away from its shoulders the burden of human's perceptions and thought.



Figure 76. Simon Olmetti, It Is Happy Now, screenshot of the video (2022)

The video loosely follows this text, extrapolating a few essential sentences, to give the images an additional meaning, disjoining them from narrative purposes. I was dissatisfied with the text itself, which I decided to discard. My use of writing corresponds and is consistent with my methodology. It is a confluence of different entities colliding into one piece, a vibration that affects/infects other thoughts, other media and paths. Writing is a virus with its own agency, an agglomerate of neo-materialistic particles in the form of words, constantly in-flux, becoming-with and copulating with other thoughts. Sometimes it works and makes sense independently, as an entity on its own right; sometimes it inspires (an)other work(s) to be produced and flourish, like a video for example; other times the writing can coexist and enhance or even be included in(side) the (other) works generated from it, making something that is more than the sum of the singular items, an ecosystem of multiple entanglements; or it can exhaust its function and disappear. Writing/words is/are queer, they entangle with other matter, constantly transforming, evolving, affecting. This process follows and is utilised in a neo-materialist way, a becoming-with connecting, mingling, entangling with other matter.



Figure 77. Simon Olmetti, *It Is Happy Now*, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 78. Simon Olmetti, *It Is Happy Now*, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 79. Simon Olmetti, *It Is Happy Now*, screenshot of the video (2022)



Figure 80. Simon Olmetti, *It Is Happy Now*, screenshot of the video (2022)

The images in the video show different scenes, places or entities (ants overlaid on my hairy leg while I'm stroking it with a plant, a tropical flower that keeps blooming, the universe mixing with a cactus etc.) giving it a sense of nature's (and matter's) endless cycles. At the end of the video, a slim strip of Aloe Vera, a slightly-spiky edge piece, sits on my finger, appearing as a sort of prehistoric creature. This

hybrid being, half plant half finger, seems to open and close its mouth, as I move up and down the tip of my finger, while a bit of gelatine dangles in between. The writing on the screen proclaims 'It is happy now. It is', showing that the full transformation has occurred and this new hybrid creature is happy simply because it exists. This image is probably the best part of the video, utilising irony to describe complex concepts and visions, much like the Radical Faeries utilise irony and fun in their spirituality and rituals.



Figure 81. Simon Olmetti, *It Is Happy Now*, screenshot of the video (2022)

In the exhibition, the dividing wall for the poem also creates a sort of 'surprise moment' with the last video hidden on the back of it, an intimate small projection of *When Things Go Wrong*. It represents a small window into the queering of a dystopian capitalistic reality through the apparition of alien Menhirs, releasing a series of queer utopic visions/hallucinations. This video represents again a disruption of land, but this time to undo capitalistic exploitations and reality. It especially connects with the second video shot in Avebury (which can be glimpsed while watching this video), because it uses the same Menhirs, but it also incarnates the spell of the wall poem or its interpretation in some Italian land, unleashing a queer virus made of ancient spirituality, tinted-coloured nature and sexual encounters/rituals to reconnect to a queer cosmology.



Figure 82. Simon Olmetti, *When Things Go Wrong*, screenshot of the video, (2022)

When Things Go Wrong is a video I have created not from a piece of writing like the others, rather by rage and indignation for the terrible (mis)use of natural land driven by capitalism and greed. While visiting my parents in Northern Italy, I heard that just behind their house, at the end of a long field, the big multinational company Amazon was planning to build an enormous new site, basically destroying for ever the little remaining countryside of an already disfigured and industrialised land.

In this video, I overlay a few Menhirs I have photographed at Avebury to this unrelated place marred by capitalism. The alien presence of these boulders, while cars and lorries travel undisturbed on the main road, produces/releases a series of overlaid images; of trees, bushes and flowers, at times bleached in a light red colour, as if coming from a dream or a different reality; of bodies glimpsed in their ghostly, diffracted, radiant vibration of primary colours, as if seeing them through a device that shows the spectrum or wavelengths of their skins, or their auras, separating the components of their light by different degrees and colours. These transparent, multicoloured dreamy bodies dance hand by hand in circle, naked and whilst seemingly performing a ritual, or so we can just discern in the haziness of their presence. Other similar colourful semi-transparent figures follow, overlaid on the forest and the bare field with cars and the more dominant presence of the Menhirs: three tongues are licking/kissing one another in a passionate threesome; followed by

a sexual group scene, barely visible; then again naked feet going around in circle. It is as if the unexpected, strange presence of the Menhirs unleashes a virus which forces the landscape to visualise or remember its connections with its old/mythical self, with its disappeared trees and bushes and the ancient rituals performed in the land.

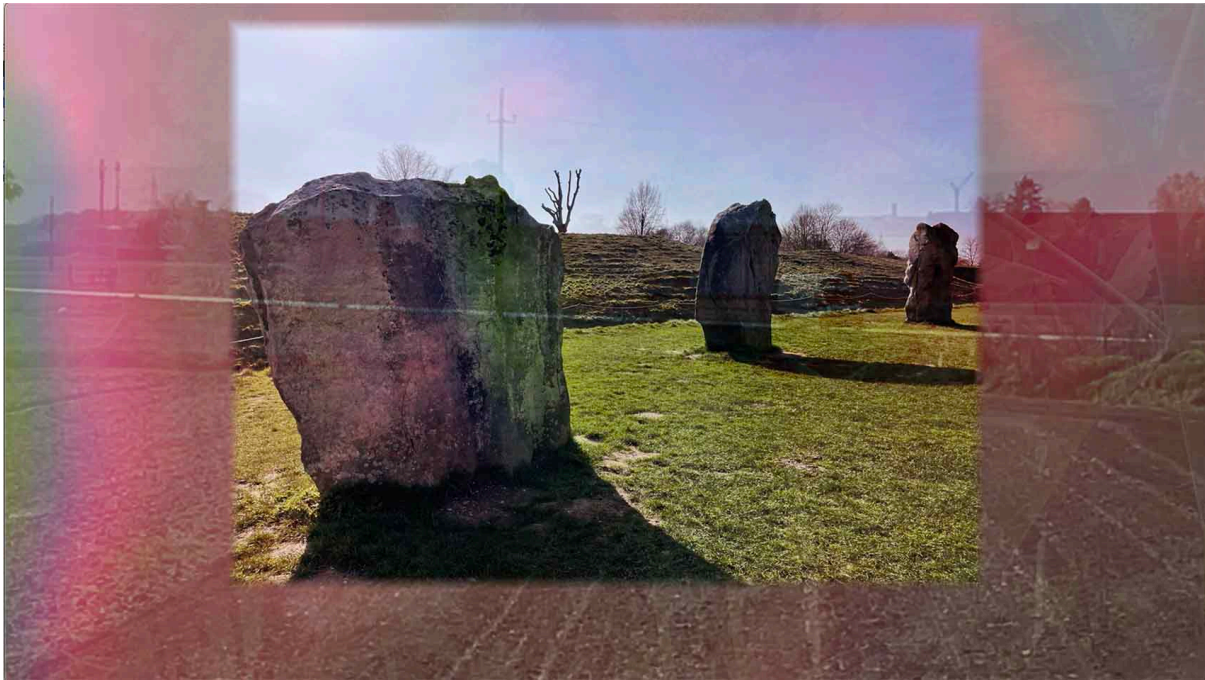


Figure 83. Simon Olmetti, *When Things Go Wrong*, screenshot of the video (2022)

When Things Go Wrong is an ironic title with a double meaning: the current state of the land and nature represent things that have gone wrong, a form of society that doesn't care or take care of its land and people, but is only interested in exploiting and making profit, in complete disregard for the wellbeing of nature and humanity. The title also alludes of what many (conservative, heteronormative, patriarchal) people think/say when seeing someone or something that behave in a non-normative or non-conforming way. In fact, this video represents a sort of nightmarish vision when looked from a patriarchal viewpoint, of what happens when things are let loose and unrestrained, of people having threesomes or naked rituals instead of conforming to decency and morality. Through this view, nature is seen as 'other', as something to tame or be afraid of, and often queer people, immigrants, black people and in general all the non-normative, non-conforming people are seen through this lens.

At the end of the video, the sudden chime of a bell abruptly interrupts the queer vision; all those overlaid images of nature, rituals and sexual activities fade away, together with the sacred Neolithic site, receding back into the no-longer-conscious or the realms of dreams; we are left with the traffic in the background and the bareness of the landscape, soon to be irreversibly industrialised.

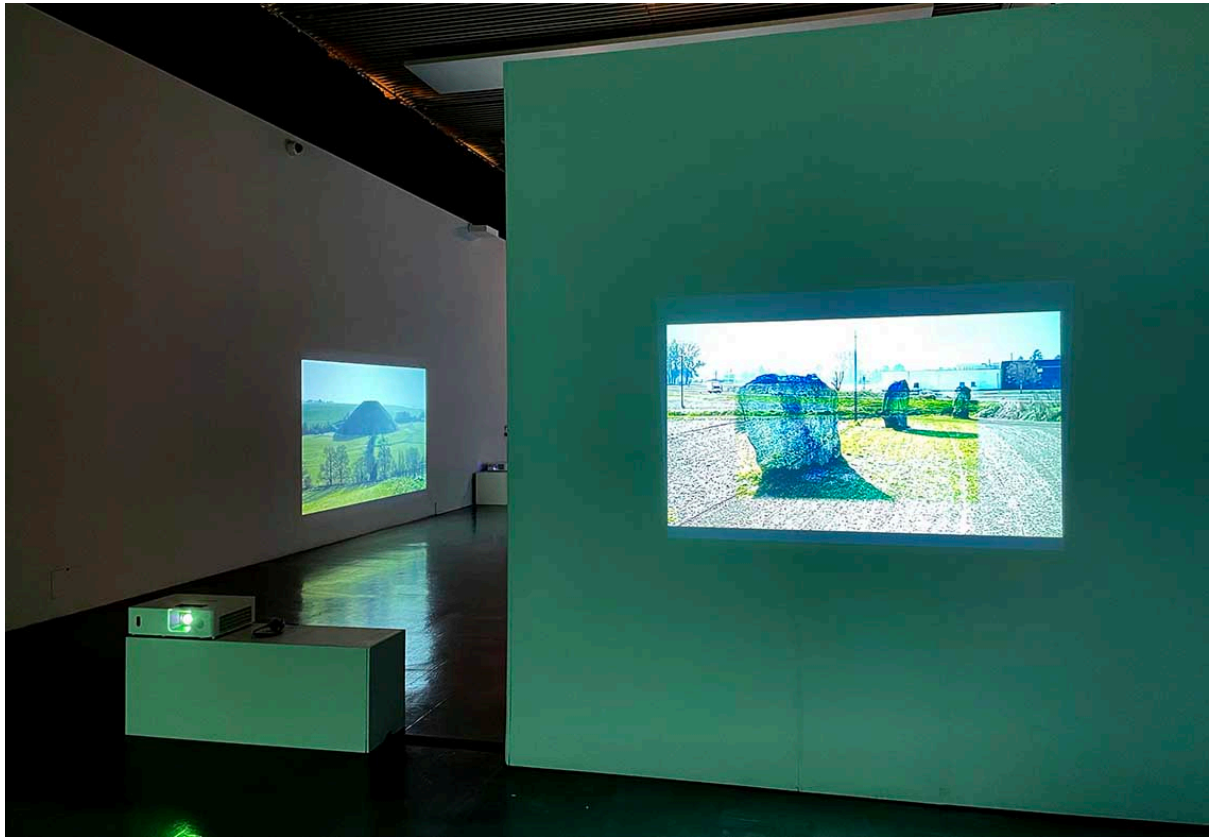


Figure 84. View of the video *When Things Go Wrong*, behind the dividing wall

The audio of the whole exhibition is the sound of *I Unleash This Virus onto You*, the only audible video, the others having headphones. This sound transforms the room into a calm and contemplative space, connoting the gallery as a (temporary) sacred queer place. Approximately all the videos rely on overlaying and tint-coloured or bleached images, creating a series or gathering of dreamscapes. Kenneth Anger believed that filmmaking was a form of spellbinding or incantation, and with these videos I have tried to make each video a sort of queer magical/spiritual experience.



Figure 85. Entrance of the exhibition, just after the entrance wall



Figure 86. View of the beginning of the exhibition looking back toward the entrance

This exhibition can be considered a journey into a (metaphorical) labyrinth, each video being a window or room into a different world one can get lost into. The Menhir-like wall at the entrance, with the exhibition's description, acts as a divider between reality/normativity and this new land, which is the aggregation, inter- intra- relation of different other lands of the various videos, all colliding into one physical space. The wall toward the end of the room is installed to create an additional more intimate space at the back, but also representing a hint of a maze, forcing visitors to follow a path and be enveloped in the dark recess it forms.

With this exhibition I have shown that through a neo-materialistic, utopic lens, queering the land becomes a spiritual endeavour, a virus that connects, spoils, undoes matter, particles, nature and ultimately humans (when they visit and watch/listen to it). It's a whispering of magical words and pictures, colliding to form anti-heteronormative visions. By getting wrapped by the web of words, light, images, dark, sound and particles, the viscosity of their matter penetrates and become-with the viewers, thus making them experience and be part of a queer land in a gallery

(and queer spirit). Equally, the space itself gets changed and transformed into a queer spiritual land, or better a multitude of lands. The gallery is temporarily transformed into a dark temple, with the sound of the wind and Tibetan bells echoing, and luminous visions projected on its walls like stained glass windows of a church. The space is queered because its function is changed, undone, made looser and more porous, multifaceted even, becoming a space of art, spirit, sexual desire, transformation, worlding and utopic possibilities, a multitude of spaces entangled and fused in a physical one, but constantly connected to other worlds through video, sound, words and worlding.

I have also demonstrated that video is the most effective medium to show the fluidity, intricacy, porosity, mesh-like property of matter, queerness and spirit, because of its multifaceted nature of having moving images, sound, projection and its various possible combinations/disjunctions, being/becoming a neo-materialist medium in itself. Video can also show more effectively how matter, queerness and spirit are tied and meshed, forming an agglomerate which is difficult, if not impossible, to separate, as one is part of the other and vice versa; by using images and audio in a disjunctive way, all the different parts/facets can be joined/enjoyed/experienced together, using an entangled/Acker-like montage method. When video is combined with creative writing, their combination becomes even more powerful, because their potentiality of creating new worlds is multiplied, overlaid so to speak, one worlding activity added/multiplied onto another. Matter becomes pregnant with futurity and hope, or paraphrasing Muñoz, this exhibition shows that matter/queerness/spirit (an entity which is one and multiple, enmeshed and porous) is/are always in the horizon.

6. Conclusions

This research has brought me to wander in many places, engaging the land with body, spirit and mind. In *Wanderlust*, Solnit describes walking as 'connecting the past with the present, as moving through space like a thread through fabric, sewing it together into a conscious experience' (2007: 15). By walking, researching and through my art practice, a multitude of flesh/particles/thoughts have been sewn together, entangling matter, concepts, art and spirit in new modalities, forming new monsters, new webs, new bodies and desires.

A fundamental stitching of this research has been by linking together neo-materialism with Muñoz's utopic vision, generating a new perspective regarding queerness, queering and nature, but also revealing tensions between positions of universality against ones relying on anti-normative ideas of 'otherness'. Declaring matter as intrinsically queer means giving everything in existence a queer dimension, against centuries of heteronormative thought, thus declaring that queerness is part of nature and even it represents one of its most fundamental cogs. It is like saying that there is a piece of queerness inside all of us and everything there is. Muñoz utilises a temporal process involving the reclamation and transformation of the past for new future queer horizons. Merging these two positions means to consider matter not only as queer, but also as having the propensity or potentiality of making kinship and becoming-with, having utopic-making attributes nestled in its porous, mesh-like structure. Thus, queer not only attaches itself to nouns wilfully perverting them, as Getsy declares, but it also becomes a catalyst for generating utopic horizons, a process of reclamation of past spaces/lands and (art) practices, transforming them for new visions. On the other hand, if everything is already queer at its core, queering itself would seem to lose meaning. Why would you need to queer something that is already intrinsically queer?

A key innovation that this research offers is that by applying a neo-materialist vision, queering becomes more about revealing the queer core of matter and its/our (inter- intra-) forms of relationship, as in general this queer kernel is not self-evident and becomes manifest mainly at a particle level. Queering is more about making evident the intrinsic queerness of everything there is, of matter but also our relationships with nature and even the cosmos.

This vision of queering as revealing the queer kernel of matter and relationships has been made manifest through my practice. My first attempt at queering the forest turned into cruising and flirting with it, revealing to me that to queer and reclaim the land doesn't necessarily mean to transform, disrupt or change something, it can also mean to form/depict new relationships and show the queerness of nature through blurred, tinted photographs; it's a form of queering by indirect and yet revelatory acts and gestures. With *Queer Rocks* something similar occurred: my effort of transforming rocks into camp objects in my act of queering lost importance in favour of the positioning of these rocks in nature, the act of 'sowing' these 'queer seeds' being more revealing and significant as a form of queering than the transformation of natural matter itself. Through this activity, a reclamation of the land as a space of potential new communality, a queer common in becoming, could occur, and a new and different vision could be made manifest or be disclosed. It's through the process instigated by my practice that the intrinsic queerness of the land/matter/relationship/spirit can be revealed and enjoyed; it's through a deviant, disruptive, anti-heteronormative series of gestures that the kernel or potentiality for new/different realities and utopic formations can be exposed, revealed, let surfaced and made visible.

When a neo-materialist view is adopted and embraced, there is a tension at play between a sort of universality of queerness, and certain queer politics centred on and advocating difference from heteronormativity and patriarchy. Hay for example encouraged to maximise the difference between gay/queer people and the (oppressing) heterosexual majority. Through my art practice I have shown that both positions are important and can coexist; for example, in *Cruising the Forest* a neo-materialist view is adopted/visualised in otherworldly photographs of the forest, showing matter as porous and something to mix/become with, yet this depiction is merged with a vision of a land to cruise and flirt with, encompassing anti-heteronormative ideas of being in the land. This union of universality and particularity/otherness of queerness is made even more evident in my writing pieces and videos, where the conflation of different realities and thoughts are webbed together, for example when describing the fusing of bodies, skin and saliva, holes, pores and tears with the desire for queer spaces where forms of brother/sister/queerhood can be explored and flourish (*A Womb of Divine Strange*

Inceptions), or by linking/overlaying the audio describing the intrinsic queerness of particles with images of nature hinting at cruising and sex (*Fucking Land Art* video). This research ultimately has revealed that by utilising a neo-materialist point of view, queering is both a process of revealing the queer relationship and materiality of everything in existence and at the same time, it's about politics centred on maximising the difference from (hetero)normativity, becoming a hybrid monster acting on different planes and circumstances. A monster of multiplicities.

Queering then is both about disruption and fusion, letting go and creation, life and death. Following Carpenter (but also Hay), queering in this research becomes the union of flesh/matter with spirit, land with cosmos, sex with the divinity, the intrinsic queerness of matter with the need of exaggerating and underlining the specific 'otherness' of queer existence. Queering becomes a rhizomatic assemblage of different and often opposing 'members-actants', using Bennett's expression, a multifaceted, complex, multi-layered aggregation of opposing things and thoughts which yet they all make sense together as an activity that disturbs and fights heteronormativity and queer-phobia.

Through my art practice, I have also found that queering resides with the small, the humble, with ephemeral, kind gestures, with diminutive, ironic, joyful acts that aim to make-kin, or even acts that embody a 'take-care-of' attitude. Instead of revolutionary or loud, big gestures, my practice has shown that queering can be about positioning small rocks, flirting with the more-than-human, creating solitary and private rituals at home, imagining anti-heteronormative realities by quietly writing about them. The care and making-kin attitude of my practice reside in the caring for and considering the forest as an equal being to flirt with, or by carefully positioning my queer rocks painted with eco-friendly paint, or in my writings and videos describing ways of fusing and becoming with nature. Queering becomes an intimate, small, private activity which binds one to the more-than-human in unexpected, unusual, anti-patriarchal and anti-heteronormative ways. Queering can be kind, caring, tender. Above all, in these times of ecological catastrophe, queering can be an ephemeral activity, one that leaves as little trace of itself as possible, a process made of walking, gestures, writing, imagining new realities.

Another important contribution of this research is that queering is about fusion. This has become evident particularly with my writing and video pieces, generating

forms of queering that are multiple, multidimensional and entangling with different elements and sources. In *I Unleash This Virus onto You*, nature is shown as being the product of multiple and overlaid realities fused together, fungi, slime, viruses, breath, hairs and the cosmos itself all encompassed in oneness, all included in particles always touching, always sharing and in contact with one another; in the video of the same title, jellyfish float and dance with leaves blown by the wind, other images superimpose one another, until at the end of the video we're back to the branches of a tree and its leaves, we realise we've made a trip into the kernel of matter, disclosing its potentialities, visions and links, and yet we were just looking at leaves moved by the wind. The use of layers in all my videos complicates (the idea of) matter, it expands it giving it multiple meanings, connections and thoughts, yet overlaying is putting two or more layers onto one, it is fusing different realities together, joining them in copulating endeavours, an act which gives new meanings, generating new horizons but also creating a sense of 'otherness'. Reality is made odd, overlaid and thus queer.

If queering is fusing, then queering an art practice means merging with it, to disrupt it in the case of land art, the way I have reused and disturbed its methods through irony, diminutive gestures and campness; or losing oneself in/to it, a sort of ecstatic fusion to create something different or new, a trans-act of wanting to become someone else, like with my *Ritual Drawing* trying to channel, imitate, fuse with Ana Mendieta, experiencing in the process an alignment with spirit and body.

An important aspect of this research has been the realisation that creative writing and video are the best media to embody a neo-materialist activity/vision, particularly when joined together. Through world-making/writing, the disclosure of potential queer futurities can be boundless, the word becoming a magical spell of creation, matter utilising/materialising into pixels and concretising into thoughts. By utilising video (adding it to the writing or stemming from it), a syncretic process occurs, words that acquire more power being added/adjacent/disjoined to the text, the language of writing and that of images colliding and equally constantly entangling/multiplying with other sources, media and concepts, affecting other works and the places they are in as in the case of my solo exhibition.

By applying or getting infected with Acker's modality of editing/putting things together, a virus that eagerly devours different, at times distant entities transforming

them into new bodies, the life-force qualities of queerness of Carpenter, Hay and Muñoz can coexist with the deathly virus of Stupart and their dystopic worlds made of corpses and revenge. It's through imagining/telling new stories that this merge of different entities finds its best representation, materialising with writing/sound and video.

This process has also brought a new understanding and interpretation of land art. Typically, land art is seen as a series of practices that break away from the gallery to create works with natural material and in nature. Land art is also seen as a practice based on heroism, of the solitary and brave artist facing the elements and 'the wilderness' to create art. This notion is also present even in more diminutive and contemplative works, like with Long's walking in remote areas of the globe and his moving rocks to form circles and other shapes, or Goldsworthy's rearranging of natural elements like twigs or leaves, as they all carry an aura of heroism or even mysticism, becoming a sort of macho gesture despite their diminutive and more human scale stance, embedding a very modernist idea of the artist as a solitary genius disrupting and reappropriating nature to create art.

Through my work, a new way of reading and using land art is activated, one that tries to reclaim its methods in a camp entangled way. With *Cruising the Forest*, I have experimented with new forms of relationships with the land based on kinship, desire, thinking-with and becoming-with, yet all in my imagination and photographs (a naïve, camp attempt indeed to affect the land!). In *Queer Rocks* I have used quiet and ironic gestures, contrasting the heroic actions typical of land art in favour of diminutive, even useless ones. I have subsequently built on these works to appropriate and queer land art further with creative writing, infecting some of their historical works with the virus of my words, reimagining them entangled with sexual encounters, more-than-human and anti-heteronormative imaginings.

This research has also highlighted queering as an intrinsic spiritual practice. Through my practice, spirituality has manifested itself with different intensities. In *Cruising the Forest*, I have experienced a sense of magic mixed with sexual desire coming from the land, only possible by coming into contact and walking in it, experiencing a sense of queer spirituality that I have tried to convey in the fuzzy, otherworldly photographs. *Queer Rocks* partly derives from Neo-Pagan rituals of leaving small rocks around sacred trees and wells, but also in the mysterious

sacredness of stones circles; through this work, a sense of lightness is obtained, of spirit that can also be trivial, joyful and ironic, and therefore subversive, a camp pilgrim wandering without clear destination, to leave small, corrupted objects along the path. *Ritual Drawing* is centred on experiencing spirituality through the (naked) body and the materiality of gesture (mark-making), a meditative process in itself, generating a new understanding of spirit. Spirit, in this work, becomes very physical, flesh even, the marks and outlines of the body transferring/being entangled with the paper, thus transforming it into another self, a ghost of me. Myself becoming trans, another me, entangling my spirit at the same time with a higher self, with the cosmos even. Through this work I felt good in my skin, whole with/in myself.

The choice of focusing on Queer Spirit has given this project a more defined/precise spirituality, focusing on a spirituality made by and for queer people. Through my creative writing pieces and videos, Queer Spirit is linked with neo-materialism and post-naturalism, showing queering as the union of flesh and spirit, as a form of kinship with the land and between the queer community to form communal, anarchic and independent ways of living more in harmony with nature. Like with the Radical Faeries, kinship with the land is based on caring, tenderness, humour, gentleness and camp gestures. With my videos and writing pieces, this form of kinship is present in the whispering of my voice, the descriptions of tender fusing, making love and becoming with natural matter and other beings, the mocking of heroic gestures and the over-the-top of certain expressions or visions. This attitude or aesthetic is fused/entangled with viruses, images of eerie jellyfish floating in the nothingness, fire, a mouth screaming. It's a multifaceted vision and process combining seriousness with irony, life with death, spirit with flesh.

With this research, I have linked essentialist notions of Queer Spirit with non-essentialist views of queer theory and sexuality, both perspectives coexisting in the same framework. This study has shown the importance that Queer Spirit can have in the present, in a world marred by ecological catastrophe, inequality, homo/queer/transphobia and racism. It can teach us a great deal about our relationship with others and nature. Therefore, let's form queer communities based on Hay's and Evan's principle, self-relying, self-sufficient, self-affirming and self-loving. Let's throw away our love for profit and technology for the love to each other and nature. Let's make love, constantly, with any matter, plant, soil, the air that we

breathe. Let's live following a spiritual neo-materialist, post-natural attitude, considering every atom in nature as a sacred item we can become-with, make love with, trans-form with. Let's mingle, touch, entangle, fuse.

I call for new queer lands, to spread like wild mushrooms, a virus that multiplies incessantly, violently, beautifully, colourfully and in a very sexy way. A queer land infected by camp entanglements, where humans and more-than-humans become/are monsters that make love, that love and tenderly care for this planet.

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