Land, Spirit and Queerness

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ASTRACT

This article aims to link land, spirit, and queerness, to reclaim nature from a queer perspective. Firstly, I will briefly describe the neo-materialistic framework of my research, revealing the intrinsic queerness and spiritual quality of nature. I will then illustrate historical attempts to use and reclaim the land through the art movement known as Land art, with its focus on questions of site, frame, and the land, together with a more spiritual approach by Ana Mendieta. Lastly, I will review my art practice, which utilises (queered) Land art methods including walking, photography, mark-making, and sculptural forms, in order to queer and reclaim the land. I will also show that the reclamation and queering process is more successful when some of those methods are used together with creative writing and video.

KEYWORDS

Queering, Nature, Spirituality, Ecology



Figure 1. Still from 'A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions', 2022, Simon Olmetti

Land is a powerful and often troubled term which has historical, rhetorical, and political attributes. For this article, land is mainly considered as 'natural space', indeed as nature. The notion of nature and natural have always been a thorny one for queer people. For many centuries, being queer meant to be unnatural, perverted, and sinful (and still is in many parts of the

world). Historically, it was the city where queerness could express itself, survive, and at times thrive, the land instead often being a hostile or even denied space. I grew up in a small village in the Northern Italian countryside, and I have direct experience of what it means to be gay in a rural setting. To reclaim the land means firstly to investigate the meaning of nature, before tackling more directly modes of reappropriations.

Nature is a bitch!

The concept of nature is slippery and complicated, particularly in the Anthropocene¹. Donna Haraway (2016, 30-57) understands nature as an entanglement of heterogeneous elements, a fertile space of/for collaborations and exchanges. She reminds us that if we want to survive on this planet marred by ecological catastrophe, we must 'stay with the trouble', embrace it and fuse/make kinship with other beings, in a sort of reciprocal entanglement, a 'becoming-with' or 'making-kin-with' between human, non-human and more-than-human in unpredictable ways and multispecies combinations. Through this reading, nature is a fluid, anti-hierarchical organism embedding multiplicity and convergence, so similar to the definition of queerness as a porous, constantly changing entity. As Eve K. Sedgwick (1994, 8) declares, queer is keenly relational and strange, it represents an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances. Jack Halberstam rightly declares that we need a new lexicon, or better a new attitude and behaviour when it comes to nature. In Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire, Halberstam (2020, 7) indeed defines nature/wildness as a disorder of things, not in terms of the opposite of order, rather its absence, in an attempt to go beyond heteronormative desires of control. A reclamation of nature needs to chime with this disorder of things, and queerness has all the attributes for it. In contrast with heteronormativity, queerness and nature share the same fluidity, the same disorderly, porous, and promiscuous entanglement.

In her essay *TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings* (2015), Karen Barad speaks of matter as in continuous flux and becoming, of being in constant 'trans-formation', materiality being in fact 'trans' (Barad 2015, 410). She also 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 (Barad 2015, 402). Through this reading, we are all trans, we all co-create ourselves, we are as much a construct as nature is, everyone is Frankenstein. Accordingly, all matter, nature included, is trans and queer. Therefore, the struggle between what is natural and what is unnatural loses meaning. If we apply concepts borrowed from quantum physics, we can easily see how limited a heteronormative idea(l) of nature is. Nature is in fact intrinsically queer, a permeable, ever-changing, constantly transforming entity entangled in multi-species and multiple ways.

It's tempting to say that it is the heteronormative idea of nature that is unnatural.

The act of queering then becomes a process that questions the centrality of heterosexual identity; it's a method of disruption, undoing, corruption even, of transforming and perverting the heteronormative structure of society. Thus, to queer ecology, as Mortimer-Sandilands describes it, means to 'to take dominant narratives of nature [...] to create space for non-heterosexual possibilities' (2010, 22); it means to expand what becomes liveable for both humans and non-humans in their 'relational interconnectedness' (Morris 2012, 90). Queer ecology rejects heteronormative and traditional values connected with nature, to create new visions and experiences of being in nature. From this perspective, nature is not merely something beautiful to look at or to cherish for its pastoral beauty, or worse an entity to exploit for humans' enjoyment and consumption; it is instead a complex organism with which we can create forms

The term was apparently first introduced by the ecologist Eugene Stoermer in the early 1980s to refer to the growing evidence of the transformative effects of human activities on the earth (Haraway 2016, 44)

of relationship on equal and respectful terms (Anderson et al. 2012, 85). Therefore, an act of reclamation from a queer perspective means to treat nature more as a partner, an entity we can have an amorous or erotic encounter with, or at least a profound respect for. This is the way I have approached my reclamation through my art, particularly in my series *Cruising the Forest*, as I will describe in the second part of this article.

Barad also states that life is a form of electricity². Nature then becomes an assemblage or accumulate of vibrant matter, a series of energy fields that we constantly interact with, creating kinship and new and trans-material with, in an endless attraction and repulsion of molecules and energy fields between humans and more-than-humans. Through this reading, nature is not only queer, but it also becomes a spiritual entity. As many non-western religions and philosophies have preached for centuries, through this vision we all become connected, humans and more-than-humans, we're all one, united, entangled; we are all, in the end, a form of energy, vibrating matter inter- intra- affecting one another. This view represents a form of spirituality which is linked to matter, the celebration of the body, of nature, and the links and relationships between all entities and beings, in contrast with one focused on sin, the mortification of the body, fear, and separation, attitudes often found in the main Abrahamic religions.

This (post-natural) vision of nature, which borrows from quantum physics, represents the framework of my research and art practice. I will now briefly introduce a historical art movement concerned with the land and its transformation/reclamation, before describing my attempts and art practice.

Land (and) art

Michel de Certeau famously conceived 'place' as a definite, specific location, whereas 'space', by contrast, was interpreted as an intersection of mobile elements and vectors such as direction, velocities, and time variables; in short, he defined 'space as practiced place' (de Certeau 1984, 17 cited in Mitchell 2002, 8). W.J.T. Mitchell, quoting Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, is interested in going beyond the binary created by de Certeau and instead connecting place, space, 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). 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 Mitchell stresses several times that no one of these terms (place, space and landscape) are logically or chronologically prior to the others.

Landscape is a bag of tricks. (Mitchell 2002, 17)

In my view, this is this premise that underlines much of Land art.

Land art, also known as Earth art or Earthworks³, was an art movement that in the 1960s and

Barad explains: '[Matter] is not inanimate, lifeless, eternal. Matter is an imaginative material exploration of non/being, creatively regenerative, an ongoing trans/formation. [...] The electric body – *at all scales*, atmospheric, subatomic, molecular, organismic – is a quantum phenomenon generating new imaginaries, new lines of research, new possibilities' (2015, 411). Jane Bennett also considers matter as vibrant and with an agency of its own. See her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010).

In the book *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, in the footnote 1, the authors describe: 'The term "Land art", "Earth art" and "Earthworks" tend to be used somewhat interchangeably in contemporary art discourses. For us, Land art is the more encompassing term [...] (In the European context, Land art is a much more prevalent term). 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)

70s shifted the focus on nature as a place and material with which to produce art. The act of using art to affect or transform a (natural) place, or the use of natural material for art purposes in a specific location, activate that place into a space, or even generate a new landscape, a new site of encounter and vision of using or being in the land. At the time, leaving the artist's studio behind and going to the wilderness to create art was ground-breaking and bizarre. Some of the works of the movement's most well-known practitioners are vast in scale, such as Michael Heizer's 'Double Negative' (1969), two massive cuts on either side of a narrow canyon near Overton, Nevada, or Robert Smithson's famous 'Spiral Jetty' (1970), a huge spiral made of mud, salt crystals and rocks built on the shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah. They often were called 'earthworks', and they entailed the movement of enormous amounts of soil or rock, or the transformation of a natural site into a vast sculptural object.

Although Land art is conventionally seen as part of Minimalism, it is more useful for this article to consider it as part of a wider practice of spatial concern, which included questions regarding the physical dematerialisation of the art object (typical of Conceptual art), together with concerns of organisation of space and the everyday life (closer to Happenings, Fluxus and Situationism) (Kastner and Wallis 2005,27-28). These projects concurred to a rethinking of social relations, space, and the body, leading to a kind of 'third space' or 'in-between space', similar to de Certeau's notion of space as practiced place, activated by social actions. This 'space activation' was crucial to Land artists, particularly of the first generation, who frequently wanted to address the representation of nature and the complex historical and social issue of specific places (Kastner and Wallis 2005, 28). It is hard at times to see evidence of this kind of preoccupations when confronted with the monumentality of the first-generation of Land artworks, but it's important to notice for example that Michael Heizer was familiar with the various ethnic cultures of the American Southwest, and Robert Smithson with the histories of specific sites and ancient myths (Kastner and Wallis 2005, 29). All these artists were indeed engaged with the politics of space, questioning for example who had access to those areas, and aiming to disrupt space (and time) with their artworks.

Connected to this notion of activation is also that of framing, of creating a new dialogue with the environment through a different/alternative physical framework, resting on the notion that seeing a portion of land from another perspective might generate new ideas, discussions, and relations. This again becomes particularly evident when the surrounding landscape is faced with or viewed from a large earthwork. This notion could also be connected to the process of queering, which becomes a form of framing too, of activating a space from a different perspective, experiencing the land in an alternative way. The process of reclamation therefore needs to go through a (new) framing device or perspective, through a new activation.

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 or 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 humanity⁴. Being in the presence of these works means to face questions related to 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

⁴ The *New Yorker* in 2016 published an article about Land art and more specifically about Michael Heizer titled 'A Monument to Outlast Humanity', by Dana Goodyear. At: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/29/michael-heizers-city

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 cosmical, 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).

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 declared⁵, 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. 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. If landscape is fixed 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 must have felt as a good solution.

Rebecca 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). Walking allows one to know, read, breathe, and connect with the land as no other activity can do, as if touching or resting one's feet on its ground allows one to infuse with its soil and character. In her book *Wanderlust*, Solnit illustrates how walking, particularly in Britain and the United States, was central in forming both an idea(l) of landscape and an ecological movement, among other things.

Interestingly, Land art has evolved from the first huge earthworks in the American desert to practices of different sizes and concerns, including Eco and Bio art, which are more directly connected and concerned with ecology and our relationship with the planet.

Land and spirit

A more intimate and spiritual approach is that of Ana Mendieta, who combined her Latin American/Cuban culture with a contemporary (and feminist) practice, creating a sort of bridge between past and present, and between indigenous and Western culture. 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 and 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). 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 About Smithson, Heizer, and De Maria he said that they don't have any respect for nature and that he feels their work is 'inescapably urban' even though found outside the city (Beardsley 1998, 44).

(1990, 86) stated that when Mendieta worked in a place, she claimed that territory 'somewhat like a dog pissing on the ground'.

Mendieta called her work 'earth body art', thus making explicit the hybrid nature of her practice (Tufnell 2006, 69), a sort of bridge between Land art and Body art, demonstrating since the beginning her desire of mixing cultures and practices, of searching for a sort of cultural syncretism. 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; photographs are the only witness and remnant 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, creating a dialogue between presence and absence, fullness, and lack, and past and present (Osterweil 2015).

There is a paradox of ancient, deep time meeting or even crushing with contemporary life. Indeed, the *Siluetas* recall Neolithic carvings, while simultaneously suggesting the outlines of modern crime scenes (Osterweil 2015). Howard Oransky, one of the curators of *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*⁶, speaks of the artist's practice as a connection between ancient mythologies and her present body, preoccupations, and land.

When Mendieta creates silhouettes with mud in the landscape, what we are left with is a photograph/video of her encounter with deep time, with millennia-old earth shaped by geological eons of construction, destruction and remodelling, layers on layers of time that stretches so far back that become incomprehensible for us humans. Indeed Osterweil (2015) says that Mendieta communicates our doomed love affair with time, reifying the encounter between body and earth into archetypal images. Her premature death, falling from a window in obscure circumstances and crushing on the land, is even more tragic and chilling if we consider her body lying on the earth as the last of her Siluetas, her final mark on the earth surface, before passing to the other side.

Her land reclamation was intimate, spiritual, and ephemeral, yet very powerful and haunting. In contrast with many of her American contemporaries, Mendieta had a very respectful approach, a search for communion with the earth and nature.

I will now depict some of my attempts to queer and reclaim the land with my art practice, using Land art methods and following the neo-materialistic framework of my research.

Of cruising forests, ritual drawings, and queer rocks

A few months after starting my PhD, the COVID pandemic exploded worldwide. The limitations of lockdown, particularly in the first few months, were daunting. How to create work connected with nature or showing its queerness core, when I couldn't even go out to nature? Luckily, London has many green spaces, and Epping Forest at my doorstep was a huge help, relief, and escape. I started to go to the forest regularly, looking for connections, perhaps hoping to replace human relations or even touch for plant encounter, voices of the wind, birds, and insects, exchange of some form of energy or vibration. Humans didn't lack either, this big green lung scarred by too many paths have plenty of walkers in their muddy wellies strolling through it. However, we kept at a distance, safe not to breathe the same air. Often, I was alone, walking for hours in the dark, wet crevices of the forest's thick vegetations, parakeets filling

One of the few exhibitions focusing on Mendieta's films, it was co-curated by Lynn Lukkas and took place at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, during the autumn 2015. It then travelled to other countries, including in Paris' Jeu de Paume.

Many people believe her husband Carle Andre (a minimalist and land artist) pushed her from the window.

the air with their aromatic, foreign singing, sound of far sunny lands strangely juxtaposed to this cold latitude. I strongly felt that I was looking at the forest, and in turn, in some mysterious way, the forest was looking back at me, flirting, perhaps even hinting at something I couldn't understand but which was erotic and exciting. I decided to cruise with it, with my camera and with my walking, to let myself be lost in its fluorescent greens, and dark browns, and smell of mud and rotting leaves. Fresh air moved brunches and spoke an unknown but powerful language.

Following Mitchell's statement, walking in and cruising with the forest transforms a simple place into a 'practiced place', that is a space which in turn activates that site into a new image or fantasy, a queer one in this case, a fluid, entangled form of relationship between a human and a more-than-human entity. Like many Land artists have done before me, walking becomes a tool to (re)connect with the land, or as Solnit describes it, for my body to measure itself against the earth. Only through a direct, slow, and immersive experience, one can really know and understand a place or a process. My regular walks in nature made me intimate with the forest; my footprints in the mud, the wet particles of my breath, the sound of my movement, and the smell of my body was exchanged with the breath of the trees, the smell of its bushes, the healing sound of the birds, the mud stuck on my skin. The forest and I were now entwined, our



Figure 2. Untitled, from the series *Cruising the Forest*, digital photograph, Simon Olmetti

particles mixed, copulating, and transforming one another to create new ones, the addition of our components more than its mere sum, forming trans new particles of human with more-than-human matter, hybrid formations for new chemical units.

The pictures generated by this exchange process, a series of photographs I called Cruising the Forest, are fuzzy, colourful images suggesting the vibrating queer properties of nature. The blurriness implies movement, a sort of activation of that space; its altered colours instead depict a land of magic, of mysterious possibilities, of strange new encounters and beginnings.

I also see the limitations of this approach. The reclamation here is more metaphorical, this work representing my first attempt, a sort of 'getting to know nature' through a post-natural attitude. It's an attempt to show the un-showable, nature's queer kernel that perhaps can only be felt, experienced but never fully or truly

depicted. The queering is implied by the fuzzy, porous, odd quality of the images, together with its title referring to a sexual encounter and relationship with the forest.

At times my strategy was to create some sort of rituals in my home-turned-studio, trying to channel Ana Mendieta in the comfort of my home, a human being in lockdown recreating an artificial encounter with nature and spirit, house plants in a corner, central heating at full blast.

Susan Sontag would call it camp,

Treating nature as an extension of theatre,

Of being-as-playing-a-role

I would lay naked on a large piece of paper, trying to outline my body with paint, or charcoal, or graphite; using my hands or a brush, I would then drag the paint/charcoal/graphite to create shapes of different colours, in a repetitive, meditative state, as if dragging out of my outlined body negative energies, fears and anxieties, 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, Queer Spirit, 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



Figure 3. Untitled, photograph, graphite and paint on paper, 2020, Simon Olmetti

rule of creating no harm is followed. The aim of this process was mainly to experience spirituality through my body and an art practice.

This was also my attempt at channelling Ana Mendieta, using her method but queering it, colourful bright paint instead of mud and leaves, acrylic instead of natural elements, a camp effort indeed. I have also tried to recreate the same process 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.

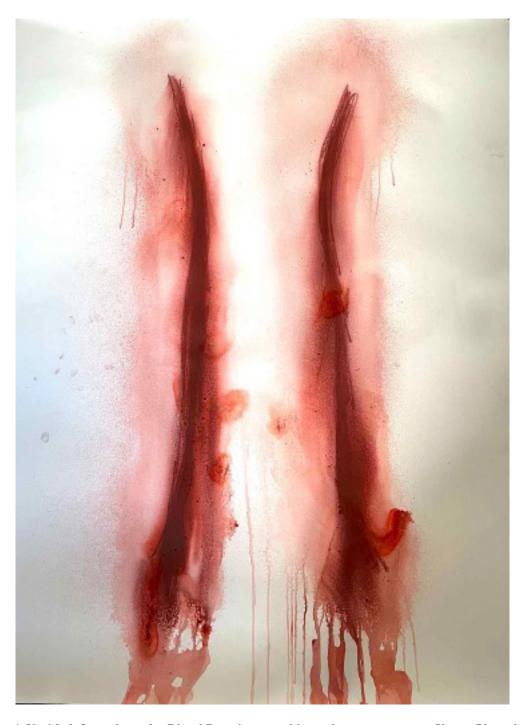


Figure 4. Untitled, from the series Ritual Drawing, graphite and water on paper, Simon Olmetti

Through these performative drawings, I have reclaimed Mendieta's way of working with the body and its outline yet using (perhaps misusing) other Land art strategies such as the concept of 'non-site', although again in a queer way. For Smithson the non-site, both the title of a series of his works and a concept, was intended as a dialogue or relationship between the artwork and its original physical place, or more generally the work of art as being an 'in-between' space, existing in a gallery space and yet related to a specific location. For Smithson, the Non-site series questioned notions of site and displacement, how the removal of a natural material like some rocks would leave a negative impression on its original place, and at the same time their installation in a gallery miles away would maintain a connection with it (Kastner and Wallis 2005, 31). With my work, I have experimented with a sort of queered version of the non-site, a looser and more fluid one, creating work mainly in a home setting that would act as 'nature', an artificial site or a 'non-natural' one and yet summoned as one through ritual, experiencing a Mendieta-style spiritual reclamation without being physically in the land, transforming the place I was in in a non-site, or an 'in-place-of' site, a metaphorical recreation of a site when going to nature and performing a ritual in it was difficult. Like in a spell or a magic object, the large piece of paper becomes the incarnation of the land, the same way a Persian carpet metaphorically represents a garden, a place that develops in a practiced space through the movement of my body in and on it, through my rituals and the outlining and mark making, which in turns gets activated as a new sight or vision, the metaphor of/for the land, or a sort of trans-land, something in between, a transformative (trans-formative?) process of creation and reappropriation, connecting to the land by proxy or magic, through the power of spirit.

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.

Lastly, as I have established at the beginning of this article, 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 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.

I have also tried to leave some marks directly in the landscape. When lockdown restrictions eased, I started going outside London, walking mainly along the Icknield Way, an ancient pilgrim path roughly connecting Norfolk with Avebury and passing north of London. I wanted to walk what is believed to be the oldest road in Britain⁸.

I felt I was somehow retracing Long's or Fulton's steps, walking in search of some connection with nature but also with deep and ancestral time. Like Long, I couldn't nevertheless resist the urge for materiality, of creating or transforming something. Instead of moving heavy

rocks or ordering stones in the form of a circle or spiral like he does, I decided to be more irreverent, to create little camp objects from natural material. Therefore, I started collecting pebbles and small rocks, taking them home, cleaning and painting them with garish, unnatural colours, for then taking them back to nature, positioning them like strange sacred objects along the way.

The idea of scattering around these sorts of queer seeds was very appealing to me, leaving a mark, a sign of the passage of a queer body in nature, representing even the pollution of the picturesque landscape that much has fomented a British ideal of nature, belonging and national pride. Unlike much of Land art, particularly of the first generation, my attempt was diminutive, small scales pebbles and rocks whose acrylic paint would probably fade away very quickly. In a way, I was again putting together some methods of Land art with more transient aspects of Mendieta's process.



Figure 5. Untitled, from the series Queer Rocks, digital photograph, 2021, Simon Olmetti

In contrast with my 'ritual drawings' at home, leaving my queer rocks in nature was a way to directly intervene in the landscape, trying to alter and reappropriate it, albeit ephemerally. This time the spirituality of the gesture was more linked to ancient forms of spirituality, such as the positioning of rocks at the feet of sacred trees or close to a well in neopaganism, or on tombs in Judaism. The spiritual process was also associated with the cleansing and painting activity, a sort of meditative process, together with a transformative one, an alchemical-like principal of generating an artificial output from natural matter.

The activation of the space through my intervention generates a sort of micro queer commons, the reclamation of a place which becomes a space for queer people. A small reminder for passers-by that we belong to nature, we are part of it, and we can have a different, innovative connection and relationship with the earth.

Like with Long, Fulton, Mendieta, and many other artists whose practice is focused on the land, photography becomes the only witness and remnant of the work. However, the small scale of my rocks and their association with (alternative and ancient) forms of spirituality, might generate spontaneous or unpredictable acts, such as other people might be inclined to leave 'their' painted rocks in the same place, or instead someone might decide to take one of

my 'queered' rocks at home and give them a different new life or function. We can't know. What we can instead predict is the more pervasive encounter with nature. Nature will repossess and reclaim them, as it has done with Mendieta's mud outlines or Long's rearranged stones. In time my painted rocks will be covered in mud, the rain will dissolve their paint, the weeds will triumphally surround them. Queering is clearly a temporal and ephemeral activity. Yet, the seemingly disappearance of their queer status will energetically embed the land, or at least it will pulsate from the photographs I have taken.

I then started using creative writing as a way of queering and reappropriating which, albeit still ephemeral in the fact that it existed only in the pixels of my computer, nevertheless had a materiality in the fixity of writing itself, and in its potentiality of generating new outcomes through different media. Barad (2015, 388) indeed proclaims that imagination is matter, and vice versa. Writing felt like a liberating act, the emancipation of my voice. Additionally, these creative pieces could inspire or become part of a video or an audio piece, being printed in a booklet, written, or projected on a wall, included in a painting, and many other more uses. Suddenly the possibilities were endless, and my queering and reappropriation process could venture beyond the limits of reality, indeed utilising neo-material properties it could go beyond the visible and the physicality of matter to affect, change and transform reality through the particles of my voice, of thought and dream, through invisible vibrations yet nevertheless material, real, effective, and consequential.

One example is A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions⁹. This video was inspired by a poem I have written while researching Queer Spirit¹⁰ and by my many visits to Avebury in the last few years, a place dear to neo-pagans with its two huge stone circles and other Neolithic sites. The result is an overlaying of different footages, images that intersect, superimpose, blend with one another, creating a sort of dreamy effect; the audio instead is represented by my voice whispering the poem again ang again, ultimately overlaying my voice as well and generating a confused, obsessive litany, a kind of spell to reclaim that space and affect the viewers. The constant overlapping of images and sound resonates with the idea of the multi-layered structure of places like this, sediments of millennia of beliefs and matter, but also it hints at the porous property of nature, its sense of interrelation and oneness that can only be glimpsed through a rich overlaying of images and sound.

Uniting writing with video has proved to be a powerful tool to affect, transform, reclaim, and ultimately queer a space. In some instances, writing has inspired the creation of a video; often it has become part of its sound. Their power relies on the potentiality of these two media of creating new visions, particularly when joined together, word that becomes image and/or sound, giving it 'body', weight, form, and consequence.

This way of working can be linked to contemporary art practices using queer world-making or so-called 'worlding', a practice of creating utopic/dystopic realities that challenge our current reality system. Haraway speaks of SF, string figures, science fact, science fiction, speculative

⁹ This video has been selected for the Visions in the Nunnery 2022's exhibition. You can watch it on www.simonolmetti.com

Queer Spirit is a spirituality specifically made by and for queer people; it develops beyond the impositions 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, neo-pagan traditions, and other nature-based spiritualities, but it fosters its own rituals and mythology focusing exclusively on queer people and experience.

feminism, and speculative fabulation, as a way to collaborate 'with all those in the muddle', in the thickly present Chthulucene¹¹, as a way to 'stay with the trouble' and survive, even thrive, in this age of environmental catastrophe (Haraway 2016, 56). Creative writing/SF therefore becomes a way of thinking-with, becoming-with matter/nature 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 make us humus, not human (Haraway 2016, 55), we become a fertile compost where new visions and alternativity can grow in multiple and unexpected directions. Queering ultimately becomes a process not only to reclaim the land, but also to understand our place as humans within the environment, not a hegemonic central one, rather one of collaboration, caring, and inter- intra- connection

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¹¹ Chthulucene is Haraway's alternative to Anthropocene and Capitalocene. It is 'made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet' (Haraway 2016, 55).

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