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Dune Dream – Self-imaging, Trans-corporeality and the Environment

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In this text a small video, *Dune Dream* (2 min 39 sec), performed in 2014 in Maspalomas, and its material, *Dune Dream (raw)*, are related to discussions of some previous works created in the same place (*Sitting in Sand* 2008), where the strategies of stillness versus movement and merging with or standing out from the landscape were compared. Here the video is looked at through the notions self-imaging (Jones 2006) and trans-corporeality (Alaimo 2010). Where self-imaging invites an interpretation of *Dune Dream* as an imagined dissolution of the self, there Alaimo's notion trans-corporeality assists in seeing it as a reminder of our indissoluble entanglement with the materiality of the world.

Reflecting on the relationship of human body and environment with the help of a performance for camera by the author, this text can be linked to performance-as-research or artistic research and to discussions concerning representation, performance, new materialism and the environment.

Introduction

Anyone who has been engaged with performance art during the last twenty years or more has probably encountered Peggy Phelan's famous dictum concerning the ontology of performance:

> Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representation: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan, 1993: 146).

For an artist who performs mainly by posing for a camera on tripod, the question inevitably arises: What is this 'other than performance'? Is it merely representation of representation, then? Regarding disappearance Phelan further asserts: 'The disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance; it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered' (Phelan, 1993: 147).

This text looks at an example of posing for camera where disappearance is the main action, relating it to 'self imaging', a term coined by Amelia Jones (2006). This idea is linked to self-imagining as well. When performing landscape for camera, a blurring of the boundary between performer and environment, even the dissolution of the performer into the surroundings can be created by the help of technology. A small, slightly embarrassing video work, based on a documentation of a performance for camera, called *Dune Dream*, where I pose for a camera on tripod, created in Maspalomas on Gran Canaria in March 2014, will serve as an example (see image below).

Dune Dream (2014), video still.

Self-imaging

According to Amelia Jones, in her book *Self/Image – technology, representation and the contemporary subject* (2006) there is a tendency:

> In Euro-American culture to deploy technologies of visual representation to render and/or confirm the self (paradoxically: objectifying the self so as to prove its existence as a subject), and … these technologies expose the inexorable failure of representation to offer up the self as a coherent knowable identity (Jones, 2006: xvii).

Moreover, it seems to her that we keep making and viewing images 'as if to complete our pictures of ourselves' as if we could not 'exist anymore without imagining ourselves as a picture' (Jones, 2006: xvii). And yet, we do recognize the disastrous effects of relying on 'oppositional models of self and other' for navigating the world, models that seem to be 'motivating our weird, counterproductive imagining of ourselves from the outside' (Jones, 2006: xvii). In the era of the ubiquitous selfie her observation is more relevant than ever. And for an artist who uses posing for a video camera as her basic tool, this comment invites some serious reflection.

Jones discusses images and projects which are not 'self-portraits' in the traditional sense, but which:

> Enact the self (and most often of the artist her or himself) in the context of the visual and performing arts (including film, video, and digital media)' and which participate in what she calls "self-imaging" – the rendering of the self in and through technologies of representation (Jones, 2006: xvii).

Jones devotes the main part of her book to discussing filmic and televisual self-imaging but since my example functions in a rather photographic manner (the camera is static, the framing is constant, movement is minimised, post production is not used, except for a slow cross fade etc.) I mention here some of her comments on photography and use them as a starting point.

While discussing self-imaging and analogue photography she describes photographic self-performances, which emerge sporadically in early twentieth century modernist photography and then in postmodern photographic practices. These establish an exaggerated mode of performative self-imaging that opens up a new way of thinking about photography and the racially, sexually and gender-identified subject (Jones, 2006: 40). Performative images are 'self portraits' because:

> They convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image', but by exaggerating 'the performative dimension of the self (its openness to otherness and … its contingency on the one who views … it)', they alter 'our conception of what a self portrait – and the subject – *is*' (Jones, 2006: 41).

Exaggerating their own self performances, some artists 'explore the capacity of the self portrait photograph to foreground the "I" as other to itself, the artistic subject "taking place" in the future through interpretive acts that bring her or him back to life via memory and desire.' Thus, Jones argues, the self-portrait photograph 'becomes a kind of *technology of embodiment*' (Jones, 2006: 43).

An image of a woman lying in a hollow in the sand dunes, slowly disappearing from the image through an extended crossfade, is not an exaggerated self-performance in the sense of Jones's examples (Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, Renée Cox or Laura Aguilar). The video is not a performative self-portrait exaggerating some assumed characteristics of the self, although imagining a dissolution of the body into the sand in a romantic and aestheticised, even pathetic manner, is of course an exaggeration of sorts. The self-imagining of disembodiment with the body merging with the environment becomes a literal disappearance of the subject of the image.

Jones focuses on images of exaggerated self-performances rather than on more traditional self-portraits because 'they complicate the belief in the self-portrait image as incontrovertibly delivering the "true" artistic subject to the viewer – a

belief central to modernist discourses of art and photography' (Jones, 2006: 44). The self-portrait photograph is a relatively low-tech example of the 'way in which technology not only *mediates* but *produces* subjectivities, deeply inflecting how we experience ourselves in the contemporary world' (Jones, 2006: 44). Not only exaggerated examples of theatrical, photographic self-production operate this way, she claims, but all images 'work reciprocally to construct bodies and selves across the interpretive bridges that connect them' (Jones, 2006: 44). But what happens in viewing such a disappearance, as in *Dune Dream*; does it produce a sense of loss, or perhaps a sense of relief, in returning to the landscape without the disturbing figure?

Discussing photography as death Jones notes that the:

Photograph is a sign of the passing of time, of the fact that what we see in the … photographic print no longer exists as we see it: it is a sign of our inexorable mortality (as well as, paradoxically, an always failed means of re-securing our hope of having the photographed subject "live" forever) (Jones, 2006: 46).

The photographic portrait is 'a death mask, a coffin, a lifeless screen stifling all breath and sensation and movement' (Jones, 2006: 46). Moreover, 'it is through the pose (and thus through representation, which necessarily predicates a freezing of bodily motion) that the death of the subject dealt by the photographic shot – its fetishizing power – is enacted' (Jones, 2006: 47–48).

In her epilogue Jones suggests that 'representation, perhaps especially in its photographic (and digital) variants, dissimulates life. It preys on our desire for the body to remain suspended in time forever' (Jones, 2006: 244). Moreover, it:

Fills the gap between the moment to moment of our lived experience (which can never be secured) and our desire both to make sense of that experience and by freeze-drying it as it is/was in one instant to delay forever the inevitable result of the passage of time: death (Jones, 2006: 244).

She further explains:

> The photograph simply exaggerates the urge built into all representational
> practices involving images of the body – the urge to delay or foreclose
> on death. Self images – renditions (in some form) that the maker has
> forged involving his or her own body – make this profound paradox of
> representation explicit (Jones, 2006: 245).

In *Dune Dream* self-imaging, involving self-imagining (of melting into the dunes
and disappearing in the sand) and sharing the existence of the materiality of the
surrounding landscape, can produce the impression of the performer merging
with the environment, which reminds of camouflage or chameleon like posing
in the landscape. Curling up in the hollow of the dune and hiding in the shadow
was an impulse within an action attempted as a formal experiment – how could
I and the dark blue scarf form a contrast to the dunes and also merge with
the shadow in the hollow in the sand. It turned by mistake, by chance or by
providence and later aided by technology (the slow crossfade between the image
with a human figure and the same image without a human figure) into an exercise
in disappearing, with meanings related to death and dying. Since the 'action'
or 'process' depicted is a form of dissolving or disappearing, a form of dying is
staged, and thus also maintained or 'freeze-dried' as an ongoing event. What is
taking place, however, could equally well be understood as the body merging
with the earth, the restoration of the surface of the sand after the disappearance
of human presence.

Ecology of the imaginary

Though the human figure is clearly distinguishable in the image, some blurring
of the boundary between the human and the environment takes place from the
point of view of the spectator. The image produces an illusion of continuity and
confluence between the human form and the surrounding sand. This could also
be understood as an interpretation of Gregory Bateson's famous axiom of the
unit of survival being organism plus environment (or action plus context), further

developed by Kershaw into an 'ecology of the imaginary' (Kershaw, 2007: 249). According systemic thinking it does not make sense to separate 'organisms' from 'environments' as they are aspects of the *same* system. (Kershaw, 2007: 248). Along the same lines Félix Guattari claimed (in 1989) that nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, we must learn to think 'transversally' (Guattari, 2000: 54 quoted in Kershaw, 2007: 249). For Kershaw transversal thinking is paradoxical. And as Guattari exclaimed, 'no one is exempt from playing the game of the ecology of the imaginary!' (Guattari, 2000: 57).

The relationship between performer and environment can be understood in terms of foreground and background, or as the option of merging with the landscape or standing out from it. Another way is to think of the difference between performing 'as' something and performing 'with' something in the landscape. And, if we extend this 'with' aspect of performance, we can ask who and what are the actors involved. In any case performances provide imaginary models for the relationship between a human being and the environment. Perhaps *Dune Dream* could be understood not only as an attempt at self-imaging but as an exercise in an ecology of the imaginary. Imagining a world without a human presence takes another turn, however, when small human figures show up at the horizon on the dunes after the woman in the foreground has disappeared, and the everyday life of the tourist resort is resumed.

The making of…

At the time of returning to the dunes in Maspalomas, by coincidence, in March 2014, I wrote in a blog, remembering my previous visit:

> Faro Maspalomas is a classic tourist resort on the south coast of Gran Canaria, next to the phantasmagorical dunes which spread out between Maspalomas and Playa del Inglés. I visited the place for the first time in 2007, during Christmas time, while staying in Puerto Rico further on the coast, and searching for interesting environments to perform for camera. /–/

On my first visit, during the year of the pig, I had with me the grey woollen scarf, which I used in all images during that year, and the grey pebbles in between the dunes in some places corresponded to its colour. Back then I used my customary technique; with the camera on tripod, I chose the framing of the image and the site where I tried to place myself, turned on the camera and walked into the landscape, stayed for a while, returned and turned off the camera. While editing I usually remove the movement in the beginning and at the end. At that time, while I was looking at the material I realised that the movement away from and back towards the camera really showed the proportions of the dunes. Thus, I edited two versions of the work, one with stillness only, and another one with the movement included. /–/

Today [in 2014] I am in Maspalomas again, without a scarf, and with no pressure to create any images. Or rather, with the pressure of creating some other kind of images. And I do have a scarf with me, although an ordinary one. I thought about it on the plane and realised that I could use a dark blue skirt and a thin dark blue silk scarf as my costume if I would like to experiment with something. And I actually did. The experience was rather confusing, though. I thought the dark blue might make a good contrast to the yellow dunes, and it did. But the long dress and the scarf whirling in the wind also made the image absurdly romantic, gothic and pathetic. I experimented with walking into the landscape and disappearing behind the dunes, but it looked rather awkward. Then I tried climbing up the steep slopes, and stopped midway when the effort was too much for me, and then just stood there, with my feet in the sand. /–/ A small dark figure among the dunes was nice as an idea, but not so fascinating as an image. /–/ At the moment, I do not know what to do, but I will make a few more trials (Arlander 2014).

A few words were added the following day: 'I think I succeeded in making some possibly usable images today, here…' An image of the site where I recorded *Dune Dream* is added in the blog, but with no further mention of my attempts.

While working with *Sitting in Sand* in 2007 was focused on performing the landscape, placing the human figure in various positions related to the dunes and the pebbles, experimenting with size and distance, *Dune Dream* in 2014 was made on impulse, as a reaction to a hollow in the sand, recognising the colour of my scarf in a shadow. Later, while editing the material I made one version of the real-time action, called *Dune Dream (raw),* which shows me entering the image, standing for a while with my back to the camera, and then suddenly lying down in the sand, lying there for a while, then getting up and returning behind the camera. Thus, I used the same technique as in 2007, although this time the distance to the camera was rather short, so the act of walking had less importance. The video used as example here, *Dune Dream,* is a shorter version of the same material, using only the image of me lying on the sand. The new technique utilised in this version, compared to the works created in 2007, is combining the image of the human figure with the same image of the 'empty' landscape using a very slow crossfade, which makes the figure dissolve into the sand.

Notes in Sand

In a text called *Notes in Sand* (Arlander, 2012: 254–264) I was looking at movement and immobility as methods of performing landscape in moving images, with the focus on questions that arose after returning from the sand, while editing two versions of *Sitting in Sand,* a video work performed and recorded in the same place as *Dune Dream.* I noticed that the relationship between the human figure and the landscape changes with movement and proposed two approaches to performing landscape: merging with the landscape or standing out from it. These notes are relevant as a background to *Dune Dream.*

Sitting in Sand was created at Christmas time in 2007 as a reaction to the sand dunes in the area of Maspalomas on Gran Canaria on the Canary Islands. The work was filmed on video and consists of moving images, though the camera is immobile on a tripod. Two versions have been edited using the same material. In the first version, *Sitting in Sand – Short* (15 min.), a human figure is sitting in the landscape at various distances from a static camera. An immobile figure wrapped in a grey

Sitting in Sand (2008), video still.

scarf sits with her back to the camera on the sand dunes or on pebbles. In the second version, *Sitting in Sand* (27 min.), the human figure steps into the image, walks into the landscape, sits down for a while, and then returns back behind the camera. The same pattern – moving away, sitting and then returning – is repeated in all images, even if the distance travelled is changing. The size of the figure and the duration of the image are altered depending upon the position of the figure in the landscape and the distance to be walked to and from the camera.

The habit of seeing the performer as separate from the environment and the attempt to explicitly make him or her stand out from the environment is strong among the creators as well as the spectators of performances (Arlander, 1998: 218). With a recorded moving image, the performance is divided in two – first a performance for the camera and then a performance or re-presentation for the viewer. This poses the question of the performer–environment relationship

slightly differently. The performance is created in one place and presented in another place.

In his doctoral dissertation *The Prisoners of Reality in the Realm of Freedom: Documentary Film and Its Production Process*, Jouko Aaltonen (2006) references the debate among documentary film-makers concerning the strategies of perception and representation.

> The study shows that the making of a documentary film is a process, in which the filmmaker takes a stand in relation to two basic factors: to the surrounding socio-historical world on the one hand, and to the traditions and conventions of representation on the other. The former is called the reality aspect, and the latter is called the representational aspect (Aaltonen, 2006: 246–47).

According to Aaltonen, the strategies of documentary film-makers can be divided into basic strategies of perceiving and representing. Each author is forced to make choices concerning both of these questions, either consciously or unconsciously: *How to perceive and encounter the world and how to tell about it to others'?* (Aaltonen, 2006: 10). He maintains that all theoretical discussion concerning documentary film circles around these two basic concerns. Aaltonen is interested in how Finnish documentary film-makers understand documentary film and its production process. My interest concerns this simple division, which seems rather problematic at first (how could you separate them?), but which is quite illuminating for my example. With the help of that division, I can distinguish on one hand the experiential dimension of the work at the moment of performing and video filming (perceiving and encountering the world) and, on the other hand, the choices involved in editing the material into a video work for the public (how to tell others about it).

Unlike what documentary film-makers perhaps do, I am not trying to describe the experience of perceiving and encountering the world. The two dimensions are separated into two different spheres – first, a private sphere, the pleasure of

the performer (encountering the world) and, second, a public sphere, the general work to be presented to the public (telling others about it). The two versions of *Sitting in Sand*, and to some extent also the two versions of *Dune Dream*, are examples of a similar division. At the level of encountering the landscape, both versions rely upon the same events. Interesting choices come into play during the editing process at the level of representation: should I cut out the movement, and, thus, the individuality of the human figure and the process of constructing the image, or should I show the movement, thus revealing personal details, while also emphasiding real time and the scale of the landscape.

Mostly, I utilise the possibility provided by a video camera on a tripod and function both as a camera person and a performer without stressing the fact, cutting the sequences where I change place before and after the image from the final work. In this case, I became interested in the movement into and out of the image, the preparation phase, which did not belong to the actual image, and so I ended up editing two versions of the work.

The first immobile version of *Sitting in Sand* has been edited into a sequence of still-acts where the minimal movement is formed by the wind in the scarf and in my hair. Being immobile, the human figure merges with the landscape, and becomes visually a part of it. In the second movement-based version, entering the image and exiting the image are included, and expose how the image is constructed. Moreover, movement reveals the identity of the human figure and draws attention to the person. In images with some distance between the camera and the figure movement brings depth and scale to the landscape. When the human figure gradually recedes, and shrinks or approaches and grows taller, the scale of the landscape is emphasised. By way of movement, the human figure performs, realises or executes the landscape. Most importantly, including movement brings in real time. The action is shown from start to finish, for as long as it lasted. Real time increases the indexical and evidential value, and reduces the imaginary, fantastic or timeless aspect. It also links to the tradition of documenting performance art, which often uses un-manipulated real-time footage, as well as to video performances, even though the action here is not addressed directly to the camera (or the viewer).

Merging or Standing out?

By placing herself as part of the landscape, sharing its immobility or nearly invisible movements, lying in the sand in the shadow of a dune, as in *Dune Dream,* the human figure participates in the being of the landscape. By dissipating the difference between the figure and the landscape through inertness, the immobile version could be understood as an imaginary interpretation of the landscape, where the human being aspires to become one with the land. Due to the movement, the second version or raw material, *Dune Dream (raw),* functions more clearly as a performance. By emphasising action with the landscape as background, this version highlights the performer, bringing her to stand out from the surroundings.

Where *Dune Dream (raw)* includes the movement into and out of the pose, *Dune Dream* contains only the still-act, this time augmented by the slow dissolve with an image of the landscape. By showing the action of the performers (the human being and the wind) in real-time *Dune Dream (raw)* is a documentation of a performance, albeit a performance for camera. By using technical manipulation in the editing, albeit in a very simple manner, combining two images with a very slow crossfade, *Dune Dream* is an augmented performance, a video work that exaggerates the merging and produces an illusion of the disappearance of the human figure, her dissolving into the sand, an imaginary event.

Based on these examples, we could outline two dissimilar strategies for performing landscape: first, performing landscape by merging with it – by reducing the difference between performer and landscape with the help of immobility, as in this case, or through other forms of similarity like colour, form or some other likeness – and, second, performing landscape by standing out from it, by showing aspects of the landscape through contrast. In this case, this is achieved with movement, by contrasting an immobile landscape with a human figure in motion. Basically, this could be done with the help of contrasting forms, colours, or qualities of movement. These two strategies could be called dissipating the difference between performer and environment on the one hand and emphasising the contrast between performer and environment on the other; or, simply, merging with and standing out from the surroundings.

If we speak of blurring the boundary between performer and environment, this is relevant mainly from the point of view of the spectator. As a performer, I can experience some kind of interconnectedness with my environment and imagine a kind of shared existence with the dunes or the sand, but I certainly do know the boundary between me and the sand – there is no real dissolving taking place from my point of view. That merging is a semi-fictional construction produced on video. Paradoxically, this semi-fictional construction comes rather close to the actual situation on a physical level. The border between the wind and my breath, for example, is not sharp. I am entangled with the environment through constant material exchange.

Trans-corporeality

In her book, *Bodily Natures – Science, Environment, and the Material Self,* Stacy Alaimo (2010) 'explores the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures' (Alaimo, 2010: 2). She introduces the concept trans-corporeality to describe human corporeality, to underline how the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world and ultimately inseparable from 'the environment' and to emphasise movement across bodies, which is often unpredictable or unwanted. In 'early twenty-first century realities', she writes, '"human" and "environment" can by no means be considered as separate' (Alaimo, 2010: 2). She focuses on issues of environmental justice and environmental health, and gives an account and critique of previous feminist theorisations of the body. For her, 'trans-corporeality as a theoretical site is where corporeal theories, environmental theories and science studies meet and mingle', while 'the movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual' (Alaimo, 2010: 3). Alaimo emphasises 'the need to cultivate a tangible sense of connection to the material world' to counter 'the pervasive sense of disconnection that casts 'environmental issues' as containable, eccentric, dismissible topics' (Alaimo, 2010: 16).

'[U]nderstanding the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity,' she argues (Alaimo, 2010: 20). A recognition 'that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world' means that 'the pursuit of self-knowledge, which has been a personal, philosophical, psychological or discursive matter, now extends to a rather 'scientific' investigation of our constitution of our coextensive environments' (Alaimo, 2010: 20). In any case, 'the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial', she notes (Alaimo, 2010: 20).

Alaimo refers to Karen Barad's concept intra-action and writes:

> Understanding the material world as agential and considering that things, as such, do not precede their intra-actions are, I think, crucial for twenty-first century environmentalisms in which the existence of anything – any creature, ecosystem, climatological pattern, ocean current – cannot be taken for granted as simply existing out there (Alaimo, 2010: 21).

Moreover, 'if the material environment is a realm of often incalculable, inter-connected agencies, then we must somehow make political, regulatory, and even personal decisions within an ever-changing landscape of continuous interplay, intra-action, emergence and risk' (Alaimo, 2010: 21).

Regarding my example, *Dune Dream,* Alaimo's insistence on a material understanding of trans-corporeality is relevant. For her:

> Trans-corporeality, as it emerges in environmental health, environmental justice, web-based subcultures, green consumerism, literature, photography, activist websites, and films, is a recognition not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world (Alaimo, 2010: 20).

The human figure lying in the shadow of the dune thus literally consists of, among other things, the wind and the moving sand. Their degree of toxicity or the amount of micro plastics they carry cannot be detected from the image; nor is the urbanisation

extending around the protected dunes visible within the frame. The scarcity of water, traditionally associated with desert dunes, is here more likely the result of the ever-growing tourist industry than the burning sun. The material consequences of the tourist dream of 'sun, sand and sea' and the ubiquitous, everywhere intruding wind are material ingredients of the trans-corporeal body lying on the ground.

So?

Where self-imaging, including Jones' insistence of the reciprocity of all imaging, invites an interpretation of *Dune Dream* as a self-imaging, an imagined dissolution of the self and the moment of disappearance freeze-dried forever on video, there Alaimo's notion trans-corporeality assists in seeing this video less as a romantic fantasy of returning to dust or a reconciliation with the human fear of death, and more as a reminder of our indissoluble entanglement with the physical materiality of the world.

Looking at the landscape and its elements as agential in Barad's terms, is understanding the sand and the wind as generators of meaning, as co-performers on the video. Barad explains:

> Intelligibility is usually framed as a matter of intellection and therefore a specifically human capacity. But in my agential realist account, intelligibility is a matter of differential responsiveness, as performatively articulated and accountable, to what matters. Intelligibility is not an inherent characteristic of humans but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differently (Barad, 2007: 335).

In Barad's posthumanist account 'meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility'. (Barad, 2007: 335). That formulation brings us from Phelan's ontology of performance as disappearance, mentioned in the beginning, to an extended understanding of performance as action, process and becoming, something that cannot be limited to humans only. And thus, we could see *Dune Dream* as simply recording an instance of the world articulating itself, a moment in the performance of the world.

Video links

Video 1: Dune Dream (2014): https://vimeo.com/238183631.

Video 2: Dune Dream (raw): https://vimeo.com/238370037.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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