

## The Steaming Earth

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If we consider ourselves as earthlings, citizens of planet earth, the question of meaningful performance practices can be approached inclusively. As citizens we are in relation to a city or society, as a site, too; as earthlings we are related to all beings living here, and to the earth. In her study *Chaos, Territory, Art* (2008) Elisabeth Grosz tries to develop new ways of addressing and thinking about the arts and the forces they enact and transform. She suggests that arts frame or compose chaos so that sensation can proliferate; they transform materials of the past into resources of the future.

Performing landscape is a method I have developed for documenting performances and for producing artworks or “souvenirs” of changes taking place in the environment. By returning repeatedly to the same place for one year, using the same action, camera position and framing of the video image the slow processes in nature can be condensed and speeded up.<sup>1</sup> This way of creating mementos of moments in a landscape is based on the idea of repetition. In *Steaming Earth* (Arlander 2010-12) a series of video performances formed of brief encounters with the excessive forces of the earth in volcanic areas, the sites were visited only once. A new challenge emerged; how to create or imagine a relationship to the earth itself as a living entity? How to show the earth perform?

Rosi Braidotti (2005/2006) has called for “a revision of the subject in terms of an eco-philosophical integration into his/her environment” in a text called “Affirming the affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity”. She reads Deleuze and Guattari “as neo-vitalists who affirm the force of the affirmative and posit an ethics based

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<sup>1</sup> This way of working I have described briefly in “Performing Landscape for Years” (Arlander 2014).

on the transformation of negative into positive passions" (p. 4). Their Spinozist ontology makes all living beings, including humans, very much a part of nature. Braidotti speaks for an understanding of the "subject that is composed of external forces, of the non-human, inorganic or technological kind... is territorially based and thus environmentally bound" (p. 5). She looks for "a re-grounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments s/he inhabits" (p. 7). By looking at the slogan "we are in this together", she "enlarges the sense of collectively bound subjectivity to nonhuman agents, from our genetic neighbours the animals, to earth as a bio-sphere as a whole", since 'we', for her is "a non-anthropocentric construct, which refers to a commonly shared territory or habitat (this)" (p. 7).

In the tradition of affirmation Elisabeth Grosz's attitude towards the writings of Deleuze, Spinoza and Darwin, for instance, can be described as affirmative rather than critical. She explains in an interview why she avoids critique: "Critique always affirms the primacy of what is being critiqued, ironically producing exactly the thing it wants to problematize. But more than that, critique is a negative exercise" (Grosz in Kontturi & Tiainen 2007, p. 255). According to her small pockets of knowledge production and art production provide a counter weight to the oppressiveness of everyday life: "I mean the point is the way in which the new world is produced is precisely through revelling in the affirmation of the strengths that art gives us. The only way we can make a new world is by having a new horizon: And this is something that art can give us: a new world, a new body, a people to come" (p. 256).

Beautiful, but what could this mean in practical terms? Perhaps performing something can mean affirming it by focusing on it, attending to it, giving it attention.

### **The expanded field?**

Before turning to the Steaming Earth, a quick detour to the notion of the expanded field. As mentioned in the call, theatre in the expanded field can be understood as a displacement of theatrical boundaries and an emergence of performative forms, including site-specific experiences and works in process, which generally refuse the paradigm of representation. The notion 'expanded field' is often linked to Rosalind

Krauss, who in her seminal article from 1979, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", suitably begins by mentioning a work she calls "a sculpture or, more precisely, an earthwork" (Krauss 1979, p. 30). Krauss explores a logical field that she generates from the situation of sculpture in the 1970's as suspended between the attributes not-architecture and not-landscape. By constructing a postmodernist expansion of this modernist space of negation characterizing sculpture at that time and by looking at the oppositions as positive statements rather than negations, she ends up with three other possibilities: site-construction (between landscape and architecture), axiomatic structures (between architecture and not-architecture), and marked sites (between landscape and not-landscape), besides the starting point, sculpture, placed between not-architecture and not-landscape (p 38). In passing Krauss suggests, that a similar type of expansion could probably be discussed within the space of painting as well, perhaps involving the opposition between uniqueness and reproducibility (p.43).

Following this logic, we should then – if we speak of theatre in the expanded field – consider the logical oppositions involved, an exercise, which is perhaps not equally relevant today. During the time of Krauss' writing, another type of discussion took place within theatre, creating an opposition between theatricality and performance (Féral 1982), related to the opposition between representation and presentation in video installations (Morse 1993). Since then, however, partly due to the development of performance studies (Carlson 1996; McKenzie 2001; Schechner 2006) one could say that performance has developed into the expanded field of theatre. If, for some reason, one would insist in constructing a field of logical opposites for theatre one could perhaps start from the notion 'teatron', the place for seeing, and look at the relationship between performance and audience or performer and spectator (viewer, participant, co-creator) as the significant one, as has been suggested in post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann 2006). Today we could ask, what notion it is useful to hold on to and expand. By speaking of theatre in the expanded field one inevitable considers theatre to be the valuable core worth preserving. Due to my background I prefer to think of performance, rather than theatre, as the field I am interested in problematizing (for its anthropocentrism), questioning (for its focus on accomplishment and action) and expanding, for instance towards various forms of non-performance (like sitting on the ground), and towards a widened un-

derstanding of who or what is performing (like steam) or by rethinking the role of the audience or spectator by creating “souvenirs” or “letters to the future”, as we could call the video works that are the results of my performances for camera. This notion of expanding the field is also linked to the question I reflected upon when first discussing this particular project: How might the performing arts transform the role of the citizen in contemporary society?<sup>2</sup>

In an intervention titled *Elisabeth Grosz and the Steaming Earth* in 2011 I tried to combine some of her thoughts with videos of my performances with volcanic steam created in 2010. The three series of works I referred to are *Furnas 1-3*, 2011 (15 min. 30 sec.), performed in Furnas on the Azores in February 2010, *Krysuvik 1-5*, 2011 (39 min.) performed in Krysuvik in Iceland during Easter 2010 and *Vulcano 1-3*, 2011 (22 min. 47 sec.) performed on Vulcano on the Lipari Islands, in Italy in October 2010. These works were shown for the first time the following year, as the exhibition *Steaming Earth* in Muu Gallery, Helsinki (28 Sept. to 17 Oct. 2012).

Later, I made some experiments using two of the works as basis for collaborative sound improvisations.<sup>3</sup> Despite the encouraging experiences this dimension of the work has remained unexplored. One reason is probably, that the gurgling and hissing sound of the steam and the harsh and rough sound of the wind hitting the microphones feel suitably chaotic and uncontrolled to go with the continuous flow of the steam. So far the most interesting part of this project has been the above-mentioned intervention, relating these works to Grosz’ ideas, which I will return to in the following.

### **Elisabeth Grosz and the Steaming Earth**

These particular performances were formed of occasional and in some sense “meaningless” moments, brief encounters with the indeterminacy and beauty cre-

<sup>2</sup> This text includes material from a paper presented in 2011, *Elisabeth Grosz and the Steaming Earth at Actor, Performer, Citizen: Thinking new modes of being in Performance & Philosophy* A research meeting organized by the PSi Performance and Philosophy Working Group in cooperation with the Theatre Academy Helsinki and the Finnish Doctoral Programme for Music, Theatre and Dance. 8-9 April 2011, Theatre Academy, Helsinki.

<sup>3</sup> I invited the participants of the Porous Studio organized by the artists’ committee of the PSi (Performance Studies International) at the PSi #17 conference in Utrecht 25-29.5.2011 to improvise sound to the video *Furnas 1* in real time during a workshop. The video was publicly shared as *Sounding Furnas 1*. Inspired by this experience I invited the performance as research working group of the IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research) to improvise a sound to *Krysuvik 2* during a workshop at the conference in Osaka 7th of August 2011. This experiment, too, was publicly shared, as *Sounding Krysuvik 2*.

ated by the excessive forces of the earth. The experience of the places they were recorded in I could not relate to in terms of representation, although, paradoxically, I did show some representations created in them. The places nevertheless did challenge me to try to think beyond representation, both artistically and perhaps politically. In the following I will thus use a broad concept of performance, although through one rather specific example, and a broad concept of citizenship. Before I return to the ideas of the Australian born philosopher Elisabeth Grosz, I want to mention five points related to these two concepts:

1. If we consider ourselves as earthlings<sup>4</sup>, citizens of planet earth, the question of meaningful performance practices and art should be approached inclusively. Thus I am here not speaking of performance merely in the context of theatre, dance or stage practices. And I do not emphasize performing arts as distinct from creative arts or visual arts. In a traditional understanding of performing arts, they are seen as an apparatus of interpretation or distribution, as an embodied and ephemeral practice in contrast to the text or composition, which is seen as the realm of creation, something general and durable. This seemingly old-fashioned dichotomy is often maintained (perhaps inadvertently) when the contemporaneous co-creation by performers and spectators during the performance event is stressed (Fischer-Lichte 2008). By emphasizing the importance of embodiment in a shared here and now and by resisting visual forms of recording and mediation, the primacy of scripture as the sole guarantor of permanence is paradoxically strengthened. Performance art has overcome only the first part of this dichotomy by combining the act of creation and the act of performing, but not always the second one; the ephemeral live moment is often extensively eulogized (Phelan 1993). Rather than look at performance as something shared with an audience, with links to distribution, I will here refer to performance as a tool or working method for creating artworks, a mode of production. Of course this is only one type of meaningful performance practice today, albeit one, which is increasing in importance with social media and distribution channels like Youtube and Vimeo. Sooner or later, today, most art performances and everyday performances alike end up as video clips on the web.

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<sup>4</sup> Latour uses the term 'earthlings' in his keynote lecture "A Plea for Earthly Sciences" in 2007, borrowing it from James Lovelock.

2. If we consider ourselves as earthlings, citizens of planet earth, the question concerning who we are addressing with our performances can be understood inclusively. We can take the future audiences or viewers into consideration, too. In performing arts, the tendency is to value the here and now over the future (or even the past in narrative forms). A poet or painter can create for “a people to come”, a performer and performance artist works for those present in the now. If we take the challenge of working for the future seriously, this has implications for our practices, in terms of sustainability and choice of media. Recording, documenting and archiving are often understood as (vain) attempts at preserving past performances. However, we can also see them as ways of initiating a conversation with the future. The rhetoric of a future, an audience to come, seems appealing to an artist who longs for (digital) immortality or who feels misunderstood by his contemporaries, but this rhetoric can be dangerous, too. Sacrificing the future for our irresponsible consumer habits is one problem; another one is the tradition of revolutionary movements to sacrifice (and instrumentalize) the present, the life of the people living now, for life in an ideal society in the future. Like Elisabeth Grosz, I see the main task of art in addressing the future, in overcoming the present, rather than memorizing or monumentalizing the past, but I recognize the limits of this approach. Life cannot be postponed.

3. If we consider ourselves as earthlings, citizens of planet earth, the question of citizenship, and our relationship to the environment, must be understood inclusively. This means understanding the energetic connection between our surroundings and us, which has consequences both ways. As critical theorist Teresa Brennan (2000, p. 191). has claimed, “[i]f the indissolubility of individual and environment is taken completely seriously, every action, every thought, has an effect” (p. 191). This realization is both horrifying and reassuring at the same time. There is no way for our performances to not transform the role of the citizen in contemporary society, besides transforming and being transformed by everything else all the time. As earthlings we have to include other living beings into our world and share our performance space with them, animals and plants and bacteria alike, (even those that are not part of our “Umwelt” since we cannot perceive them) and accept that we are visitors in their world, too. We could speak of extending “human rights” – or *liberté, égalité fraternité*, if you wish – to concern others than the free city

dwellers of a manmade state, for instance all sentient beings (however we want to understand sentience), or all species of carbon based organic life. Animal rights discussed today can be seen as an extension of women's rights, the rights of slave's (before the abolition of slavery) and so on. We can probably agree on this development and disagree only in terms of priorities or practicalities, which I do not want to trivialize.

4. As earthlings we are not only related to all beings living here, but connected to the earth as well. In the same way as we, as citizens of Rome or Helsinki, are related not only to our fellow citizens however we want to define them, but to Rome or Helsinki, the society or city, the place, perhaps even the land. This connection easily leads to a dangerous nationalist rhetoric of course, but cannot be entirely denied. We have a relationship not only to all the myriad beings that we share our habitat with, but also to the earth itself. I have elsewhere discussed the relation of performer and environment (site, place, landscape, or land if you wish) and stressed that it is all too easy to deny our dependency of the surroundings, to bypass the environment as unimportant and focus on the performer.<sup>5</sup> To try to consider us as citizens of planet earth, with a common written language for all, for instance, as the poet Velimir Hlebnikov (self-appointed president of planet earth and king of time) suggested in 1916, is hard enough. Can we really have a relation or even attempt to comprehend what it could mean to have a relation to the earth itself, the planet as a whole?

5. Something new comes into play – at least that is how I experience it – when the site itself, not only the citizen becomes an actor, when the earth itself takes action. I am not referring here to the Gaia hypothesis, which is more like an idea of the extended systemic capacities of the combined ecosystems of the planet.<sup>6</sup> No, I think of the way the earth is alive and active in earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other seismic activities, which have had dire consequences recently. During the years 2010 and 2011 we witnessed (or heard of) eruptions starting with the Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland, and the earthquake on the coast near Fukushima in Japan. In Finland, where the bedrock is visible on the surface and relatively stable, among the oldest on the planet, it is easy to forget that the earth is alive. When

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<sup>5</sup> Arlander 2012 (a); Arlander 2012 (b)

<sup>6</sup> James Lovelock (2000) presented his Gaia Hypothesis already in 1979.

we hear the notion 'living earth' we think of the myriad life forms that cohabite the surface of the planet, not of the semifluid mantle with its spots of boiling magma slowly moving below the crust of the earth, which in proportion to the rest is as thin as the skin of an apple. To understand that we are living within a layer of a kind of eczema on the thin skin of a feverish planet (slowly cooling on the inside while warming on the outside) seems almost impossible.

The steaming, stinking soil of the places I performed in made me realize that the planet is constantly in action, alive and volatile. My intention in creating the images, however, was related to the color of the steam, the white formations pouring forth, moving, appearing and disappearing. I had chosen white as the color of the scarf to work with during 2010.<sup>7</sup> In Furnas on the Azores I encountered clouds of steam in the middle of a village. Holes in the ground bubbling with hot sulphurous water produced large white billows. Small smokes, like emerging forest fires, appeared here and there on the ground. The smelly steam was relatively pleasant to breath, since it was moist, not smoke. Like rapidly moving mist in the mountains, which suddenly hides everything in a soft white cloud. Inspired by these steam clouds I decided to explore other volcanic areas, in Iceland and on Lipari Islands north of Sicily. There the volcanic steam pouring forth from cracks in the ground seemed different; the whole landscape was producing vapors. Unceasing flows of steam hinted at the activity condensed and compressed within the earth. This experience of a contained chaos brought me, finally, to Elisabeth Grosz.

### **Chaos and art**

In her study published in 2008 *Chaos, Territory, Art* Elisabeth Grosz is exploring "the peculiar relations that art establishes between the living body, the forces of the universe and the creation of the future" (Grosz 2008, p. 3). She develops with the help of Deleuze, Guattari and Irigaray, new ways of "thinking about the arts and the forces they enact and transform and thus, indirectly, new ways of conceptualizing politics and the ways in which art and politics can be linked together and rethought" (p. 2). According to her the arts explode from the provocations posed by the forces of the earth, cosmological forces, chaos, or material and organic

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<sup>7</sup> For a description of the work Year of the Tiger, performed in 2010, see Arlander 2012 (a).



indeterminacy. They respond with the forces of living bodies, which through their energy and force produce the new and create "territories that temporarily and provisionally slow down chaos enough to extract from it... a performance, a refrain, an organization of color or movement that eventually, transformed, enables and induces art" (p. 2-3). So is this what happened to me while encountering the steaming earth; a desire to transmit that intensity rather than represent the experience? But since I did it with my tools, performing for camera, I was almost inevitably also producing representations of sorts.

Grosz builds on Deleuze's ideas about art as producing sensations, affects and intensities rather than representations and suggests that arts frame or compose chaos so that sensation can proliferate. What she adds to his ideas is the insistence on the importance of sexual difference from Irigaray. She reads Darwin, who speaks of two processes that regulate life, natural selection related to survival and sexual selection related to reproduction. And interestingly, she sees the origin of art in sexual selection and the impulse to seduction. The impulse to art is not to make oneself seductive, however, but to make oneself intense, and thus circulate some of the erotic energy that otherwise would go into sexuality, she explains (p. 2).

According to Grosz the evolution of life is evident in the increasing differentiation of life forms, "in their becoming artistic", in their self-transformations beyond the requirements of existence. She sees sexual selection as the "most momentous invention that life has brought forth" (p. 6), the machinery for guaranteeing endless variation, the mechanism of biological difference and also an opening to the indeterminacy of taste, pleasure, and sensation. Life elaborates itself by making its forms and territories performative, intensified (p. 6-7).

### **Art and the animal**

"Art is of the animal", Grosz insists. Art does not come from reason or from any uniquely human sensibility, but from what is excessive, unpredictable and lowly, she maintains. Art comes from the excess that enables objects and living things to be more than they are, to give more than themselves. Art is the consequence of that energy or force, which puts life at risk for the sake of intensification, for the

sake of sensation, not only for pleasure or sexuality, but for creation, for what can be magnified, intensified (Grosz 2008, p. 63).

She explains how according to Darwin, unlike his neo-Darwinian successors, "the living being is 'artistic' to the extent that its body or products have within them something that attracts or entices not only members of the opposite sex but also members of the same sex and members of different species" (p. 65). Sexual differences are bodily differences and sexual selection magnifies and highlights these differences. Calling to attention, making one's body into a spectacle, a display of attractors, involves intensification. Organs on display are intensified or puffed up, as well as the organs that perceive them, which are resonating with colors, sounds, smells, shapes, rhythms, she notes. (p. 66). Grosz criticizes neo-Darwinians who reduce sexual selection to natural selection related to survival, thus simplifying evolution and excluding "the unpredictable vagaries of taste and pleasure that sexual selection entails" (p. 67).

In an example linked to performance she describes how in Darwin's opinion, many territorial struggles are primarily theatrical, and involve a performance of the body at its most splendid and appealing. The battles among the males of ruffed grouse "are all sham, performed to show themselves to the greatest advantage before the admiring females who assemble around; for I have never been able to find a maimed hero, and seldom more than a broken feather", says Darwin (1981, book 2:50) according to Grosz (2008, p. 68). "Territory is artistic, the consequence of love not war, of seduction not defense, of sexual selection not natural selection" (p. 69) she summarizes.

According to Grosz, there is 'art' in the natural world through sexual selection; from the moment there are two sexes that attract each other's interest through sensations. However, art in the proper sense emerges "when sensation can detach itself and gain an autonomy from its creator and its perceiver, when something of the chaos from which it is drawn can breathe and have a life of its own" (Grosz 2008, p. 7). According to her art and nature share as their common structure excessive and useless production, production for the sake of profusion and differentiation. Art takes what it needs from the earth to produce its own excesses, sensations with a life of their own (p. 9). Thus, interestingly, she roots art in the superfluousness of nature, in the capacity of the earth to render the sensory su-

perabundant, in what for her is “the most primitive and sexualized of evolutionary residues of man’s animal heritage” (p. 10).

It is perhaps slightly embarrassing to link performance art to sexual selection. In these cases, it seems rather obvious, however, that instead of through displaying the skills and capacities of the human body (I am simply sitting on the ground), the artworks are produced through, and celebrate, the excessive forces of the earth, the endlessly performing steam.

### **Framing and the territory**

According to Grosz the first gesture of art is not the exteriorization of one’s bodily energies, but a more primary gesture that requires a separation from the earth. The metaphysical condition and universal expression of art is the construction or fabrication of the frame, she claims, and the first artistic impulse is thus architecture-art rather than body-art (Grosz 2008, p. 10). She insists that the emergence of the ‘frame’ is the condition of all the arts, since the frame “establishes a territory out of the chaos that is the earth” (p. 11).

Grosz quotes Deleuze and Guattari’s example of a bird’s performance when it constructs a stage for itself out of leaves dropped on the ground. She explains how all the arts are linked to birdsong, to the dance of insects, or the performative displays of vertebrates; they constitute a sexualized territory, but also a space in which sensations may emerge, and from which they can be extracted and moved elsewhere, to resonate for the sake of intensity alone. “Framing and deframing become art’s modes of territorialization and deterritorialization through sensation; framing becomes the means by which the plane of composition composes, deframing its modes of upheaval and transformation” (p. 12-13).

In my examples framing is not only a territorializing impulse, like saying, “this is the setting for my performance, the site I now occupy”. It is also the actual artistic method. The video images are literally created by framing the view, by choosing what is visible in the image and what remains outside the frame.

### **Art and the future**

For Grosz art is not disconnected from the natural and social worlds, but it is not a

window into them or a mode of their representation; nor does it take the place of social or political analysis or philosophical speculation. For her art is “where intensities proliferate, where forces are expressed for their own sake, where sensation lives and experiments, where the future is affectively and perceptually anticipated” (Grosz 2008, p. 78). For her art is nevertheless intensely political because it elaborates the possibilities of new, more, and different sensations than the ones we know. “Art is where the becomings of the earth couple with the becomings of life to produce intensities and sensations that in themselves summon up a new kind of life” (p. 79). This makes art an important tool for creating the future.

In concluding her study Grosz states: “Art is the process of making sensations live, of giving an autonomous life to expressive qualities and material forms and through them affecting and being affected by life in its other modalities.” (p. 103). For her art is not only an expression and celebration of an animal past, but primarily a transformation of the materials from the past into resources for the future. “In making sensations live, each [artwork] evokes a people and an earth to come, each summons up and pays homage to imperceptible cosmic forces, each participates in the (political) overcoming of the present and helps bring a new, rich and resonating future into being” (p. 103).

This sounds beautiful, yes. But How?

### **Performing (with) steam**

By creating performances for camera, resulting in video works that can be watched somewhere else and at some other time, I explicitly choose to create artworks for an audience to come, “souvenirs” or “letters to the future” as it were. The combination of sensation and evocation (or imagination, speculation, expectation) is challenging, however; the ‘here and now’ and the future (somewhere else at some other time) could be understood as opposites in some sense. Sensation, which must be in the present, sensing what is there, easily excludes the future (which involves imagining or anticipating what is not yet there but could be there). And although somehow necessary, the combination is also difficult in practice. If I am sitting on the steaming earth sensing the smell of sulphur around me, I am focused on these sensations in the now. Each swirl of the steam is pouring forth,

right there and then. If I am imagining how in the future somebody might look at the moving steam in the image I am creating, I am already somewhere else, in my fantasies. But of course I have to be there, too. Otherwise I would not even bring a camera with me to the site. Moreover, how can I produce sensations and affects, without also stimulating the imagination of the viewer? In some sense they are both combined in the main action of showing, demonstrating, pointing at what takes place: "Look, see how the earth is alive, how the steam is pouring forth, endlessly performing..."

## Videos

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Vulcano 1-3 – Available at: [http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/vulcano-1-3\\_en/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/vulcano-1-3_en/)

Krysuvik 1-5 – Available at: [http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/krysuvik-1-5\\_en/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/krysuvik-1-5_en/)

Sounding Furnas 1 – Available at: <https://vimeo.com/24557604>

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