

Earth

This paper will consider one of the four elements – earth – and its use in art since the 1960s. When we think about earth in art, we inevitably think about vast, remote masterpieces like Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*: two massive, fifty-foot trenches blasted and bulldozed into the Nevada desert in 1969-70; or Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*: over six thousand tonnes of earth dumped into the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970. I deliberately call these works 'masterpieces' because they seem to manifest a fundamental urge to *master* the earth, while subscribing to the mythology of the artist-genius as a figure of superhuman powers. During the late 1960s and early 70s, audiences watched in awe as the 'heroic' artist – usually white, male and North American – defied the institutions of the art-world in order to make epic, isolated interventions in the landscape; albeit trailed by an invisible team of wives, assistants, contractors and patrons. The practices associated with 'Land Art' or 'Earth Works' have been much discussed, and I'll avoid reiterating those debates here, in order to explore other kinds of works with earth – works which are incidental, provisional, fugitive, comical, invisible or literally self-effacing. Bearing in mind Smithson's warning that "one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects," I will loosely organise my paper into five sections: Burial, Excavation, Displacement, Cultivation, and Territory.¹ These aren't meant to be exclusive or all-encompassing categories; neither will I attempt a comprehensive survey of earth as an artistic material. Instead, I want to use these themes in order to explore a set of diverse and often contradictory practices, which take 'dirt,' 'soil,' 'earth,' or 'terra firma' as their common ground.

Burial

After the eight o'clock news on the eleventh of October 1969, German TV station WDR 3 played a static image for two seconds, before continuing with the evening's programming. Broadcast without commentary, it showed a man in jeans and a black top standing on a grass verge backed by trees and shrubbery. An hour later the man was back, for two

¹ Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," (1969) reprinted in Jack Flam ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (California: University of California Press, 1996), p. 100.

seconds only, his pose the same but his feet having sunk, inexplicably, into the ground. The following night, the man reappeared on the same channel: still sunk at eight-fifteen, and further submerged in his two-second slot the following hour. Every night that week, at eight-fifteen and nine-fifteen, the man appeared for two seconds, each time *dis*appearing further into the ground. At the end of the week an interview revealed him to be British artist Keith Arnatt, and the images *Self Burial*: a series of pre-existing photographs which, in this new context, gained the subtitle *Television Interference Project*.² Hijacking the medium of popular entertainment, Arnatt also addressed a more specialised art-world audience. Commenting on current debates surrounding the “disappearance” of the art object, he suggested it was a logical corollary that the artist should also disappear.³

Arnatt’s humorous intervention engaged with two key artistic debates of the late 1960s: the much-vaunted “dematerialization” of the art object proclaimed by critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, and the “death of the author” described by French theorist Roland Barthes.⁴ The fundamental absurdity of both positions when taken literally is made manifest in Arnatt’s photographs, which seem to ask: what kind of artwork has no visible form; and what kind of author has no presence at all in his own work? If the object and author are buried, does that really mean they have “disappeared,” or do they lurk just beneath the surface, like so much brute matter and raw humanity gasping for breath? Conceptual art’s sometimes dogmatic critique of visuality and subjectivity is at once tested and ridiculed in Arnatt’s photographs, in which the deadpan figure of the artist appears swallowed up by the grave.

Arnatt’s *Self Burial* also stands in direct counterpoint to the heroic gestures of many of the better-known practices associated with ‘Land Art:’ instead of stamping his presence on the earth, his work is literally self-effacing, erasing all trace of his existence from its surface. While one contemporary critic described the American land artists as “long hairs in hard hats” – suggesting an amalgamation of counter-cultural rebellion and brute, macho force – in Arnatt’s work the figure of the artist has more in common with Winnie, the forlorn yet stoical heroine of Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*.⁵ Described by one critic as a “hopeful

² *Television Interference Project* was one of a series of television programs produced in the late 1960s and early 70s by German artist and curator Gerry Schum.

³ Keith Arnatt interview for the BBC, 1979.

⁴ See Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* Vol. 12, no. 2 (February 1968), pp. 31-36; and Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1967), reprinted in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148.

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, Grove Press, 1961.

futilitarian,”⁶ Winnie sinks further into her mound of earth with each act of the play, all the while maintaining: “perhaps some day the earth will yield and let me go, the pull is so great, yes, crack all round me and let me out.”⁷ Beckett’s grim humour seems also to permeate Arnatt’s piece, and a related photograph, *Self Burial with Mirror* (1969) in which the deadpan artist regards his situation with an air of resignation and a decidedly British stiff upper lip. Both hilarious and bizarre, these works turn the conventions of self-portraiture on its head, rendering the revered figure of the artist a figure of fun. Earth is deployed as means of exploring the cultivation and deconstruction of the artistic persona, via processes of reflection, concealment and defacement.

While *Self Burial* provides a pointed counterpart to the self-aggrandising gestures of some American land artists, Arnatt’s work can also be understood as part of a productive transatlantic dialogue during the late 1960s. *Self Burial* was made in direct dialogue with Sol LeWitt, who described himself as a conceptualist “with a small c” and had his own form of dry humour. After a series of hypothetical proposals made in the mid 1960s – including encasing the Cellini Cup or the Empire State Building in cement – LeWitt buried an object he described as being “of importance but little value” in the garden of Dutch collectors Martin and Mia Visser in 1968. The object was sealed in a metal box fabricated according to LeWitt’s instructions, a physical enclosure analogous to the secret shared exclusively by LeWitt and his collaborators. Sometimes described as a symbolic gesture marking the death of Minimal art, *Buried Cube* has also been read as an act of refusal: a pointed denial of visual pleasure, acquisition and commerce.⁸ The work cannot be seen, loaned or sold: the artist and collector are bound into a contract, but one that hinges upon shared knowledge rather than the exchange of a precious commodity. Yet the fact that LeWitt chose earth, rather than his originally proposed cement, as the material with which to inter the cube produces more generative associations. Lucy Lippard has suggested the work possesses: “a sense of the possibilities of the transformational at its most profound – energy buried in the neutral (‘dead’) form and activated (‘brought to life’) by the idea.”⁹ This rhetoric of resurrection highlights the ritualistic and mystical aspects of much conceptual art – also captured by Lippard’s own term “dematerialization.”¹⁰ As one of the

⁶ Robert Brustein cited in Graver, L. and Federman, R. (Eds) *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), p 258.

⁷ Beckett, S., *The Grove Centenary Edition Vol III Dramatic Works* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p 289.

⁸ See Susan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, (California: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 88-91.

⁹ Lippard cited in Boettger, p. 90.

¹⁰ See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-72*, (California: University of California Press, 1997).

four elements in alchemy, earth is associated with birth, creation and manifestation. The potentiality of the buried cube is not that it might one day be dug up – as a related work by LeWitt was in the year 2000 – rather, its conceptual power is rooted precisely in its inaccessibility to perception.¹¹

Another project of the same period dealing with notions of burial and secrecy was Nancy Holt's series of *Buried Poems*, dedicated to five of her friends and buried in various locations in the Utah Desert in the early 1970s. The content of the poems remains private, but each location was chosen according to physical, spatial and atmospheric qualities which – according to Holt – evoked the person to whom the poem was dedicated.¹² These works therefore engage in a particularly subtle and imaginative form of site-specificity: aligning the geography of a specific location with the character of a particular person. Indeed, we might call these locations 'found sites' – in the manner of Surrealist 'found objects' – in that they appear to be the physical manifestation of unconscious questions or desires. If Holt's work involved matching the site to the person, the recipient of each poem was invited to embark upon his own voyage of discovery; armed with a map, drawing, photograph, specimen or description of his gift's location. This is Barthes' active readership in the most literal sense: a reader forced to scavenge and dig, to physically break open a vacuum container in order to gain access to a potentially revelatory text. Earth is cast here as a bearer of secrets – not just because of the hidden treasure buried beneath its surface, but because of the private references to individuals encoded in the psycho-geography of Holt's chosen sites.

Excavation

Around the time that LeWitt was fantasising about encasing the Empire State Building in cement, Claes Oldenburg was planning to entomb two other symbols of the American Dream. *Kennedy Tomb* of 1965 was a hypothetical statue of the assassinated President the size of the Statue of Liberty, hollow, inverted and buried underground. Colossal yet invisible, this subterranean cavity turned the phallic logic of the monument on its head, memorialising the loss of an American icon by means of a gargantuan void. Two years later, Oldenburg was invited to participate in "Sculpture and the Environment," an exhibition of public sculpture organised by the New York City Administration of Recreation and Public Affairs. Having proposed a series of projects rejected by curator Sam Green as

¹¹ In February 2000, LeWitt opened another cube he had buried during the mid 1970s in front of an audience at Brandeis University, Massachusetts.

¹² See Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis eds., *Land and Environmental Art*, (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 96.

“preposterous” – these included a scream monument, to consist of an amplified scream resounding through the city late at night – Oldenburg proposed to dig a grave-sized trench in Central Park, to be officially titled *Placid Civic Monument* (1967).¹³ Professional grave diggers were hired for the task, and paid the going rate of \$50 per grave a man. A photograph shows a group of boys who had been playing nearby watching with a mixture of puzzlement, scepticism and boredom as this mundane yet labour-intensive task was gradually carried out. The grave diggers then stopped for lunch, and subsequently returned to fill the grave, before smoothing over and trimming the ground. In the face of public ridicule, officials of the Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration described the work “an invisible sculpture.” Oldenburg referred to it simply as “the hole.”¹⁴

Unlike the artists previously mentioned, Oldenburg buried no object in his hole – his interest lay in the excavated space, and in the earth itself. In a statement issued at the time he explained: “by not burying a thing, the dirt enters into the concept, and little enough separates the dirt inside the excavation from that outside... so that the whole park and its connections, in turn, enter into it.”¹⁵ Yet it seems that something *did* separate the dirt inside the hole from that surrounding it. In his journal, Oldenburg added: “this is the first clean dirt I’ve had my hand in in New York, and it took enormous pressure for me to rupture the surface and get my hands clean-dirty with the damp red soil under the soot superstructure.”¹⁶ Dialectics of dirt and cleanliness, purity and pollution run through Oldenburg’s vocabulary, echoing the logic of digging and filling, presence and absence that structured the work and its critical reception. Oldenburg’s use of the word ‘dirt’ as opposed to ‘earth’ is also suggestive here. Sometimes described, in a quotation attributed to Lord Palmerston, as “matter in the wrong place;” the word ‘dirt’ implies a transgression of boundaries, something I’ll return to later under the theme of displacement. But for Oldenburg, the boundary transgressed was the skin of the earth itself, or should I say, *herself*. In his journal Oldenburg wrote: “I felt great excitement at the moment of first incision of the shovel. The first shovelful was surprisingly red and accounted ‘virgin’ by the diggers.”¹⁷ In case the none-too-subtle gendering of such an account was missed, Oldenburg rammed the point home by locating his “hole” next to Cleopatra’s Needle, the granite erection that dominates the area of Central Park behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹³ As described in Boettger, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Alongside these primordial references to the fundamental purity of Mother Earth, Oldenburg also professed to have had a more contemporary message in mind. As Susan Boettger points out, *Placid Civic Monument* was dug in a period of intense anxiety and paranoia in the United States, generated by – amongst other things – the assassination of President Kennedy, the Vietnam War and the ongoing climate of political protest during the late 1960s. Defending his work against further charges of “preposterousness,” Oldenburg remarked that his grave was “the perfect anti-war monument: like saying nothing.” In a statement he wrote: “The BM (Burial Monument) is not frivolous. In fact, it is a frightening introduction to a year of burials (don’t be melodramatic).”¹⁸ Evoking at once a grave, a trench and an underground bunker, *Placid Civil Monument* tapped into an undercurrent of nervousness and disquiet in the face of real and imagined threats, running through the United States in 1967.

Describing the atmosphere of the subterranean chamber in his 1958 book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard linked the space of the cellar with feelings of “exaggerated fear” and “buried madness.”¹⁹ The irrational psychic pressure exerted by the underground chamber has been comprehensively explored by Alice Aycock, an American sculptor who began making what she describes as “psycho-sculpture” in the early 1970s. *Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary)* was built by Aycock and her mother on a farm just outside Pennsylvania – once again in sharp contrast to the remote locations, teams of contractors and heavy machinery involved in much Land Art. Twenty feet wide and twelve feet long but only thirty inches high, visitors were forced to crawl inside this tomb-like space, under seven tonnes of earth supported by its roof. *Low Building with Dirt Roof* was technically a space *made* subterranean by covering an architectural structure with earth, but other works by Aycock, like *Project for a Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels* (1975), delved deeper underground. Citing a range of influences, from Bachelard’s description of “underground manoeuvres” to book entitled *The Architecture of War*, Aycock likened her subterranean psycho-sculpture to the oppressive spaces of “burial holes... underground bunkers...dug-outs, cellars, sarcophagi.” By holding back the earth, she suggested that the walls of the tunnels indicated a repressed anxiety that brute matter might penetrate the space, thus suffocating its inhabitants.²⁰ Protector and potential

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 20.

²⁰ Alice Aycock, “Project for a Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels,” (1975) reprinted in Kastner and Wallis, pp. 231-32.

aggressor, earth in Aycock's work threatens the viewer not with contamination, but with total obliteration.

If the United States of the 1960s and early 70s were characterized by paranoia and social unrest, then the same period in Italy saw a major economic downturn, and the emergence of Arte Povera – literally 'poor art' – a movement christened by critic Germano Celant, who described the artist in evocative terms as a "guerrilla warrior" battling exploitation.²¹ In 1967 one of the lesser known artists of the group, Pino Pascali, exhibited two works related to, yet distinct in intention from, Oldenburg's *Placid Civil Monument* of the same year. *One Metre Cube of Earth* and *Two Metre Cube of Earth* (the second title is not, strictly speaking, geometrically correct) were two compacted blocks of earth attached to the wall of the gallery, jutting into its pristine white space. With their clean lines and wall-bound location reminiscent of the work of Donald Judd, these mechanically-produced cubes conflate the logic of industrial production evident in much Minimal art with materials drawn from nature. While Celant described the cubes as "natural synecdoches in a natural world," I would suggest that the technological precision of these objects is what makes them so compelling.²² Their eerie uniformity and seriality makes the cubes appear fresh off the production line – suggesting that even the supposedly "natural" might be manufactured. The term "Earthworks" – the title of an exhibition curated by Smithson in 1968 – was in fact appropriated from the 1965 Sci-Fi novel of the same name by British writer Brian Aldiss.²³ Here the term refers to the manufacture of artificial soil, in a future where even earth has become a scarce commodity. While it's unsurprising that this dystopian vision appealed to Smithson, it seems also to permeate Pascali's box-fresh units of earth, undercutting Celant's utopian rhetoric of a return to authenticity. Rather than offering an escape from Italy's economic problems, I would argue – contrary to Celant – that Pascali's cubes have the failed logic of post-war industrialization pressed into every particle of their soil.

Displacement

While Pascali bought earth into the gallery, the rigid geometry of his forms mimics, rather than threatens, the organisation of the white cube space. His *Metre Cubes of Earth* stand in sharp contrast to Asta Gröting's *Acker* (2007), a massive, mulchy, fetid heap which confronts the viewer head-on, like some enormous flying cowpat. Against the clean white

²¹ Celant cited in Boettger, p. 15.

²² Ibid., p. 16.

²³ Brian Aldiss, *Earthworks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

walls of the gallery it looks repulsive – abject even – in Julia Kristeva’s sense of that term as that which transgresses boundaries, threatening the physical or psychic integrity of the subject.²⁴ Very much “matter in the wrong place,” this earthy intruder disrupts the hushed sanctum of the gallery, defiling its apparent purity and neutrality. If the white cube space was seen by Smithson and others to sanitize and “politically lobotomise” the work of art, *Acker* appears at first like a dirty protest against the regulations of the art institution.²⁵ Yet coming closer, *Acker* doesn’t smell, or crumble, or threaten to soil the viewer’s clothes. Made of epoxied resin, it is a carefully constructed facsimile, in reality far less earthy than Pascali’s industrially-processed cubes. Alongside other works in Gröting’s exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute [8th February – 26th April 2009], including metallic potatoes and a futuristic, stylised fireplace, this artificiality is anything but comforting. If these objects represent the fundamentals of human survival, we quickly realise that they are useless – nothing will grow in this fake soil. Another version of *Acker* is even more sinister: imbued with a phosphorescent pigment, the soil glows as if contaminated with a radioactive substance. Like Oldenburg, Gröting’s soil sculptures suggest that we defile the earth – and not vice versa.

If, in Kristeva’s terms, abjection arises from a threat to the integrity of the individual – like excremental matter which traverses the body’s limits – then the word might also have a broader, political resonance, describing those marginalized groups excluded from the body politic. David Hammons has been dealing with the politics of exclusion and the psychology of abjection since the late 1960s, employing discarded materials and peripheral locations in order to fulfil what he describes as: “my moral obligation as a Black artist to try to graphically document what I feel socially.”²⁶ *Rock Head* (2004) neatly encapsulates Hammons’ strategies of retrieval, displacement and subversion. Having once said that the Harlem neighbourhood in which he lives is as rich in ruins as ancient Rome, Hammons salvaged a head-shaped piece of rubble from this urban environment. He then visited his local barbershop – a site itself richly coded in terms of gender and ethnicity – and swept up clippings of afro hair discarded on the floor, recovering this abject matter jettisoned from the body as waste. Meticulously, Hammons glued the hair to one side of the oval rock, heightening its likeness to a human head. Then, in a typically ludic twist, he returned to the barbershop with *Rock Head*, to get the rock a haircut. A final displacement occurred when, encased in a raised vitrine like a primitivist sculpture by

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁵ Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement,” (1972) reprinted in Flam, pp. 154-156.

²⁶ Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artist on Art*, (Los Angeles: Contemporary Crafts, Inc.) 1969, p. 21.

Brancusi, the work was installed in the gallery environment (*Rock Head* is now in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art). By bringing his Harlem neighbourhood into the austere spaces of the art institution, to an art-world audience he has described as "over-educated, conservative and out to criticize not to understand," Hammons plays upon the fascination with the cultural 'other' that ensconced Brancusi's sculpture in similar spaces a century ago.²⁷ Imbuing discarded or abject materials with what he describes as a kind of "tragic magic," Hammons proves the adage expressed by one commentator in response to Oldenburg's *Hole*, that "one man's dirt is another man's sculpture."²⁸

This confrontation of indoor and outdoor, private and public space, Black and White culture is explored further in the series of *Basketball* pieces Hammons began in the 1990s. In one, a tree supporting a basketball hoop lies fallen next to an African vessel, like the relics of some abandoned civilization. The walls of gallery are marked with the traces of a basketball game, but the ball is nowhere to be seen, until one peers inside the vessel, which contains a ball its neck could not possibly have accommodated. Hammons lists his materials as: "tree trunk, basketball hoop, African vessel, basketball and Harlem earth," suggesting that the marks on the wall, rather than just 'dirt,' might be understood as the material residue of a particular site, the geological foundations of this culture marked as 'other' by means of its clinical display. This "Harlem earth" is another kind of "matter out of place:" in the 'wrong' neighbourhood, in front of the 'wrong' audience, it becomes a substance of quasi-anthropological curiosity.

The imprinted mark or indexical trace, like the mark of a basketball on the gallery wall, operates via a logic of displacement. As Rosalind Krauss described in her well-known essays "Notes on the Index Part 1 and 2" (1976), the indexical mark registers that which was once physically present but now is absent, memorializing a past moment of contact. The photograph, Krauss pointed out, is also an indexical trace, a document of that which once was (of course, Krauss's essays preceded the onset of digitalization).²⁹ Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series of the late 1970s utilized the medium of analogue photography and the strategy of the indexical trace in order to figure the artist's body as doubly absent. Working in Mexico and Iowa, Mendieta marked her outline on the land by pressing her body into long grass, outlining it with sand, or – more dramatically – filling the contours of

²⁷ Hammons, text accompanying work in the exhibition *Protest and Survive*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2000.

²⁸ David L. Smith, "David Hammons: Spade Worker," in *Yardbird Suite* (Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 1994).

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1" and "Notes on the Index: Part 2," (1976) reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996) pp. 196-220.

her silhouette with gunpowder to create an ashen pit the size of a human being. These ephemeral traces marked the land only temporarily: washed away by rain or slowly blown to dust, the only remainders of Mendieta's actions were the photographs she took to document them. In 1981, Mendieta described her work as "a return to the maternal source," adding "through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth.... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body."³⁰ Her words subscribe to a notion of the earth as nurturing, timeless and explicitly feminine. Yet in her images this attempt to "return to the source," to a mythical moment of total symbiosis and plenitude – seems bound to fail. Mendieta's work deals in residues, traces and moments passed: the precarious and transitory. These silent souvenirs of travel could also be said to echo Mendieta's status as an exiled subject, forced to leave Cuba at thirteen and cast as an outsider during her teenage years in Iowa. Provisional, scattered and nomadic, these momentary enclosures for the body indicate a futile search for a stable, protective home; a search which coalesced, in Mendieta's writings, in an attachment to the maternal archetype.

If Hammons uses displaced earth to raise questions of location and exclusion, and Mendieta deployed it the repeated quest for a fulfilment that would never come; the work of contemporary British artist Onya McCausland explores displacement more abstractly, in a manner which is nonetheless grounded in the geology of a particular site. Her *Red Earth – Displaced Drawing* series (2008) was made during her time as an artist in residence at Gloucester Cathedral, when she became fascinated by traces of polychrome decoration left on the building's interior after it was stripped of all ornament under Oliver Cromwell. The Medieval painting cycle that once decorated the building contained the precious *terra rossa* pigment: an ochre made of red earth, which was also used in the Sistine Chapel.³¹ McCausland visited the Forest of Dean where the ochre had been mined in order to excavate the pigment for her drawings. The drawings exist in pairs: one sheet of paper to which the ochre is applied in small, vertical, rectangular units; and another made by meticulously removing pigment from each unit with an eraser and transferring to its counterpart on the adjacent sheet. These resultant drawings are the result of a series of displacements; from the dark and claustrophobic interior of the mine to the bright space of the studio or gallery, from page to eraser and eraser to page. Yet despite its status as

³⁰ Mendieta cited in Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in Catherine de Zegher ed., *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the feminine*, (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), p. 167.

³¹ See Charles Darwent, "English Red Earth," 2008, <http://www.onyamccausland.co.uk/darwent.html>.

“matter out of place,” McCausland’s meticulous handling of her pigment attests to its preciousness, the faceted fields of colour demonstrating why *terra rossa* was so prized.

Cultivation

During the 1970s and early 80s issues of ecology and cultivation were explored in art on a grand scale: from Joseph Beuys’s *7000 Oaks* planted in Kassel in 1982, to Agnes Denes’s field of wheat sown two blocks from Wall Street the same year. But in the final section of this paper I want to look at three works in which earth is cultivated in a less spectacular way, in unseen interventions, or the invisible labour of maintenance. In 1969, Mierle Laderman Ukeles issued her “Maintenance Manifesto,” and details of a proposed exhibition entitled “Care” which was to have three parts: “Personal Maintenance,” “General Maintenance” and “Earth Maintenance.” Explaining in her manifesto that: “maintenance is a drag: it takes all the fucking time,” Ukeles proposed a show that would “zero in on pure maintenance, exhibit it as contemporary art, and yield, by utter opposition, clarity of issues.”³² While Part One of the exhibition consisted of Ukeles’ personal maintenance tasks as a wife and mother, and Part Two was to be made up of interviews with people from all sectors of society, who “run the gamut of maintenance,” the third section, “Earth maintenance,” is of most interest in this context. For this piece Ukeles proposed:

“Everyday, containers of the following kinds of refuse will be delivered to the Museum: - the contents of one sanitation truck; - a container of polluted air; - a container of polluted Hudson River; - a container of ravaged land. Once at the exhibition, each container will be serviced: purified, de-polluted, rehabilitated, recycled, and conserved by various technical (and/or pseudo-technical) procedures either by myself or scientists. These servicing procedures are repeated throughout the duration of the exhibition.”³³

Ukeles’ proposal of a kind of valet service for the earth may have been tongue-in-cheek, but it also highlighted the insurmountable nature of her chosen task: to clean away every piece of garbage, purify every litre of air and water and every metre of ravaged land, really would take “all the fucking time,” while her description of “pseudo-technical” equipment further highlights the necessarily hypothetical nature of her project. By making the laborious, repetitive and impossible labour of maintenance the subject of her work, Ukeles juxtaposes the invisible, day-to-day drudgery of the maintenance worker with the supposedly heroic, extraordinary struggle of the avant-garde artist.

³² Mierle Ladermann Ukeles, “Maintenance Art Manifesto,” (1969) reprinted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings* (California: University of California Press, 1996) p. 622-624.

³³ Ukeles, “Proposal for an Exhibition ‘Care,’” excerpts reprinted in Lippard, pp. 220-221.

Ukeles' tactical intervention into the realm of the everyday frames the mundane business of maintenance and holds it up for inspection, calling our attention to that which usually goes unnoticed. The same could be said for Hans Haacke's 1969 piece, *Grass Grows*. Invited to participate in "Earth Art," a 1969 exhibition at the Andrew Dickson White Museum at Cornell University, Haacke selected the brightest space in the gallery and shovelled in a mound of peat and moss, via an adjacent doorway that opened directly onto the museum's grounds. He seeded the earth with a fast-growing winter grain, which required watering throughout the exhibition. In line with Haacke's 1965 proposal to "make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is non stable," *Grass Grows* utilized the gallery space as its eco-system, responding to the warmth, light and careful tending of the curator.³⁴ Taking the process-based art of the late 1960s to another level, Haacke's piece reframed a process that goes on all around us, making it strange in this spotless, spot-lit interior. His laconic title stands in direct contrast to the histrionics of his compatriot, Joseph Beuys. This is no ritualistic or alchemical transmutation – only nature, going about its everyday business.

This tendency towards the incidental, the minute, the fragile and momentary has been a consistent thread in Charles Simonds' work since the 1970s. Yet in a similar manner to Ana Mendieta, his precarious artworks are situated within a robust mythology of origin and omnipotence constructed by the artist. When Lippard opened a 1974 interview by asking Simonds: "What do you do?" he replied matter-of-factly: "In 1970 I buried myself in the earth and was reborn from it. This exists as a 16mm film and a double series of twenty four time lapse colour photographs." He continued: "I lie down nude on the earth, cover myself with clay, remodel and transform my body into a landscape with clay, and then build a fantasy dwelling-place on my body on the earth."³⁵ Since the 1970s, Simonds has constructed these *Dwellings* made of clay and earth for an imaginary tribe of inhabitants he calls "little people" on his body, in the derelict lots of New York City and the interstitial spaces of the art museum. For the 1971 series *Landscape-Body-Dwelling* he used his naked body as a foundation on which to build with clay, the miniature city colonising contours like some parasitic infestation. This ritualistic communion of body and earth indulges in a fantasy of total harmony and integration, which Simonds has described as "a process of transformation of land into body, body into land."³⁶ Yet this sense of totality is

³⁴ Hans Haacke, "Statement," (1965), reprinted in Stiles and Selz, p. 872.

³⁵ Charles Simonds, "Microcosm to Macrocosm, Fantasy World to Real World: Interview with Lucy R. Lippard," reprinted in Kastner and Wallis, pp. 239-240.

³⁶ Ibid.

innately precarious: the tiny, temporary structures doomed to crack and tumble as the body supporting them rises once more. Simonds has explained that even his more permanent dwellings, such as those pressed into the corner of a stairwell at the Whitney Museum of American Art, begin to lose interest for him as soon as the clay starts to harden and fade. It's the process of manipulating this material that Simonds enjoys, and which gives his *Dwellings* their peculiar, obsessive, libidinal charge. Challenging the sculptural conventions of solidity, mass and permanence in a manner related to Process art, Simonds nonetheless rejected the exploration of process 'for its own sake' in order to construct a personal mythology that sets his work apart from much art of the period.

Territory

The final section of my paper departs from what has gone before, in that it focuses not on the physical manipulation of earth – like the processes of burial, excavation, displacement and cultivation – but on the means by which earth becomes culturally and politically inscribed. More so than the other three elements – Air, Fire and Water – Earth carries connotations of nationality and identity, indicating the material specificity of a location, nation or state. This concept was explored in a series of works collectively entitled *Geographical Mutations*, made by Cildo Meireles in 1969. Working at the height of the military dictatorship in Brazil during the late 1960s and early 70s, Meireles instigated a series of minute interventions in the landscape which, like his contemporaneous indoor *Virtual Spaces*, deal simultaneously with the phenomenology and ideology of space.³⁷ *Geographical Mutations: Rio-Sao Paulo Border* involved working on the border between the two rivalrous cities, digging a hole on each side of the border and exchanging soil, plants and debris between the twinned excavations. Earth and plant material from each site was also collected in a leather carrying case, with an internal division replicating the topography of the border. In a further dislocation, the soil could thus be transported around Brazil and ultimately, out of the country.

The same year, Meireles gave another group of works the collective title *Nowhere is My Home*, suggesting that the repressive regime in Brazil had rendered him an exile in his own country.³⁸ The fugitive materials of *Geographical Mutations*, and the logic of concealment and subterfuge operative within the leather carrying case, suggest an outlawed existence also explored by the other Brazilian artists at the time, notably Helio

³⁷ For more on the *Virtual Spaces* see Guy Brett ed., *Cildo Meireles*, (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2008).

³⁸ Cildo Meireles and Frederico Morais, "Material Language" (interview), *Tate ETC* 14, Autumn 2008, p. 99.

Oiticia. It is also evident in *Condensations 2 – Geographical Mutations: Rio-Sao Paulo Border*, one of many silver rings containing soil from both sides of the border and a diagram detailing the work's construction. Like the ingenious gadgetry of some undercover agent, the ring conceals its earthy treasure under a shield of amethyst, distilling the vast terrain of Meireles' homeland into a discreet and fragile entity. In a phrase which echoes comments made about Arte Povera in Italy, Meireles has suggested that: "certain characteristics of Brazilian art – economy of materials, power of synthesis and a good deal of its creative potential – refer to the country's very socio-economic and cultural precariousness."³⁹

This sense of precariousness: an inherent fragility of territory, habitability and mortality, has been comprehensively explored by Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum since the late 1980s. Her *Hanging Garden* (2008) consists of seven-hundred-and-seventy jute sacks filled with earth and stacked to head level to form a ten meter long barricade. An extended version was installed in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris, disrupting this refined and elegantly landscaped space with its utilitarian associations of pre-empted violence and self-defence. Yet like Haacke's *Grass Grows* of forty years earlier, this earth was seeded, causing the sandbags to sprout tufts of grass. Hatoum's title, *Hanging Garden*, evokes the Babylonian paradise once said to have occupied the middle-Eastern landscape now ravaged by violence. This simple work encapsulates many of the themes I have covered, with decidedly ambivalent results. The barricade suggests an imminent threat of death and burial, while its displacement into the Tuileries Gardens, where it appeared as if transported from another world, engages with Hatoum's consistently explored themes of exile and homelessness. But just as Hatoum's title mournfully excavates the lush history of the Middle East, the sprouting grass also has a redemptive effect, suggesting that life persists against the odds. Between comrade and enemy, attack and defence, life and death, the barricade occupies a liminal zone, thus posing as many questions as it answers.

The final work I want to consider also draws together many of the themes of my paper. Invited by German parliament to propose a work for the Reichstag in Berlin in 1998, Hans Haacke sought to engage directly with the culturally and historically loaded site of the newly refurbished building. Above the main steps is the 1916 inscription *Dem Deutschen Volk*, or *To the German People*. Noting the racial specificity of this address and the use of the word "Volk" by the Nazis to shore up restrictive notions of national identity, Haacke

³⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

suggested that a neon sign reading “Der Bevölkerung” (“to the population”) be erected in the courtyard of the North Wing of the building. The sign was to be installed in a rectangular trench, to which each Member of Parliament would contribute a bag of soil from his or her constituency.⁴⁰ The proposal was hotly debated in parliament and was eventually passed by a narrow margin. Interestingly, one objection to the work came from the Green Party, who described it work as “bio-kitsch,” possibly unaware of Haacke’s sustained engagement with issues of ecology since the 1960s. Other MPs suggested that the use of soil from across Germany was evocative of Nazi “blood and soil” propaganda, in which German racial identity was claimed to be tied, literally and metaphorically, to the land. Yet Haacke’s point was exactly the opposite: that the German population should be constituted in terms of habitation, rather than ethnicity. When the project was accepted, politicians bought earth from historically loaded sites including the graves of important historical figures, or former concentration camps, and some invited their constituents to vote on the location from which the soil should be sampled. Two members of the Green Party later claimed that they had spiked their soil with marijuana seeds, leading to newspaper reports of marijuana growing in the Reichstag.⁴¹ Once the trough had been filled, Haacke specified that it should be left to the elements, so that seeds contained within the soil would begin to grow, watered by the rain; whenever a politician joins or leaves parliament he or she is requested to bring or remove a bag of soil. The piece stays true to Haacke’s 1965 aim to “make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is non stable,” yet here that ecological responsiveness is aligned with political response-ability. *Der Bevölkerung* contends that in order to survive, parliament must remain an open, rather than a closed system; constantly adjusting in order to serve the needs of the population.

Earth has always been an artistic material: ochre in painting, clay in sculpture, the land as a ground for drawing or building. A shift occurred in the late 1960s towards an interest in earth as matter and process in itself, as opposed to a medium deployed in the service of artistic representation. Most of the artists I have discussed use earth in an abstract or performative way, exploring its material properties while exploiting its potential as a signifier of birth and death, concealment and revelation, temporality and place. One of the most effective aspects of Haacke’s installation is its ability to apply the lessons of process and systems-based art of the late 1960s to convey a political message – something

⁴⁰ For details of the project see Hans Haacke, “*Der Bevölkerung*,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24 no. 2, special issue *On Installation*, 2001.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

achieved surprisingly little in the art of that period, despite its attendant political turmoil. Constantly evolving and literally self-effacing, *Der Bevölkerung* resists the intransigent, moralising logic of the monument. Instead, it quietly demonstrates that whatever the conditions and however diverse the soil, grass will continue to grow.