

*Clouds against my cheek,
Soil behind my ears,
Sweet sweaty raindrops,
Too loose to lose the shape of me*

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Touch

Using our hands to encounter matter.
Searching for empirical and sensual explorations of our environment.

The body as a tool.

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Introduction

How do we inhabit the world today? We use goods while ignoring what they are made of. We consume while ignoring the time it took for the used resources to grow. My thesis research is a reflection on the relations the West entertains with the materiality of the world in the Anthropocene or Capitalocene era. We have a dominating position towards our environment, everything is a substance that can be commodified. Far behind us is the idea that our world is sacred, that humans have been made out of clay and will one day return into that clay, that nature holds higher forces that deserve respect, that taking from it has to follow ritualistic rules.

Today, our eyes are satellites orbiting around the earth, camera scrutinizing, x-rays scanning, we see it all and have thus lost our capacity to be enchanted by the unknown and by the world itself. It seems that in Western society our ability to place ourselves in the world with humility has vanished. New technologies divert us from visions of ecological decay, the results of overconsumption is always happening somewhere else, we easily forget that even virtual devices consume matter and that each Google search has a carbon footprint.

I am interested in a sensual approach to materiality; a position outside domination, using softness to retrieve a way of relating to the world based on sensible observations. Artworks that express the fragility of matter, works that witness sensitivity, ephemerality, decay, disappearance, and speak to the senses and emotions of the viewer are the core of my research. This interest finds an echo in my sculptural practice: is grasping a piece of material grasping a piece of the world? My interest in sculpture comes from a very basic impulse, the one of feeling a material in my hand, playing with it, modelling it, feeling its strength and fragility, its point of seizure, seeing it rise or yield. I am fascinated by the performativity

present in the act of sculpting. Actions, gestures and processes interests me more than results, I am curious about how the agency of objects can testify gestures, and become performative itself. Those touching me are: the clumsiness of the unfixed, the one temporarily holding it together, the ones surrendering to their own weight and refusing pressure, the scattered one, the disappearing one, the absent one...

/ see sculpture as a tool that can be used to reflect on our way of being in the world and being to the world.

A tool for observing gestures, for redesccovering forgotten gestures, developing gestures left out, gestures considered as purposeless. The way we touch, grab and hold can be a reflection of how we consider the materiality of the world, what we think we own and how we position ourselves towards or within it.

*Using our hands to encounter matter.
Searching for empirical and sensual explorations of our environment.
The body as a tool.*

Touch

How far can we use the tactility of our bodies and our sensitivity as apparatus to gain knowledge about the world that surround us? In the *Uses of the Erotic*,¹ Audre Lorde describes the erotic as a tool for listening and feeling oneself. She denounces how the spiritual (psychic and emotional) has been separated from the political to the point of being considered contradictory. Hypatia Vourloumis wrote “to knowingly touch and be touched is to be in a state of wakefulness.”² According to Audre Lorde, too, the erotic is often disregarded as pornography while it is in fact essentially different: pornography is sensation without feeling and therefore a denial of the power of the erotic. Turning the erotic into pornography goes back to turning something that is empowering into something that weakens and this confusion discredits the complexity of the erotic. Lorde’s notion of the erotic goes beyond sexual considerations; what she proposes is to use our erotic capacities to listen closely to ourselves, to go inwards, to deepen in ourselves and acknowledge what gives us real satisfaction and fulfilment. From this knowledge we can get to know a sense of the “excellence” we can require for ourselves, an excellence that comes from inwards rather than from the outside.

Searching for the erotic is experimenting with a certain kind of consciousness, based on our very inner sense of rightness (what feels right) and our emotions and sensations. We have internalized the idea that it is normal to disconnect the erotic from vital areas of our life like work. Repetitively doing an action that does not give me anything has always depressed me - this is one of the reasons why I end up hating bread-and-butter-jobs after three months. Lorde explains that the system which defines the good in

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Audre Lord, “The uses of the erotic; The erotic as Power” written in 1984, republished in *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*, (Berkeley, California: Crossing press, 2007), p.53-60

2

Hypatia Vourloumis, “Ten theses on touch, or writing touch”, International center for Hellenic and Mediterranean studies, Athens, Greece in *Women & performance : a journal of feminist theory*, published online 25 november 2014 <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/ampersand-articles/ten-theses-on-touch-or-writing-touch-hypatia-vourloumis.html>

terms of profit rather than in term of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional component of that need, robs our work of its erotic value. “Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities.”³ After a few attempts to re-eroticise my work time, by performing the never ending scrubbing-rinsing-drying cycle of my dishwasher job as a choreography, I realized that I could only fail because of the rhythm that was imposed on me and the speed I had to follow. I understood that the erotic requires a certain temporality, an organic one, growing or shrinking; sometimes really slow to allow space for me to hear and feel, sometimes an accelerated one that follows the pulsations of my blood. The erotic is inseparable from the notion of interiority as it requires one’s feelings and sensations to dictate their reality rather than the opposite; to “begin to live from within outward”⁴. Lorde describes the erotic as a source of raw knowledge that can be a tool, a lens through which we can observe our lives so as “not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.”⁵ The erotic not only offers new situations but has a transformative power for already existing ones; I have always been impressed by how doing an action in a conscious manner can transform the trivial into something essential. In this way the erotic grounds me into feeling myself and what surrounds me; it’s an attention that goes from inward to outwards, opens a dialogue that leads me to be more careful with what constitutes my surroundings and measure my impact on those surroundings, as well as the impact of the surroundings on myself. Hypatia Vourloumis has noted about Lorde’s notion of erotic that its usefulness is thought through expansive immersion and the extension of limits.⁶ By allowing ourselves to feel, we make our limits porous.

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Lorde, *the uses of the erotic*, p.56.

4
Lorde, *Ibid*

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Lorde, *Ibid*

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H. Vourloumis, *Ibid*

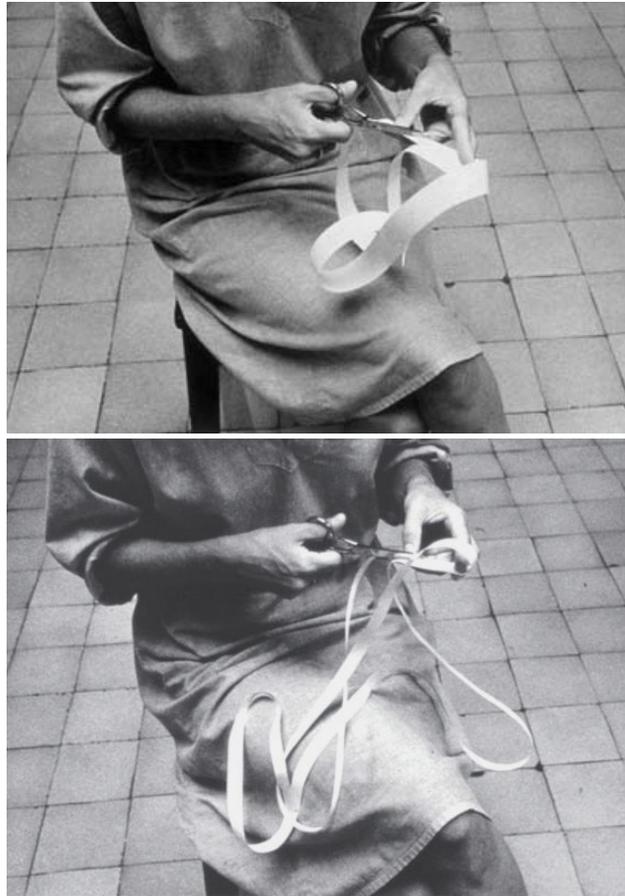
Audre Lorde’s proposition for a search of our erotic can find an echo in the work of Lygia Clark (1920-1988), a Brazilian artist whose research was based on sensual experimentations. From 1966 to 1968 Clark produced a series of “propositions”; she used this term instead of the denomination “work of art” as the aim was not to produce a finished object but to experiment with the manipulation of sensory objects. The overall title was Nostalgia of the Body. The impetus for these works was a phenomenological investigation. Her aim was to find sensory means to bring consciousness to the body⁷.

Two of her works that especially interest me are the ones she called “sensory objects”. With Caminhando (walking) made in 1963, she used a Moebius strip, a loop of paper half twisted in a way that makes one continuous surface. She cut the loop until it became too narrow to cut any further. She described the process: “the act is what produces the caminhando, nothing exists before it and nothing after”⁸. There is a sensation of irreversibility and temporality — as the scissors go along the line, the movement changes the shape of the object.

7
Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless; A user’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997)

8
Essay by Christine Macel on Lygia Clark, excerpted from the exhibition catalogue *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment Of Art, 1948-1988*, Moma, 2017 http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1005-part-1-lygia-clark-at-the-border-of-art (accessed december 2017)

Lygia Clark's Caminhando, 1963-4



Lygia Clark's Caminhando, 1963-4



Clark's other work I am interested in is *Pedra e ar* (Stone and air), 1966. After a car accident, the artist had been told to keep a plastic bag wrapped around her wrist to keep it warm. She later removed the bag, filled it with air and placed a stone on one of its edges. With her two hands she pushed the bag in and out thereby moving the stone in and out. She compared this result to the act of being born. I see it as the action of coming out of matter and returning to it. The stone is incorporated into the bag and as the artist's hands press the bag, liberated from it to enter its own existence. To me the coming and going movement evokes a breathing cycle as well as a cycle of birth and death, appearance and disappearance.

Both of those works rely on the use of her hands—she uses them to encounter matter and their sensitivity to feel pressure. She enacts a movement and, by feeling it, understands it, without words, in a sensual and empirical way. She thinks with her hands and plays with their capacity to alter and modulate matter. If our guts are our second brains, what about our hands? We understand the fragility of an object by touching and weighting it; how many times have I, at an exhibition, had to refrain from my desire to touch an object in an attempt to understand what it was made of. Touching to understand, could that be one of the ways pre-humans were discovering and grasping the world? An understanding that relies on sensuality must be different from an understanding based on intellectual thinking. We can learn how to think with our hands, as the leather craftsman understands a piece of leather and its qualities just by touching it. In an essay about Lygia Clark, Christine Macel wrote that she was

intuitively working with perception at a somatosensory level⁹. The somatosensory system is a part of the nervous sensory system and the first system that is functional during the development of a foetus. When an individual is deprived of somatosensory stimulations in their early years, it can provoke major and irreversible psychological troubles. Touching and being touched is essential to human development.¹⁰

Lygia Clark's research recalls a perception of our bodies as it is in pre-verbal stages, "when the border between oneself and the outside is inverted and the body becomes externalized, as though turning a glove inside out"¹¹. Those works redefine the subject in its relationship to the world, abolish the borders between subject and object. In the case of *Caminhando*, Clark said that she brought the precarious and the whole together, helping one become aware of one's own body while perceiving the totality of the world in an instant that melts with eternity. It "effected a meeting between the subject and his or her own boundaries". "The active subject meets his own precariousness," Clark writes.¹² In the aforementioned essay on Lygia Clark¹³, Christine Macel traces the connection between Clark's fascination for psychoanalysis and its influence on her artistic experimentation with the body and mind.

Clark's work was greatly influenced by Donalds Woods Winnicott (1896-1971), an English paediatrician and psychoanalyst researching in the field of object relations theory. In his research on mother-child relationships, Winnicott developed the idea of the self as first and foremost corporeal, and stressed the importance of making art in order to remain in touch with the primitive self. Furthermore, as Christine Macel writes about Winnicott,

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Essay by Christine Macel on Lygia Clark, excerpted from the exhibition catalogue *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment Of Art, 1948-1988*, Moma, 2017 http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1005-part-1-lygia-clark-at-the-border-of-art/ (accessed december 2017)

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Montagu A. « The skin, touch, and human development » *Clinics in Dermatology* 1984;2(4):17-26.

11

Macel, on Lygia Clark, *Ibid*

12

Clark, "On the Act," 1983, in *Lygia Clark* (Barcelona), p. 165

13

Part 2 of the Essay by Christine Macel on Lygia Clark http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1007-part-2-lygia-clark-at-the-border-of-art/ (accessed december 2017)

"In his book *Playing and Reality*, he described the transitional object—teddy bear, piece of cloth, thread, etc.—which, like a bridge, helped move the child from the inside to the outside, from fusion with the mother to the ‘capacity to be alone.’"¹⁴ In his book about self, power and intimacy in Amazonia written in 2012 the anthropologist Harry Walker describes the Urarina people’s (Indigenous population of the Peruvian Amazonian Basin) fabrication of a hammock for new-borns¹⁵. The hammock weaved by the mother is considered as an extension of her body, a second uterus of sorts. When the baby is born they are first kept in a cell of the house with their mother. In the second stage the child will be placed in the hammock where they will spend all the time not spent in their mother’s arms. Once the child has grown and the hammock is not being used any more, it will be buried. The Urarina invented specific stages in order to slowly bring their children from the inside of their mother bodies to the outside world. It is as if the spaces in which the baby is placed become an expansion of the womb of the mother to the womb of a room, to be confronted with the world but from within another kind of womb, the hammock. The gesture of the mother weaving the hammock is a way of expanding herself, her care and surveillance for her baby, it allows her to move freely knowing that her baby is still held by a surrogate of her body. So the baby is slowly leaving their mother matrix until they will be ready to be placed into the matrix of the world, that without intermission. This non-intermission unites the mother womb with the broader womb of the world, as our common matrix. The burying of the hammock testifies to the organic qualities it has been

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D. W Winnicott, *jeu et réalité : l'espace potentiel* (Paris : Gallimard NRF 1975)

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Harry Walker, *Under a watchful eye; Self, Power and intimacy in Amazonia*. 2012 (From the 2015-2016 class of anthropology of the University Paris-Ouest Nanterre la Défense)

endowed with; it is not a utilitarian object, its corporeality is too close to human's and therefore requires to be treated the same way. Making this connection between Winnicott’s description of the transitional object and the Urarina’s hammock brings me back to another work of Lygia Clark: *Rede de elásticos*. (Elastic Net) produced in 1974.

Lygia Clark’s proposition *Rede de elásticos* (Elastic net), 1974. Shown in use, in Paris, 1974. Courtesy Associação Cultural “O Mundo de Lygia Clark,” Rio de Janeiro.



It was a participative work where lines of elastic bands had to be knotted together (similar to the weaving of the hammock but this time by several hands) and activated by a group of people. The assemblage of the elastic bands produced lines in space that allowed bodies to connect and thus to be conceived as a collective body. Any one person's movement would stretch the entire net in a given direction—one can imagine that the participants could feel someone else's movement in a peculiar way.

Clark's works and Lorde's notion of the erotic both challenge the perception of our physical borders: they are not only what separates and keeps us apart but can also be used as a meeting point, as the tactility of our skin allows us to meet and feel otherness.

Reaction to land art; against its violent gestures.

Earth as our matrix, earth as a womb

Materiality ~ Earth

I was observing workers from my window; they started by breaking down the asphalt, then dug several holes into the soil. It was satisfying to look at them, in the midst of the cityscape, removing the hard body covering the soft one underneath. In order to build upwards they needed to dig downward to root their metal foundations, penetrating the soft body under the hard one.

Looking at them I wonder: are pavements the skin of the city or rather a shell growing over earth flesh? We, soft beings, cover the surface of the earth with hardness. We cover and surround ourselves with hard structures and surfaces, helmets, soles, cars, houses; are they armours to protect our flesh? Are we building an immense and continuous exoskeleton forever expanding over our softness?

Cutting, dynamiting, bulldozing and displacing are some of the actions Michael Heizer undertook in the Moapa Valley in Nevada. There is an inherent violence in the way some land art pieces were executed in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA. Michael Heizer's Double Negative, made in 1970, consist of a long trench in the earth, 9 meters wide, 15 meters deep, and 457 meters long. The trench resulted from the removal of 244,000 tons of rock, rhyolite, sandstone, and straddle from a natural canyon. Heizer was interested in the negative space created by the removal of material echoing the natural negative space of the canyon. The work bears witness to what is not there, what has been displaced (or thrown into the canyon as the artist created the disappearance of material by dumping it down). What strikes me with this work is the brutality of the action of cutting out a large piece of rock from the landscape and it's permanent result.

Michael Heizer practice demands industrial tools because of its monumentality; it would not be attainable by hands. For me his work is an illustration of the relation that Man entertains towards nature; he confronts nature with machines that multiply his strength, capacities and therefore his impact. His work would not be possible without power and money: he had received substantial funds to achieve it and the art collector Virginia Dwan purchased that piece of land for him. His work evokes conquest; working in the desert, in a space with harsh conditions, reflects the conquering spirit and the virility of the American pioneer, gold-digger, or cowboy.¹⁶ To cut into the earth crust in order to sculpt has something to do with remodelling nature in order to force it to testify¹⁷. Inscribing a memory into geological time is what pushes Heizer to make sculptures. His father, Robert F. Heizer was an anthropologist at the University of California with whom he travelled to visit archaeological excavations throughout Latin America and the South West of the United States. His travels in Egypt, Mexico or France and the encounter with

Aerial view of Michael Heizer's double negative



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Serge Paul, *Michael Heizer and the Vagaries of the Technological Sublime*, Marges Revue d'Art Contemporain, 2012, p.28-46 <http://journals.openedition.org/marges/314> (accessed on November 2017)

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Baldine Saint Girons, *op. cit.*, p. 108

absolutist architectures made a strong impression on him. Those kind of monuments are indeed impressive, and it was what they intended; to demonstrate the power of one's nation or civilization. When we see these monuments, the same question arises: "How did they do that?" We are struck by the fact that at a time when construction machinery was not as developed as today Man could still build that monumental. The fact is that the power of non-existing machines was provided by immense amounts of slaves. There is something narcissistic in absolutist architecture as they glorify their own creators, but they were built in a communal way for communal causes.

Michael Heizer is alone and piece is only reflecting his personal need of leaving a trace. The gesture of double negative is not building but removing; I am disturbed by the act of cutting as the artist is not embracing the space he chose but is instead modifying it. I read the urge for surpassing human scale as a way to prove one's power to oneself. Heizer is not only imposing a shape onto an already existing one but is also imposing his time frame onto a broader one: he carves out a new canyon in a year when canyons are made by the effects of erosion and weathering, the beauty of it resides in the time one can read in the slowly eroded strata. It is as if the artist thought that nature deserves contemplation only if there is a human trace to look at, and one that is big enough to give one a sensation of monumentality and power; nature therefore becomes a "blank canvas" that is awaiting to be drawn on by a human hand. Are we so fascinated when we look at our own impact

because it makes us feel powerful and reassure our position of domination over nature?¹⁸ Many of the land art pieces were more about appropriating space outside the gallery and the possibilities that the semi-immensity of that space offers, rather than "connecting" with the already existing environment in which they took place.

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Paul, on Michael Heizer,
p.28-46

A counter point to the roughness of some of the land art gestures could be the gestures observed in pre-historical art. In 1914, three teenagers discovered a cave-complex formed by the Volp River in south-western France. It appeared that three caves were forming a network of subterranean passageways: to the west, the Tuc d'Audoubert cave; in the center, the Trois frères caves; and to the east, Enlène Cave. The last two are physically connected. The cave system has three levels, the lowest one being actually unusable as it carries the river. Enlène has a few pictographs and petroglyphs (pictographic symbols cut or carved into the rock surface) and engraved objects. Tuc D'audoubert and les Trois frères were used for more ritualistic forms of activity involving different creations of stone art. One of the most famous is an engraving of the anthropomorphic figure known as the "Sorcerer".



Another sculpture found in the same cave is a relief of two bison. They are modelled in clay and have a smooth appearance given by a wet finish. The plastic texture carries finger marks along the length of the animals. Some details, like the mane and the beard, have been carved with a tool, but the jaws are traced with the sculptor's fingernail. Both sculptures are supported by a central rock. The chamber also contains two other bison figures, both engraved on the ground. Both the paintings and the sculptures were realized through direct use of the very specific environment of the caves. Sculptures are erected from the ground alongside the rocks, in a continuum between the given materiality of the room and the materiality formed by hands. In one of the rooms, there are two levels: the lower contained the wet clay that was taken onto the higher one to make the sculpture. The clay still bears footsteps. I find it beautiful that humans went into the obscurity of the earth's entrails to make those sculptures and paintings.

I like to think about how the cave obscurity and depths that attracted pre-humans afterwards repelled or were perceived as dangerous by humans, and remained unvisited for so many years. I wonder how it felt to be inside the cave, without natural light but with the warm and flickering firelight. They must have felt the space, touching the cold walls to paint, digging into the floor to get clay and pressing it against the rocks. In caves the sound propagates in a different way, it echoes and resonates, the sound of water drops falling can fill a room; it is a space that receives and echoes what it receives. The resonance does not only happened to sound in caves but seems to have an impact on time itself, as if time was itself captured in a perpetual echo.

Merleau-Ponty wrote that prehistory is called as such because it is when "the continuity of time breaks, jags and fragments with only brief and scattered images flashing here and there"¹⁹. He was writing about Lascaux's paintings. Images and time echoes are possible because the caves remained untouched and closed for some 15,000 years. The sensation of the unseen and untouched is impressive because it erases the time between the gesture of making and our encountering with it. Time becomes concentrated and unified; suddenly we are extremely close to something extremely far. It also makes us feel the continuity of our humanness as we can relate to a gesture which is also ours, shared between humans of today and a being at the breach between humanity and animality. For George Bataille, Lascaux's paintings depict the dawn of humanity's self-consciousness as both the same as and different from the rest of the animal world²⁰. He conceives the passage between animality and humanity as happening in "a slow change, a change of infinite discretion"²¹.

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Brett Buchanan, *Painting the Prehuman: Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, and the Aesthetic Origins of Humanity*, Journal for Critical Animal Studies, Volume IX, Issue 1/2, 2011, <http://www.criticalanimalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/2.-Buchanan-B-2011-Issue-1-2Painting-the-Prehuman-pp-14-31.pdf> (accessed on January 2018)

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Buchanan, *Prehistoric Art*, p.20

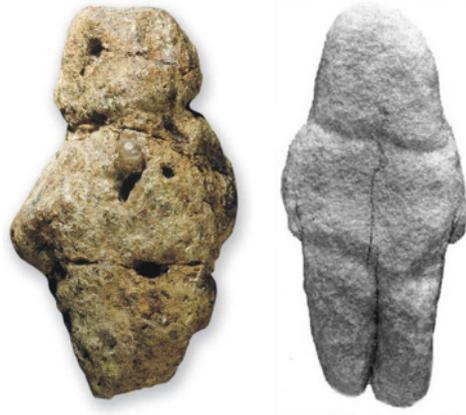
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Buchanan, *Deformed humanity* p.23

I have been curious about another pre-historic artefact; the Venuses, some of the most ancient sculpted figures to be found. The Venus of Tan-Tan found in Morocco and its contemporary the Venus of Berekhat Ram found in Israel have been claimed as the earliest representation of the human form. According to their discoverer Robert Bednarik, an Australian pre-historian and cognitive archaeologist, the object shapes have been created by natural geological process, giving it a human like shape that had then been accentuated by carving it with a stone-wedge. As I was reading about those two Venuses I was thinking about the evolutions of shapes in human-made objects created in order to depict humans. I like the idea that the deeper we go back in time the rawer the shapes become. Some specialists contend that the shape of the Tan-Tan was produced only by erosion. Formed by the human hand or by natural forces, the doubt is raised due to the roughness of the shapes. If the creations of Lascaux testify to human birth as the passage from animality to humanity,²² the Venuses may testify to the porosity of the borders between pre-human and their environment. Their shape is infinite (as in, non-finished, not closed), placed in the undefined, between something and nothing. Their sculpting gesture reflects the erosion that occurred on the pre-existing material: the difference between the decisive action and the operation of time comes together.

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Buchanan, extract from
Georges Bataille lecture,
January 18, 1955, p.23



The French speleologist Norbert Casteret next to the Montespan Bear (-20,000) soon after its discovery in 1923²³



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New interpretations
of Franco-Cantabrian
paleolithic paintings <http://cavepaintingspinturasrupestres.blogspot.nl/2012/05/new-interpretationsof-franco-cantabrian.html> (accessed on november 2017)

*Refusing to stand,
cancelling figure-ground distinctions,
twisting the ego*

Formlessness and Softness

These last months I've kept noticing apparitions of pits of soil in the city streets. I guess they've always been there, appearing and disappearing, heralds of new structures soon rising up from them. Beyond the pleasurable presence of soil in a concrete-built environment, what I find really seducing is their quality of formlessness. I perceive the digging of the holes and the displacement of soil as an intermission in the rigid structure of the city. They are emergences of organic matter and shapes in the midst of the concrete and immovable; a momentary interruption of the established order.

The French writer and philosopher George Bataille introduced in 1929 the term 'formless' in the Surrealist journal Documents.²⁴ He proposed 'formless' as a term that "serves to bring things down in the world,"²⁵ a refusal of what he considers the academic goals of giving determined shapes to everything, a refusal to categorise. Following the semantic of this term, Bataille refused to define or fix the formless, in order to preserve its instability for the formless is an operation and is performative.²⁶

Thus it blurs the definite into the indefinite. The material characteristics implied in the formless echoes its intellectual behaviour. Formlessness challenges any kind of rigidity and fixity, whether it is the one happening when one defines an object, contouring and enclosing it, or the one serving idealism, resting on fixed hierarchies and orders. By refusing boundaries and contours, Bataille's formless opens our perception to a notion of continuum, which leads to the erosion of the "figure-ground" distinction.²⁷ In this regard, the formless comes close to entropy; tearing down the distinction of the figure and the ground suggests that the ground and the figure are one. Entropy is the inevitable

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Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless ; A user's Guide* (New York : Zone Books, 1997)

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George Bataille, *Vision of Excess : Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1985), in *Formless a user's guide*.

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E. Krauss and Bois, *Formless introduction*, p.18

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E. Krauss and Bois, *Entropy*, p.75

degradation of energy; all things come from the ground and will return to it. This way of reading the formless has helped me reconsider the separation between the object and subject. By erecting itself in a standing position, Humans separated themselves from the horizontal axis that governs animal life. The pride of being erected is nevertheless founded on a repression advance Bataille²⁸. We disregard things placed on the floor, as rubbish, dirty, worthless.

I am accustomed to go to flea markets in Amsterdam; here too the law of horizontal axis is applicable. Objects placed on the floor are the cheaper ones, as opposed to the ones placed on tables. Closer to the ground you go, the less value things have. It is interesting to consider the posture one has to take in order to grab a worthless object. The upper part of the body bends down, hands come closer to the floor in a fragile balance trying to prevent oneself from ending up on all fours. Bending down to grab something from the floor always comes with a certain feeling of discomfort and embarrassment, a feeling that children do not seem to experience as they naturally grasp objects that attracted their attention from the floor; treasures in their eyes, rubbish in adults eyes. I wonder if their easiness comes from the fact that their perception of themselves is not as separated from the world as it is for adults. Similar situations can be experienced at the supermarket, where, in order to grasp the cheaper version of a product, you have to bend down, bend your knees, maybe even sometimes place one hand on the floor, to be able to reach something you can afford with your purchasing power. This, again, may be accompanied by a feeling of shame as your physical inferiority is exacerbated by the higher standing position of consumers with higher purchasing powers.

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E. Krauss and Bois,
Formless introduction,
p.26

This potentiality for the formless to bring everything back to the ground has a significant strength as anti-value statement. Robert Morris applied the concept of anti-value to art practice and the artist's interaction with materials in his essay *Anti-form*, written in the pursuit of Bataille's formless in 1968. Diverging from his minimalist practice, in 1967 Morris started to work with felt, producing soft sculptures made of thick black industrial felt sheets into which he cut long diagonal slits, whilst still retaining it as a single piece of fabric. He interacted with this material in a way that first and foremost acknowledged the inherent tendencies and properties of the material itself²⁹. From this practice he suggests that to achieve such a thing you have to embrace chance and the organic process that will appear. For example, instead of fighting against gravity you let the body of the piece collapse under its own weight. Rather than imposing a form, he let the material reveal its own form and was in this way able to go beyond personalism³⁰.

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Robert Morris, *Anti-Form*, (Artforum, April 1968) republished in Continuous project altered daily: *The writing of Robert Morris* (An October book, the MIT Press Cambridge Massasshuetts, 1993, London, England) p.44

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Morris, *Anti-Form*, p.44

This gesture or non-gesture, this 'letting go' is a way to sweep away traditional expectations of sculpture: durability, monumentality and the artist control of material. The artist has to surrender to a material; the object-subject positions are reversed. This reversal alters our notion of the dichotomy between subject and object; the object becomes its own subject as it acts upon itself, its agency dictated by its own physical characteristics rather than by the external hand of the artist. This comes back to the capacity of the formless to blur pre-determined positions and in this sense enable the artist to approach sculpture from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Giving more importance to the material itself is a way of questioning where and how we place ourselves in the world, always as a subject facing the world considered as an object. I wonder if formlessness and softness in sculpture are not in some way attempts to negate the ego as they reposition one's perception of oneself as a subject having power over objects.

The act of forming something following one's intention can, in a way, satisfy one's impression of capacity; there is something exhilarating in creating a shape because it is a demonstration to oneself of one's own power and influence over matter. But even if the artist is refraining from anthropocentrism with the execution of soft sculptures, the viewer does still look at it through anthropomorphism. In the soft corporeality of the sculpture I find similarities to my own corporeality and thus sympathize with it. Max Kozloff wrote about this effect in the Poetics of Softness, in which he comments on the work of Claes Oldenburg. Kozloff acknowledges two different reactions that the viewer can experience: one may feel oneself less organic than the dead thing laying in front of them (because of its grotesque and overplayed softness),

or these sculptures may provoke a reconsideration of one's own position, the 'possibility of a liberation from the conceit of having to dominate all things.'³¹

When looking at a soft sculpture the notion of strength cannot be avoided, but it is approached in reverse. If one compares soft sculpture to Classical Greek sculpture, which depicted the idealized, strong, powerful body, soft sculptures suggest fatigue, deterioration and inertia. They introduce a pessimistic and unflattering vision of humans. Soft sculpture mimics a kind of surrender to the natural conditions that pulls bodies down. Therefore, as Kozloff noticed, soft sculpture is inevitably emphatic; looking at them we find a correspondence to our own transient mortality through its echoing of the softness of our bodies. However abstract soft sculptures may be, they always evoke the human. But beyond the fatigue and "weakness" that soft sculpture suggests, does it not also suggest a different kind of strength, one that does not rely on hardness?

In his text, Kozloff mentions Öyvind Fahlström who wrote that an object that gives in is actually stronger than one which resists, because it allows the opportunity to be itself in a new way³². In this regard, softness also means flexibility and adaptation. Kozloff uses the word soft in the sense of easily yielding to physical pressure. "A soft thing can be poked, moulded, squeezed, scrunched. In a word, its surface is elastic, and its densities are scandalously rearrangeable."³³ Soft sculpture surrenders not only to its own weight but also to its environment, its flexibility allows them to adapt to pre-existing forms, to occupy a space without modifying it.

31

Max Kozloff, *The poetics of softness* in Maurice Tuchmann (Ed.) *American sculpture of the 60's*, (New York: New York Graphic Society 1967) republished in *Materiality*, documents of contemporary art, ed by Petra Lange-Berndt (Whitechapel Gallery London, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts)

32

Öyvind Fahlström (footnote from Kozloff text) in *The catalogue of Oldenburg's Moderna Museet*, Stockholm show, 1966, cited in the Poetics of Softness in the materiality reader p.91

33

Kozloff, Poetic of Softness, p.92

In French there are two different words that signify softness: mou, which, as Kozloff describes, easily deforms through touch, is flexible, does not erect itself, just surrenders. Doux, on the other hand, is something that is not abrupt or violent, but gives a pleasant feeling. It can also be used to describe a taste; in this case it can be translated as sweet. The pleasure is found in the fact that the touch (soft touch), the taste, or even the sound is not abrupt, sharp or brutal. Something doux brings pleasure, calm, peacefulness. Something doux also has the quality of following the shapes of what already is, like a caress which embraces the shape of a body. It does not interrupt; it does not reshape otherness but itself. A gentle touch is to feel but not to alter. Gentleness requires observation and being able to feel the other. It implies lightness and carefulness. Caressing as fusion, caressing as embodying a relation; the body of the other exists for the one caressing but also makes the caressed feel its own body.

These qualities made me wonder: could we use formlessness and softness as tools to reconsider our position in the world? To step out of the Cartesian tradition calling us to master and possess nature? If our perception is oriented in relation to our upright posture as Merleau-Ponty wrote,³⁴ what happens when we turn that upside down? I find this relevant when I transpose it to the current environmental crisis and to our commodifying view of the resources of our planet. We need to seek new positions towards the materiality of the world. That is why I believe in the necessity for a rejection of sublimatory art which tries to elevate human and separate them from their bodies³⁵ and instead for an art that brings the viewer back to their body and the reality of its materiality.

In Balance: Art and Nature³⁶, John K. Grande writes about maleness and femaleness in art. I do not support the separation of things into this dichotomy but I would nevertheless like to use some of Grande's arguments. According to Grande, to subjugate creativity to an external, aesthetic purpose is a male notion; he holds that the historical prototypes

of maleness enhanced the capacity of building something more enduring than life or, representing an idealized beauty, instead of working within the on-going processes of life. These notions of creativity as the production of objects external to the on-going process of life interest me. I can use it to look at the different ways of interacting with materiality, for example, the one of the land art artist who cuts through materiality, shaping and remodelling it with monumentality.

The practice of the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, situated between land art, performance, video and body art, demonstrates a beautiful alternative position: she places herself within the natural material she uses and she works at her own scale, in an ephemeral way. The difference between her practice and that of the above-discussed Heizer lies in her working within an environment, whilst he works over it. One uses her hands to shape, the other uses a mechanized hand. The uses of machines place a third actor in the encounter between the artist and the material, and therefore more distance. The uses of machines enable the artists to create super-human shapes with super-human strength. It can be perceived as surpassing human strength, surpassing human time. I perceive it as inhuman. This kind of land art is a reproduction of the relation humans maintain towards nature.³⁷ Societies were built over nature and not through it. We place value on what transcends the natural context; our vision of power is inscribed in domination.

34

E. Krauss and Bois, *qualities (without)*, p.169 (about Merleau-Ponty notes in his *Phenomenology of perception*, 1945).

35

E. Krauss and Bois, *Introduction*, P.25

36

John K. Grande, *Balance : art and Nature*, Black Rose Books, 1994

37

K. Grande, *Balance : art and Nature*.

*Negative and positive, absence and presence,
mysteries of the shape being formed*

L'empreinte / Traces and Moulds

Imprints are a way of meeting materiality, an adherence to it, traces of bodies encountering their limits. Is digging a hole creating a negative space? Then the materials removed from the hole deepening the negative forms an extra positive on the surface. The mould (the negative) is the part that is necessary to form a shape but will not be used. I tend to prefer negatives to positives. They bear something mysterious, as one has to imagine the result of their action, to form their reverse in their head. Moulds are shape makers and detain powers of creation but once used are destroyed in order to free the moulded shape; they will be thrown away after their utilization being completed. So are mould only utilitarian objects? To me they become poetic objects once their utility has vanished. They have something welcoming, as they are containers waiting to be filled and are generous as they repeatedly give away their form. In the catalogue of the exhibition *l'Empreinte* that took place at the centre Pompidou in 1997, Georges Didi-Huberman quotes Simondon's phenomenological description about moulding³⁸. There is an analogy between sexual reproduction and the operation of the mould as the produced shape resembles the mould and is formed by embrace or even penetration. The mould is a matrix, a place where resemblance is formed, where the once ancestral existence becomes the now of the newborn.³⁹ An imprint is a system that unites form and counter-form in one operation of morphogenesis⁴⁰. Simondon talks about how the operator does not have access to the "taking shape", as it is an invisible phenomenon, internal to the system of the mould and the material. The artist prepares the mould but the contact between the clay and the mould is out of their reach. In some of her works, Ana Mendieta is the mould as she uses her body to mould and leave an imprint. In 1981, she stated:

38

Didi-Huberman,
Simondon, Moulding p.38

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Didi-Huberman, *Ibid*

40

Didi-Huberman, *Ibid*

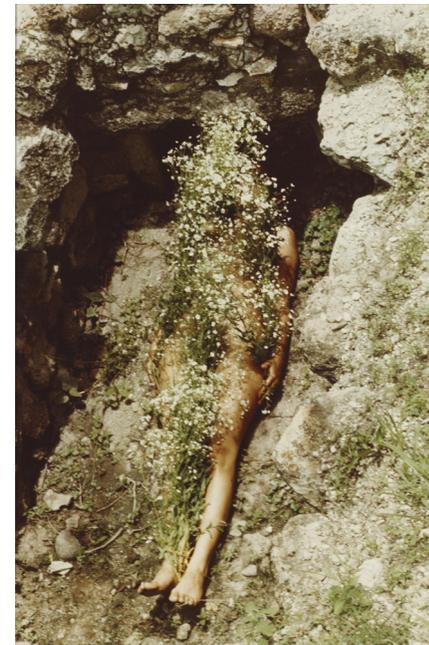
*"I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth ... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs... [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb."*⁴¹

If Mendieta's body is the material that is used to leave a trace, she experiments fully with the sensation of moulding. She is in direct contact with the material in which she will leave her trace. Her use of moulding is different as she doesn't make the mould but is one herself and the earth is the material that will receive the influence of her shape. She plays with the plastic qualities of the world and celebrates a possible union between her materiality and the materiality of the world.

41

Petra Barreras del Rio and John Perreault, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York 1988, p.10.

Ana Mendieta, "Untitled (from Silueta Series in Mexico)," 1973-77/1991 © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York and Paris and the Collection of Diane and Bruce Halle.



At some point this year I was feeling rather frustrated as I was thinking about city structures and lines, their rigidity and the way we build in general. An urge started to grow in me to interrupt this rigidity, to create disturbance, to open a little breach to see and feel what lay under the pavement. One day I finally removed a piece of pavement from the street, hidden behind a staircase where I could hear the hustle of the city around me but where no one could see me. I then started digging into the sand with my hands, piling it up next to the hole. After a while I stopped and looked at the hole - it should be bigger but I didn't dare dig further. The second hole became a lot bigger, so much that at some point I could enter it and start digging while sitting in it. The sand I had removed from the ground slowly piled up next to it; as the hole deepened, the sand pit beside it became taller. My body determined the measure of the hole; it had to be big enough for me to lie in it in a foetal position. The time it took me to dig a hole big enough for my body was based only on the capacity of my hands to scoop out sand. This little breach in the structure was enough to allow me to penetrate the ground, and under the pavement I could enter into a connection with the materiality of the earth. It felt calming to be lying there, against the body of the earth.

One of the magic characteristics of making an imprint is the immediacy of the operation⁴². In my practice, I am trying to open up a dialogue between a material and my gestures. Imprints can reveal a gesture, a way of encountering a material. It requires very elementary materials, ones that are still malleable because they have not been previously processed. In this regard, using clay for me is using one of the most primary and immediate materials. There is a heuristic dimension to it, (from ancient Greek εὐρίσκω, eurisko, "find" or "discover", the art of invention and

42

Didi-Huberman,
*Immédiateté de
l'empreinte*, p.9

making discoveries). Furthermore, imprint reunites the two meanings of the word experience, the physical experience and in the sense of gnology,⁴³ experiencing as encountering.⁴⁴ This way of working and researching leaves a lot of space for me to follow my intuitions, lead by the use of my sensual capacities⁴⁵. Moreover, imprints raise questions about the process: how is it made? It's a way of communicating with the senses of the viewer rather than their intellect; they can feel the gesture that has been taken upon a material, if it has been pushed, squeezed, pressed... One of my works included making clay imprints of the city pavements: while removing the clay from the pavement, a distortion happened in its shape. In this case the imprint also has the power over its substratum as it changes our perception of it. The imprint process inscribes itself in the notion of origin or loss of origin as it can be a reproduction of an original shape or an alteration of it; it can be familiar or strange, formed of deformed, a contact or a gap⁴⁶.

43

Gnology "the philosophy of knowledge and cognition"

44

Didi-Huberman, *The heuristic of the imprint*, p.25

45

Duchamp was considering his experience with mould and imprint as « technic erotism » because they possess the approximate character of the caress and their precise characteristic is the one of the organic embedding, p.169.

46

Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte*, p.19

Didi-Huberman gives us the example of a footprint in the sand whereby the imprint reveals the contact of the foot with the sand as much as the absence of the foot; therefore it simultaneously tells us of the contact of the absence and the absence of the contact. This feeling of the unity of past and present in an object is also what I find poetic about it as the imprint lasts longer than the gesture which created it, but also inscribes this gesture forever in the present. Derrida wrote that traces are like becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space; through its traces the being becomes anachronic⁴⁷. I remember wanting to be an archaeologist as a child and going on several holidays to Greece and Crete with my mother where I was fascinated by the ruins we visited.

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Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte*, p.169

One of my thoughts was about how “hundreds of years ago ancient Greeks walked upon those flagstones”. I was touching the polished stone as a point of connection between me and absent people, as if touching what has once been touched by a hand or a foot would allow me to touch that hand or foot, as if it would give me a glimpse of how things were at that time. Well, I guess the millions of tourists walking over and over upon the same aisles are the ones that mainly polished the stones. What is so fascinating about imprints or traces is that they extract from absence the strength of a form.

CONCLUSION

Forming and deforming a piece of material, forming and deforming one's own shape within this material. It is fascinating to consider how sculpture has always been intrinsically interwoven with humans' existence and how the emergence of an act of sculpting echoes the emergence of humanity. From the hand to the stick to the mechanized arm, our gestures evolved hauled by technological development but the essential action of sculpting the world around us remains. Gilbert Simondon wrote that technology is a particularity of the human specie due to the development of our hands itself being a consequence of the vertical posture of the Australopithecus. Without technology there is no humanity, no technology can exist without language, no tools without gesture, no gesture without the relation bodies enter in with matter. If our gestures and therefore our relation to matter is so embedded in our vertical position, it seems to me more important than ever, at this time of environmental crisis, to poke and provoke that position. Negating our ego seems to be an impossible task but could we start playing with it, palpating it, stretching it until it loses its consistency, turning it upside down, smoothening it, flattening it into the ground, reversing the subject-object positions, up and down and down and up until it all becomes blurry? As an artist I experience this in the playful plasticity of sculpture which keep bringing me new metaphors, to encounter the world, to come closer to it and thus allows a sensual inhabitation of it.



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FILM

Herzog, *cave of forgotten dreams*, 2010

Clouds against my cheek,
Soil behind my ears,
Sweet sweaty raindrops,
Too loose to lose the shape of me

Garance Früh

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Teachers:

Jay Tan
Alena Alexandrova
Frank Mandersloot
Jean Bernard Koeman

Thesis supervisor:

Alena Alexandrova

Graphic Design:

Yunie Chae