

Body Lands: Image Performativity in Object and Shadow

By Monica Toledo Silva*

We should not stay, but pass, not belonging anywhere.
Maurice Blanchot

The epistemological investigations concerning the visual arts of sculpture and video proposed in this essay begin in a performative field of research on the Greek islands of Kos and Crete. The intentional act of creating images from my own shadow meeting archeological objects brings an insightful approach to an update of these aesthetic languages, inspired by semantic displacement and ageless nomadism phenomena. The research is based on cognition, philosophy and body studies, as well as the modern concepts of minimalist art.

From original minimalist art theories to an aesthetic field of investigation activated by performative actions of image creation, I intend to propose a new approach to the arts of sculpture and video by generating embodied images in ancient sites. This experience is born of a desire to deepen an understanding of nomadism and migration as ageless human acts that also reflect upon art.

During a field research for migrant traces in millennial rocks forgotten along the centuries in urban outskirts of Greece, suddenly turned into archeological and corporeal presences and random testimonies of life, I explored a borderless sensation of space and territory. Crossing these physical traces through open fields around Athens, Crete and Kos, I recreated a body trajectory over time, by performing images with my video camera. Shooting within my self-projection as a shadow over these Hellenic rocks, their presence was made active, displacing time and place as sculptural and site-specific contexts were fused, once related to performance.

This essay explores the idea of sculpture “challenged by the contingency of perception”,¹ that occurs in the outskirts of archeological sites of Greece, with objects uncategorized and available for sight. An active perception generates sensuous experiences and affects the landscape—both the environment’s and the body’s—as well as enables one to shift dialogical procedures in different art languages. This broadens the understanding of sculpture as a living object through moving image media (video in its capture and projection actions). In this context the essay also intends to displace formal notions of both site-specific and land art.

*Professor, Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

1. Hal Foster, *O complexo arte-arquitetura* (São Paulo: Ubu, 2017), 132.

This practice of tracing absent bodies (embodied as objects, i.e. the ancient rocks) offers a space of interaction where an imagined map is created by both presences. To inhabit timeless gestures brings a performative body in a visual form —my presence as a shadow plays with an absent figure (the material vestige) — which plays in the video language; an emergent time and place embody a nomadic being (myself).

Art practices related to this embodied field experience proposition were presented as two video installations, *Tracing Mermaids* (Artist Residence Mudhouse, in Crete/GR, 2018), and in 2019 as *Body Lands* (during the Winter Festival of UFSJ at Adro Arts Gallery, São João del Rei, MG/Brasil). My first intention was to meet new aesthetic experiences moving through those unknown lands in order to challenge grounded fields of visual arts, more especially sculpture and video, engaged to embodied performance.

Body's intentional presence, made visible, activates imagination in sensuous contexts. Walking through Crete's mountains, beaches and petroglyph stones left in the open on both Greek islands has been a practice of image creation and connection to other forms of being. Therefore, a discussion about territoriality, active perception, embodied landscapes and performing images, focuses on an expanded understanding of sculpture as both performative and visual.

Minimalist sculpture has qualitative principles applicable to performative procedures of a body practice intended to meet and share a new time and space. Modern notions of displacement apply to this minimalist sculpture in a semiotic context and semantic sphere of body discourses. Corporealities play in sculpture and video—performing images—in an expanded aesthetic experience.

The number of people who have been there over the decades have thus generated other shared experiences with these same objects and will always be unknown (for instance, a child, a homeless person...). In the same way, their events or encounters remain to be imagined. In minimalist arts, the status of meaning and subject are embedded in reality, in a subject/object ambiguity, seen as a phenomenological experience.

Art historian Rosalind Krauss² argues that each given meaning “depends on how a being contains a latent experience of simultaneity.” As in this context, between states, my presence in a random ancient spot where I meet “sculptural” objects (Hellenic rocks) taken as marks of the presence of bodies who have trod their routes, elaborating a symbolic subject to the object I perceive and recreate.

Minimalist would in this aspect be a contraction and its expansion, beyond recognition, says Michael Fried; “Minimalist work would be somewhere between the object and the monument.”³ The porosity of this artistic language allows the encounter of bodies (human and mineral) reversing these original “states” into images and another temporality in an audiovisual piece (Figures 1 and 2).

2. Ibid, 57.

3. Ibid, 61.

My relation to Hellenic rocks outside catalogued, named objects affects me as long tracks of unknown presence of bodies—as from migrants who left a trace of their existence in a certain spot—in a visible narrative in body lands, and by this process attests a trajectory.



Figures 1 and 2. *Study for the Tracing Mermaids Installation, 2018, Ierapetra/Crete*
Source: Monica Toledo Silva.

The practice I experienced by performing encounters, where living bodies are fused in my aesthetic, meets a poststructuralist version that criticizes categories of representation. When I lose my category of subject and turn an image into an object, susceptible to any other body, myself being this other subject, as a body vestige. I meet a Hellenic trace, a rock body, and take it as a presence to my performing acts of affected perception and gesture. Mapped categories are surpassed to inhabit the encounter where we turn transitory and alternate qualities of intention as presence-absence and material images (my body projected as shadow over the object-subject) in simultaneous body presentations.

In this fresh space of encounter, in which we grasp the object “varying positions and spatial context,” minimalist art “seeks to discover and project objectuality,” as Fried suggests. As another, object as trace, body as image. This essay seeks to qualify presence in sculpture and video as possibilities of an embodied performance, to suggest the phenomenon of nomadism as a timeless human presence.

Sculpture as Object

Richard Serra⁴ describes sculpture in terms of a “topological place” delimited “through motion; a dialectic between walking and looking at the landscape.” Thus, I look for a condition of sculpture in its phenomenological approach; it “exists in primary relation to the body. Not as its representation, but as its activation.”

4. Ibid, 167.

Krauss suggests that “the specificity of a place is not so much its end as it means - its environment is the body in destination.” Thus, an object comes to signify the place where it is, and it also reframes this place (affected by “other” presences). Sculpture for Foster⁵ would be both subject and local: “an exchange between place and subject, (re)defining the topology of a specific site through the motivation of a specific viewer. An overlap of different spatialities and subjectivities, so that experience can be sensorially retained.”

The spatiality of these bodies also assigns us (me and the rocks) new fields of images. My subjected-objected body is present not only by registering the object (the rock subject), but also through my shadow. This, insistently made visible by the island’s summer sun, determined my visual presence in the scene I create and provides a simultaneity to another past and present—the Hellenic object and my body. In its insistence on being itself visible in the scene, it illustrates and fulfills a desire to fuse media boundaries of video and sculpture in a visual performance and expands the perception of time itself in this moment of togetherness.

The enunciative dimension of the object—a rock and a material sign—plus an aesthetic temporality of my own image and the past (the mineral-archeological vestige, as in Figure 3), generates a confluent present moment. A performative body in a given place of my passing body leaves a mark of a previous one. Donald Judd also beckons other domains of objects: their presence would imply a new concern with perception—that is, with the subject.⁶ Foster continues: “The contingency of the reception of the body in a particular place and time generates this complex alternation of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts.”

Judd will call “specific objects” a “returning to forms - to volumes - their intrinsic power, inventing forms that would be an obstacle to the whole process of belief before the object.”⁷ The detachment of the object from its statute—of an Hellenic ruin, a rock, a minimalist sculpture, a scenic object or material vestige—grants its intervention in space, a place to be territorialized by my gesture, performed as shadow (Figure 4). Subjects guarantee present objects an existence of their own; the imaging production is related to this nature of sensuous attributions of power and availability for exchanges.

Plus, when in my performing path I come across an object which I take as a subject—a lived body—it is in my desire to generate an availability for exchanges in an aesthetic form (as a sense of belonging, cognitive or epistemological possibilities of engagement). In this way I am also taken as an object, being some sort of existence to the emerged in this place of exchange and expanded temporality.

5. Ibid, 42.

6. Ibid, 59.

7. Ibid, 41, 46.



Figures 3 and 4. *Study for the Tracing Mermaids Installation, 2018, Ierapetra/Crete*
Source: Monica Toledo Silva.

This tension between the autonomy of an artistic language and its dispersion in a new relational context reminds us of Barthes (1968): “I, who see, become part of the landscape I see.” The sculpture in the extended field, as presented by Krauss (1978), ignores this act of simultaneously perceiving and acting of embodying and involving the encounter to a third place of creating sense where both bodies are transformed (through my intentional-disturbing presence). The object (rock) becomes sculpture through my gaze that sees it as a body trace, a subject attested by the video performing traces modeled by the action of time; a materiality over the centuries which also lost its original meaning.

“Only when stable as a format can the work suspend objectivity, transcend literalism, and acquire the quality of being present.”⁸ Aligned to this, Morris also conceives of shifting the focus from the object to the situation. Objectuality becomes experience: the sculpture is turned into subject in presence and performance (in this work, in visibility) of my body.

Considering that our body expresses singular and diverse modes of presentation of the self, I am myself a multiplicity of others, embodied at the intersection of “components of partial utterances on all sides of individual identity.”⁹ This partial otherness focuses beyond identification, and the very genesis of enunciation is taken up by the flow of “processual creation.”

This is the connection that defines site-specific art: it is not the site that would have a specificity, nor the work, but the connection. It is the displacement that raises the question of the site of the work. Says Cauquelin:¹⁰ displacement “embodies contingency, linear causality, the weight of states of affairs and meanings that beset us with a choice of irreversibility and singularization.” The displacement of my body is recorded by the encounter with an embodied other (an actual mineral existence, yet a rock body)—a materiality of its own displace. Therefore, this trajectory is exposed in a video installation as an event.

8. Ibid, 63.

9. Felix Guattari, *As três ecologias* (Campinas: Papirus, 2011), 97, 123.

10. Anne Cauquelin, *Frequentar os incorporais* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2008), 72.

A Timeless Presence: Rock Bodies

Since the Middle Ages, theologians feel the need to distinguish the concept of *imago* from *vestigium*: what is visible around us should be seen as the trace of a lost resemblance. Heidegger has defined the “fundamental mode of feeling in every situation: the revelation that privileges the being-there.” In this being, nothing will be definitive: “life will no longer be there but elsewhere, where the body will be dreamed, somewhere.”¹¹

Visibility processes the forms through which we share our experiences, which includes impermanence and a multitude of inner actions. “Movement is both sign and symptom that all presence is haunted by disappearance and absence. This stepping into invisibility of both movement and presence generates a new nervousness within the project of writing performativities.”¹²

For Tony Smith¹³ a minimalist sight is a dialectical image that carries a latency. This frustrates an iconographic analysis that considers it a symbol or allegory, since it demands a perceptive, expanded attention. “The object of the image would only be a component of form, which may also be the medium of expression.” In this thread the presentation of the object would be renounced: “art must be liberated from the object, which extends beyond its appearance and through our knowledge of its interior.”

An image, a sound, a map, do not speak—they are not communicating devices—but latent enunciators of landscapes (narrativities). Rock bodies as imagined marks of trajectories: singular reality generated through my intention. In body lands I perform affected by the landscape. The imagined and materialized mark (the evidence of the rock) will be the image that I form from my own body through my shadow cast on the subject-object (overlying the rock). My action generates a spatial duration that triggers an unreported phenomenological process.

In my wanderings I imagine moving narratives while crossing opened fields of archeological unmapped treasures. The image I trace and catch includes me as a shadow. The rock image is its own presence from its previous history in my virtuality and, in this creation of a new spatiality, I map another mode of presence. The space is experienced by this meeting of bodies performing a new cartography, as modes of presence between the rock and the shadow.

In this situated image of a real (virtual, mineral, human) body—rock and shadow, past and present—subjects and objects of themselves, we come across the category of heterogeneity. I present as video pieces a drama that does not represent, a trajectory as a dramaturgy of the body. My path creates a landscape as a mode of presence, and I meet this other body that makes sense in my intention.

11. Georges Didi-Huberman, *O que vemos, o que nos olha* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2013), 40

12. Randy Martin, “Dance and its Others,” in *Of the Presence of the Body* (ed.) André Lepecki (Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

13. Didi-Huberman, *O que vemos, o que nos olha*, 2013, 82, 95.

The landscape performs in me and I experience a sculpture as a living material (Figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 and 6. *Study for the Tracing Mermaids Installation, 2018, Ierapetra/Crete*
Source: Monica Toledo Silva.

Foster beckons art as a sculptural experience in itself, as Serra points it as a “process that modulates by pertinent procedures in motivated structures.” These principles are to meet their various systems (metaphysical, scientific, psychoanalytic, animistic), involved in the art experience, bypassing the problem of enunciation. What should be stated in the enunciation are transfers, Serra suggests.¹⁴

According to Guattari,¹⁵ the multiplicity of enunciative instances of the order of polyphony of language can formulate significant breaking points, as well as objects losing their given meaning. A discursive phenomenological approach enables a heterogeneity of manifested expressions. The expression x content reversibility, as an alternative to Saussure-inspired structuralists¹⁶ and in favor of a visual expression, becomes investigative for a body that does not generate a map, but instead moves through random routes. Site, place and presence: the visible as a performed gesture.

If the discontinuity of the places of the body is always given, how can one overcome fissures of the lived space, if it is at the risk that the body will displace organic oneness? With the discourse that its dispersal will emerge from the void where it raises some unknown figures?”¹⁷

14. Foster, *O complexo arte-arquitetura*, 2017, 86, 165.

15. Guattari, *As três ecologias*, 2011, 31, 39.

16. *Ibid*, 34, 85.

17. Marc le Bot in Henri-Pierre Jeudy, *Le corps comme object d'art* (Armand Colin, 1998).

Perception and Performance

A created landscape as an extension of the body emerges as a visual solution of this set of attention; a landscape that also shifts in past and future times and is not tied to a spot: it is both singular and affected. The unfolding of a landscape as body phenomenon intensifies. To create a landscape is to inhabit a time and a space created by a body in a present mode—to inhabit an embodied image.

For phenomenology philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty,¹⁸ perception promotes an articulation of ideas and actions. In these, there occurs a process of reduction—the “liberating a thematic object from its effectiveness, operating a free variation”. In this context corporeality is articulated on a multiplicity of levels: it is “constitutive of all experiences of the object;” corporeality “as a bond between me and things is the subject—object of sensitive experience”; and a reflection on it would reveal an “inadequacy of ordinary descriptive categories - subject and object, interiority and exteriority.”

For Merleau-Ponty,¹⁹ the living being is not a pure identity but a field: the “latent being is multiple, born in the thickness of a temporality and the availability of the being for diverse perspectives.” Language would be merely an “articulation of a general expressive function.” The minimalist object, therefore, in this approach, “engages the subject” in its given field.

Didi-Huberman²⁰ offers an idea: “the conception of language that transcends our lived experience incites us to search beyond the enunciation.” In our memories, affections, traces, we perform discourses in visual forms. Landscapes of the other, landscapes of myself — subject and object mixed in virtual narratives.

Krauss²¹ brings specificities that allow us to shift the attention from the object to the relation—to what she calls “specific relation”. The way the object nature becomes exchangeable in a given situation will be in tune to a body behavior itself. The relationship between the object and its place, the meeting of objects and subjects, may characterize “intersubjective dialectics.”

Presence is placed in what is preserved. The other is a sign, index of the past; object of chance; archaeological history; potential memory of a passing body, that my performance updates. Thus we return to a contemporary notion of sculpture: performing an embodied continuity, occupying a spatial narrativity, connected to the notion of land art.

Presence as a given spot dedicated to a reminder of a body not so much as a mark but rather as a performative continuity of dialogic presentations. This dramaturgy that emerges from the encounter meets presence as an intervention field promoting the end of categories (virtual/material, object/sculpture) and

18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *O visível e o invisível* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005), 33, 36.

19. *Ibid*, 66, 190.

20. Didi-Huberman, *O que vemos, o que nos olha*, 2013, 119.

21. *Ibid*, 66.

enables a path of performed displacements, acting as a space of visibility: the visible as a performed gesture. This imagined gesture of visible acts as a performance of mobility: visibility itself as the act of being present.

The creation of a dramaturgy of the body is a trajectory through territories marked by presences that renew the present. It promotes in me a landscape as a state of presence. “Enunciative subjectivity, a narrative event, consists on situation and environment.”²² The presence of the other as an intervention in my affected body generates a perceptive image that will be the creation of body images—from my body’s encounter with this other, in a “displacement in which something presents itself (as an action, idea, image) and gains visibility by establishing a new process with its surroundings.”

Alain Martin suggests that the non-place of art resides in the body. Its dynamics of displacement, which at any moment, updates and turns a place into a territory, opens a space that comes from a “need to create fissures”. In this cartography elaborated by body paths, I update my state of presence in the trace (the path remains) of the other. I perform the imaginary mark of the other and this trace that I perceive and perform (through the image I create) reinvents the non-place of art in a visuality generated by the encounter.

Greiner²³ beckons on the “stage prior to language and artistic genres, at which body movement destabilizes evidence - that kind of movement would be the performative.” Through cognitive processes, “image is not just what one sees, and vision is completed by a perceptive network.”

The attributes of site-specific and land art meet us here. The idea of cartography as a performance generated by body spatiality is related to movement as an enunciative form and cartography itself as a mode of presence—to map an affected path. My trace is in their trace; the processes of visibility that meets the desire for visuality (my shadow meeting the other). Art as language, medium, narrative and aesthetics allows a previous dialectical spatiality, the “dialectic at work”.

Territory as an appropriation of a place that becomes singular, performed by the body. Territory that is not only physical and that generates meanings. The presence of the other (Hellenic rocks designed by time) is organized in this remaining territory where what remains is organized in infinite possibilities of attachment to the present time. The rocks perform their presence in my shadow, an image affected by my own mobility in this path of moving cartography. Body lands become what evolves, not what remains.

A random minimalist sculpture comes into existence as a body since the encounter with my image creates this territoriality that legitimizes a place. The

22. Ibid, 95, 121.

23. Christine Greiner, “A percepção como princípio cognitivo da comunicação: uma hipótese para redefinir a prática da performance,” in *Corpo em Cena 6* (São Paulo: Anadarco, 2013).

shadow's (the image of my present body) quality of recategorization this place touches the object and evolves it to a body, live thus petrified as visual noise out of the landscape.

"A presence cannot simply be distinguished from absence - the two are complex in their relation."²⁴ The quality of shadow as a virtuality creates interference in the present and acts as an image that touches the object, which is not a ruin but visual noise and virtuality, like a self of its own. This phenomenological meeting of bodies—rock and shadow, body and image, two moving figures that present themselves—demarcate a dynamic territoriality which is performed because it is not tracked, planned or mapped.

Medium becomes a singular cartography made by the displacement quality of bodies and of territories, creating possibilities. This creation of spatiality will be embodied and updated in the images of these subject and object exchanged to object and subject of one another. "The immemorial, the precise places of what is absent from our knowledge, the role of the forgotten in language is to intensify the absence inherent in memory. Immemorial is both presence and absence, intensified."²⁵

"A time-crafted sight that would allow time to be unfolded as a thought, that would leave time to space in order to retract in another way, to convert over time."²⁶ Phenomenology turns itself into artistic substance. Fried evokes the critical distance of the temporality of time, past and to come, approaching and receding simultaneously; the experience of being distanced or invaded by the presence of another body.

Henri Bergson brings the concept of corporeality linked to virtuality and actualization, as its subdomains. Thus is the dramaturgy of the body: a mode of presentation of a self and another as an extension of one's own; dramaturgy as a performance of affection when meeting bodies in a sudden simultaneity of times are embodied to the present in every form. Ruins have just met a new visuality.

This very intensity of place brings into play the mobility of spatiality.

Karmen Mackendrick

Bibliography

- Cauquelin, Anne. *Frequentar os incorporais*. (Inhabiting Non Corporeality.) São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2008.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *O que vemos, o que nos olha*. (What we See, What Sees us.) São Paulo: Editora 34, 2013.
- Foster, Hal. *O complexo arte-arquitetura*. (The Complex of Art-Architecture.) São Paulo: Ubu, 2017.

24. Didi-Huberman, *O que vemos, o que nos olha*, 2013, 142.

25. Cauquelin, *Frequentar os incorporais*, 2008, 43.

26. Didi-Huberman, *O que vemos, o que nos olha*, 2013, 150.

- Greiner, Christine. "A percepção como princípio cognitivo da comunicação: uma hipótese para redefinir a prática da performance." (Perception as a Cognitive Principle of Communication: A Hypothesis to Redefine the Performance Practice.) In *Corpo em Cena 6*. São Paulo: Anadarco, 2013.
- Guattari, Felix. *As três ecologias*. (Thee Three Ecologies.) Campinas: Papirus, 2011.
- Jeudy, Henri-Pierre. *Le corps comme object d'art*. (The Body as an Object of Art.) Armand Colin, 1998.
- Martin, Randy. "Dance and its Others." In *Of the Presence of the Body*, edited by André Lepecki. Wesleyan University Press, 2004.
- Maurice, Merleau-Ponty. *O visível e o invisível*. (The Visible and the Invisible.) São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005.
- Silva, Monica Toledo. "Cosmologies and Body Politics in Imaging Performances from the Americas." In *Venturing into the Uncharted World of Aesthetics*, edited by Linda Ardito and John Murungi (England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing Ltd., 2022).

