Body lands:

Image Performativity in Object and Shadow

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

During a field research for migrants traces in millenar rocks forgotten along centuries in urban outskirts of Greece, suddenly turned into at once archeological and corporeal presences, randon testimonies of life, I explored a notion of borderless configurations of presence and territory. Crossing these material traces through open fields around Athens and the isle of Kos, I recreated a trajectory of body vestiges crossing lands over time, performing images with my video camera. Capturing images within my self projection as a shadow in these Hellenic rocks, their presences were made active, displacing time and place as sculptural and site specific contexts were fused, once related to performance.

This practice of tracing absent bodies (past characters) as related to objects (the ancient rocks) offers a field of dramaturgy where cartography is an imaginary map. To navigate in timeless gestures: a body that performs the place that performs a body. These forms of visuality - my presence as a shadow playing over an absence figured through materiality - play in video language an emergent time and place that embodies a nomadic sense of life.

Body’s intentional presence activates an imagination placed in our sense of perception and visuality. Walking through Ancient sites, rocky beaches and inscripted stones left in the open in both Greek islands of Kos and Crete has been a performing exercise of image creation and connection to other forms of being. Therefore discussion about territoriality, presence, active perception, embodied images and performing landscapes, focused on an expanded understanding of sculpture as both performative and visual is proposed.

Art practices related to this embodied experience were presented as two video installations, Tracing Mermaids (during the Artist Residence Mudhouse, in Crete/GR, 2018), and in 2019 as Body Lands (during the Winter Festival of UFSJ at Adro Arts Gallery, in São João del Rei, MG/Brasil). The epistemological investigations concerning these fields of art and media studies are elaborated and presented here, and includes cognition science, phenomenology and body studies.
This essay explores the idea of sculpture “challenged by the contingency of perception” (FOSTER, 2017:132;143), that occurs in outskirts of archeological sites with objects uncategorized and available to sight. An intentional perception generates sensuous experiences as an affect on the landscape - both the environment’s and the body’s, as well as enables to shift dialogical procedures in different languages and a broaden understanding of sculpture as a living object. In this context the essay also intends to displace notions of both site specific and land art.

Minimalist sculpture has qualitative principles applicable to a perceptive and performative practice of a body that proposes to meet potencial objects from imprecise time and place. Both modern and contemporary notions of displacement apply to this idea of the minimalist sculpture as a phenomenal allegorical object able to act in a semiology of context, and a semantic moving field of body discourses. Corporeality plays in dialogical spaces of understanding of the artistic language of sculpture and performing images in an expanded sense.

In minimalist arts the nature of meaning and the status of the subject are embedded in reality, in a subject/object ambiguity seen as phenomenological experiences. Art historian Rosalind Krauss (FOSTER, 2017:57) 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 Greek island where I meet “sculptural” objects (Hellenic rocks) taken as marks of the presence of bodies who, in past times, have trod their routes there so far elaborating this symbolic subject of the object I create and perceive.

Minimalism would be a “contraction of sculpture and its expansion, beyond recognition” for Michael Fried; “Minimalist work would be somewhere between the object and the monument,” for Morris (FOSTER, 2017:61). The porosity of this artistic language houses an understanding of resignification of the encounter of a body (me as a subject) with an object (an Hellenic rock) reversing these “states” to a performative thought legitimized by my intention to create images and unify temporalities in an audiovisual work.

My perception of Hellenic rocks around Greek archaeological sites (in Kos), over outside established mapped objects makes me think of them as long passed tracks of the presence of bodies - more specifically from migrant bodies who left a trace of their presence there in the spot,
presenting their passage on performing narratives in body lands, and by this process attesting their trajectory.

Figures 1 and 2. Monica Toledo Silva (crd.)

The minimalist practice I experienced by performing encounters, also meets a poststructuralist version that criticizes categories of representation and authorship: the “minimalist suppression of images and gestures is a death of the author.” (FOSTER, 2017:79). When I lose my category of subject I turned into an image (as shown shortly) to become an object observed by any other body, being this other that I turn into a subject by approaching it as a body vestige, I meet an Hellenic vestige, a rock body, and take it as a presence to my performing acts of perception and gesture. We surpass mapped categories to inhabit the context of the encounter, where we become
transitory and alternate qualities of being 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 such,” as Fried suggests. (FOSTER, 2017). Myself and an other, object and trace, body and image. This essay seeks to qualify artistic languages of sculpture and video as an embodied performance to understand the phenomenon of nomadism mentioned as a timeless human presence.

Sculpture as Object

Richard Serra (FOSTER:2017,167) describes sculpture in terms of a “topological place” delimited ‘through motion’; a ‘dialectic between walking and looking at the landscape’. Thus, I look forward an hybrid condition of sculpture in its own phenomenological approach, in which it “exists in primary relation to the body, not as its representation, but as its activation.”

Rosalind Krauss suggests that the specificity of a place is not so much its end as its means; its environment “is the body in destination”. Thus, an object comes to signify from the place where it is located, and in addition it resignifies its place (in the sense of a living space, affected by its presences).

The sculpture for Foster (2017:167;42) would be both subject and local. Sculpture as an exchange between place and subject, (re)defining the topology of a specific site through the motivation of a specific viewer, There would thus be an overlap of different spatialities and subjectivities, so that experience can be sensorially retained. The enunciative dimension of the object - here both a rock (as a record of a once moving body) and a sculpture (material sign) - includes a temporality of me in the present moment and in the past (the vestige body), thus generating a confluent present.

Sculpture would be redefined in terms of place: this particular intervention (an affected body) in a given place generates a performance of my passing body with the trace of a previous body, of this semantic intention becomes a performed visual work (my captured images). Donald Judd also beckons other domains of objects: their presence would imply a new concern with perception - that is, with the
subject. (FOSTER, 2017:59;46) The conception and contingency of the reception of the body in a particular place and time generates this “complex alternation of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts.”

To rediscover the “specificity of the object” that minimalist artists took - and what D.Judd will call “specific objects” would be a “returning to forms - to volumes - their intrinsic power, inventing forms that would renounce to images and that would be an obstacle to the whole process of belief before the object.” (FOSTER, 2017:59;41). The detachment of the object from its statute - be it an Hellenic ruin, a rock, a minimalist sculpture, a performed object, present trail, guarantees its intervention in space, which is no longer a place to be territorialized by my gesture, in turn performed. In relations that involve presences there will be subjects who guarantee specific objects an existence of their own; the activity of producing images is related to this nature of escape.

When, in my performing path, I come across an object which I take as a subject (a lived body), assimilating it in my desire to generate both a semiology and an aesthetic form - in which I am also taken as an object (being an other moving body), the performing images emerged in this place of exchange and expanded temporality.

The spatiality of these bodies, by assigning us (me and the rock) new fields of images. Plus, my subject-object body is present not only by registering the object (the rock subject) but also through my shadow. This, insistently made visible by the summer sun position, determined my visual presence in the scene I create and provides a simultaneity to a past and present moments - the Hellenic object and my body that insists on being visible the scene, illustrates and fulfills a desire to melt these media boundaries in video and sculpture as embodied, expanding the perception of time itself.
This tension between the autonomy of an artistic language and its dispersion in new forms reminds us of Barthes’ (1968) birth of the spectator: I, who see, become part of the landscape I see. I also become an object in this space of exchange that I visually present. The sculpture in the extended field, as presented by Krauss (1978), ignores this way of simultaneously perceiving and acting, passing through forms and temporalities in a scene that is only possible from the encounter. The object (rock) becomes sculpture through my gaze that sees it as a body trace, a subject attested by my intentional act (of perception and of filming) performing its trace modeled by the action of time.

“Only when stable as a format can the work suspend objectivity, transcend modern literalism, and acquire the quality of being present.” (FOSTER, 2017:63). Alligned to this, Morris also conceives shifting the focus from the object to perception and situation, while encountering the other. Objectuality becomes experience: the sculpture object becomes subject in presence and performativity (in this work, an intentional visuality) of my body.

On the outskirts of the city of Kos, capital of the island, public space promotes randomness configurations of time; just as I walk there, I
perceive the Hellenic trails (rocks unmapped as of historical value and interact with them in my performativity (I also realise the number of people who have been there over decades and thus generated other Interactivities or immersive experiences with these same objects will always be unknown. In the same way their vestiges will also be unknown).

Considering that our body expresses singular and diverse modes of presentation of the self, I am a multiplicity of others, embodied at the intersection of “components of partial utterances on all sides of individual identity.” (GUATTARI, 2011:97;123) This partial otherness focuses beyond identification and the very genesis of enunciation is taken up by the flow of processual creation.”

Art is always close to its starting points: chaos, territory and body. In a body performing its own subjects into objects of perception, visuality comes as an embodied and impermanent solution. Even though the body is its own home for all living experiences - it has no permanent mode; how may we elaborate discourses within this nature of self environment?

Corporeality is in motion, not permanent. Denys Riout points to the mode of existence of invisible works, which “require peripheral apprehension, as sites of inscription and images of absence - absence that stage in peripheries. “Thus, visibility turns to the periphery, “an area of over visibility, and moves to the foreground becoming the center of the work.” (CAUQUELIN, 2008:83).

Leaving behind any ordinary thinking, that connects reality to presence, words to messages, space to a visual perspective, a performative thought is extended to all sorts of visibility processes. Interaction would be “insufficient to characterize the operation that interactivity supposes”, being so “proper to every individual who reacts to his environment and acts in return upon it”. (CAUQUELIN, 2008:168).

It is not a matter of claiming imaginative bodies (the artist body present itself as the “object of claim” (the rock as a vestige of presence or sculptural object to my perception). When I interact with the work virtuality, time and place oscillate as they become embodied, Anne Cauquelin explains (2008:185). “This interface makes the body oscillate to the incorporeal and this is precisely where its own poetics is situated”. Added to this is the fragility of the “happening” (at first
glance, unintentional): it is not the place of perception but perception itself - not the place, but the body - in indeterminate place.

This is the connection that defines the 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 (2008:72): displacement "embodies contingency, linear causality, the weight of states of affairs and meanings that beset us with a choice of irreversibility and resingularization." The displacement of my body is recorded by the encounter with the other (the rock body) - a mark that attests its own displace. We document this trajectory itself as an event.

A Timeless Presence: Rock Bodies

Since the Middle Ages, theologians felt 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." (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013:40).

Visibility processes, the forms through which we share our experiences include impermanence and a multitude of other 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.” (MARTIN 128).

For Tony Smith (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013:95;82) a minimalist sought is a dialectical image that carries a latency, demanding a posture before it. This frustrates an iconographic analysis that considers it a symbol or allegory. It demands and embodied attention. “The object of the image would only be a component of form, which may also be the medium of expression.” Thus 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.”

For Jean-Luc Nancy (2008), visuality refers to what is significant in itself: the image as a situation of a body; what I sense from my reality and intention. A form of what and how we want to make visible it (me
producing video images from what affects me as I see it). What is revealed will be a new relationship between me and the object and its surroundings - the perceived landscape.

Visuality and materiality promote non-linguistic statements - possibilities of shared realities. From my imagination in relation to the historical trace (the Hellenic rock) I have performed traces of nomadic bodies. I embody this landscape by conceiving it through the images I see and create; I embody the image by recording it from what affects me.

An image, a sound, a map, do not speak - they are not communicating devices but latent enunciators of landscapes (narrativities). Rocket 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 (overlaying 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 its own presence from its previous history in my virtuality and, in this creation of a new spatiality, I map an other 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 heterogenesis. 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 and performativity. The landscape performs in me and I experience a sculpture as a living material.
Figure 5 and 6. Monica Toledo Silva (crd.)

The agency between object and subject would thus be generated by a disturbance, mobilization or reconfiguration” (MATURANA; PELLANDA, 2009:73) of media corporealities. Henri Bergson beckons a corporality that brings virtual updates, subdomains of the body. Thus one can understand this bodies encounter in times (me in the present and the rock presenting
a past body) and diverse materialities (me virtually visible in my
shadow, the other made present through its mineral condition).

This nature of agency is marked by “diversified and heterogeneous
territories,” (FOSTER, 2017:120;47) both singular and objective. Félix
Guattari (2011:78;113) proposes a “reterritorialization activity”,
essentially an embodied intervention, affective and affected, that would
integrate the whole of life itself: territorialized assemblages of
enunciation.

Foster beckons art as a sculptural experience in itself, as Serra
points it as a “process that modulates by pertinent procedures in
motivated structures” - this tonic making his second sculptural
principle. Serra’s third principle is the situational one: sculpture
“involves the particularity of the place.” These principles are to meet
their various systems (metaphysical, scientific, psychoanalytic,
animistic), involved in art experience bypassing the problem of
enunciation. What should be stated in the enunciation are transfers,

According to GATTARI (2011:31;39), the multiplicity of expressive
enunciation and content instances of the order of expression,
polyphony of language and a multiplicity of expression systems can
formulate utterance points, a significant breaking points, as well as
objects losing their given meaning.

The discursive phenomenological approach therefore enables a
heterogeneity of virtual enunciative focus in manifested expressions.
The expression x content reversibility as an alternative to Saussure-
inspired structuralisms (GUATTARI, 2011:85;34) is also present in this
essay, once the visual expression (the image I produce at the spot of the
encounter) becomes itself an investigative content, for these alternation
and simultaneity of body and sign qualities of existence at that instant.
A body that does not generates a map but instead moves through
random routes. Site, space and presence: the visible as a performed
gesture.

My path is my narrative, and I experience the territory as a signic
duration, performing suspended codes and symbols - the displaced
rock of the archaeological site, random but not forgotten. The sculptural
object is a form of resistance: empty subject body in a mineral form (at
once materialized and absent body). Maturana (PELLANDA,
2009:47;97) draws attention to this “sensory materiality” where “one
exists with the other - a created reality that reverses entropy.”
Narrative diluted to a trace, a presence index, pre sign, is configured as a landscape for a dramaturgy of absence represented by the rock. Landscape as a dramaturgy of itself configured as territory. The changing landscape as an extension of the body. The rock as a cartographic object of this performance of the encounter.

“If sense is absent it’s by way of being here and not by way of being elsewhere and nowhere.” (Randy Martin, 2004:14;17). “There is always a multitude of places in the body, because it is unique in itself. And if the discontinuity of the places of the body is always given, how to overcome fissures of the lived space, if it is at the risk that the body will displace organic oneness? With the discourse that its dispersation will emerge from the void where it raises some unknown figures?” (Marc le Bot; Henri-Pierre Jeudy, 1998).

Perception and Performativity

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 the spot: it is singular and affected. Landscape as body phenomenon unfolding intensities. To create a landscape is to inhabit a time and a space created by a body in a present mode - to wish to inhabit an embodied image.

For phenomenology philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2005:33;36), 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 (2005:66;190) 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-Huberman (2013:119) offers an idea: “the conception of language that transcends our lived experience incites us to search beyond the enunciation”. In our landscapes - memories, affections, traces, we perform discourses in visual forms. Landscapes of the other, landscapes of myself - subject and object mixed in virtual narratives.

Krauss (DIDI-HUBERMAN:2013,66) 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 sytony 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 performativity 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 remembrance 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 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 as a trajectory through territories marked by presences that renew the present promotes in me a landscape as a state of presence. “Enunciative subjectivity, a narrative event, consists on situation and environment.” (DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2013,121;95). 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 remain) 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.

Christine Greiner (2013) 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 a 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 in their trace: processes of visibility that meet 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 creating this territorality that legitimizes a place. The shadow’s (the image of my present body) quality of territorializing 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.” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013:142). The quality of shadow as a virtuality that 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 that 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 creation 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. Inmemorial is both presence and absence, intensified.” (CAUQUELIN, 2008:43).

“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.” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013:150)

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 an other as an extension of one’s own; dramaturgy as a performance of affection when meeting bodies in simultaneous temporalities that expand as they are embodied to the present in every form.

For Paul Klee (2001:33;36) “form provides matter”, and abstraction would “find the way in its present relationship with the world, giving it a visible expression; being abstract is based on the unraveling of pure aesthetic relations.” The concept is attached to reality; it is the “abstraction of transience”.

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

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