

Borrowed Atoms

The Human Body as a Part of its Environment in
Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis I analyze Western ideas regarding the human body's relationship to its environment, and explore how these prevailing ideas have shown up in contemporary art. I also discuss the working process and methods of the practical part of my thesis, a series of mixed media collages titled Borrowed Atoms, and how these works add to the discussion on the topic.

Looking at contemporary art can reveal much about the ideas of the time. Art is a product of the culture in which it was made and is a good lens for examining the prevailing ideas of said culture. This is not a one-way street, however, as art can shape views and create change in cultural norms. I will look at how these cultural views show up in contemporary art, and how these artists are part of reinforcing or changing them in turn.

Lastly, I look at my own creative process, and examine the working methods and final pieces in the context of the philosophical frameworks I lay out earlier in the thesis.

Key words: contemporary art, human body, environment, Western culture

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1 INTRODUCTION

Ever since the agricultural revolution and the creation of cities, humans have experienced a separation from the rest of the natural world. This shift was first a physical one, with walls being built and livestock being protected from predators, but it quickly began to influence the culture of humans, and a psychological separation was created as well. (BBC 2022.)

Throughout history and cultures, different ideas about nature and our place in it have existed. Of these I will focus on the Western perspective, particularly modern and contemporary views. It is important to understand what psychological and cultural perspective the West operates under when it comes to the environment, as nations in this broad cultural category use significantly more resources than others and are as such in need for a change in norms (Giljum & al. 2009). What is not understood cannot be changed, which is why an examination of norms is necessary.

I will examine these norms through case studies in contemporary art. The art of any given time can reveal the attitudes hidden beneath the surface of even what the artists themselves say the meaning of their work is, as well as act as a catalyst for change (Fitzpatrick 2023). My case studies involve Land Artists, who work directly with the landscape, as well as the photographer Sally Mann (b.1951), whose work about death I examine from the perspective of the cyclicity of nature.

2 WESTERN RELATIONSHIPS TO NATURE

2.1 Introduction

While Western cultures are not a monolith and there are differences between religions and regional cultures in how they relate to nature, there are qualities which are recurring and distinct to Western thought. Of these, I will explore hierarchical thinking, progress as virtue, and humans' separation from the rest of the natural world. I will use Arthur O. Lovejoy's history of the Great Chain of Being as my framework and look at how things have progressed since his seminal work's 1933 release.

2.2 The hierarchy

The Great Chain of Being is a hierarchy of beings that has influenced Western thought throughout the ages, starting with Aristotle and Plato (Lovejoy 1933, vii, 59). It was written about extensively by scientists, theologians, philosophers, and poets throughout the centuries, and went through many changes, being modified along the way to keep up with the theology and scientific discovery of the time. However, the main structure of the Chain has remained the same: minerals are at the bottom of the hierarchy and God is at the top, while humans are situated above the rest of the earthly sphere, above plants, animals, and the inanimate objects of nature, yet beneath the spiritual realm (60, 190).

Our place in the hierarchy is due to the prevailing dualism in Western thought, which distinguishes flesh from spirit, with spirit being superior to flesh, and humans being the middle link between the two realms (80, 198). This is also known as mind-body dualism, in which the person within is a different entity from their physical body. Mind-body dualism, according to Dr. Alex Byrne, allows for the hope of immortality: even though our bodies die and decay, our minds are not one with the body and can continue on in the spiritual realm. This promise of immortality was key to Christianity and through it, Western thought. (Wireless Philosophy 2015.)

2.3 Progress

The superiority of the spirit over the body was reflected in our place in the Chain and entitled us to use our environment as we please (Lovejoy 1933, 187). This attitude towards nature fit in well with the texts of Christianity: Take Genesis 1:28:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and *subdue* it. *Rule* over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (emphasis mine)

This ownership model over nature has persevered and was noted as a distinct characteristic of the Western relationship with nature (Tuck & Yang 2012, 5-6). Alongside subduing nature comes the ideology of progress. Perpetual progress as an end to itself came into vogue during the Enlightenment (Lovegood 1933, 246-249). In the past two centuries, this ideal of progress for progress' sake has molded both our relationship to nature as well as nature itself. We have created unprecedented change in the landscape, the atmosphere, and the oceans, building dams, diverting rivers, cutting down forests and polluting the air in the name of progress. (BBC 2021.)

2.4 Contemporary currents

A contemporary philosopher, Emanuele Coccia, frames our relationship to nature as that of the subject's to the object. He writes on how our relationship to the environment is based in seeing ourselves as being active doers within a given space, rather than experiencing our submersion in it. He compares the human body to that of the jellyfish: inextricable from its environment, pierced and made up of the same matter as its surroundings. (Coccia 2016, 20, 38-39, 58-59.) Seeing ourselves in the active role as subduer has, as was shown, deep roots in Western thinking, and has had dire consequences.

The fact that we are a part of one big ecosystem began to seep into the cultural consciousness in the latter part of the 20th century, through the environmental movement (BBC 2021). Yet as we are beginning to recon with the damage that

we have done to the planet, our use of resources is still increasing (Charlton 2024). Growth is still seen as an end to itself, proving the continuing primacy of the ideal of progress (Marchese 2022). We are now at a curious crossroads concerning humans' relationship to their bodies and nature. Our sense of fragility is growing in the face of ever-intensifying weather phenomena, yet belief in the saving grace of progress in technology prevails. (BBC 2021.)

2.5 Conclusion

Western thinking regarding humans' place in nature separates us from the rest of the natural world. Superior to all others in the Chain of Being, our societies have viewed and treated nature as a reservoir of resources, a playground for progress. This worldview has led to catastrophic consequences for our planet, and we are now facing an urgent need to shift not only our practices regarding resource extraction, but the cultural attitudes that brought us to this point. Our physical beings are just as tied to the ecosystem of the Earth as any other living being, and while it is clear that our minds are truly special –this thesis is not being written on a computer assembled by a rabbit or a wolf–, we are only just beginning to recon with the fact that our bodies are not.

3 LAND ART: ARTISTS AS ACTIVE ANIMALS

3.1 Introduction

In the late 1960's, a wave of artists started to bring contemporary art out of the white box gallery and into nature. They made works directly of the materials surrounding their chosen location, with interventions ranging from ephemeral stacks of sticks to large-scale sculptures. This was the beginning of a new movement in contemporary art, called Land Art. (Hodge 2009, 92.) While undeniably changing the way we conceptualize art, land art –and its subset of large-scale earthworks especially– have been the subject of much controversy and criticism. In this chapter I will examine what the practices used in creating Land Art can tell us about the relationship the artists had with this land. Land Art can be seen as a part of the bigger environmental movement of the time. The artists aimed to call attention to and protest the effects of urban industrialization in the wake of the environmental crisis. (National Galleries n.d.) However, in this context the intentions of the artists are of secondary value, as I aim to look beyond their words at the actions behind them, and examine what these actions can tell us about the underlying cultural understandings about humans in relation to nature that these artists were operating under.

3.2 Earthworks

Although the term is often used interchangeably with Land art, I will be using Earthworks to refer to the large-scale Land art pieces, as per Sue Spaid's categorization. These works comprise some of the most famous land art pieces, two of which I will examine: Michael Heizer's (b.1944) Double Negative (1969) and City (1970-2022), and Robert Smithson's (1938-1973) Spiral Jetty (1969). (Spaid 2002, 10.)

3.2.1 Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer

I cannot write about land art without discussing Robert Smithson's 1970 work *Spiral Jetty*, perhaps the most famous Earthwork. Smithson moved 6 650 tons of rock to form a 457-meter-long spiral in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. He embraced entropy and temporality, leaving the work to change with time and the tides. (Holt/Smithson Foundation n.d.)



FIGURE 1. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. (Holt Smithson Foundation, n.d.)

Rather than creating something into the landscape, Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) was made through subtraction. Heizer extracted 240 000 tons of rock to form two trenches in the Mormon Mesa, Nevada. (Moca n.d.) Heizer has continued working in a grand scale, with the most recent addition to his body of work being *City*. *City* is a 1.5 mile by 0.5-mile-wide sculpture made of earth materials located in Central Eastern Nevada, its construction spanning from 1970 to 2022 (Triple Aught Foundation, n.d.).



FIGURE 2. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*. 1969. (Photo by Ken McCown, 2012)



FIGURE 3. Michael Heizer, *City*. 2022. (Triple Aught Foundation, photo by Michael Heizer)

3.2.2 Criticism

As becomes obvious from the descriptions of these Earthwork pieces, works in this subset of land art made huge, permanent interventions in their locations. For this reason, amongst others, the works and the artists who made them have received their fair share of criticism.

The most prevalent critique is a political one, which concerns Earthworks' use of land, its acquisition and lack of awareness of the places' histories. A recurring

site is the American West, which artists continually refer to as “empty” (Harris 2020, 18) and “primitive” (Triple Aught Foundation, n.d.), either ignoring the millennia of indigenous histories that took place on these lands (Harris 2020, 14) or claiming ownership of it through settler history (Triple Aught Foundation, n.d.). Heizer, while acknowledging City is built on historic Nuwu and Newe territories, guards his work like a secret and only admits six people per day to view the sculpture (Liu 2022), cutting off these peoples from their land and reinforcing his ownership.

This is where the cultural attitudes towards the environment Heizer has learnt become apparent. While indigenous peoples can be widely described as having a kinship to “all elements of place” –such as water, dirt, wind and flora– (Harris 2020, 21), the Western approach to land is that of ownership and property, seeing the environment as an opportunity for extracting resources (Tuck & Yang 2012, 5-6). All these works reflect Western ideals of progress and development, as well as the subject-object dichotomy which Emmanuele Coccia outlined: humans are active creatures, practically made for molding their environment. They also show a sense of power that the artists seek to have over the sites, forcing the land to submit to human will through heavy machinery and explosives.

Earthwork artists using the environment as a means to an end is rather obvious when considering the context of the funding of the pieces. Virginia Dwan (1931-2022) was a financier of all the Earthworks I have written about in this chapter (National Gallery of Art 2022). She was also the heiress to the 3M corporation, formerly known as the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (Genzlinger 2022). Alicia Harris put it succinctly:

At the same time that [Heizer, Smithson, and Nancy Holt] started making these works [of land art], 3M was in court fighting over dumping toxic waste into rivers and streams in Minnesota. The woman who benefits from that directly is funding these artists to go and make violent aggressions toward the land... And then we filter that down through the next generation, thinking about [this land art] as a beautiful sight. (Liu 2022.)

Other criticisms of Earthworks include the misuse and appropriation of indigenous cultures, symbols, and stories (but as this does not pertain to the

subject at hand, I will not delve into it further. Also outside of the bounds of this text is indigenous land art, which has been around for millennia and serves cultural, historical, and spiritual purposes on which I am not qualified to speak on (Harris 2020, 7-8, 19, 21). Instead I will juxtapose the ownership model of the Earthwork artists' relationship to land with Richard Long's more subtle approach to Land Art.

3.3 Richard Long

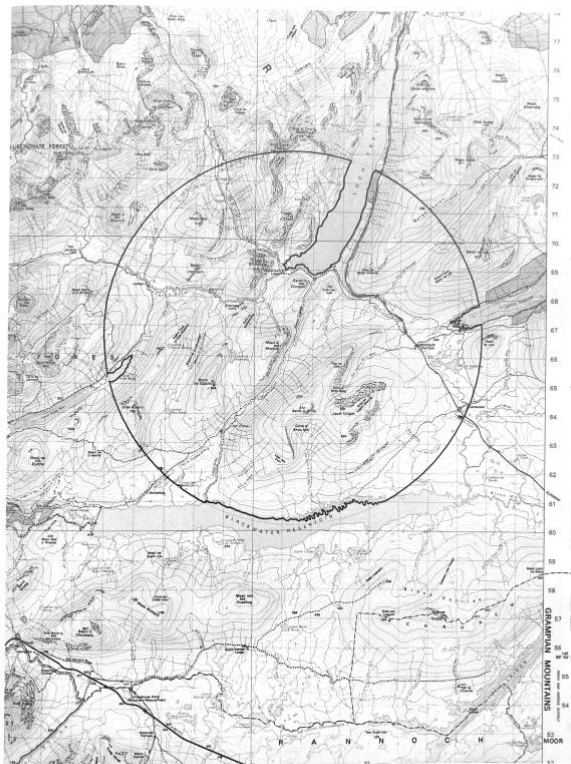
Richard Long (b.1945) is a contemporary English artist. He has a large oeuvre that includes works made for and exhibited in gallery spaces, but for the purpose of this text I will be focusing on his site-specific works and map pieces. Long's working process involves taking long walks all over the planet, and using whatever materials are available in these places to make his pieces, which he then documents either by photography, mapping, or text. He repeats simple shapes such as lines, crosses, and circles in his works. (Fuchs 1986, 43.)

3.3.1 Man at scale

While Spiral Jetty is indeed at the mercy of the elements and its eventual decay, the element of ephemerality is much more apparent in Long's small-scale works. Although the impermanence of the works is a by-product rather than the intention (Cole 2016), it adds to the overall impression of Long putting himself at scale with his surroundings. His work leaves only marginal traces of his presence, and he enters each landscape with an open mind, responding to the elements and materials rather than going in with a predetermined idea of the ways in which he will leave his mark on the earth. Long has responded to his surroundings by using the natural lines made by rivers to direct his path (Low Water Circle Walk, 1980), using the wind's direction as guidance on how to place stones (Wind Stones 1985), along with the countless recurring shapes made by walking, sweeping, plucking, moving rocks, driftwood, snow et cetera.



FIGURE 4. Richard Long, England 1968 (Tate, n.d.).



LOW WATER CIRCLE WALK
A 2 DAY WALK AROUND AND INSIDE A CIRCLE IN THE HIGHLANDS
SCOTLAND SUMMER 1980

FIGURE 5. Richard Long, Low Water Circle Walk, 1980 (Fuchs 1986, 145)

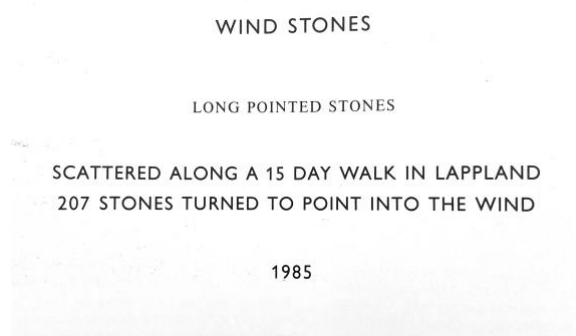


FIGURE 6. Richard Long, *Wind Stones*, 1985 (Fuchs 1986, 232)

There is no denying that Long's works show the human-as-subject model of relating to the environment. His works are based in human activity, in molding his surroundings. However, his works' impacts are much more subtle than the *Earthworks*', and sometimes leave no visible trace at all. Emanuele Coccia brings forth the idea that just existing in a space changes it, that no intentional activity is needed to create a shift in the environment which we occupy (2016, 50), and Long's line-works reflect this framing.

3.3.2 Lines

Richard Long's seminal work is his 1967 piece *A Line Made by Walking*. He walked up and down a line in a field in England until a visible line formed and photographed the result. (Tate 2007.) This is still very much in line with framing human impact through visible changes. However, the lines Long was creating through walking became longer and thus invisible. He started to document his walks through maps and poems, my focus being the map-works. (Fuchs 1986, 46.)



FIGURE 7. Richard Long, A Line Made by Walking (Tate, n.d.).

Long himself approaches these walks through variation in form, be it distance, the amount of time walked or the pattern of the walk (Fuchs 1986, 103), but I am more interested in them through the lens of human presence and impact. When the line lost visibility through its length, the map became its form. A line drawn on a map is a documentation of the fact that Long was in these places and visualizes his presence in the environment, something which cannot be seen (Fuchs 1986, 103). The line also serves as a record of his invisible impact: even on walks where he moved no stone, plucked no flowers, he still left behind skin cells, footprints and heat, his body altering the atmosphere of these places through cycling the air, his mere presence altering the landscape through being in it. Just because these longer lines were not visible like A Line Made by Walking does not mean they did not alter the paths he walked on in similar ways.

3.4 Conclusion

Due to its physical connection to the landscape, the practices of Land Art serve as an excellent mirror of Western attitudes regarding humans and our place in nature, through actions rather than the artists' intentions. Although different in

scale, method, and degree of invasiveness, both Richard Long's and the Earthworks artists' works have an emphasis on humans as active animals operating in a space. Even so, there are two different currents between their oeuvres, with the Earthworks exemplifying human dominance over nature while Long's pieces showcase the more subtle effects human presence has on an environment by merely existing.

4 DEATH, DECAY, AND SALLY MANN

4.1 Introduction

In this part I look at Sally Mann's (b.1951) photography book *What Remains* in the context of contemporary art as well as Western ideas about death in a broader sense. Sally Mann is an American photographer, whose photos have been subject to equal amounts of controversy and critical acclaim. *What Remains* is a book made up of three parts –*Matter Lent*, *Antietam*, *What Remains*– which face death through themes of decay, remembrance, and ageing. I will not discuss the titular series, as it does not pertain to the relationship between humans and the environment. Mann creates her images with a wet-plate collodion technique, which has its roots in the 1800's. The method is prone to imperfections, but Mann embraces these unplanned additions to her work. (Barth 2018.)

4.2 Cultural context

The foreword of *What Remains* reveals the very essence of modern, Western attitudes toward death: that it is ghoulish to be curious about it; that witnessing someone's decay is disrespectful, violating. These are things Mann ponders upon the excavation of her beloved dog, already mostly decomposed, while recognizing that things used to be different:

Death was normal back then. People died at home. Animals eaten by a family were usually killed on the property. Their culture did not have the buffers that ours does protecting us from death's realities." (Mann 2003, 5-6.)

In his book *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, Philippe Ariès outlines the cultural evolution of death from "tame" to "wild" (Ariès 1974, 13). Death went from being a shared destiny, merely a part of the human specie's lifecycle, to a personal experience concerning only the dying and their loved ones, becoming a social taboo in the process (28, 92). Mann breaks this taboo in more ways than one, bringing death in its many forms into public discussion through her art. Looking

at a sample of the artists and works included in a death-themed art exhibition from 2016 (Life. Death. Whatever. n.d.) and a book titled *Art and Death* (Townsend 2008, 11-20), it is evident that a vast majority of contemporary art approaches death as a spiritual and social event, focusing on the mind of mind-body dualism. Mann's work focuses on the body, physical death, leaving what happens to the mind up for the viewer to decide.

4.2.1 Matter Lent

The first part of Mann's book documents the bones of her deceased dog, Eva, and dead bodies on the grounds of the Forensic Anthropology Center, colloquially known as the "body farm", in Knoxville, Tennessee. Decomposition, the physical manifestation of death, is shown in explicit detail, masked only by the lack of color in the photographs. The imperfections brought on by the wet-plate collodion technique bring a brutality to the images, mirroring the destruction of decay that the photos depict. The result is haunting. The images are not a traditional, symbolic *memento mori*, a reminder of the fleetingness of life, but a confrontation of the physicality of death, and thus life.



FIGURE 8. Sally Mann, *Untitled WR Pa 53*, 2001. (sallymann.com, n.d.)

What specifically interests me are the photographs taken at the “body farm”. In them, the audience can see the very process of human matter transforming into something new. Utilizing Emmanuele Coccia’s framework of the fluidity of life through matter (2016, 39), some of these images break down the subject-object boundary: it is no longer possible to tell which molecules belong to the deceased, which ones to the fungi, which ones are already earth. The pictures visualize the exchange of atoms that we constantly engage in, in the last stages of our physical existence, from which we then move on to other matter. Mann herself said that the series shows how “death is not an end, that nature goes on doing its work long after the body has become a carapace,” (Morrison 2010.) The images also take on the body-mind divide. They show what is left after life, and immortality may be difficult to imagine whilst looking at realities of decaying bodies.

Preventing decomposition through embalming has been seen as a matter of honoring the deceased, although a slow shift has started toward natural burials since the time of the photo series’ 2003 release (Araujo-Hawkins 2021). Some even see green burials as “disrespectful or gross” (Fox 2023). Perhaps it is due to how ingrained the Great Chain of Being is in our cultural beliefs about ourselves, that we feel we are too good, too high up in the hierarchy to degrade ourselves by being consumed by and thus becoming lesser life forms. After all, this hierarchy is based on a progression in which we hold a high place (Lovejoy 1933, 262-263).

4.2.2 Antietam

Shifting gears from intimate portraits to landscapes, the second part of the book examines death through remembrance. Photographing a place on her farm where a fugitive shot and killed himself after a police pursuit led Mann to think about how future generations would not know of what happened on the land by looking at it. She then continued with the theme by photographing battlefields from the American Civil War, exploring how carnage and death had shaped these landscapes, how cultural remembrance of the battles in turn shapes the way we see them. (Smithsonian American Art Museum 2013.)



FIGURE 9. Sally Mann, Battlefields, Antietam (Trenches), 2001. (sallymann.com, n.d.)

The Antietam-series works as a continuation of *Matter Lent*. In these photos we see what is left after the earth has swallowed us –a visibly unchanged place, marked only by cultural knowledge. This is evident in the choice of place, as Mann recognizes that death is everywhere, in every landscape (Smithsonian American Art Museum 2013), yet she chose to document governmentally protected fields of cultural and historical significance. Here, the bodies are gone, yet a memory of the minds of the soldiers remain. Just as with the place of death on her farm, to a viewer left in the dark about the locations of the photographs, the images of the battlefields could be of any place in the world, reflecting again how death is in every place, whether we put up memorial plaques or not. In the photographs the bodies are hidden yet present turned to grass, soil, and cultural remembrance.

4.3 Conclusion

To me, these images are both comforting and complicated. They show that the earth does not care, it does not remember, it simply is and will continue to be, long after we are gone. Mann's work reflects a way of relating ourselves to our environment in which we recognize our smallness in the grand scheme of things, and our interdependence on the environment and other creatures. The images capture bodies disappearing into the earth, visualizing the briefness of life. Reminding audiences of the physicality and temperance of life flips the idea of mind-body dualism on its head: our atoms will continue to roam the earth while our minds will be gone, kept alive only through cultural remembrance.

5 ARTISTIC AND WORKING PROCESSES

5.1 Introduction

Borrowed Atoms is a series of five works, which constitute the practical part of my bachelor's thesis. Each one is a mixed media collage, each employing a variation of different materials and methods of making. The name of the series is quite straightforward, referring to the way in which the atoms within us are not ours to keep, but merely passing through us. These works focus on the physical body and its place in the cycle of matter, with one exception, which touches on the mind/spirit as well. Though it is not the main message of the series, the embracing of cyclicity is simultaneously a critique of the current progress-idolizing society we live in, which is built on a linear view of resources that is destroying the environment (Knight 2023).

Aside from the paint and some store-bought inks, all the materials used were recycled, including the surfaces on which the pieces were made. As a distinction, I did not go looking for recycled versions of a selection of predetermined materials, but rather rummaged around in my cache of materials and surfaces, choosing from what I already had available. These restrictions feed my creativity, which flows better when combining existing elements rather than making decisions onto a blank canvas –the reason I use collage as my main method of working in general. This way of creating also resonates thematically with the pieces: relying on an existing cache of material puts an element of chance into my work. We cannot know where the atoms we surrender into our surroundings will go to next, and I rely on the same force of random chance to make some of my artistic decisions for me. In my artwork statement, I compared myself to worms and fungi, taking in waste and creating something new out of it.

My visual inspiration came from the works of Anj Smith (b.1978) and the collages of David Lynch (b. 1946). The result looks somewhat like a combination of Smith's use of flat horizons, vast swaths of sky, and intricate details mixed with Lynch's limited color palettes and potpourri of materials. What has drawn me to these pieces is what Roland Barthes calls enigma, or hermeneutic codes: mystery

within the pieces draws viewers to stop and look for answers to questions posed by the works (Dixon 2020, 8). My aim was to create pieces that are compositionally interesting enough to be looked at from afar, while including a sense of intrigue in my pieces through use of detail, texture, and by combining details to form new forms, e.g. by creating flora out of body parts. This intrigue was important in leading viewers to look closer and have a sense of discovery while looking at my work. Anecdotally speaking, at least, I have succeeded in my goal. I have gotten positive feedback from peers, industry professionals and gallery-goers alike, and watching people looking at my work has shown viewers to stop, take one step closer, then another, even lean in to get a closer look.



FIGURE 10. David Lynch- Billy (and His Friends) Did Find Sally in the Tree, 2019. (Art in America, n.d.)

FIGURE 11. Anj Smith: Lost Patteran, 2010. (Art in America, n.d.). Kuvaan tulee otsikon lisäksi lisätä vaihtoehtoinen teksti saavutettavuutta varten.

5.2 Return



Return
 Silja Tusa
 Collage, acrylic, ink, gouache and dead plants on cardboard
 43 x 30 cm
 2024

This was the first piece I made for my thesis project. In fact, I had already started working on it before I decided on my thesis subject. I simply wanted to create plants out of body parts, and I had been thinking a lot about Western burial practices and their irrationality. I combined these ideas into a piece that reflected how we are interconnected with the universe through matter and decay. When I discovered Coccia's philosophy, I knew immediately that I had found a fitting framework for the type of art I wanted to make, and I decided to follow this path as my thesis' subject.

Due to its first-born status, Return is the most literal representation of the idea of the exchange of matter. Alongside enigma, I wanted to include a sense of levity and humor in the work, in order for the themes of death and decay to be more

palatable. The smiling face of the dead, the hand-turned-root pushing down on her face, the flowers on the tree made of Colgate-smiles, all laughing at the absurdity of our delusion of being above nature, above decay: human bodies submitting to the earth.

5.3 Roots



Roots
Silja Tusa
Collage, ink, gouache, thread, sand, dead plants and plastic on wood
108 x 70 cm
2024

The creation of Roots embodies my way of working very well, so I will approach it through process rather than content.

I was halfway done with *Return* when I decided I wanted to continue with the visual of hands forming trees, but on a much bigger scale and with more intricacies in the shape. The tabletop as a surface was chosen out of practicality, as it just happened to be the biggest surface available to me. Once composed, I glued the hands together before gluing them to the table. I first made chunks of collage that I then modeled on the canvas, building up the work very slowly, noncommittally. I painted the hands to be consistent, using gouache and some acrylic paint, as well as expired tattoo ink. For the table, I used the tattoo ink and natural inks I had made from chokeberries and onion skin.

Dissatisfied with the lack of dimensionality at this point, I started to chisel away at the table, inspired by a recent Veera Kopsala (b.1991) exhibition. I then went on to create details, as many and as intricate as was plausible in the timeframe I had. I began with making “veins” with thread, an arduous process of gluing one centimeter at a time that was thankfully worth the result. Due to the slowness of the method, I tried to replicate the effect with an ink pen, but the lines were not as sharp or consistent in thickness as I’d hoped, and although the thread is very light, it still added a layer of texture and dimension that ink could not compete with. I also added beard moss –taken from already dead trees, as it is protected–, seeds from a cherimoya fruit, dead flowers, sand, and painted silica gel. I also added highlights by carving out thin lines into the wood with the tip of a mechanical pencil.

All in all, my working method is much like play, looking for interesting materials and textures to add bit by bit. The only thing I plan is the basic composition of the work and go on from there with curiosity and intuition. This piece especially succeeded in creating enigma and intrigue through detail, material, and texture, as viewers have asked me about almost all aspects of the creation of the work: what is the surface? What are those seeds? Are the hands really paper?

5.4 Borrowed Atoms



Borrowed Atoms

Silja Tusa

Collage, gouache, natural inks (chokeberry, onion), string and dead plants on MDF-board

47 x 60 cm

As I previously stated, I had wanted to reuse the shapes of body parts as plants before I had decided to make my thesis on this subject. Even more inspired by Coccia's framing of plants as the creators of shapes (2016, 21), I started to create a variety of differently shaped flowers, many of which did not make it into the final piece. Although I only knew the basic structure of the theory at the time of making these works, I played around with the Great Chain of Being, flipping the hierarchy on its head. Making flowers out of body parts combined two lifeforms on different levels of the hierarchy, equating the high with the low (Lovejoy 1933, 59; 184.)

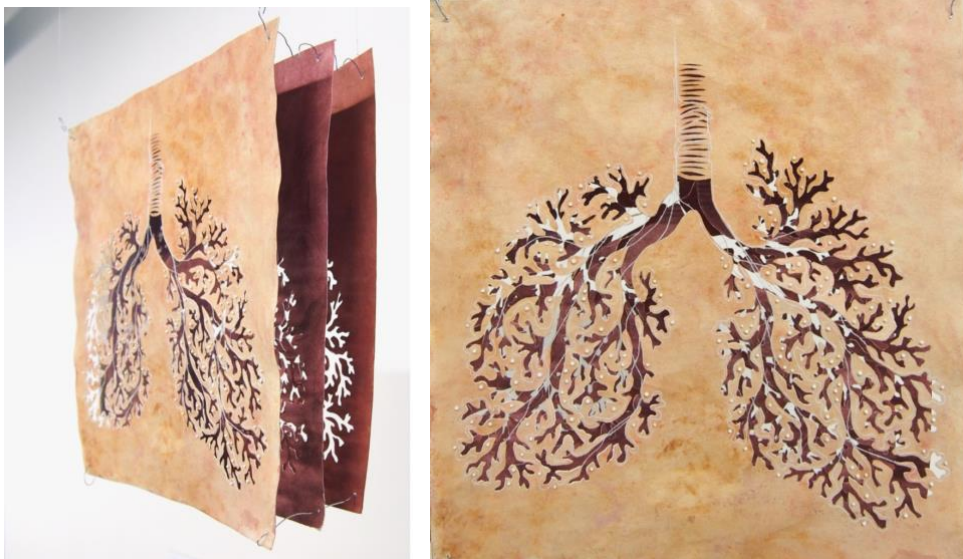
Due to the nature of collage, I could decide on such a fundamental aspect as the surface on which to make the work only once I had compiled the body, as that

determined the size of the piece. I ended up using an MDF-board that used to be a painting I had made in the first year of my studies.

While the plants were the focus of the work, I wanted to put a human body into the scene as well to highlight the interconnectedness of human and environment. The body, as well, is collaged together from various pieces. I wanted to keep the subject's pose and expression ambiguous, not revealing to the viewer whether she was alive or not. This was to express how, even in life, we are constantly melting into our surroundings, leaving behind skin, hair, heat, carbon dioxide.

The figure in the piece being bald was at first a matter of convenience, what with not having to cut out hair, but I soon recognized that it reads as some type of self-portrait. In hindsight, I realize I have been thinking about my own mortality and physicality of being while making these pieces, which adds a layer of meaning to the work. Through putting myself in the work, I am not only pondering the human condition as an abstract, but including myself as a representative of humanness, facing my own mortality.

5.5 6 Litres of the Atmosphere



6 Litres of the Atmosphere

Natural inks (onion, chokeberry), ink, wheatpaste, string and silica gel on paper
28 x 27 x 12 cm

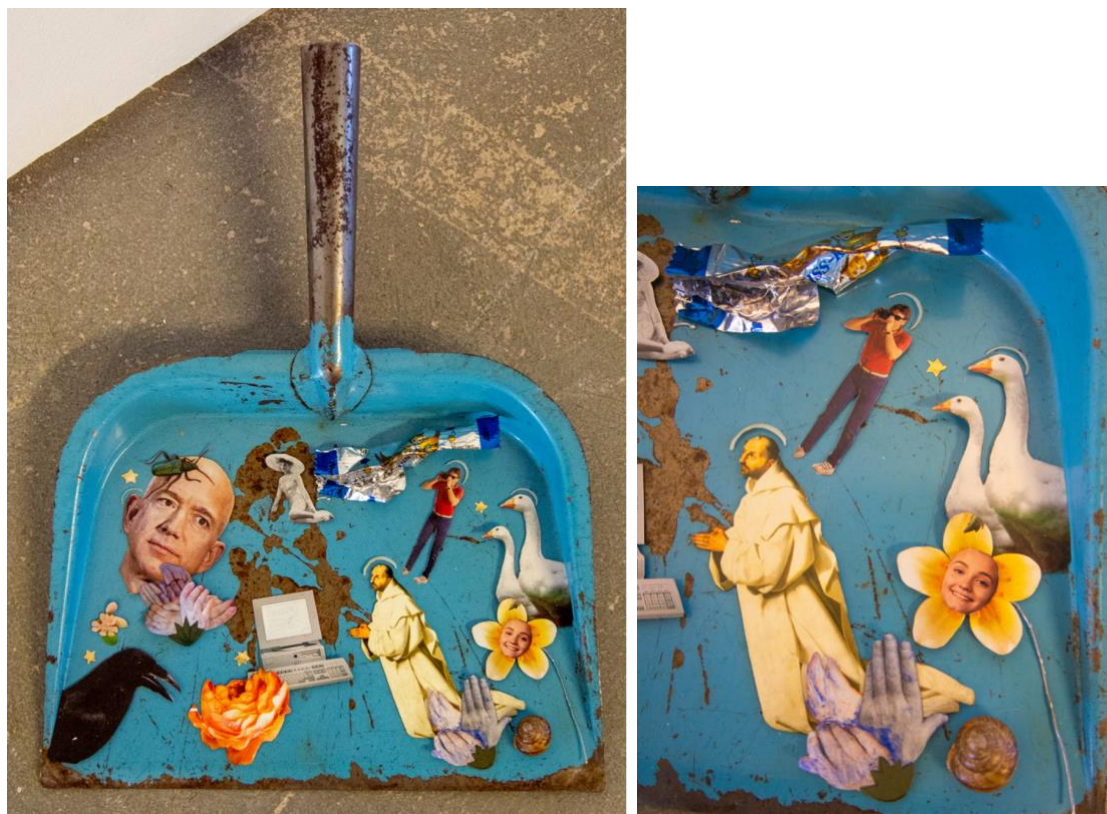
2024

My original plan included only making Return, Roots, and Borrowed Atoms. In congruence with the theme of being connected to space, I wanted to bring my work off the gallery wall and create a sense of the work interacting with the space around it. Coccia writes about the atmosphere as being the basis of the fluidity of life (2016, 20), as the fluid that is always in and around us. This idea, combined with the fractal pattern of lungs, inspired me. The fractal pattern and the color of the work tied the work to the rest of the series, despite it being otherwise very different from the collages.

The lungs in the work are roughly the size of the average human lung, and the name comes from the average lung capacity. It visualizes the idea of the body being in space just as the space is within the body, as per Coccia's philosophy.

In practice, I first painted the papers with natural inks and strengthened them with wheat paste, after one failed attempt that proved the paper was not thick enough to resist tearing. I used thread once again, to uphold the structure of the work, which once again gave a visual tie to the rest of the series. I then added the same silica gel I had used in Roots, this time painted white.

5.6 Dust is Us



Dust is Us
 Paper, collage, the artist's fingernails and trash on dustpan
 32 x 23 x 11cm
 2024

This work came into being on a whim. The dustpan is my grandmother's from the 1960's, which I saved from being thrown out when she moved houses. It was never intended to be a part of an artwork, and I used it in my day-to-day life. I first came up with the name and played around with different ideas of visualizing dust.

Once I decided to use the dustpan as my base, the process was very quick. I went through my stash of magazine cutouts and sprinkled the most interesting, funny, symbolic, or purely conveniently sized images onto the pan, took a snapshot of it to capture the composition and left the pieces in a box until the week of setting up the degree show.

I usually make heavy adjustments to the collaged pieces in my works through painting or abstracting them by only using a single detail, rarely using whole, unaltered images. I added a visual tie to the rest of the pieces through using

leftover hand flowers from Borrowed Atoms. It fit in with the series well, and its placement on the floor added dimension and visual interest in the composition of the wall.



The wall in Galleria Himmelblau with my series. (Silja Tusa 2024)

This piece has an unusual amount of symbolism for me. It is simultaneously about the way in which we are constantly shedding skin, hair, cells, bleeding into our environment, but also about death as the great equalizer. Neither the monk's religion nor Jeff Bezos' fortune will help them escape physical death. The former's faith and the latter's wealth act as symbols for the different ways we try to immortalize ourselves. The crow is a classic symbol of death. The now-outdated computer marks the passing of time through its obsolescence. The pistil of the flower is my face. My fingernails adorn the work in several places along with a snail's shell, abandoned cells integrated into the work. I integrated myself into the work to once again highlight my own mortality, equating myself with the rest of humanity, as well as bringing Bezos down to our level.

I displayed the piece on the floor. I recognize that the placement of the work holds some accessibility issues, as not all can crouch down to view it more closely. However, the work would lose some of its appeal and humor were it to be placed on a stand or mounted on the wall. Its placement seemed to intrigue viewers, as did the content, particularly the image of Jeff Bezos. His face is so recognizable and the image was big enough that it drew viewers in for a closer look, which led

to the discovery of smaller details, like my smiling face, the flowers and the trash. I once again utilized the sense of enigma, as some images were there for symbolic purposes while others had no special meaning at all. This creates a sense of mystery, making the viewer wonder of the meaning behind the ducks or the photographer. This question has no answer, further deepening the intrigue.

5.7 Conclusion

I explored the theme of physiological cyclicity in this series, utilizing reused materials and the element of chance to reflect the visual content and the theme at large. By creating plants out of human elements, I distorted the linear, progression-based way of thinking about matter and life, which Arthur O. Lovejoy outlines as being a fundamental element in Western thought (1933, 263; 306). I aimed to visualize the human body's physical connectedness –Coccia's submersion– with the rest of the world. Through use of visual enigma, I managed to create visually interesting works that invite viewers to stay and explore, works that reward the audience by revealing new details with closer inspection.

DISCUSSION

This thesis examined how generalized Western attitudes regarding the relationship between our bodies and the environment revealed themselves in the works of contemporary artists. Case studies of Land Artists and Sally Mann were contemplated through the framework of the Great Chain of Being, mind-body dualism, as well as Emmanuele Coccia's thoughts on submersion, which represents a newer wave of thought. Lastly, I examined my own working process of creating *Borrowed Atoms*, a series of mixed media collages I made as the practical part of my thesis.

The most prevalent findings in the collective Western mind were the primacy of hierarchy, progress, and viewing humans as the active stewards of nature, extracting resources and bending our environment into submission. The dualism of mind and body, or flesh and spirit in the context of Christianity, separates us from the rest of the natural world, and has thus played its part in our shared sense of superiority. Through the environmental crisis we are now facing, our relationship to our environment is at a crossroads, with a growing sense of fragility on one hand, and a steady belief that progress in technology will solve this crisis.

As art is the reflection of the cultures in which it is made, it is expected that these beliefs and attitudes come through in contemporary art. Seeing humans as active subjects, molding our surroundings and submitting it to our will is present in the works of Land Artists, particularly those who made Earthworks. Although their intentions were to reconnect art with nature, their actions and artworks reveal this attitude of stewardship. Sally Mann's work, on the other hand, speaks more to the shifting relationship between humans, their bodies and the environment. Her work breaks taboos about death and decay, showing the physical interconnectedness our bodies share with their surroundings. They convey a contemporary recognition of the human species' place in the cycle of matter through death, but this viewpoint translates into life as well.

The practical part of my thesis was a five-part series of mixed media works, which explored submersion through cyclicity in both visual content and working methods alike. I foraged for and gave new life to discarded material through art.

Content-wise I broke the taboo of death and decay, played with space, and equated culturally elevated beings with the so-called lower life forms. I approached the theme through my own worldview, secular and science based, with a concern for the environment and its destruction.

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FIGURE 2. Michael Heizer, Double Negative. 1969. The Cultural Landscape Foundation, n.d. Retrieved 23.4.2024. <https://www.tclf.org/landscapes/double-negative>

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