

The circulari project

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Project made in collaboration with Paula Meijerink.

Introduction

What kinaesthetic sensations do we transplant as we move from one place to another? How do these circulate and become inscribed in our bodies and in lands we cultivate? The *circulari* art project finds its inspiration from the kinaesthetic scores or corporeal maps we gather, generate and leave behind as bodies move through urban and rural landscapes. With *circulari*, the choreographic stage takes the form of an inverted grapevine field where the dancers are not people, but inanimate objects, that is, uprooted grape vines or as they are called in French, cèpes. These organic materials originating from a specific agricultural landscape in the south of France were uprooted, inverted and imbued with kinaesthetic qualities. In this transplanted and transformed landscape the choreography is manifested by interpolating movement between the ‘bodies’ of the cèpes using compositional groupings of solos, duets and trios (Image 1) in a landscape grid.

circulari like my past art practice transplants, transfigures and transforms kinaesthetic qualities across material forms. For instance *trajets*, (2007) co-directed with Susan Kozel is an ecosystem of moving screens which respond to the movements of the public, much in the way that water propagates and ripples around your body when you wade in water. *Shifting ground*, (1998) on the other hand, is an interactive installation where three filmed dancers of separate geographic and kinaesthetic cultures are choreographed in a video dance together with an interactive interface. *circulari* unlike these works, challenges my practice as it uses organic, yet inanimate materials as choreographic objects and integrates methods from landscape architecture.

Within the context of this conference *Topologies, Bodies, Sites and Technologies*, I would like to highlight the idiosyncratic nature of this choreographic and landscape architecture project by first summarizing a selection of historic and contemporary choreographic examples that couple the body and landscape. The second part describes the process of making *circulari* and introduces the theoretic outcomes and future artistic itineraries. The lecture demonstration includes over 20 images (many not included in the proceedings) and concludes with a physical slow motion walking exercise inspired and inherited from Japanese choreographer Kei Ta Kei.

Part One: Context of other practitioners

There is little written on landscape and choreography¹ and the examples cited below serve not as a genealogy of the

genre, but instead as evidence of ways in which the body and land, so to speak, materialize new choreographic works, methods and concepts. Within the context of this presentation a non-exhaustive selection of examples provide a thematic platform to help articulate the singularity of the *circulari* project. These examples include the works of contemporary British company Igloo (Ruth Gibson and Bruno Martelli, <http://www.igloo.org.uk/>) Japanese Eiko and Koma (<http://www.eikoandkoma.org/>), American Anna and Lawrence Halprin (www.annahalprin.org), Austro-Hungarian Rudolph Laban and the Monte Verita dancers and the French King Louis XIV (if we can call him a choreographer).

Hervé Brunon, art historian with the Centre Nationale Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in the article, *Lieux scéniques et chorégraphie du parcours: les jardins de Versailles et la danse sous Louis XIV* in the anthology *Comme une danse* illustrates relationships between choreography and landscape design in the courts of Louis 14.th Brunon exposes the ways in which a movement map was created to guide the visitor’s paths through the gardens in Versailles. These share visual features with the Feuillet’s dance notation systems of the 17th century. For instance, there were indications of where one’s body stopped to gaze at a particular fountain and then turned to appreciate another feature of the garden. There was even sound that accompanied each step of promenade in the garden. (Welcomme 2007:92-99) Here as Brunon demonstrates with visual examples, dance notations and garden viewing shared a common mapping or *kinaesthetic navigation*.

A few centuries later, mapping new choreographic territory was one of Rudolph Laban’s drives with his dancers in Monte Verità Ascona, Switzerland between 1913-18. Here dancing (naked) in the natural settings of the land was an integral part of the spiritual quest for understanding new movement and choreography. Here the landscape was a sort of *fertile stage and source of spiritual inspiration* for living and dancing and the development of ‘new dance.’ The landscape or nature inspired a new way of being, expressing and describing the bodyⁱⁱ.

With the contemporary work of Igloo, on the other hand, new digital and analogue landscapes are not only sources of inspiration but are constructed and materialized as new hybrid artworks/landscapes. In their artwork, *Summerbranch* (2006) they explore movement and stillness in nature coupled with a variety of digital tools to materialize

new choreographic *landscapes or danscapes*. Other works such as *Back Strikes Empire* (2006) and *War Stars* (2002) were filmed in the natural settings of Western Australia and Iceland. Their work staged as games, performances, and installations create alternative landscape-choreographic metaphors. Another contemporary company Eiko and Koma, based in the United States integrate landscape spaces that partner the dance movement. Their performance work *River* (1995), the outdoors version, for instance is staged in water.ⁱⁱⁱ *River* is staged in a natural setting where the choreography is a *mise en scène* or perhaps better stated as a *mise en mouvement* with the qualities of the bodies and the movement of the water.

Seminal and contemporary choreographer, Anna Halprin, also makes *mise en movements* with dancers in particular environments which date back to *Automobile Event* (1968) where dancers are invading cars in urban settings, or with *Seasons* (2003) where bodies in netted bags hang like cocoons in the trees of a forest. This choreographer went beyond making work in natural settings and developed with her husband, Lawrence Halprin, a landscape architect, a new devising method, namely RSVP (Resource, Score, Valueaction, Performance). This method used by choreographers and urban designers alike, illustrates how ideas of landscape design and choreography together have become *compositional strategies of creativity and planning*. The RSVP method does not only serve the dance community but has been used as a creative method in urban design.

With the works cited above, we can see how the coupling of choreography and landscape led to new *landscapes/danscapes* (Igloo), *mise en mouvement* with nature (Eiko and Koma), *transdisciplinary methods of devising landscape design and choreography*, (The Halprins) *a source of physical and spiritual inspiration (Laban- Monte Verita)* and even with the gardens of Versailles a sort *kinaesthetic navigation or mapping (Louis XIV)*.

Part Two: the making of the project

Before collaborating with the landscape architect Paula Meijerink I exercised an eclectic range of research methods which included observing the public in transit in busy train stations, to filming flocking flamingos in the Camargue, France or observing darting schools of fish underwater. With time I found that my interest did not lie in ‘representing these collectives’ but instead in extracting choreographic and kinaesthetic understandings of collective behaviour. I discovered through observation and readings that tendencies of collective dynamics create unpredictable but organised dynamic behaviours such as displace-come together-pull apart. (Feder 2007: 28-30)

Closing my eyes on the metro I let myself ‘be’ the crowd to feel the accelerations, decelerations and movement vibrations. The train not only affords a place to transport the body but it also offers the rider with a particular type of body

or kinaesthetic-dwelling of a moving landscape. Was my body and the train a technological-kinaesthetic-landscape? Building on this notion of displacement and kinaesthetic transformation of sensation, landscape architect Paula Meijerink and I began discussing the notion of transplanting kinaesthetic sensations and patterns of mass movement in public and agricultural spaces.

Paula grew up on a farm in Holland and I had an upbringing living in different geographical and linguistic backgrounds. Both of us began discussing the ways in which we could think of displacement as well as transformation of place and embed particular movement qualities into physical space design. During our research we considered the qualitative tensions and rhythms inscribed in moving landscapes from different places and experiences of transit. The creative process began to evolve and we focussed on, mass movement in rural and urban sites, kinaesthetic inscriptions between the landscape and the body, the particularity of a place and the ‘natural resources’ or ‘site’s resources’, and finally the idiosyncratic cultivated inscriptions of a landscape.

We set off to begin the residency at L.A.C Lieux d’art Contemporain in France in the summer of 2008 for the first phase of the project with a series of ideas and sketches and the decision to use local ‘natural’ resources. We were given the opportunity to create an outdoors installation beside the L.A.C gallery: a converted wine cellar. Upon arrival at L.A.C we found two types of landscapes or agricultural motifs that contradicted each other. The fertile grounds of vineyards pulled your gaze from one lush field to another. The other was less fluid, punctuating space with heaps of uprooted cèpes lying dead in piles on the field. We understood later that these piles were uprooted cèpes waiting to be removed or burned. From a distance the cèpes looked like a heap of bones- horizontal, dead.

The landscape rhythms of this particular region took on another sort of kinaesthetic depth and itch: from grapevines to graveyards. The economic culture was such that these cèpes had been uprooted and discarded to control wine production. The vineyard owners received financial compensation for controlling the production and uprooting the cèpes as proof of their good economic behaviour. These piles of roots would be used for summer barbeques or heating during the winter months.

When I picked up the discarded pieces of wood from the heap of twisted uprooted roots I felt as if I was holding onto a sculpted body, a limb, amputated, but somehow still carrying the memories of the winds, rains and sun that had brought about its curves and contortions. As I began picking up these ‘cepes-body-parts-roots’ closer to my own body I found that each had a particular expressive potential and a sort of resilience. With this art project this uprooted piece of cèpe would resist its death.

At first Meijerink’s intent was to use a few hundred cèpes as a support structure for a porous video wall that the

public could appreciate as a sculpture or a video screen. As we began working with these cèpes, however, we ran into problems. We found that the dense nature of these cèpes contradicted our metaphor of a breathing porous transformed wall. We were humbled by our ignorance of the particular nature of this material. We were trying to make it do something that was against its material qualities. With the help of the architect Thierry Beaudoin, the porous wall was abandoned and instead, we became interested in the singularity of each cèpe standing up looking alive again, alone, but with others.

Could we bring them back to life through verticality? We turned them upside down, cut them across with a chain saw and painted the cut bleeding red like the vessels of the body (Image 2 and 3). Each cèpe was analyzed and cut based on its potential to somehow support its own weight. During this process, I felt the tensions, turns and rhythms of each cèpe. Moving from the foreign to the familiar the cèpe-body began to trigger movement memories in my own body. The cèpes were movement mnemonic devices. As I was choreographing the dynamic relationships between the cèpes and 'planting them upside down' I was also reminded of Doris Humphrey's choreographic statement that verticality is life - horizontality is death and that the dance took place between these two places...the arch, the suspension.

How could a dance take place between two pieces of still uprooted roots? Somehow it was our body's interpolation of movement and the potential of the dynamic tensions of stillness that afforded a kinaesthetic structure.

We laid out a grid, a common landscape architectural practice for Paula Meijerink which echoed the original spatial organization inherent in the vineyards. The solos, duets and trios took place along the x-axis (Image 3). By transforming their position from horizontal to vertical, giving them a form, we had planted a new grape garden, upside down from their original positions bleeding with another layer of blood pouring and spilling into the field with a video projected during the evening performances.

What I began to realize was how the absence of literal movement created a desire for movement. The curves and dynamic trajectories inherent in each cèpe and the oppositional and counterpoint positions of their neighbours created a kinaesthetic pull in the landscape. Inanimate objects could be animated through a potential of dynamic stillness. (Image 4)

With *circulari phase one* the leitmotifs of the bodily and organic collide and bleed across each other as a dynamic landscape. While we were satisfied with this collective field we realized that the next phase would demand more time. We want to add yet another layer of movement with miniature video and sound sources grafted to the cèpes. But we now knew that this would involve more technical

consideration and moving the landscape inside as an installation where we can control the electronics.

The next phase of the project is to produce another incarnation of the artwork as well as publish a short pictorial book highlighting the concepts we are discovering together through this collaboration. The installation plans (Images 5 and 6) are sketches of another incarnation of the project - a spiral promenade and nesting structure. Paula Merjerink is also looking at the wine production sectors in the world and the changing landscapes due to the economic production of wine markets.

To conclude, prior to this project Paula had never considered this kinaesthetic aspect of landscape, and I had not thought of the economies of the production in landscape design. We ask ourselves is this a movement landscape, a kinaesthetic sculpture, a new video vine or a video garden – or simply a work where roots are uprooted and transformed from one place to another. Or, as Gertrude Stein says: "Its great to have roots as long as you can take them with you."

Exercise- Stillness and Slow motion

To conclude the presentation I asked the participants to take off their shoes and engage in a slow motion thirty minute walk from the inside of the studio to the outdoor space. I inherited this exercise from Japanese choreographer Kai Ta Kei's class that I undertook at UCLA while doing my MA in choreography. It physicalises the slowing down of time offering a way to slow down movement and approach stillness.

This slow motion walk, like *circulari* takes me closer to tiny shifts of movement effort, pulse and tension which linger in our bodies and space permanently. The *circulari* landscape is a field of compositional stillness. As a kinaesthetic perceiver, however, I can only feel the movement.

Images

Image 1. Duet Cèpe.



Image 2. Painted Cèpe.



Image 3. Paula Meijerink
L.A.C



Image 4. Field at night



Image 5. Field of Cèpes

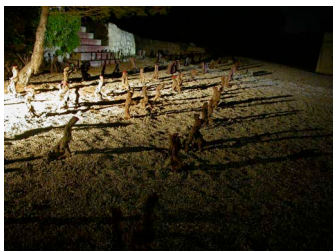


Image 6: Circulari Phase Two

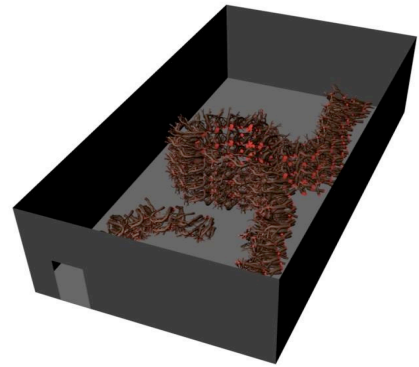
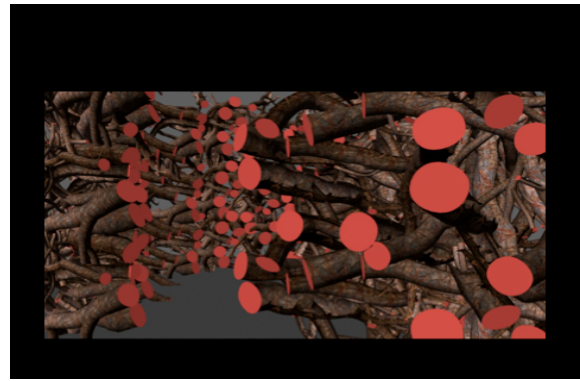


Image 7: Circulari Phase Two Cross Section.



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Endnotes

ⁱ With the exception of the thematic book concerning dance and landscape. “Comme une danse” Les carnets du paysage published in 2007.

ⁱⁱ (<http://www.csf.ethz.ch/about/history/highlights>)

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on this work and others see their website: (<http://www.eikoandkoma.org/index.php?id=1460>).

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