

# Elemental Spaces, Elemental Performances

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Performance always engages space as a central question. Type of space: proscenium, black box, amphitheatre, street corner, warehouse, chat room, concert hall? How to fill it: elaborate sets, props and sounds, contexts and objects conjured by speech and movement? Shall we include the audience in the performance space or leave them in the utopia of spectatorship? Indoors or outside? Will it be cold, warm, muggy, cramped, full, empty, noisy? Whether a performance space is large or small, inside or outside, designed for performance or temporarily adapted to it, there is at least one thing common to all. Performance spaces are necessarily immersed in and surrounded by elements: light, warmth, scent, air, moisture, breeze and ground.

Some of the most profound discoveries are those that illuminate phenomena so basic and imperative that they tend to go otherwise unnoticed. Such phenomena tend to be integral to the structure of experience and perception itself and thus take on the transparency of taken-for-grantedness. These include such familiar themes as the performative constitution of identity, the orienting effects of space and the lived body, the seeming truths of ideology and the narrative structure of social reality. We say that these kinds of phenomena are naturalized because they are given to us *as* natural and are thereby immune to ordinary reflection. These cultural and performative phenomena themselves are articulated within and subtended by the 'primordial' phenomenon of *the elemental*, or the elements.

The elemental envelops the milieu we inhabit and move through. The elements fill our experiences and exceed their horizons. They fluctuate, encompass, transform, encroach and recede. As the elements wrap up space in depth - from the intimate spaces of our bodies to the vastness of the world - they are prior to the vast catalogue of things already understood and acted upon as objects and tools. 'Prior to being a system of tools, the world is an ensemble of nourishments', writes Emmanuel Levinas (1987: 63). For Levinas, the elemental supports and sustains the things of the world, which are given to us first and foremost in a relation of enjoyment. The furnishings of the world are things that we enjoy; they can be obtained, toted away, possessed. Yet the milieu from which things come to us (terrain: earth, light, sea, city, wind) cannot be grasped in this mode of possession. 'The element has no forms containing it; it is content without form. Or rather, it has but a side: the surface of the sea and of the field, the edge of the wind', writes Levinas. 'The medium upon which this side takes form is not composed of things. It unfolds in its own dimension: depth' (1969: 131). Depth is the sensual plenum in which nature-as-process-and-experience is given to us. As Alphonso Lingis puts it, 'the elements are sensuous realities; they are not perceptible frameworks, dimensions or intelligible structures. . . . The elements are there by incessant oncoming' (1998: 14-15). The elemental is given in and as

movement: oncoming. It is vitality and sensuousness, the very milieu of living.

In this essay, I consider some of the works of two artists, Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) and Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), as elemental performances. Elemental performances concern performative relationships between techne and nature, movement and milieu, nourishment and knowledge. Like all performance, elemental performances imply questions of space. These questions are articulated between two poles. In the first case, there is the human-crafted environment in which nature-objects and elemental processes are brought into a performance space and used as a medium or a context for the presentation of aesthetic work. On the other pole, the performer ventures into elemental spaces themselves to craft works from the processes and objects of nature. Common to these two poles are encounters with both elemental processes and nature objects. By focusing my attention on Beuys and Goldsworthy, I don't intend to discard the insights and works of artists like Robert Smithson, Sandy Gellis and Michelle Stuart, or Christo, each of whom produce varying degrees of environmental or earthwork art. Rather, I find the work of Goldsworthy and Beuys to span the poles of elemental performance enough to allow me to begin to articulate a theory of elemental performance.

To investigate elemental performance, I follow Jill Dolan's description of 'utopian performances'. Dolan takes up the familiar theme that performance can be socially and culturally transformative, and that a commitment to this perspective 'might offer us consistent glimpses of utopia' (2001: 456). In the course of her essay, Dolan discusses the fleeting and transient experiences of utopia that are created, summoned forth, made possible, or otherwise constituted during the lived experience of many performances. Dolan revisits the theme of artistic idealism in contemporary (narrative) performance art, claiming that the no-place/happy-place of utopia 'can be imagined or

experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide' (2001: 460). A 'glimpse' of utopia is a felt encounter, an affective moment that, however temporarily, cracks open the joint of time to a future of possibility. This ungraspable, fleeting quality of live performance, of these 'feelings and sensibilities', brings about what Dolan terms the 'utopian performative' (2001: 460). The lesson I wish to take from Dolan is that performance can constitute unique types of space that exceed traditional static notions of spatiality. Dolan's descriptions of utopian performance call for an understanding of space that is haptic rather than optic; it is a space that is lived immediately rather than observed from a mediating distance.

Andy Goldsworthy is most appropriately described as a sculptor, so it is a bit unusual to consider his work from the perspective of performance. Goldsworthy is well known for working with nature-objects like stone, slate, dirt, sand, clay, wind, light, leaves, feathers, sticks, plants, flowers, ice, snow, rivers, tides and frost. Several of his sturdier works (e.g., giant stone arches, winding walls, cairns and modified boulders) occupy museum spaces or are available for public viewing. Most of his works, however, occur within elemental spaces and must be adapted to the vicissitudes and contingencies of the 'oncoming' of the elements. These works tend to be transient, fleeting and marked by failures. Goldsworthy and an occasional assistant are often the only audiences for these temporary sculptures. Nevertheless, most of these works are preserved imagistically through photographic documentation and collected in a series of art books. Though the photographs are static representations of elemental processes, the texts and descriptions accompanying them make clear that temporal and eventual arcs mark the processual boundaries of the works. It is in this sense that I consider Goldsworthy's sculptures to be performances. Like more traditional performances, Goldsworthy's works occur in a

particular place, and go through a temporal succession of planning-rehearsal-execution. The execution stage (i.e., the performance) has a temporally marked beginning and end, with nothing remaining but documentation and description, matter and memory.

The elements are central to Goldsworthy's works: elemental processes are characters, providing plot, structure and conflict, as the natural objects Goldsworthy works with are encountered in a relation of enjoyment. Whether in the midst of working on a large-scale sculptural project or working by invitation in some location, Goldsworthy tries to make several works each day. These sculptural performances rely on encounters and experiments with the elements. A typical sculptural performance is as follows. While in Holland, Goldsworthy explores a terrain of woods and dunes. He decides to try to work between the two by making a sculpture of sand against the bark of a pine tree, giving special attention to its orientation to the light. Goldsworthy uses trial and error with the elements until he can get the sand to stick to the tree. Gravity, moisture and light provide performance problems for him to solve, as several attempts find the sculpture collapsing during construction. Finally, he compacts and sculpts damp sand onto the side of a tree into a raised serpentine design. The visual effect is of a flowing stream of earth climbing out of the ground, cut by the light to maximize contrast. As the sand dries, its texture, firmness, stability, and colour changes. Over the period of a week, gravity, evaporation and wind contribute to the partial decay of the work. Evoking elemental processes, Goldsworthy writes, 'I am trying to understand the internal tree - the tree below and above the ground and the process of it drawing nourishment through its roots - discovering the tree of earth that is within the tree of wood' (2000: 122). Goldsworthy's discovery is itself a relation of nourishment and enjoyment, revealing that movement is an essential structure of elemental processes, encompassing

nascence, growth, decay and change. In similar works, Goldsworthy will sculpt clay, sand or dirt onto stones at a beach or along the banks of a river. Texture, light and colour are essential features of the works, which are photographed before (and during) being washed away by a rising tide or river. When working with the elements, Goldsworthy encounters a performative urgency. The work - an elemental transformation - must be completed before being washed away. Yet the tide itself brings about another elemental transformation, and thus is incorporated into the temporal span of the work (as a final moment/movement in the performance). At a beach, the elemental force of the tide operates as a kind of placial palimpsest, and nature itself becomes an elemental performer in Goldsworthy's work.

Water plays a central role in much of Goldsworthy's work, as a way of working with and encountering the elemental force of fluidity or movement. Fluidity is descriptive of the nature of performance itself, as it evokes process qua process: flow, change and transformation. Working with tides, Goldsworthy creates works that are either knocked down or carried away. A cairn of stones on a beach or a serpentine trench in the sand has the time of its construction constrained by the oncoming tide, which then completes the performance by washing it away. Colourful leaves stitched together with thorns or pine needles are placed in a stream while the flow of the water choreographs the floating sculpture into a dance, which ends in the dissolution of its form. In other works, colourful leaves or feathers are dipped in water and wrapped over a stone in a stream; the striking effect of the assemblage of light, water, leaf, feather and stone eventually washes away. Red stones are ground to a powder and dumped into a pool of water, becoming an ephemeral sculpture of moving colour that quickly dissipates and settles at the direction of the elements. Snowballs are mixed with blood or dirt and melted onto paper to make a type of elemental painting (thawing and evaporating

become performative processes in this case). The most ephemeral of Goldsworthy's works are his 'throws', in which snow, pebbles, dirt or stones ground to powder are tossed into the air. The fluid movement of the wind, combined with the play of light off the material, constitutes the work (which is captured and solidified in a photograph). Considering the relation between performance and the elements, Goldsworthy writes, 'At times it is difficult to say where my touch ends and the place begins' (2000: 22).

In much of Goldsworthy's work, the elemental imperative of transition plays a constitutive role in his sculptural performances. The transition from night to day brings not only shifting plays of light, but atmospheric changes of warmth and breeze. An arch made of slates of ice will be assembled through the night; the elemental glory of its illumination at dawn brings with it the warmth of its destruction as its structural stability melts away. Seasonal transitions of plant growth or snow will overtake a cairn or stones or a hole structure built from woven branches or sticks, reproducing the diurnal tidal process of dissolution over an annual period. Transitional elemental processes like freeze, thaw, decay, dawn and dusk highlight the liminal, ephemeral and contingent nature of performance in Goldsworthy's work, as evidenced by the following description accompanying a photograph of a work done in Cumbria, England, in 1982: 'ice arch/left to freeze overnight before supporting stones removed (made in a field with cows - a tense wait)/pissed on stones too frozen to come out/fourth attempt successful/other three arches collapsed or melted' (1990: 27). Here Goldsworthy depends on the cold of night to freeze slates of ice together. The risk of animals destroying the work during the night passes into the urgency of removing the supporting stones before the elemental process of thawing compromises the structural integrity of the arch. Goldsworthy has to use the warmth of his own urine (itself a transitional material) to loosen the arch from its supporting stones. A

photograph records the temporary arch of ice before it collapses and melts away. It is important to note that failure appears to be a central performative constituent of many of Goldsworthy's works. Trial and error, along with risk and failure, themselves become performative transitions between techne and understanding in a relation of enjoyment with the elements.

Levinas's phenomenological and primordial sense of enjoyment describes the performative aspect of Goldsworthy's art, which is articulated in the doing. Goldsworthy's enjoyment rests in the encounter with the elemental, which is at once growth and decay, transition and movement. As Lingis writes,

Every enjoyment is a death: a dying we know, not as the Heideggerian anxiety knows it - being hurled from being into nothingness - and not as pain knows it - a being mired in oneself and backed up into oneself by the passage into passivity - but as a dissolution into the beginningless, endless and fathomless plenum of the elements.

(1998: 22)

Goldsworthy immerses himself into this plenum, becoming an inevitable part of the transitional movements of the elemental. This can clearly be seen in his 'shadow' sculptures, where he uses his body as a shield to temporarily delay an elemental transition. Lying on the ground when it starts to rain, for example, Goldsworthy will remain motionless until the surrounding ground (dirt, stone, asphalt, cement, sand) has become saturated with the wetness of the rain. When he raises himself up, there is a 'rain shadow' of dryness in the form of his body that will disappear either by continued raining (dissolution of the shadow) or by the evaporation of the water from the ground (dissolution of the elemental background). Goldsworthy also makes 'frost shadows' by standing in place at dawn, allowing the frost surrounding his shadow to burn off, leaving only a fleeting elongated human form of frost.

Working with a combination of transition and delay, Goldsworthy produced a series of

'midsummer snowballs' in which he stored large snowballs in a freezer and then placed them in an urban environment (London) during a warm summer day. These large snowballs (they were several feet in diameter) had been made in the winter months and were filled throughout with various nature-objects - such as pine cones, ash, beech branches, cow's hair, sheep's wool or elderberries - or with cultural materials like barbed wire or hunks of metal. As the large snowballs melted, the materials that remained created a secondary sculpture. The midsummer snowballs are more easily understood as a case of performance because of the addition of (unsuspecting) audience members. The snowballs became something of a combination of street performance and installation art, similar to a 1960s happening or a fluxus performance. The difference, of course, is that a happening was an abstract comment about the limits of the ontology of art, whereas Goldsworthy raises concrete, though implicit, performative questions of elemental processes and space. As the snowballs melted, leaving only their elemental innards, they also interacted with passersby, creating a secondary flow of elements among the flows of people. This suggests a deeper affinity between human experience and the elements, and can be understood as an attempt to expose the forgetfulness of the elemental forces subtending cultural objects and activities (which is why Levinas included the city as an example of an elemental milieu). Goldsworthy's comments on the elemental experience of his snowballs are consistent with Levinas and Lingis:

Nature does not stop or start at the boundary of a city. I want to see growth in wood, time in stone, nature in a city. I don't mean city parks, but the earth on which it is built, the stone with which it is made, the rain that falls on both field and pavement, the people moving around its streets. I dislike the way that nature is perceived by some as peripheral to and separate from the city. . . . Part of the reaction to the snowballs is likely to be a sense of shock and bewilderment provoked by the feeling that nature has emerged in a place

where it doesn't belong. . . . For me, unexpected occurrences of this sort are evidence that nature is never absent, just not seen.

(2001: 33)

With his midsummer snowballs, Goldsworthy's work itself transitioned from an encounter with the elements to a performance of the elements. For people coming and going from work, the melting and transforming of the snowballs marked an elemental performative. The elements intruded on those in the milieu of the city as a reminder that they are in fact always in the midst of the elemental. As movement and transition, the elemental always intrudes on bodies, spaces and perceptions. Elemental performances constitute an immediate space that is affective, sensual and haptic. Not only are the elements given as oncoming; they are also given between things. A giant snowball in the city during summer announces not just the elements we inhabit but the elements that inhabit us. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, 'the space in between things is the space in which things are undone, the space to the side and around, which is the space of subversion and fraying the edges of any identity's limits. In short, it is the space of the bounding and undoing of the identities which constitute it' (2001: 93). An elemental performance happening in a place of familiarity can direct our attention to the nourishment and enjoyment of life, those things sustained by the elements.

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Joseph Beuys has long been considered a luminary of performance art, and (like Goldsworthy) he is a sculptor who works with materials from the natural world. Though Beuys and his work has been discussed extensively in terms of modernism, social healing and redemption, the fluxus movement and cultural critique, and spiritualism and shamanism, I limit myself to a cursory examination of elemental performatives in his work. In many ways, Beuys is both Goldsworthy's forebear and his opposite. A brief exposition of Beuys

through contradistinction to Goldsworthy should help articulate the range of elemental performance.

To begin with, Goldsworthy usually works in the elements themselves; Beuys was more likely to work in gallery spaces. When working outside, elemental flows can be captured and harnessed in processual contexts, taking advantage of the elements *qua* elements. An elemental performance for Goldsworthy is a performance *in* and *with* nature. This, of course, places the artist/performer at the whim of the elements, which hasten decay and the ephemerality of such work. As a result, Goldsworthy relies on extensive documentation (film, photography and journaling) of his performances. In effect, then, the most performative of Goldsworthy's pieces are experienced by audiences only through mediation and documentation. Goldsworthy's more permanent pieces (e.g., walls, stone cairns and arches, as well as commissioned works for sculpture gardens) lack an ephemeral quality but still perform elemental processes, if only on a long-term view of event and movement. In contrast, an elemental performance for Beuys is a performance *of* nature, and it is usually presented indoors. Rather than capturing elemental flows *in situ*, Beuys was able to capture, isolate and reproduce elemental phenomena within a performance space or gallery. Take, for instance, what is likely Beuys's most famous performance (he preferred the term 'action'), 1974's *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*. In this performance action, Beuys was wrapped in felt and taken from the New York airport to the Rene Block Gallery in an ambulance. Inside the gallery, Beuys, along with a coyote recently captured from the wild, was caged in a room with wood floors and a couple of windows. In addition to the coyote and the large felt blanket he continued to wrap around himself, Beuys had a stack of hay, a cane, and copies of the Wall Street Journal. Beuys stayed in the performance space with the coyote for a week in an attempt to create communion with

the animal in the warmth and primacy of life. During much of the performance, Beuys emitted a churning, moaning, primal hum. This aural component of the work is a performative refrain that helped constitute the performance space as elemental, reminding us that 'for hearing to awaken is to listen to the rumble of the city or the murmur of nature, from which sound emerges and back into which they sink' (Lingis 1998: 13). As Beuys performs the murmur of nature in a gallery (itself wrapped in the elemental rumble of the city), he is able to temporarily transform a cultural space into an elemental one. This transformation of space and intrusion of the elemental is similar to what Goldsworthy accomplishes with his midsummer snowballs, yet the caged space and the presence of the artist indicates a more intimate enactment of the elemental performative. The body of the artist or performer (and by extension, the bodies of audience members) becomes the pivot point for all of performative tensions that Beuys tries to bring to the fore. The oft-discussed political critique and spiritual tenor of *Coyote* must, then, be understood in terms of the elemental performatives that articulate its very context.

Second, whereas Goldsworthy works with nature-objects that are mineral and plant-based, Beuys tended to work with animals and materials derived from animals. Fat, felt, blood, honey, gelatin, wax and fur make routine appearances in Beuys's sculptures and performance actions, as do hares, bees, stags and elk. Most of Beuys's products require a technological intervention for rendering or acquisition. In addition, Beuys tends to use nature-objects for their symbolic value (as concepts or philosophical/political themes) in order to produce aesthetic arguments. Goldsworthy, on the other hand, uses nature-objects for their formal values (colors, textures, densities) in order to explore elemental depth. For both artists, sculpture is a performance because they understand sculpture fundamentally in terms of process and movement. An

understanding of the difference between the two artists in their choice of nature-objects incorporated into their work can be made clearer by another distinction: for Goldsworthy, the elements are a performative and ontological milieu sustaining both nature and culture; for Beuys, the relation between the elemental and the cultural is articulated in a dichotomy of spirituality and utility.

Such uneasy dichotomies usually express the dramatic conflict of a Beuys performance. When sticks and stones are used, for example, they tend to be in a culturalized and spiritualized form, as shamanic implements or primal resources. The animal materials Beuys employs express the uneasy ontology of man, who is at once nature and culture, spirit and thing. Beuys often highlights such uncomfortable relations by bringing animal materials into contact with cultural items like chairs, shovels, walking sticks or newspapers. Whereas Goldsworthy will wrap a river stone in wet red leaves, Beuys will cover the seat of a chair with a large wedge of fat or make a sculpture out of gelatin, wax and electrical transformers. For Beuys, cultural objects fill the role of intruder, and this intruding performative is heightened by the proximity of elemental materials. Take, for example, Beuys's 1968 sculpture *Earth Telephone*, which consists of a rotary telephone next to a phone-sized clump of mud and straw on an unfinished wooden board. A telephone is a tool of communication (both *techne* and *communion*), but it remains circumscribed by the elemental and orientational primacy of the earth itself. The representational symbolism of the sculpted clump of mud is necessary in order to pursue Beuys's political critique that the earth is calling or that we need to hear the earth's call as a call to action (Rosenthal 2004: 48).

From the performer pole of elemental performance, fluidity also plays a central role in Beuys's works. Now, however, it is the performer-as-a-human-body that is fluid. The elemental not only subtends our overall

environment at its furthest horizons, but it also subsists in the orientational loci and elemental vitality of our bodies. In many of his performances, Beuys makes himself into a character of transition and movement, occupying a role of shaman or enchanter, mediating between the cultural, the spiritual and the elemental (Levy 1988: 57-9). For Beuys, the warmth of bodies and elemental transformation is a primary presence in his work, and is brought forth by thermal objects like fat, felt and fur. Fat, like gelatin, wax and honey, can be readily transformed from solid to fluid states with the addition of heat, and has both an emergent fluidity and warmth as part of its elemental essence. Fur, hair and mammals also express elemental warmth, while felt can be seen as a primal thermal sculpture (since it is produced by the primitive elemental technique of matting fur, hair, or wool by applying pressure and moisture). These transitional elemental objects in Beuys's work act as thermal performatives and create elemental warmth. In Beuys's work, the elements are encountered as oncoming and intrusive. Whether in a sculpture or in an action, Beuys's minimalist style lays bare the elemental as intruder - phenomenologically, the elemental is given to us in Beuys's work both as stranger and caregiver. Beuys explicitly incorporated phenomenological thought in his aesthetic practice, as it highlights the fluidity of phenomena and 'an open attitude in the face of what man encounters' (Durini 1997: 86). What we encounter without fail, always and already, is the elemental. Movement, warmth and flow animate the individual life lived, social relations, and the dialogue of nature and culture. Like Goldsworthy, elemental spaces and elemental performances encompass Beuys's work.

Though this foray into the elements has been brief, we can see their nourishing role and articulating function as a performative resource. The elemental (and the elements) is a primordial phenomenon explored in the phenomenological works of Levinas and

extended in the work of Lingis. The elemental expresses a phenomenological depth prior to and subtending all objects (of culture and nature alike); it is prior to both *techne* and episteme and must, necessarily, encompass each. The elements are given as both a sensuous plenum and incessant event - that is, as process, movement and flow. The elements are content without form. An elemental performance, then, is one that creates the emergence of content in an aesthetic encounter between *techne* and the elements. This most clearly happens as an encounter between nature-objects and aesthetic practices. Goldsworthy and Beuys offer two examples that cover a wide array of ways that this encounter can take place. Though Beuys and Goldsworthy's works are ostensibly quite different in their materials used, their modes of presentation and the types of space they work in, they are joined by the sensuous enactment of elemental performatives: warmth, light, transformation, transition, decay, movement, flow. What their work shows us is that performance can create glimpses of elemental space - spaces that are haptic, affective, alive and nourishing. Movement and transformation have primacy in these performative spaces, as the sustaining elements are oncoming and intruding. Through a primal encounter with the elemental, the *techne* of performance can articulate nourishing relationships with nature.

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