Natural Histories
Traces of the Political

Working with Trouble: Reassembled Landscapes of History and Nature

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Trouble was the word environmental theorist Donna Haraway chose as the most pertinent to introduce her discussion of the interlocked social, political, and ecological crises that profoundly afflict the present. Pointing to its etymological roots in the thirteenth-century French verb *troubler*, meaning to stir up, make cloudy, and disturb, she talks about disturbing, troubling, and turbid times on Earth, claiming that it is our task to "make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."[1] We need to stay with the trouble, Haraway demanded, in order to learn "to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in a myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings."[2] Such unfinished configurations of historical and natural assemblages, in which meanings and matter are intertwined across the shifting sands of time and human destinies are conjoined with those of other critters, have elicited a plethora of artistic responses. At the same time, when it comes to galvanizing public awareness and political consciousness, stirring up trouble has shown itself to be a reliable artistic strategy.

The palpable acceleration of anthropogenic changes to the Earth's climate over the last decades and the growing awareness of the fact that the "traces of our urban, industrialist, chemical and nuclear age will remain for thousands or even millions of years in the geological archives of the planet"[3] have also contributed to the rising sense of trouble. The great divide between nature and society that was maintained during the last two centuries of industrial modernity have consequently been called into question by scholars invested in the study of the age of the Anthropocene, whose intellectual project, formed in light of ecological urgency, calls for the "reunion of human (historical) time and Earth (geological) time, between human agency and non-human agency."[4] Such novel temporal, ontological, and institutional considerations underlie the emergence of the environmental humanities, a convergent field that also encompasses the environmental arts and its histories and is dedicated to working through the troubles brought about by the separation of human and natural history. These have materialized not only because of the understanding of the inextricable interdependence of humans, non-humans, and the biogeochemical processes on the planet but also because our species is now recognized as a geological force with the agency to change and potentially terminate those existences and processes.

In such an atmosphere of tangible trouble, heightened attention is also devoted to the excavation of particular overlaps of natural and human histories from the near and distant past. The reconfiguration of the landscapes of history is considered in this contribution through artistic projects that have focused on specific turbid instances of historical and natural conjunctures, whether by revisiting the sites of wartime terror, uncovering the material residue of those

1 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

2 Ibid.

3 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso, 2016), 21.

4 Ibid., 32.

conflicts, or by disclosing their natural afterlives. It also examines those practices in which a politicized engagement with natural processes and non-human agency also provides a means to reconsider the legacy of social and cultural struggles, such as by assigning plants and animals a role in revealing social conventions and shaping the political climate at particular historical junctures. Furthermore, the shifting soils of the post-fascist, post-communist and post-colonial amalgam that fervidly troubles the present are refracted here through an environmental prism that situates them in a planetary and not just a social order. Finally, while reflecting on cultural and natural entanglements that are a constitutive part of artworks, it also questions their encoded environmental attitudes.

When three members of the Slovenian OHO group covered themselves in long black drapery with only their heads protruding and struck a pose in a snow-covered park in Ljubljana on the day before New Year's Eve of 1968, they were counting on the trouble such an act would provoke in the public sphere of a socialist country. In other words, by placing beneath their living sculpture a banner that read in capital letters TRIGLAV, literally meaning three-headed, they provocatively merged their urban action with the anthropomorphic signifier of a mountaintop in the Slovenian Alps, a geological formation that when observed from a distance resembles a trio of human heads. As the highest peak in the country, Triglav is the prime symbol of Slovenian national identity, featuring in many literary and cultural references of nationhood as well as on the country's coat of arms, the post-socialist version of which was in fact designed by Marko Pogačnik, a founding member of OHO. For Slovenes, who in addition to taking pride in their distinctive language and culture also consider themselves as characteristically mountain dwellers,[5] the humanlike mountaintop took on the function of personifying the essential qualities of the nation. When it comes to the imagining of national identity, environmental historian Simon Schama has observed that patriotic sentiment "would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland."[6]

By performing *Triglav* in the city center, OHO artists subverted the hallowed status of the mountain peak and brought it down from its elevated position in the pantheon of national consciousness into the midst of a tumultuous sociopolitical atmosphere. The period in question saw a softening of the communist grip on Yugoslavia and the voicing of national demands by the Federal Republics, with Slovenian intellectuals briefly able to openly discuss the possibility of achieving a more sovereign status, before party functionaries objected to the centrifugal implications of such proposals. There was, however, an additional layer of subversion in *Triglav*, namely that the heads of Milenko Matanović, Drago Dellabernadina, and David Nez poking out though the fabric were all unshaven, long-haired, and quite possibly stoned. It was their countercultural

5 Aleš Erjavec, "Neue Slowenische Kunst—New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management, and the 1980s," in id., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 135.

6 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), 15.

orientation and the way they drew on the revolutionary spirit of 1968 that aided OHO in their daring expression of dissatisfaction with mainstream society and its national horizons, a position which eventually led them to abandon the institutional art world and retreat to a rural commune where they could engage in lifestyles that are closer to nature. In these new circumstances, rather than questioning the meaning of natural symbols in national consciousness, they were able to go a step further and engross themselves directly with the physical landscape, exploring the possibilities for a more sustainable form of society.[7]

Miroslaw Balka took a different point of departure to unsettle national consciousness when he made a number of pilgrimages to the sites of concentration camps from World War II, making inconspicuous film recordings in the most gruesome historical locations on Polish territory. Visual fragments from the death camps of Majdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Treblinka are looped in Balka's exhibition settings as countless repetitions of a continuous struggle to come to terms with the trauma of the Holocaust. "We can only see the Holocaust in fragments, and these fragments are individual lives and individual deaths," the artist explained, since "consciousness of fragments [is] the only way to understand life."[8] However, he also pointed out that these films "were not made for exhibitions" but were rather from his "own need to make them."[9] Such a claim is not surprising bearing in mind that the artist grew up in Otwock, a small town in the vicinity of Warsaw, which due to its microclimate and great pine forests became in the second half of the nineteenth century a popular spa resort and sanatorium, before the onset of World War II changed it forever. The Nazi occupation, in addition to the euthanizing of its psychiatric patients, also saw the extermination of the town's large Jewish population, either in the Otwock Ghetto or after transport to the death camps of Treblinka and Auschwitz, leaving a permanent scar in the geohistory of the place. The artist, who turned his family home in Otwock into his studio, incorporates his own personal fragments of this troubling history into a practice that pertinently questions how to work through such disturbing legacies.

The fragment depicted in his 2003 video *Winterreise (Bambi)*, which was filmed in Birkenau, shows four small deer unsuspectingly grazing in the snow behind the barbed wire before they are interrupted by the presence of the cameraman; they then pause, look up, and run away. The title of the work was borrowed from Franz Schubert's somber lieder cycle, while the subtitle references the Hollywood film *Bambi*, which was released by Walt Disney in 1942, also the year the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" was put in motion. The video carries connotations of the banality of the everyday and the persistence of the gruesome past in an apparently antagonistic scene of the intrusion of wildlife into the landscape of the Holocaust. Indeed, we are "accustomed to think of the Holocaust as having no landscape," wrote Simon Schama, or at most we could

7 For further discussion of OHO see Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 65–110.

8 Interview with Miroslaw Balka by Susanna Davies-Crook, "Disassembling Bambi," *Exberliner* (December 7, 2011), accessed April 4, 2017, http://www.exberliner.com/culture/art/interview%3AMiros%C5%82aw-Ba%C5%82ka/.

9 Ibid. See also Marek Goździewski, ed., *Miroslaw Balka: Fragment*, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 2011).

imagine it to be "one emptied of features and color, shrouded in night and fog, blanketed by perpetual winter, collapsed into shades of dun and gray; the gray of smoke, of ash, of pulverized bones, of quick-lime." This makes it evermore "shocking," Schama continued, "to realize that Treblinka, too, belongs to brilliantly vivid countryside."[10] A similarly disconcerting reaction is provoked by Balka's filmic record of deer moving heedlessly around a *lieu de mémoire* of incomparable suffering, while it is equally distressing to realize that the site of such atrocities is being irresistibly reintegrated back into the natural environment, where natural processes obliviously continue to take their course.

The reference to *Bambi* in Balka's work is usually interpreted in relation to the paradoxical fact that while Europe was in the turmoil of the darkest hour, America was mourning Bambi, a young deer whose mother was killed by hunters in a heartbreaking story based on the book by Austrian author Felix Salten. However, when considering national consciousness and ideas of nature, claims have also been made that Bambi, more than any other real or fictional character, has influenced the way Americans feel about their wildlife and woodland. Namely, that its "images and concept of nature have been impressed on the American psyche and reinforced through decades of exposure to the film, its multitude of spin-offs, and Disney's marketing magic," so that Bambi has become one of America's "most widespread and emotionally powerful national symbols of nature, one that motivates deep concern, and dedicated action to protect wildlife."[11] The environmental message encoded in the film, in which humans do not appear but are the biggest evil and threat, is amplified today when the anthropogenic changes to the natural landscape are recognized as the cause of the current wave of the extinction of species. Namely, in contrast to the five previous mass extinctions that have occurred in the history of the planet, the Sixth Extinction, as environmental writer Elizabeth Kolbert has pointed out, is a result of an "unnatural history," since this is an "event of our own making."[12] Although the sight of deer running and grazing in the countryside is a familiar one, it is also a reminder that their spread is also a result of the extermination of other large animals over centuries of overhunting.[13]

The destruction of nature and species extinction is also closely connected with the history of the expansion of European modernity to other parts of the planet. The exploration of unknown territories and colonization of new lands came with "deadly ecological consequences" since, as eco-critic Ursula K. Heise has stated, "a natural abundance" itself became "one of the lures of the imperialist enterprise."[14] The tension between the exploitative attitude to the natural world that colonialism brought about and more environmentally attuned indigenous cosmologies was the subtext of an action, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, performed by Joseph Beuys on his first visit to the United States in 1974. Indicatively, in order to avoid setting foot on American soil, the artist chose an ambulance as a

10 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 26.

11 Ralph H. Lutts, "The Trouble with Bambi: Walt Disney's Bambi and the American Vision of Nature," *Forest and Conservation History* 36, no. 4 (October 1992), 160–71.

12 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 267.

13 See George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life* (London: Penguin, 2013).

14 Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 36.

form of transport from the airport to the René Block Gallery in New York, alluding also to his own emergency art operation. Tactically deciding to reach out to the suppressed history of America by spending several days in a gallery with a wild coyote, the preeminent symbol of Native America, Beuys also pointed to the political and economic upheavals the country was facing at the time, including the Vietnam War, the oil crisis, and the impeachment of President Nixon.

Beuys addressed the social and political situation of the most powerful country on Earth by engaging in an unorthodox exercise of establishing intra-species communication. Recognizing the coyote as a sacred animal to the Native Americans, Beuys "conjured a world where animal, human, and spirit were one," while at the same time the coyote was not only present as a metaphor but also as an animal that modern farmers saw as a pest and was therefore faced with "threats to its existence."[15] The real coyote and its animist role were inseparable in this work that was concerned with working through the troubles created by the abyss between human and animal in the Western humanist tradition. In parallel, the coyote could also be perceived as an embodiment of the "post-colonial animal," pointing to the consequence of the "practice of European Enlightenment colonialism as a 'civilizing' mission, involving the pacification (and passivication) of both savage cultures and savage natures."[16] Furthermore, through the act of reading newspapers to the coyote, the artist indicated the indivisibility of natures and cultures and their entanglement with the current political order.

Comprised of compounds housing permanent exhibitions of animals displayed for public education, entertainment, scientific study, and conservation, zoological gardens are also sites of heightened nature–culture conflicts. Linked to the Enlightenment, their histories have been criticized as epitomizing the "praxis of imperialism," since they have operated according to a model of empire in which animals are directly exposed to human domination and are also "fundamentally a construct of imperial culture" that imposes extractivist power relations on the natural world."[17] A very different zoo history was the background of the film *Arena* (2001) by Anri Sala, where not so much post-colonial but rather post-socialist realities take center stage. It was shot in Tirana Zoo, which during the communist regime hosted only native Albanian animal species, while after the political changes a few "international" animals, such as a lion and tiger, were acquired as a gesture of hope for the good times to come. The film, however, actually deals with the period of the late nineteen-nineties when the country was thrown into economic turmoil. It depicts the devastated and abandoned state of the animal enclosures, which were neglected as a consequence of social unrest during the financial crisis of the period, when zoo inhabitants were decimated by abduction or neglect, with only a sporadic few remaining.

15 Barbara C. Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 54.

16 Philip Armstrong, "The Post-colonial Animal," *Society & Animals* 10, no. 4 (2002), 414.

17 Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 59.

Paradoxically, Tirana Zoo became an arena for feral dogs, who freely roam premises originally envisaged for animal captivity. Domestic dogs as pets, or "companion species" in Donna Haraway's terms, have in "capitalist technoculture" acquired, for instance, the "rights to health," while "canine consumer culture" has also spread to nutrition, pedagogical services, day-care, clothing, and so on, turning "family-making practice[s]" into economic relations.[18] It has also been pointed out that while in such techno-capitalist geographies stray dogs are "almost always perceived as abandoned or escaped pets," in many countries of other geopolitical landscapes they are recognized as "free living dogs that thrive in both rural and urban areas." However, it is notable that in recent times such animals have also been subjected to control and sometimes extermination based on various "street dog control programs,"[19] while a similar fate awaits Tirana's feral dogs, which also face being subjected to vaccination and sterilization.[20] In Sala's *Arena* the feral dogs and decrepit animal enclosures have been seen primarily as a vivid testimony to turbulent events in the sociopolitical amphitheater of the country; however, they also offer a snapshot of a particular moment in urban animal histories.

The destiny of plants in Sanja Iveković's video installation *Resnik* (1994) is predetermined by the instruction given to the gallery personnel not to water them for the duration of the exhibition. Placed in a dark room in front of a projection, the plants are bathed instead in visual poetry made up of both abstract notions, such as obscenity, deception, foreignness, and exile, and more material categories, such as water, border, and nature. Accompanied by a soundtrack of dripping water, the work deals with the experience of war and the consequences it has on the individual destinies of those who have been subjected to violence or displaced and dispossessed in the turmoil of conflict. A more specific historical reference derives from its title, *Resnik*, which is both a colloquial term for the robust perennial herb *Eupatorium cannabinum* and more commonly associated with the site of a makeshift refugee camp on the outskirts of Zagreb that was crowded with mostly Muslim evacuees during the Bosnian War of the nineteen-nineties. Comparing human suffering with that of vegetal life, which when denied water and light ceases to exist, the artist foregrounds the universal cruelty of the refugee experience.

In his correspondence with Luce Irigaray on vegetal being, fellow theorist Michael Marder commented that the "plant's rootedness in a place, their fidelity to the soil, is something we can only admire," especially since "our condition is that of an increasing and merciless uprooting."[21] Such deracination is sometimes a forcible result of armed conflict, but it can also be the outcome of speeded-up and encouraged mobility in a globalized world, in which staying in one place is "associated with stagnation, incapacity to adapt to changing circumstances, and a sentimental relic of the past."[22] He has also described the effects of ethnic conflict on vegetal life, which in some cases has entailed a parallel destruction not only

18 Donna Harraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 51.

19 Krithika Srinivasan, "The Welfare Episteme: Street Dog Biopolitics in the Anthropocene," in Human Animal Research Network Editorial Collective, ed., *Animals in the Anthropocene* (Sidney: Sidney University Press, 2015), 203.

20 See report in the *Tirana Times* on "City Starts Vaccination, Sterilization of Stray Dogs" (April 8, 2016), accessed April 12, 2017, http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=127032.

21 Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 117.

22 Ibid.

of the homes of belligerents but also in the uprooting of their trees, resulting in the "reinforced transformation of the entire population ... into refugees," since in this way they were also "prevented from seeking meaning and refuge (even) in the vegetal world."[23] Recalling ancient laws according to which the uprooting of trees was "a declaration of total war without a chance for reconciliation," Marder has emphasized the powerful and enduring function of trees for the sense of rootedness and belonging to particular geographies, as well as providing shelter in times of need.[24]

The role of forests as places to hide for those escaping conflict or persecution is also the subject of a work by Anca Benera and Arnold Estefán, titled *No Shelter from the Storm* (2015), which deals with woodland that has been devastated by deforestation and can therefore no longer offer a place of refuge. The destruction of the natural environment, and in particular deforestation, that in the last decades has taken place on an unprecedented scale is interlinked with forces of economic globalization and the workings of multinational companies, as well as corrupt practices of illegal logging, with the consequence that "forest clearances can seriously erode the social and ecological services that woodlands provide at both local and global levels."[25] While traditionally forests have provided refuge to people in trouble, the current wave of deforestation not only threatens the availability of hiding places but also has the potential to destroy humanity's own asylum, since it could have the effect of turning Earth into an uninhabitable, desolate, and lifeless planet.

Nevertheless, disturbed landscapes have also been viewed as a constitutive part of the geologic now of planetary existence. As anthropologist Anna L. Tsing has demonstrated in her study of matsutake mushrooms that thrive "on capitalist ruins," namely in forests altered by human activities, such disruption can also create assemblages which could actually offer a "possibility of common life on a human-disturbed earth."[26] In other words, although the planet is in a radically unsettled state, there is still potential for the emergence of new alliances, even if in precarious conditions. The disturbance that brought about the coexistence of humans and plants in Nikita Kadan's work *Limits of Responsibility* (2014) was of a political nature and related to the protests in his native city of Kiev which started in November 2013 and continued into the summer of the next year. The anti-government protestors, who demanded closer ties with Europe and clashed with state forces, turned Independence Square into an urban battleground. The artist documented the barricades, fires, and shelters assembled by pro-democracy activists, among which was also a vegetable patch with onions, lettuce, and cabbage that was planted to offer both real and symbolic support to the protestors. Giving a literal meaning to the broader concept of guerrilla gardening, the Maidan allotment stimulated the protestors, with one of them approvingly commenting that "the garden stands for burgeoning new life, for the future, for many days to come."[27]

23 Ibid., 119.

24 Ibid.

25 Mark Whitehead, *Environmental Transformations: A Geography of the Anthropocene* (London: Routledge, 2014), 88.

26 Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 163.

27 "Seeds of Protest: Maidan activists plant vegetable patch in Kiev square," *RT* (March 28, 2014), accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.rt.com/news/garden-maidan-kiev-ukraine-821/.

In an exhibition setting, the work superimposes a slide projection from the contested site on Maidan with a small raised garden bed built according to instructions in a 1979 Soviet manual for agriculture. Although in the original Soviet version the horticultural structure came with optimally prescribed display boards for promoting agricultural achievements, Kadan notably decided to leave the display formats blank. In this way the artist elects to omit the burdened history of Soviet propaganda and keep only its frame while leaving a space for newly imagined, post-utopian content. Through his decision to represent political and social unrest by isolating and emphasizing one element as a material residue of the struggle, that of growing vegetables, the artist has situated it within a larger planetary narrative. By merging natural and political endeavors, Kadan suggested a link between cultivating a garden and tending to a political course. Nevertheless, he also pointed to the socialist legacy of his country and posed a question about what could grow in the ruins of socialism. Commenting also on the exhibition context and museums as institutions that represent history, the artist abstained from spelling out the answers or taking full responsibility.

In the years preceding World War II, a truly megalomaniac art project was taking shape in the heart of America that could be perceived as a distorted reflection of the cult of political leaders that was flourishing in the land of state socialism. It entailed carving the portraits of four American presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln—directly into a mountain range that had been formed by the folding of the earth's crust some sixty-five million years ago. The *Mount Rushmore National Memorial* was constructed between 1926 and 1941 by the sculptor Gutzon Borglum, a member of the Ku Klux Klan who had "the temper and prejudices of a naïve fascist" but also "sincerely supposed himself to be democrat."[28] Intended as a shrine to American democracy, the sculpted edifice equally became a memorial to the gruesome colonial past on which the country was established. Built on embezzled land that originally belonged to the Sioux, the history of their ordeal, killings, and displacement to reservations was subliminally inscribed on the faces of the presidents. However, the monument should be perceived not only in terms of colonial oppression but also in terms of its contempt for the natural environment. Namely, to turn the mountain "into the form of a human head," as Simon Schama has observed, is "the ultimate colonization of nature by culture, the alteration of landscape to manscape."[29]

The overlap of colonial, democratic, ecological, and geological histories contained in the *Mount Rushmore National Memorial* is the subject of Matthew Buckingham's work *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.* (2002). Choosing to refer to the natural site using the toponym given to it by the Sioux, who indicatively called the mountain range after a group of grandfathers, seeing in it both anthropomorphic figures and also regarding nature as the

28 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 394.

29 Ibid., 396.

ancestor of human civilization, the artist pointed to its prehistory but also to the future. Setting out from the predictions of geological studies that it would take approximately 500,000 years for the portraits of the US presidents carved into the living rocks to erode and become unrecognizable, the artist challenged both the anthropocentrism and permanence of human culture by pointing to slow-moving but inexorable geological processes. While Mount Rushmore is set in the future, other sites of historical unrests have already been assimilated back into urban or natural tissues, reabsorbed into the biogeochemical processes of the planet. In that sense, the World War II bunkers uncovered by Benera and Estefán are d issolved into natural vistas in which historical landscapes are transformed into natural history. Similarly, the oak saplings awarded to gold medalists during the notorious Berlin Olympics of 1936, known as "Hitler oaks," have, as artist Christian Meyer has demonstrated, grown into regular trees, despite having their roots in a troublesome history.

As the works discussed here have shown, tensions in intra-human relations are interwoven with the relationship to the natural world and reflected in the reconfigured landscapes of history and nature. Acknowledging the interdependence and collaborative entanglements of all the critters inhabiting this planet could, as Donna Haraway has pointed out, "better sustain us in staying with the trouble on terra."[30] That is to say, in order to avoid succumbing to a paralyzing anxiety about the future of a world transformed by social, political, and environmental crises, we have to continue to deal with disturbing issues and the troubling histories that so influentially shape our present. By working through our responsibility, both at the abstract level of species and practically as participants in an economic system based on social injustices and extractivist attitudes towards nature, the ground is laid for re-assembling the entwined histories and reconfiguring the shared destinies of the human and non-human dwellers of the planet.

30 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 63.