

Hiking Performance Stonelines;

towards a landscape performance practice of the female gaze

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Introduction

When I am invited to create a walking performance at an unfamiliar place and within a restricted timeframe, I am always confronted with the condition of site specificity as problematic. Issues of positionality and relativity become very crucial in making the work: whose gaze narrates the site and to whom; what as an artist could I convey to the people who have been dwelling and embodying the place. As a walking performer I have developed a methodology of landscape based on somatic listening that I have called Geopoetics. I approach the site through the experience of the body always integrated with that of the mind, the affect and the psychic. I build a way into a landscape not by imposing a concept of it but by emptying oneself and listening for a meeting with it. In this way, my in-situ narrative, embedded or not with the place's cultural context derives as an outcome and not as a pre-condition. Instead of reading a place, I practice of its ways of being seen. Instead of interpreting it I explore its 'gazed gaze'¹. This is what filmmaker Jill Soloway has determined as the practice of the 'female gaze'².

In this paper I present hiking performance *Stonelines* for which I was invited to create on Syros island in order to raise the geo-conscience of the place. I describe the production guidelines of the project and how they could expose its creative outcome. To that end, I argue for a landscape practice coming from the filmmaking process, called 'the female gaze' practice.

The place

Positioned in the central Aegean Sea, Syros has been the administrative center and traffic junction of the Cyclades Prefecture. It is also a place with a remarkable history, culture and shipbuilding and industrial tradition. Since the 90's the island has increased tourist activity both in its urban centers and in its small seaside settlements. Like in most of the Cycladic islands, this economical flourishing has been evolved into an unforgiving appropriation of the Aegean cultural landscape:

¹ Soloway, J. (2016) *Jill Soloway on the Female Gaze*, In Master Class: TIFF <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I> (Accessed: 3 March 2019).

² Soloway, Ibid.

The model of fierce tourist development that has been applied over the last decades in the Aegean islands...is primarily an embodiment of a totally unbalanced and destructive, for the environment and the man, mentality that commodifies and devours everything in the name of short-term profit. Employees are devastated, seas are being polluted, beaches and public places are being deprived, energy and natural resources are wasted, noise is spread, the mountains are being built, and the whole natural environment is hastened in the name of a tourist industry that after two months [July, August] of covetous exploitation of everything, everyone leaves behind only debris. It leaves behind islands that are deserted in the winter and whose few inhabitants do not have access to even the most elemental goods, damaged natural environment and ruins³.

As a reaction to this chaotic exploitation of the area, citizen's initiatives groups have been activated throughout the whole Aegean area. Their aim is to argue and promote degrowth and sustainable development, to connect environmental non-profit organizations with public services, schools and universities in order to conserve marine and terrestrial life and to guard local governing bodies in preserving designated protected areas both of the seascape and the landscape. Either by themselves or as a network, these groups have been working strongly towards the cultivation of the landscape as a collective good and conscience.

The invitation

The Cooperative Community Enterprise (CCE) 'Apano Meria Syrou' is consisted of a group of citizens interested in protecting and preserving the specific site both as an ecological system and as a local economy. Situated in the northernmost part of Syros, Apano Meria is designated by Natura 2000 as a Special Protection Area and Conservation. The place contains two prehistoric archaeological sites and discloses the most specular evidence of the island's (and the Aegean area's) geological activity. Due its poor road network, its hilly steep territory and its - only by walking - access to its beaches, Apano Meria has been untouched by the madness of touristic advancement but also abandoned by any plan of growth. For the past three years, the CCE 'Apano Meria Syrou' has been working in re-building the social and economic tissues of the area, supporting organic agricultural production and alternative tourism. Towards that end it has been focusing on creating Apano Meria and Syros into a geological park recognized by the World Heritage Center of UNESCO.

³ Pollatos. Thanasis (2009) 'Degrowth and Island Environment'. In Eyploia e-journal of Aegean Network, (23). In http://www.eyploia.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49:nhsiwtko-perivallon&catid=44&Itemid=71 (Accessed: 5 May 2019).

In October 2018 Geopoetics group was invited by the CCE Apano Meria Syrou to participate in an event organized for promoting the idea of the geopark. Entitled as ‘Looking for the geological treasure of Syros’ the one-week event involved scientific and artistic activity. It included walks, lectures, roundtables and discussions to disclose the geological heritage of the place and to present possibilities of infrastructure for geo-tourism. The event also entailed an art exhibition ‘Apano Meria Syros; genius loci- the spirit of place’. Walking performance *Stonelines* was one of the only live art pieces of the exhibition and one of the few which took place in the site of Apano Meria⁴.

The Geopoetics practice

Performance *Stonelines* is a participatory hiking performance devised in and for Apano Meria Syrou by the group Geopoetics. Before I elaborate performance *Stonelines* in relation to the landscape of Syros I would like to explain here the methodology of Geopoetics. Geopoetics group operates as an artistic collective drawing its collaborators each time from different disciplines (such as architecture, visual arts, theatre, dance, anthropology, geography). Its aim is to create walking performances in rural and urban landscapes as collective experiences and mythic narratives of the present moment positioning in the heart of its process a mindfulness (sati) site-specific performance practice

Geopoetics practice examines the lived experience of a place. It prioritises its somatic event before becoming integrated with the cultural practices embedded on site. The practice elaborates the performance/site interplay as a discipline of ‘presence’. It develops an experiential listening of site upon which an awareness of the processes of knowing and understanding in space is cultivated as a narrative. ‘Geo’ comes from the Greek ‘-γεω’, which means ‘coming from earth’. ‘Poetics’ derives from the word ‘ποιητική’, the practice for creating an artistic product. Geopoetics has four focal points:

- i. The exploration of the physical, emotional and mental experience of the body (-ies) in situ, grounded on the notion of presence as a dynamic, reciprocally active movement between the self and the environment.
- ii. The notion of the practitioner-site interrelationship not only as an experience but also as a dramaturgy found between the body and the cultural practices of the site.
- iii. The approach of site not through a standardised classification but as an open-ended system of signifiers based on the experience of the present moment.

⁴ Initially I contextualized performance as a walking one. However, as the course of the performance included elevation from a highest point to a lowest one, I considered that the designation of hiking gives a more precise frame of its experience.

iv. The discovery of a place through events of relationality and connectivity; through the revelation of inter-relational patterns between the self (-ves) and the narratives of place.

The very core of Geopoetics practice lies on the Buddhist notion of mindfulness (*sati*), organized in two stages. In the first one it builds and grounds the practice of mindfulness (*sati in situ*) as contemplations of breathing, walking, movement and actions. The process is further extended via the performance disciplines of Somatics, Grotowski-based actor training and Barbara Dilley's Contemplative Dance Practice. In the second stage, site is being examined as a combination of bodily and cultural practices. The experience of place is being established as a web of interrelationships and creates a narrative as the enactment of one of them. Performance material is organized into a dramaturgy and evolves into a 'meta-narrative'⁵ of place. Performed as a walking participatory event, it becomes a score of a communal experience *in situ*.

The Stonelines performance⁶

When the CCE 'Apano Meria Syrou' commissioned Geopoetics to create a walking performance on site neither my collaborator Despoina Chatzipavidou nor I had any previous experience with the place. We had ten days to develop our work. In the first three days, we wandered around the area in order to become familiarized with the landscape and decide upon a course for the performance. We looked at the northwestern side of Apano Meria as most of the trails are well-marked, not so steep and end up at beach-sites. We walked on the trail of Grammata, visiting all of its branches (Americanou and Marmari) and decided upon the route of Lia as it is the shortest in time for our performance purposes.

The following four days we worked on the trail of Lia. The path descends down a steep sliding hillside full of geological stones⁷ and then continues to a gully where locals keep their beehives. The trail ends at an abandoned field with a house at its end which finally leads to the beach. The whole course lasts 45-50' minutes. During the last two days, we organized our *in situ* devised material along the specific course which was presented three times into an audience group.

⁵ Smith, P. (2008), *The Mythogeographical Manifesto* (with etcetera). 95. Plymouth: Hidden City Symposium.

⁶ The Stonelines title arose by *kserolithies* (ξερολιθιές) a traditional way of separating land in Greek rural landscape. Made of layers of stones placed one within the other in order to create a wall, *kserolithies* construct stone lines creating a cartography of the living into the land. In Apano Meria, *kserolithies* are everywhere. As markers in the space, they reminded me the Australian Aboriginal Songlines operating as ancestral 'path-stories', formulating an identity of/ in the land. In this way the title *Stonelines* affiliated the performance with the place both as a materiality but also as a way of being.

⁷ More about them below.

We immediately became interested in the geo-conscience of the landscape; how it is related with us and what kind of a performance narrative will raise such an awareness. According to Greek cultural geographers Terkenli and Pavlis, landscape conscience is ‘the distinctive bonds (conscious or subconscious) that characterize a person’s or a people’s relationship with their landscapes’⁸. They see the term as an investigational tool for a place and admit that it is fully ‘underdeveloped in the case of Greece’⁹. Based on the fact that we had literally a few days to relate with the place we started exploring landscape through our somatic experience on site. In the following paragraphs I disclose how we devised the core event of the performance that grounded our position as Athenian makers and created an experiential platform of relationality and of landscape awareness.

What one notices immediately on Lia’s trail is the peculiarly beautiful consistency, formation and color pallet of its lithic environment. Surrounded by stones full of minerals, the trail is known for its majestic eclogites along the way: rounded dark-colored rocks. The biggest one, 30 m. in perimeter and 15 m. in height, has been interpreted by the local culture as a meteorite and named aerolith. Eclogites are derived from the transformation of basic rocks in conditions of very high pressures and relatively low temperatures corresponded to depths of 40-60km in lithosphere. This is a geodynamic process which takes place 40-50 million years ago. As a geologist later on explained to me: ‘it is as if you are walking upon a cesarean section of earth’.

We approached eclogites by practicing the following somatic instructions: standing, sitting or lying on them, breathing in the shape-body, informing/ changing shape or voicing. The materiality of stone was being revealed to us through its different qualities, ground, dust, liquid and fire giving us an understanding of the breath of time in geological proportions. Andy Goldsworthy, Scottish environmentalist sculptor says: ‘We set some much by our idea of the stability of stone and when you find that the stone itself is actual fluid and liquid that really undermines the essence of what is here to stay and what isn’t’¹⁰. Through our lying on top of the eclogites, we found fluidity in hardness and alchemy in touching. The rocks were functioning as a cartography of life and our physical presence became the next thing upon layers in the land that have happened already.

Our practice made us see the landscape as a serpent in time. Both in its macroscale where the hills were meeting each other towards the coast and in its microscale when the stones were formulating a single wavy

⁸ Terkenli, T.- S. & Pavlis, E. (2012) ‘Landscape conscience: awareness raising, training and education’, in T. Papayannis and P. Howard (eds) *Reclaiming the Greek Landscape*. 246. Athens: Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁰ Goldsworthy, A. (2003) *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working With time*. In <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WP2AfqyOsI> (Accessed:10 June 2019).

body along the trail. At that moment, my collaborator Despoina Chatzipavlidou brought into our process the poem by Wallace Stevens 'the Auroras of Winter'. The poem articulated and justified our bodily experience with the geological site of Lia:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless. / His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
Eyes open and fix on us in every sky. / Or is this another wriggling out of the egg, /
Another image at the end of the cave, / Another bodiless for the body's slough? / This
is where the serpent lives. This is his nest. / These fields, these hills, these tinted
distances.../This is form gulping after formlessness, / Skin flashing to wished-for
disappearances /And the serpent body flashing without the skin. / This is his poison:
that we should disbelieve/ Even that. His meditations in the ferns, / When he moved so
slightly to make sure of sun, / Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head, / Black
beaded on the rock, the flecked animal¹¹

The seeing of the landscape as a formlessness serpent that moves beyond our perception in situ but at the same time defines it, created the event of our performance. Devised by our embodied practice, the idea of the 'bodiless serpent' manifested a state of being-ness which was relating the land with a body/mind/heart experience independently of context and positionality. It operated as a platform of relationality among the landscape, the doers and the watchers. The fictional idea of the serpent¹² made me realize that specificity is not generated exclusively from what is being narrated. But it could be also a modality through which the landscape is being experienced. The serpent narrative became a means of 'seeing/feeling' the landscape enabling it to be suspended from all conceptual frames and the performance operated as an experiential and of the affect, container. If the landscape constitutes a way of looking then a walking performance constitutes a closed look of that gaze or as Soloway defines it, it becomes its 'gazed gaze'¹³.

The female gaze

Jill Soloway, writer, and film director, argues for a creative process as a practice of the female gaze. She defines it as follows:

[The female gaze] uses the frame to share and evoke feeling of being rather than looking at...The emotions are being prioritized over the actions. Our feeling bodies are being

¹¹ Wallace, St. (1950) *The Auroras of Autumn*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf. In <http://openmods.uvic.ca/islandora/object/uvic%3A537/datastream/PDF/view> (Accessed: 30 May 2019).

¹² It is remarkable to mention that nearly at the end of our project in Lia, it was showed to us another particular stone of the site: Ophiolite. It is a kind of stone that originates from a section of the Earth's oceanic crust and the underlying upper mantle that has been uplifted, exposed above sea level and often emplaced onto continental crustal rocks. Ophis is Greek for "snake", and lite (from Greek lithos) means "stone".

¹³ Soloway 2016, *Ibid*.

prioritized. [The female gaze] shows...the gazed gaze [stating] “this is how it feels to be seen”. It returns the gaze daring to say “I see you seeing me”¹⁴.

The term was created as response to Mulvey’s notion of the ‘male gaze’. In the mid 70’s, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey discloses how mainstream cinema signifies woman as something to ‘simultaneously looked and displayed’¹⁵. Either performed by the camera, the character of the film or the watcher, cinema positions women in order to create ‘strong, visual and erotic impact’¹⁶. This ‘to be-looked-at-ness’¹⁷ intention defines what Mulvey names as the ‘male gaze’. Based on that concept Soloway orientates her filming practice as a counter-movement which returns ‘the gaze, looking back instead of being looked at’¹⁸.

The female gaze does not connote a gender/sex distinction but suggests a narrative structure which is ‘circular and not linear... environmental and not human made’¹⁹. It cultivates a way of looking that does not ‘objectify the body of the world continually’²⁰. Coming back to the issue of positioning when one devises site-specific work, the female gaze operates as a conceptual frame for investigating and narrating landscape. As it is manifested through physicality and affect, the female gaze cultivates an experience as an authorship of what is being looked at. By not imposing a pre-conditioned storyline in the space, the performance dis-objectifies the site and makes it accessible to all backgrounds.

Conclusion: the female gaze practice for raising a landscape consciousness

Cultural geographer John Wylie states that when one gazes the landscape, one is looking for ‘what cultures and histories expresses or symbolizes’²¹. But Wylie, as a post-phenomenologist geographer knows that the act of looking also entails another process which is much more physical, affective and associative. He discloses it as ‘a perceptual actualization...of materialities and sensibilities’²². Walking performance is a practice that narrates place while embodying it. How a site is being received is directly dependent on physicality. However, this is not enough. As practitioners we need to think of embodied accounts of landscape. Tim Ingold discusses about its ‘taskscape’²³: the series of tasks in situ that a dweller performs

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mulvey, L. (1999) *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*. In *Film Theory and Criticism Introductory Readings*. NY: Oxford UP, 842.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Soloway 2016, Ibid.

¹⁹ Glide, K. (2017). *Laura Mulvey and Andrea Arnold’s Fish Tank* (kevinglide.wordpress.com) [on line].

²⁰ Engelman, L. C. (2017) *On the Female Gaze/* In *womenfilmnet.com* (Accessed: 10 November 2019).

²¹ Wylie, J. (2007) *Landscape*. 91. London: Routledge.

²² Wylie, J. (2006) ‘Depths and folds: on landscape and the gazing subject’. In *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*.24(1).

²³ Ingold, Tim. (1993) ‘The temporality of the landscape’, *World Archaeology*.25. 159.

perpetually and in the present time. Still the walking practitioner has no time in converting her passage to an inhabitation. We need to create walks grounded in the body but at the same time effective in activating the experience of the place as a deep psychic mythic image. Approaching landscape as a practice of the female gaze, we are allowed to narrate place as a way of being-ness. Reversing the gaze to the one who has been gazed, we question our modalities of projection into to it. In this way, landscape's conscience is being revealed not as a cognitive knowledge to understand and follow but as an experiential necessity through which we orientate ourselves into the world.

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