

# The para-normal of live art\*

Hester Reeve

*“He lives to disturb himself.”\*\**

Whilst we all long to be at home in the world, we all know that to wall ourselves in leads to paralysis. A strange paradox in our desires - striving for life but missing the mark through aiming at what is set out already. We who are so fragile physically are insurmountable in becoming *spirited*. But we prefer bricks to plunging an unsure fist into the invisible mud of the riverbed. Watch me abandon myself into the world. A man wanders down a country lane, carrying his head under his arm. Now I must breathe in really deep as a kind of homiostasis; part of me is kept together by clay and it must be kept putty soft. Desolation makes hearths of our hearts. I am on fire, flicking in and out of the solid world, licking it. My ecstasy decoded as strange words scribed in dark charcoal against the sky as I plot in the hollow of a tree. Spirits are not able to sit still. Shape your fist of clay or the everyday will smother us. “Rooms like artificial skin you want to jump out of.”

If through use of the word “home” I can refer to how we feel about our place in the world - “Beingness” - then I’ll also choose to use it about art making; art as a way to build out from ideas and drives relating to Being-in-the-world. Roofing in the essences that feed, gardening in the hopes for the future and decorating our immediate environment with significance - just because (I will never give another reason again). But rather than descriptive houses, fixed foundations and representations, I want to talk about “in- between” space. Space that is neither here nor there until we take our desire to practice and breathe in it. The places that take place because of us, built more out of a belief in dynamism than the architectural skill of watertight projection. Hovering space that for all the ephemeralness allows us to really feel real. To stay hungry within health; to let in an uncanny chill into one’s living room. Otherwise: “To die of the self-satisfaction of places.”

\*The term live art refers to the practice of artists who create out of the mediums of time, place and their own human presence. These ‘events’ or actions are usually carried out before a gathering of people/placed in the public arena. This term is necessarily ambiguous; live art works are experimental, consciously anti-technique/theatricality and usually once only phenomena. Live art can be gallery based or site specific. The antecedent terms “performance art” and “happenings” refer to a practice of multimedia art events and body art that emerged in the sixties and seventies.

\*\*From *The Secret Heart of the Clock: notes, aphorisms, fragments* by Elian Canetti, Farrar Straus Giroux 1989. All quotes throughout this text are from this source.

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\* “The kingdom of pirate-Being” is an idiosyncratic term for my ‘art-world’.

Now, there’s the malaise. Another need in me as an artist: *thoughts as ladders not cameras* (that is what I mean most of all in this text). Expression as picture is just not enough to locate myself in a meaningful existence. The meaning is always somehow “in- between” everything and the real task is to trust in that, accept its impenetrable to another human’s heart but still look for its language trace (the imprint of a smiling human head upon the page of the riverbed). Keep your courage to speak out without committing a political act. Then meaning calls you and life will never be the same again. I force an atmosphere out of these ideas and ask you to witness me materializing within it. This text is not about me though it is only possible because of me. The moist sensation you feel is the penetration of my ideas finding porous gaps in the skin that holds you together. I am interested in the way extractions of clay leave your body and flush into the river spelling “unsatisfied”; this is where humans meet each other most. “When everything fits together, as it does with the philosophers, it no longer means anything. Disconnected, it wounds and it counts.”

(Otherwise, the sky is being slept). I moved from city to country from country to city from foreign land to homeland, then on the run again. I wanted to honour the river. Our bodies yearn for spirited communication - insights and celebrations of Being that destroy the division between today-tomorrow yet take on board the end. Live art: sailing a pirate-Being\* ship upon the water and stalking up upon the unsuspecting day. The always ever of the human moment. Treasure underground. The way the non-solid rules you after a funeral, the world can no longer behave and obey the text books. Strange sensations that pour out from “in-between” everything and stare you in the face (the invisible clay is also where your throat once was). I accept that an art making that echoes such atmospheres is not and can not be the same as “everyday” Being. Though nor is it outside of it, a relief from it, an alternative. It somehow inhabits it, is because of it. It exists to disturb it. Imagination as a necessary starting point of knowledge (remember the mud, remember your hand and all it can encompass, remember you are not made of clay but will reduce to it). “Insights you didn’t *dare* have. They remained stuck in a kind of limbo.”

This is art but the word needs re-shaping. The word art needs some danger. Danger as in primal urgency of spirit. As part of my art, I might show you my arse - its scarred with a map of how to resist sitting com-

fortably in a world constructed through reason. I reach such a momentum and manage to take place within it through the live art medium. The continual effort to escape from pre-conditioned modes of cultural meaning, the attempting to break through the expectations of normalised behaviour; *the para-normal of live art*. The ‘audience’- their ‘dread’ at the sudden in-your-face and earnest arty-ness of live art that summons self-consciousness and dis-comfort. People hate to be reminded that we are desperate to meet one another in the midst of what we really are but that the depth of our own agency scares us. Transformation of space and time from within the sphere of human effort. I feel like I am to disappear, that I loose substance as it were before performing my action; who I know myself to be dematerialises - not quite nerves so much as who I am specifically is no longer of any significance. My breathing body has become signifier for an instance of human-Being-ness. The beauty of the atmosphere of the action is an apparition that is rarely sensed. Stigmata open up within the centre of my unfurled fists. The blood trickles into new sentences, people become alarmed. Live art as a ‘haunting of the present’. Haunting not from the past, present or future, but from somewhere “in-between” - Canetti’s *Secret Heart of the Clock* (1989)?

The words are playing, the metaphor enjoys itself and is voted captain of the ship. So lets follow the red vein in the fist that is in the river further, to the point where art-as-conscious-Being forces itself upon the everyday, right into the middle of “ordinariness”. Taboo. The refusal to take place in a space designated for entertainment; the eroticism of placing a human made clay shape into the naked landscape. Taboo. Ordinary and extraordinary charges of reality are forced into confrontation through certain artistic acts. A mere walker by can be startled, the rest of the day haunted by a sense of the impossible (in terms of expectation) materialising before their eyes. Taboo. Live art can impart a ‘presence’- sometimes disquieting - that remains inside the viewer’s head long after leaving the gallery. The ‘ghost’ of an idea or of the artist’s emotional urge perhaps? Something definitely demands to be witnessed yet its non-literal communication obscures easy possession of understanding on the witness’s part. The risk of unintelligibility in order to give complete experience clothed in the newness of experience qua experience. A paradoxically raw and refined origin. This is the call to spiritedness, the “in-between-ness” of what we are. Taboo. The hands of the clock are reaching into the invisible mud, our hopes tick. Whatever is waiting can be released. Home coming. “‘I as space, not as position’”

“Sometimes he is overwhelmed by the feeling that *it is not too late for anything*.”

*Hester Reeve*



Hester Reeve, "Diatribes on the ebb of our estate" 2000, Photograph: Bruce Johnston-Lowe.

*Spatial Hauntings*