

Caressing the Earth: Of Maps and Mice, Flowers and Feet

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Biography

celine s diaz (GER/COL, b. 1994) is a visual artist, based in Portugal. Their research aims to demonstrate the transformative potential of ritualistic interactions to conjure authentic connection and presence weaving together the individual and its ecology. They explore the relationship between humans and nature in artistic practice and have been exhibited internationally.

Dominik Fleischmann (GER, b.1989) is a lens-based visual artist and writer. He is now based in Helsinki after living in different animal sanctuaries across the globe while searching for happy endings on this journey of suffering in the relationship of humans and nature. His long-term projects deal with ethics and empathy for disregarded topics through work that combines a documentary approach with conceptual elements and a lyrical narrative. Dominik's artistic research has been supported by the Patricia Seppälä Foundation, Finnish Cultural Foundation and Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taika).

Abstract

This joint article draws on artistic practices that showcase how relations to nature can articulate rituals of care and reciprocity in embodied experiences and symposiums. It discusses active approaches to practicing sympathetic interaction with Nature by challenging our habitual processes of forming connection.

The paper revolves around modes of exploitation in animal experiments and the lack of emotional knowledge and connection in science, in *The Touch of Soil* by Dominik Fleischmann; and advocates for attention to soil, in *Palpat-ing Landscape* by celine s diaz, as ritualistic extension of inclusiveness for the landscape.

Through creative writing, theoretic reflection and the photographic medium, both unravel deep concerns for the human-centred approach of viewing and engaging with the natural world and its habitants and advocate for a broader agency, action invoked in caring. Finding overlapping questions, this paper shows two practices of responsibility as empathy and care are evermore significant in our relationship with nature. These vulnerable acts comprehend disruptive temporalities and propose a kinder but equally relevant message: “I care”.

Keywords

Ritual, soil, connection, inclusiveness, mice, landscape, care, bodily knowledge

Introduction

Observations and mapping, examination and experimentation shape our conclusions about the world; but empathy, caretaking and love doesn't often enter scientific debate. The empathetic art practice bridges the chasm between formal assessments about life and the active involvement of tending to it. This paper joins two projects that encourage acting and correlating with conscientiousness—reflecting on touch and feeling as a method to expose the flaws of human centred perception.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

The authors undertook the task of widening their involvement with an “other”: subjects in scientific experiments and the landscape itself. Dominik Fleischmann in *The Touch of Soil* engages with rodents sequestered from their native habitats living in a scientific laboratory that uses animal testing in their investigation. His research draws from Donna Haraway’s (2016) philosophy on human animals and non-human animals’ interaction that rejects the human-centred understanding of the world. Unfolding his own research and relationship towards mice, he seeks love and care between white walls and sanitised gloves that hold breathing beings far from the soil they belong. celine s diaz’ research through ritual—*Palpating Landscape*—intends to expand habitual interaction with nature within a *westernized* context in an offer of vulnerability from human to land. By sculpting a connection between soil and feet through senses and emotion, they reflect on the forms of involvement with nature departing from David Abrams’ (1996) “The Spell of The Sensuous”. While Dominik combs for caring engagement in a sterile environment, celine inspects the soil for a connection that is missing within ourselves.

Through writing, ritualistic acts and the photographic medium, both show deep concerns for the anthropocentric view and engagement with the world. This paper reveals artistic practices of responsibility that entangle readings of theory, creative writing, lived experience and historical contexts with acts of purpose. Beginning with the first layer of empathy towards other animals and each other in *The Touch of Soil* the paper transits into care for the greater context in *Palpating Landscape* Poetic reflections extend themselves over both reports as the two artists manifest artistic research as practice of care and inquiring connection-building in art and life.

The touch of soil

Dominik Fleischmann

In just one minute the heart of a mouse beats 632 times—ten times faster than the hearts of our species. *The Touch of Soil* was conducted with a slowly beating human heart in a place where mice are far removed from the elements shaping their natural environment to question empathy, morals, and ethics. The project looks at the world of mice, their relationship with their natural environment and sheds light on their role as caretakers of soil. Several visits to a laboratory animal centre in Finland, where mice and rats are bred for scientific experiments provoked *The Touch of Soil* and culminate in a photographic series that tends to the love, care and grief that was lost when we removed soil from our bodies and other bodies from soil.

-1-

In their lifetime, mice embody different roles, depending on the stance of the beholder but little attention goes towards their lives as soil carers¹. Nevertheless, for people who study them closely, not in isolation, but rather in the environment they were born to inhabit, (the woods, fields, and shrubs, their native clay and dirt), their ability to nurse their surroundings becomes apparent. They are pollinators and gardeners, tree planters and soil restorers. Mice have a way of being and worlding with their environment that humans are only beginning to understand.

The newborns crawl blindly through the insulating wood shavings until they find their mother hiding under a white tissue and a half-eaten cardboard.

Taking pictures is easy, editing is the difficult part, because that's when you have to face the things that you saw. What I saw were only the breeding facilities. Dozens of transparent boxes, mice and rats, rats and mice.

Through their innate awareness of touch and smell, mice navigate above and below ground and form a reciprocal bond with soil, shaping entire ecosystems. When building their tunnels,

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

mice foster the soil as they aerate humus and aid the flow of water². The small mammals are also key to restoring mycorrhizal fungi communities after clear cuts³. They are important ecosystem engineers⁴ and trees and plants grow to be the living testimony of the little rodent's diligent underground and overground work.

Mice are rarely credited as pollinators, but the effect of their unexpected talent can be seen all around the natural world⁵. The role of mice as propagators has been well observed in the orchid species *Cymbidium serratum* in the Shaanxi province of Central China. Attracted by its smell, mice will find the flower, stand on their hind-legs, and dive their snout deep into it as they devour the scent and sweet tasting labellum of the orchid. The rest of the plant remains unharmed and once the mouse moves on to the next flower, they carry the pollen on their whiskers and snout which in turn fertilise the plant as they continue their journey in the dark⁶.

What gives us the right to take everything from nature without ever giving back but to ourselves. How on earth are we allowed to live such miserable lives and yet justify the torture of everything natural for our glimpse at immortality. How much do we deserve when we are willing to give so little?

In nature, no relationship is unilateral. As mice shape and change the soils, the soils reciprocate by shaping them as well. Their symbiosis, simpoesis⁷ and unravelling has led to the curious phenomenon that the fur of mice will match the colour of soil wherever they are⁸. The matching fur colour helps mice to find shelter not only in the belly of soil but also on the surface camouflaged by their native grounds. Moreover, soil as a caretaker of mice can be witnessed as it improves their physical health⁹ as well as their emotional wellbeing¹⁰. This knowledge was acquired through experiments conducted on animals, in a study designed not to learn more about soil or mice but to find a cure for humans¹¹. This study acknowledges the increasing psychiatric disorders and inflammation risk due to our obsession with cleanliness, living on

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

steel-supported concrete floors and glass walled buildings far removed from healthy soil, dirt and animals.

It may not be surprising, or even appear logical in our western way of thinking, that studies like this are conducted in a setting where hygiene and extreme cleanness form the status quo of research—an environment where clay and humus do not exist, and where a dirt-based cure for maladies is tested on an animal that will never know the taste of soil nor the smell of flowers.

They don't have names, do they? The animal technician looks at me pitifully. I don't know why I needed to ask. Of course, they don't. They have holes in their ears and numbers on their cage cards.

In the mid 1800s, Claude Bernard established experimentation on animals, despite a vocal opposition, as a reasonable form of research (LaFollette & Shanks, 1994). In one of his most famous quotes, he describes his profession and understanding of the relationship between humans, animals and research (Md & Frcp, 2014, p. 415):

The physiologist is no ordinary man. He is a learned man, a man possessed and absorbed by a scientific idea. He does not hear the animals' cries of pain. He is blind to the blood that flows. He sees nothing but his idea, and organisms which conceal from him the secrets he is resolved to discover.

A lot has changed since the days of Claude Bernard (LaFollette & Shanks, 1994), but his beliefs are a testimony for the detachment and cruelty that lies at the root of western knowledge production. According to the European Commissions' report (2020) on the statistics on the use of animals for scientific purposes 9,388,162 animals were used for experimental purposes. 5,707,471 of them were mice. Millions of mice are born and die inside of laboratories while scientists take advantage of the fact that their genetic and biological characteristics closely re-

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

semble those of humans. However, from all the drugs that are successfully tested on animals, less than one out of ten is successful in clinical trials (Akhtar, 2015).

-2-

The Touch of Soil unfolds through witnessing and empathy. The series adopts an anti-speciesist practice of artistic research with animals (human and not) and their relationships in nature. Dedicated to mice and rats that are used in the name of science, I combine photographs of animals used in medical research and pictures of fading flowers to open a dialogue around the ethical and moral questions in animal testing.

When I was a kid my parents had taught me that all animals feel pain and all life is precious. But they didn't tell me that we need the suffering of millions to find a cure for many. They never told me all life is equal. No one does.

The Touch of Soil is defined by three visual elements. Part one depicts the life of laboratory rats and mice, the breeding facilities, and their living conditions through a series of documentary photographs taken at the Central Animal Laboratory of Turku. Part two speaks of medical achievements in microscopic images of cell migration. Finally, part three reclaims our connection to earth, using the traces of graceful decay in photographs of withering flowers. The plants remind of our taking and displacing beings and things from their natural environments until they are rendered meaningless. In their decaying state the flowers contrast the clinical conditions that form the world of an animal in a laboratory, and mirror my sadness and grief for each individual animal that I've met at the laboratory animal centre.

My photographs attend a ritualistic act of collecting unsold flowers from a bouquet shop so they would not end up as trash. After photographing them, I returned them to the earth in memory of the laboratory animals I had visited, who were never able to experience the scent of flowers or feel the touch of soil. The rite of returning to the ground what has grown from

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

it accentuates the elementary reciprocity in the natural environment of mice and further defies and criticizes the disposal of laboratory animals as waste¹²; thus, unfulfilling the universal task of the breathing world to give our bodies back to soil.

The combination of the series' different elements challenges a topic that is too often ignored and demands a conversation: the ethical flaws of testing on animals.

All I could offer is my presence. A few curious seconds that come with being a rare visitor, a different smell. Some stretch, some yawn. And one by one they would come to the edge of their container and stretch their neck and put their tiny fingers around the metal bars and stretch their neck a little more and put their nose as high as they could until you only saw white fur balls pressed against the cage and tiny pink noses moving rapidly, soaking in the scent of everything new.

One does not need a degree in biology to understand the ever-present detachment of science from the feeling world. It is something even a layman like me can observe when stepping into a laboratory. It is not a secret; it is a necessity. Stainless steel and glass, plastic cages and plastic tubes comprise the environment of laboratory mice and rats. Instead of burrowing in soil, the most species-rich element of our terrestrial ecosystems, mice lie on white wood shavings, paper, or dust-free corncobs. It is a sterile world where their caretakers are referred to as Animal Technicians. During my four visits at the Central Animal Laboratory I witnessed great empathy, patience, and tenderness in the work of the human caretakers. Yet, they cannot prevent the destiny of every laboratory animal. It is not their fault that the research system only allows a bodily connection protected and obstructed by disposable gloves—a system that only works when vulnerability and dirt are removed from it.

The scientific way of understanding the world excludes our emotional knowledge, the bodily wisdoms we feel only through interaction with the complex web of ecosystems¹³. Free living

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

mice teach us a way of knowing that we also inherit, knowledge that draws from a billion years of evolution and the smallest experiences of everyday life. By allowing ourselves vulnerability and to need empathy, touch and feelings we grant ourselves new ways to care for others and rediscover the wisdoms we already possess.

I wrote to several florists in Helsinki after my first visit to Turku and asked them what happens to flowers that are unsold. I'll try to pick up those random bouquets and broken blossoms before they go to waste. Maybe in that way they will find meaning. Maybe for most people the value of an animal's life is only measured by their contribution towards mankind. Maybe I'm not in the position to condemn decades of medical achievements on this journey of suffering. But I know the least I can do is show some respect towards life. Even if it's just a mere gesture, like placing a dying flower into the dirt, in the belief that all life is sacred.

In human eyes, a mouse lives a fast life. Maybe too fast for eyes to follow, for a mind to grasp, and for our slowly beating hearts to ever fully understand. The caring allyship of soil, mice, and plants is just one of the innumerable examples of the intertwined web of life-confirming species partnerships in the complexity of ecosystems. Care starts by appreciating how the tiniest help the tiny so that a rugged earth, pained and scared by humanity, can birth mighty oaks and fields of gold in the form of flowers and nectars.

Emotional distance and physical separation are inherent to research on animals and prohibit a deeper understanding of the entangled earthly connections and how to nurse them. Unfolding the simpoesis of mice and soil and the caretaking nature of their relationship deeper exposes the lack of reciprocity and love between white walls and sanitised gloves. The Touch of Soil is a tribute to the animals in medical research. Using the testimony of injustice as practice of care and active understanding I advocate to pause, to feel grief, sorrow and pain as well as to witness

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

and cherish our ability to empathise.

Caressing the earth: of maps and mice, flowers and feet aims to identify the power structures to dismantle that keep undermining the intertwining ways of becoming, between species and other entities, and reimagine ways to care and be cared for. Linked through the entity of soil and acts of care, the following part of this research paper continues to draw a network of implications which entail a history of social inequities and disregard for ecologies. *The Touch of Soil* shows the human inflicted disconnection from other living beings and how we inhibit ourselves from building connections in scientific practices. Beyond interspecies engagement, *Palpating Landscape* reveals how relations to the more-than human world translate care and reciprocity into practice.

Appendix A — The touch of soil



Figure 1. *The Touch Of Soil I.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.



Figure 2. *The Touch Of Soil II.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.



Figure 3. *The Touch Of Soil III.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.

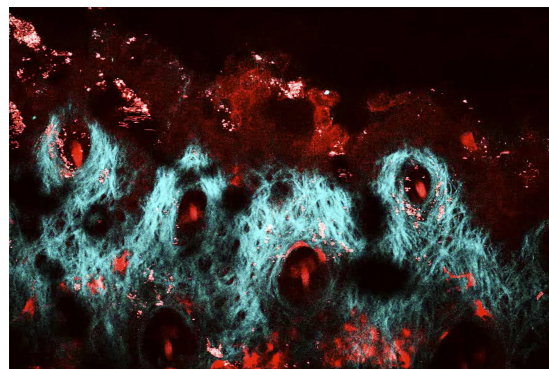


Figure 4. *The Touch Of Soil IV.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET



Figure 5. *The Touch Of Soil V.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.



Figure 6. *The Touch Of Soil VI.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.



Figure 7. *The Touch Of Soil VII.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.

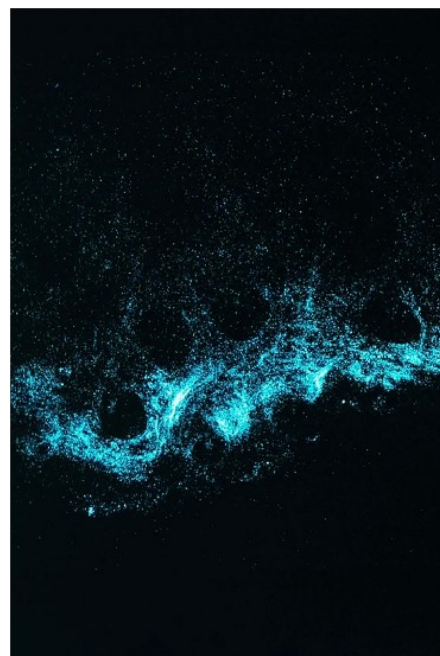


Figure 8. *The Touch Of Soil VIII.* Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

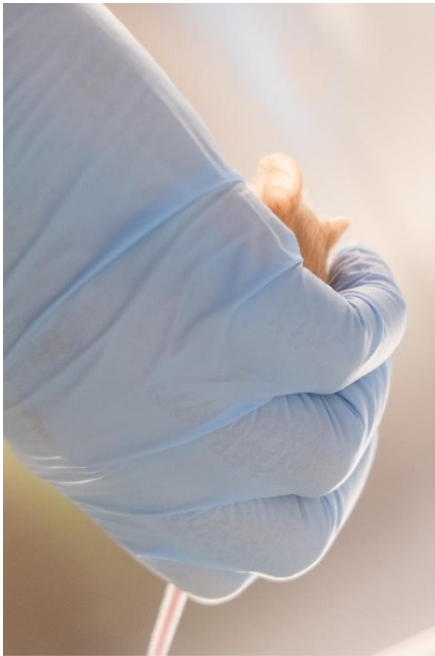


Figure 9. *The Touch Of Soil IX.*
Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.

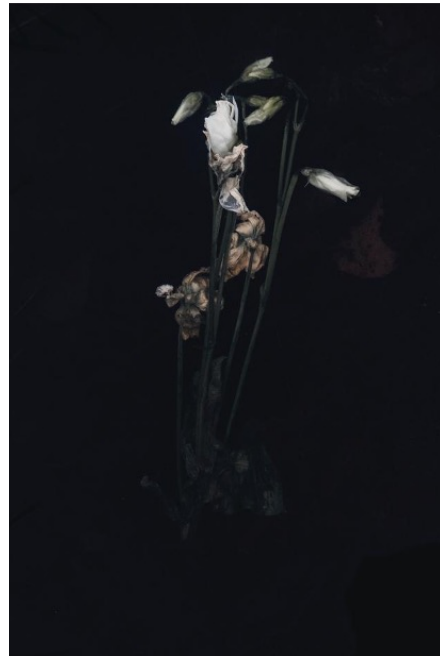


Figure 10. *The Touch Of Soil X.*
Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.



Figure 11. *The Touch Of Soil XI.*
Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.



Figure 12. *The Touch Of Soil XII.*
Dominik Fleischmann, 2021.

Palpating landscape

celine s diaz

I walk on the cliffs, walking the coastline barefoot. My eyes transfix the ground to absorb the path through feet and eyes. The sensations play with sounds though all remains abstract. (Some trails I remember in light, colours or sounds—The memories sometimes silent, sometimes screeching, sometimes low and deep or one loud all-encompassing noise). The ground's pressure engenders sensations in my body: A round stone under the foot's arch travels into my belly button; a sharp one in the centre of the sole pierces the stomach.

I am to walk.

The ground is rocky and uneven. I cannot stop until pain is overtaking me.

Either I'm numb or the ground became soft.

Inevitably my pace slows, even if I should avoid it. I am not to stop. Through movement I integrate the landscape in my mental world map. I've known parts of that path only in feet-felt sensibility:

Where the surface pained me more,

where the soreness blurred the visual remembrance,

where the ache made my ears ring.

I look back to find my footprints in the dirt are imperceptible. I find comfort in knowing that this soil under my feet exists, I walk over it lightly, open to meet it, humbled by my own human condition—the present fully shaped by the land.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

-1-

Palpating Landscape consists of my walking barefoot along the coastline; no defined end in sight except the moment in which pain becomes unendurable; to shift my perception into a sense less visual living within the realm of touch. This 5-hour barefoot walk¹⁴ is a commitment to mapping out a terrain creating, for one, a conceptual landscape through sensations captured by my feet and, for another, a map of the landscape on my soles through the marks made by the land itself.

A habitual interceptor of our connection to the soil are shoes: obstructing feeling a place through our feet. Shoes protect us from pain which the ground might (un)intentionally inflict upon us. Would we not have more respect for a world experienced through our soles? Would we see the landscape differently? Would we give the land some rest? Might the ground appreciate the soft touch of our feet? Would it feel caressed? Inquiring on the idea of hierarchy in the human experience of moving through places, I begin to question my understanding of the surroundings I roam through, the soil itself and the sole of my feet. How can I walk through a space, tinging my movement with self-awareness and directing emotional attentiveness to it?

My impulse for carrying out this walk stemmed from a generalised feeling of human disregard for the place that nurtures us—literally supporting us by supporting the weight of our lives, bodies, and our universes; and a search for my own connection to soil buried in confounding layers of German heritage, Colombian ancestry, and Portuguese residence. There is a sense of belonging that transcends these cultural borders and that sees the soil for the soil, and the connection to it as part of a greater scheme. At the same time, we never really get to know these lands, even those we live on. We can walk through them, but do we engage with them in the sense that we let them take over us? How to show this specific landscape where I plant so much of myself emotionally that I care about it? In my artistic research and practice, I apply ritual to re-evaluate connection.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

I do not know what this land asks from me. A human approach to love means getting to know the other and see them in perspective, rather than mere self-projection. I want to give the soil the softness of my body—the time that drapes it and the attention that cultivates it. My idea of care relies on the recognition of the other, walking ‘through the other’ kindly without exerting a rigid weight; and while that weight exists inherently, I removed the separation between myself and the ground by eliminating the rigidity of shoes, immersing within the “other” as deep as possible.

As my foot adapts to the composition of the ground underneath, the surface receives my trace and its formation imprints on me. When I encountered the footsteps of others—marks of their shoes—I would turn and find theirs, but I could not see my own, for my feet were conforming to the soil. Before walking, I had imagined my feet traveling over the field like an ant across a human body. It tickles a bit, it feels soft—each wandering step a gentle caress on the skin by a creature wandering over you; and I imagined myself, a tiny cartographer, mapping in my mind a sketch of the land’s evocations—be they pain or visions, colours or tastes—for, as you tread the soil tries to speak through your senses. I must give something of myself in return. Let the landscape occupy my body, vibrate in my muscles. Let it prevail over me denying me any imposition. My feet serve as records not for the land which they have known but that has been known, becoming agents that keep record and assert care.

-2-

The landscape retains in it the marks of its dwellers. Colonial history left its imprint of unjust treatment towards soil and the civilisations who cultivate relationships with it. I am included in this analogous story that humans have written on the lands, in that my ancestors have part suffered theft of their land part denied it to others. Colonial-Capitalist displacement of native peoples, along with the entitlement and possession of foreign lands, has strategically distanced humanity from the earth by instituting dynamics of societal organisation¹⁵. A disso-

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

ciation visible in our daily interactions with the soil underneath as it steps into the background of our attention in many forms: For one, we fail to acknowledge the earth directly beneath, fail to address the consequences of this neglect¹⁶ but also misjudge the interconnectedness of decisions in Europe that impact the soils in South America, Africa, and Asia.

Reinforcing social inequalities, capitalism compels expelling people from their territories for corporative gain, to contribute to a physical, emotional distance to the land. As climate change and the exhaustion of soil drives us toward an ever-worsening cycle that broadens and imposes colonial structures (damaging both Earth and our connections to it), the fight for land persists, for soils that are tied to human identity and claims of belonging. Amid this conflict I crave for directness in my relationship to the earth.

My understanding of land has been infused with a repeated exposure to the actuality that it contains a frail line between dispossession and ownership. The Western method of depicting Earth uses cartography as a tool for appropriation and spatial understanding. We relate to the places we live in by delineating borders through which we ascribe, ideologies, cultural weight, and social interactions upon the landscape. This shapes our perception of the world mathematically, enforcing patterns of subordination and hierarchy. As my family says: Land and soil are something that you are born into and is poured into you. You then need to learn to grow it inside yourself for otherwise it cannot belong to you.

We must embrace land as a habitat—being part of, not living on—overcoming detrimental patterns in our interactions with Earth's intricate life system. We are to find a system of values that cooperates with science, that accepts and acknowledges a spiritual and human correlation to the world within our ecological consciousness, where neither science nor religiosity undermine each other, and both claim sovereignty of life as well as food¹⁷. From mycelium to plants, flowers and fruits, animals and trees—The soil represents an element of justice and health of the ecosystem.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

There is an enchantment in crossing the terrain bearing in mind the repetition and macro/micro-cosmic simultaneity of happenings on the same planet. *Palpating Landscape*, the ritual experience of walking barefoot over a land carrying emotional affection, focuses on engaging with Earth while renouncing any perceived superiority. Here, I propose a 'sensorial map'¹⁸ as to be seen in the appendix, requiring genuine interaction as a method to distance myself from the prevailing attitude, topographic account-keeping and occupational interference. This map of space and pain reads as a consequence of our meddling in the natural order—whether directly through litter and path making, or by conceptual beliefs. By walking I confront not only my own individual connection but also deep-rooted claims to land and soil; entitlement regarding our understanding of the Earth; and the recognition of *an other's* place within this system—I walk rewriting the assertion of power through mapping to signify humility before the world.

This new map, born out of a new perception, regards the value of phenomenology of ritual, meaning a conscious being in space, acting as a body sensibly engaged—an allusion to my endured experience of the physical world, rather than formally understanding places as points of reference. By walking barefoot, I call for acute awareness of the very ground beneath our feet and suggest experimenting with our ways of correlation by adopting a ritual designed to re-form the connection with Earth. Seeking for belonging, we are allowed to weave belonging into the sands, rodents' burrows, the tracks of ants, the rocks.

Whether born in it, brought to it, come to it, or made to settle upon it; the soil with all its inherent richness carries purpose for us to recover as to requite with the care it deserves.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

-3-

*I-body echo the world,
I pulsate recalling my movement.
The landscape vibrates in my muscles,
my feet, proof of my roaming,
the subtle footprints, an ephemeral witness to my existence.
I am a human consciously complying to its environment.*

The world is made of causal and consequential circumstances. We physical beings inhabiting a physical place sense the environment in infinitely diverging manners; interpreting these sensitivities as medium, agent, or conspirator. Body and environment are inextricably linked. In this ritual-walk, my body is both myself and my accomplice, allowing for subjective sense, feeling and connection. I focus on my body from the inside, seeing my surroundings and my reactions: I let *me-body*¹⁹ be a door to experiencing the world. I perceive the landscape by becoming a register of circumstance as the space engraves into my flesh—until I only feel the aching muscles and skin under my feet. The ground pierces into me.

There is a rather romanticised vision of overcoming the body and its human condition, or an opposing emotional distancing from the body²⁰. I believe we should instead root ourselves back into the body to be present, to acknowledge us as bodies, so we might create a more egalitarian understanding of empathy for all. Being a body is not exclusively human, but we lack an understanding of ourselves, each other, and our habitats in this sense. By paying attention to internal responses to circumstances of pain and love within ourselves, we might more easily discern them in others and in the natural world surrounding us.

I am not reflecting on a new idea but pondering something new to my body for the brief span of my existence—reciprocity, to absorb and be absorbed by the earth underneath and let the consciousness that I put into my feet become the only presence in me. We are bound to impermanence, we are ephemeral and there is a transience

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

to our bodies and to what we believe in, but then there are beliefs that we know to be true because they swim through our body perpetually—The knowledge of certain constants. Our body contains abiding moments that carry truth and these truths swim in us. Through intent we have the power to evoke these moments, to retain these moments even though they're fleeting, our flesh a web of timelessness and passage, our existence a dance of the sensual and the sacred.

In conscientious devotion to the visible strength of cliffs and their timelessness, sinking my feet into them, I wake to the coasts ever increasing fragility fronting climate change. Harsher winters erode the cliffs, modifying coastlines even faster. My connection-building ritual, then, so too contemplates that imminent erasure: by attempting to hold onto and appreciate all while it remains, I ponder impermanence, organic transience, and the adjustments forced onto nature. We struggle to confront ourselves with changes brought upon the land that surpass our direct, individual meddling—beyond pollution, desire paths, or river engineering—inevitably and unpredictably altering landscape on massive scale. Our intervention in nature, subsidised by politico-economic systems, has and continues remodelling habitats around the world. . . perpetually.

While contemplating interconnectivity, erosion, and the probable loss of this place I feel connected to, my pursuit of connection with the transitory branches into a process of documentation of ephemerality, coalescing stability and fragility. I envision what lies beyond the precipice, permanently changed, conceded and fallen. I see the duality with a sense of duty—an emotional consequence, addressed by a routine of responsibility²¹.

The space between soil and feet is a room for endless thoughts: What sprung from the contact of two bodies that hurt and love each other in existence were puzzle-pieces in the research of my relational patterns towards natural environments. Palpating Landscape is a ritual of reflection on respect, the soil and myself. To touch receiving pain, having removed a very significant

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

layer, uncovers a connection that moves across the planes of physicality and interiority, roots and presence, the individual and the whole. In connection, one recognises the synchronicities between themselves and nature and advocates for the human to be humbled by the ecology that sustains them and for respect in the interaction.

The personal aspect of the ritual is to be underlined. While this pain was for me a part of my affirmation of relation, I do not see it as a sacrifice but a part of an interaction that dwells in the realm of love. I do not invoke it for a pleasuring of my senses, I do not regret it, I do not advocate for it. I was feeling pain as an element of reclaiming my connection to Earth.

If I invite the reader to create a ritual that challenges their own interactive habits, it will be on their terms. I merely ask one question “To what extent do you limit yourselves in building a connection?”

Conclusion

In writing, and thus examining the artistic practice this paper affirmed itself as a medium to examine experience and identify problems that come with our relational existence. In dialoguing two projects approaching the same core of empathy, a universal awareness of a hierarchical structure in interaction emerges. This pyramid of value undermines a whole world of knowledge and realisation that is revealed in the act of care.

By incorporating the consideration for soil, mice and the immediate reliance between them, (in which we humans so often find ourselves in the middle of), *The Touch of Soil* celebrates animals for themselves countering to the misconceptions. It assigns its focus to the care we neglect in our contact with other animals and problems with modern science that perpetuate this indifference. In similar method of regard, celine s diaz uses ritual to invigorate an emotional connection in their sensuous interpretation of the soil, challenging interactive habits between the reader themselves and the Earth they inhabit. By asking for physical pain from the landscape,

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

the action opposes analogous branches of biases and power as voiced in *The Touch of Soil*. Having soil and ritualistic engagement as a direct link between the two works, we draw a network of implications which entail a history of social inequities and disregard for ecologies. The true component of each research revolves around connection, its possibilities and significance.

This article provides a framework for artistic research within a routine of care and responsibility encouraging multiplicities of knowledge in academic research and discourse. In poetic writing we embrace emotional and embodied experience and propose active engagement as a method.

Our final acknowledgment addresses the need to innovate our current structures in interacting, being and thinking about and with the earth. Whether we act based on a profession or our own personal attachment towards animals and natural environments, it is of substance to challenge our preconceptions and transform our practice of care to be all-encompassing. The research will continue to delve into the possibilities of relation with the environment broadening it beyond human perception. While we introduce personal approaches, there are infinite possibilities for relationship-building that summon empathy and consequently action for a more equal coexistence with the Earth: To have the land blossom and flourish into us without being claimed.

Appendix B — Palpating landscape

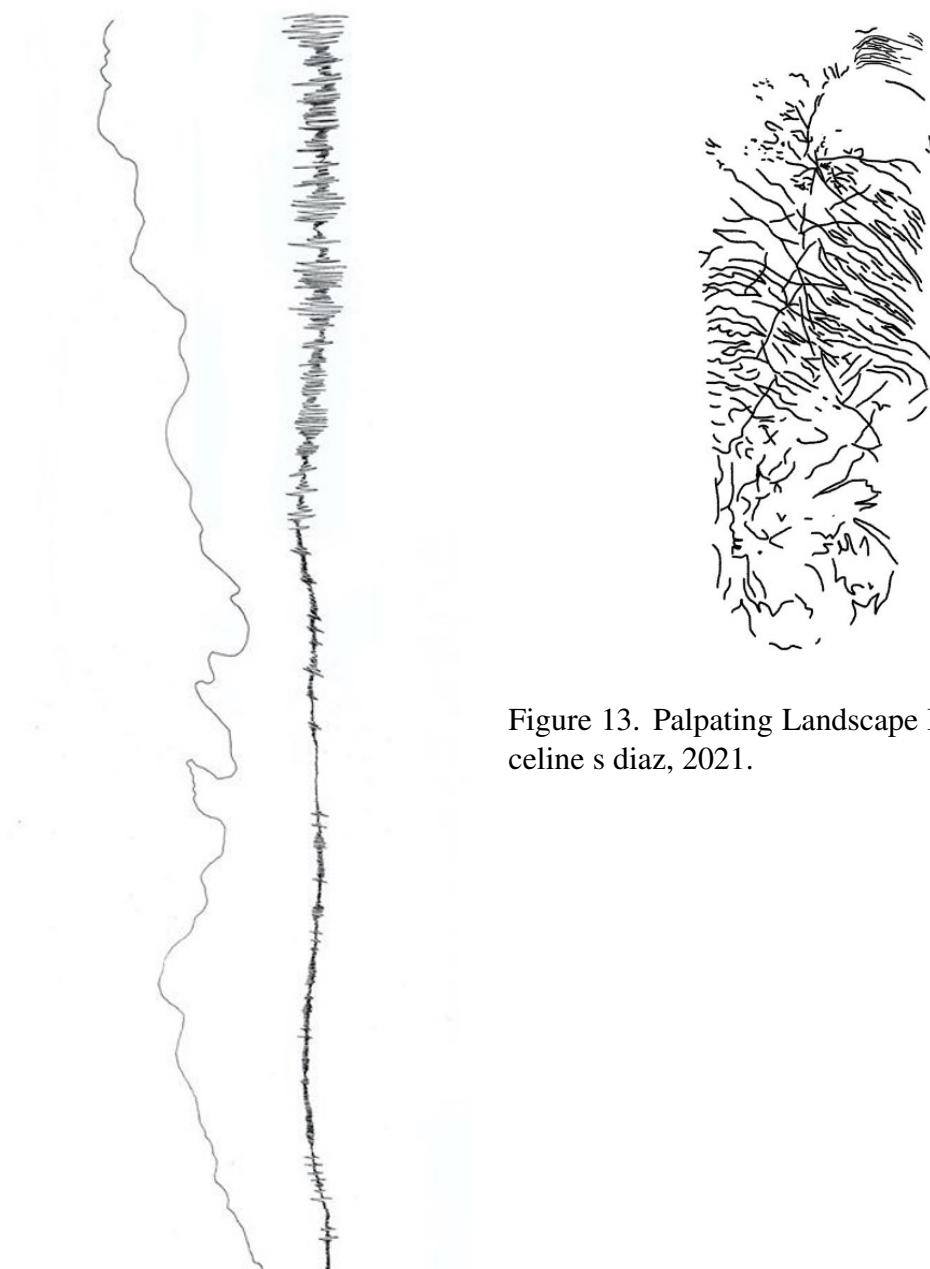


Figure 13. Palpating Landscape I & II, MAPS.
celine s diaz, 2021.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET



Figure 14. Palpating Landscape III. celine s diaz, 2021.



Figure 15. Palpating Landscape IV. celine s diaz, 2021.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET



Figure 16. Palpating Landscape V. celine s diaz, 2021.

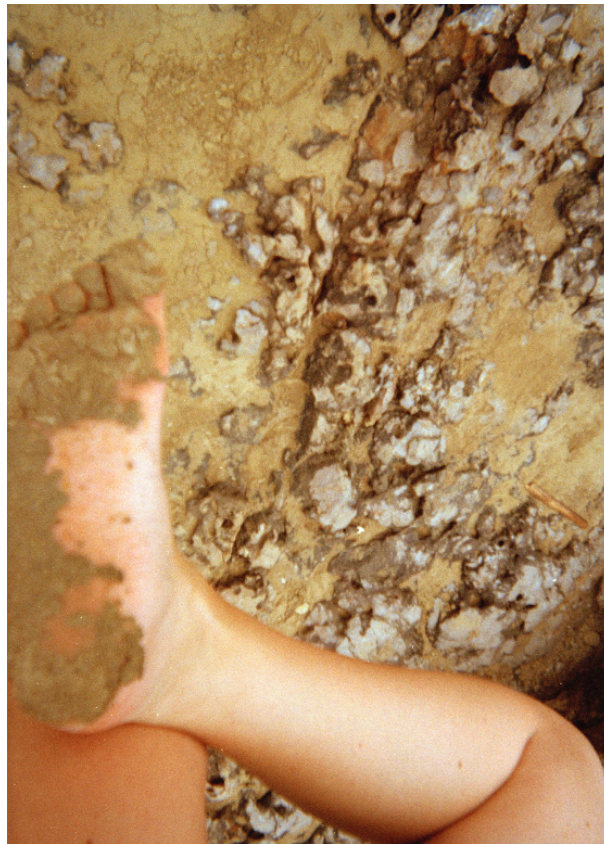


Figure 17. Palpating Landscape VI. celine s diaz, 2021.

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET



Figure 18. Palpating Landscape VII. celine s diaz, 2021.



Figure 19. Palpating Landscape IX, MAPS. celine s diaz, 2021.



Figure 20. Palpating Landscape X, MAPS. celine s diaz, 2021.

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Notes

¹The importance of mice for a healthy ecosystem is primarily acknowledged in their role as prey, as crucial links between plants and predators (Shalaway, 2016).

²Studies proved that rodents significantly improve soil composition and have a strong influence on ecosystem sustainability and diversity as their actions support the growth of new plants. See e.g. Faiz, Fakhar-i-Abbas & Faiz (2017) and Davidson & Lighfoot (2008).

³Scientists have found out that mice who feed on fruiting mushroom bodies can disperse fungi spores through their droppings. Truffles which fruit below the ground rely even more on mice to expand their mycelium network (Stephens & Rowe, 2020).

⁴Often mice store more seeds than they eat which allows the remaining seeds to germinate in fertile conditions and in the most unexpected places (Forget et al, 2013 and Sunyer, et al 2013).

⁵Some prime examples for rodent pollination of flowers and shrubs are *Protea Nana* (Biccard & Midgley 2009) in South Africa and *Cymbidium serratum* in China (Wang, Zhang, Ma, Dong, 2008).

⁶It might not be a coincidence that the smell of these orchids is strongest at night, when nocturnal wild mountain mice, the only known pollinators of *Cymbidium serratum*, are roaming the hills (Wang, Zhang, Ma, Dong, 2008).

⁷The term *simpoesis* was coined by Beth Dempster (2000) and reimagined by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) as “making with” and to “become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff”. A “*sympoietic tangling*” is the ecological and evolutionary development where entities create worlds together.

⁸A study by Belk and Smith (1996) found very strong analogues between the brightness of soil and the coat colour of different Oldfield mice populations.

⁹In a new study from 2021 scientists proved that when mice intake parts of soil, it decreases the potential for allergic reactions and causes gut microbiota to flourish which significantly influences a positive immune function (Zhou, Li & Yang, 2021)

¹⁰Research suggests that *M. vaccae*, a microorganism found abundantly in soil, helps mice to prevent colitis, decreases anxiety, and promotes resilience to stress (Reber, Siebler, Donner et al, 2016)

¹¹The demand for a study like this comes with the surge in inflammatory diseases as our modern way of living has distanced us from soil and deprived us of the connection to its microorganisms essential for our immune regulation (Reber et al, 2016).

¹²The dead animals are wrapped in durable double plastic bags before they are incinerated (Waste Management, 2017).

¹³Robin W. Kimmerer describes science as a “language of objects” and “a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts” (Kimmerer, 2015, p. 40). She explains that despite accuracy and preciseness of the scientific language, it is a language that is incomplete, for it lacks a truths that resides within and around us.

¹⁴Realised in 2020 and 2021.

¹⁵Many problems in the colonial period in Africa were concerned with conflicts between groups that were forced to become homogenized because of the lines on a map they had never seen. Geographical societies of scholars

CARESSING THE EARTH: OF MAPS AND MICE, FLOWERS AND FEET

and government-directed cartographers devoted most attention in their map-making to plotting out areas of likely settlement and colonization, and paid little attention to how the native peoples would receive them (Stone 226) . Maps in Colonialism, Ryan Nock (2001).

¹⁶Referring to soil nutrient depletion in agriculture industry - the nitrogen crisis. Information gathered from the online lecture 'Thinking the Nitrogen Anthropocene' by Elina Staikou, November 27, 2021 by IDSV - INSTITUTE FOR DOCTORAL STUDIES IN THE VISUAL ARTS

¹⁷Penniman, L (2019) in *By Reconnecting With Soil, We Heal the Planet and Ourselves* relates our inequitable treatment of farmers of Colour, the cultural importance of reconnecting to the soil, as well as soil health for spiritual reawakening. Yes! Media. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/dirt/2019/02/14/by-reconnecting-with-soil-we-heal-the-planet-and-ourselves>

¹⁸MAPS in Appendix, Page 27

¹⁹me-body instead of 'my body' that implies a possession of a body and a disassociating of 'mind/body'.

²⁰Expressed moreover in white (male) arts that centralizes their work around the body. Jones, A. (1998) *Body Art: Performing The Subject* (1998). University of Minnesota Press.

²¹In the documentation of this moment in time I affix it for all it contains in relevance, one can narrate and read life in the subtext; see the cosmos in an image; An example is Palssón's *Down To Earth* (2020). The Habitat chapter regards a photograph of his hometown, destroyed by volcanic eruption analysing the image and the tragedy on a grand scale.