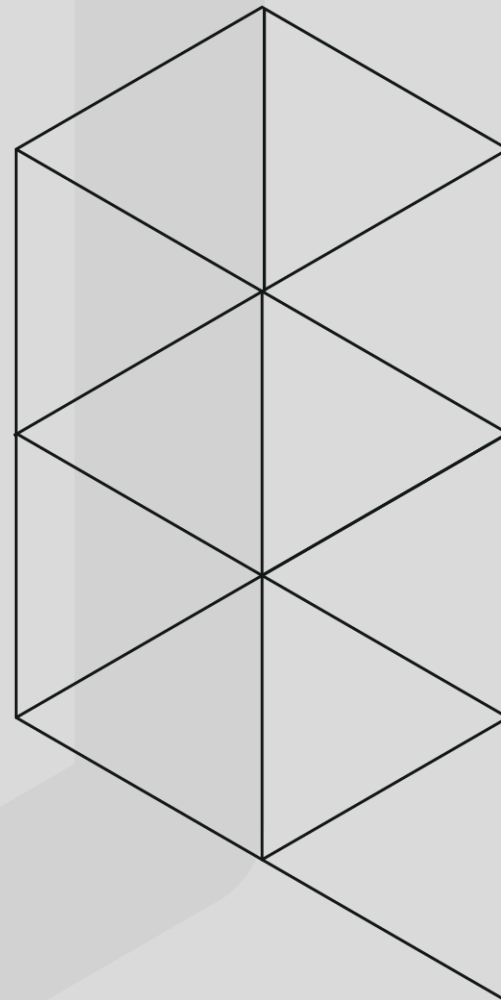


Performing Sedimentation as Agent of Connectedness and Adjacency in and through the Works of James Joyce, Zbigniew Gostomski and Joseph Beuys

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In the early phases of the Russian war on Ukraine, I read a newspaper interview with an experienced and otherwise retired British soldier, who joined the Ukrainian forces, in order to teach inexperienced men how to survive.¹ His advice stuck in my head: You have to keep moving. If you're in a place for longer than five minutes, you have to dig yourself in. Following the Belo Horizonte gathering out of which this volume has emerged, this warning gains further poignancy, when it comes to Palestinians in Gaza. How a body becomes part of the earth, in both life and death has a lot to do with – it is – sedimentation and mining. Human beings perform connectedness between life-forms, geological times, often including memory of (or current) trauma. Do they do that as a form of solidarity? Or should I possibly call such relationality by a less triumphalist term? I would like to follow Tina M. Campt in calling it: adjacency. Aided by Barbara Bolt's take on art(istic) research and performativity, I wish to explore how, in the works of Zbigniew Gostomski and Joseph Beuys, through their reading of James Joyce, thinking and performing far-reaching connectedness has become a word and image matter – and one directed at societal change.

In order to do this, let us first turn to a recent example of artwork that establishes certain now current terms and lets me speak of performativity in a larger frame: The Otolith Group sets itself the task of

seeing and listening across media, from deep time to the cosmos, opening up human and non-human life to an aesthetics of intertemporality and interscalarity. The poethics of thickening time chronopolitically to make the human and biotic community sensible, audible and visible. (Otolith Group)

In their 2018 work *O Horizon*, they thematize the top layer of soil, sustainably enriched in the area of Bengal, India, where

Rabindranath Tagore's teachings have shaped practices. It was also Bengal (West Bengal) that saw British policy failure cause the devastating 1943 famine. Human thinking and teaching does have large-scale effects, one way or another. Considering the nearing and irreversible global heating of over 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels, paying attention to geology and the soil is eminently necessary today – and this book's theme does its bit to foster such reflection. The 2023 British Association for Art History conference in London similarly included a panel that was entitled "Matter Matters: The Aesthetics and Politics of Soil", where Maja and Reuben Fowkes, scholars of Eastern European art, delivered a paper entitled "For the Rights of the Soil not to be Exhausted: Ecocentric Practices for Land Restoration". It featured artistic responses to the Kazakh famine, caused by the failures of Soviet policy. Such recent work is in keeping with scientific findings, namely the Gaia theory (developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis), which "proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic and self-regulating, complex system that [has so far helped] to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet." (Gaia) An epistemic shift towards co-dependency and synergy seems to be underway, bolstered by those who address the earth's crust. Tagore did this positively, highlighted, as I said, by the Otolith group's recent work.

This change was already underway (among some exceptional cultural practitioners) in the early twentieth century, following relativity theory and what Albert Einstein called "spooky action at a distance": quantum physics. Art historian Mehmet Berkay Sülek has identified a similar shift in the work of Aby Warburg, James Joyce's contemporary, who was eager to meet with Einstein and eventually had a fruitful meeting with him, outlining the communalities of their projects. The artist John Latham told me that, while most of the 20th century's art producers acted as if Einstein had never existed, Joyce was for him the great exception in this. In a recent essay "The Geological Metaphor and Multiplicity of Time", Sülek outlines that Warburg's currency today owes to epistemic correspondences between Warburg's (or for me Joyce's) projects and current thinking:

Warburg had a particular way of looking at the past as a dynamic multilayered space rather than a fixed singular one. To arrive at such a significant understanding of the past, both postwar thinkers and Warburg employed geological metaphors to describe how temporality runs at a different

pace at different locations, just like the layers of the earth.
(Sülek 1)

Geology now knows that layers of sedimentation, even if initially uniform, can be disturbed by earthquakes, meteorites, or the actions of living beings at a later point, rendering geological strata as complex markers of diachronic time, rather than witnesses to teleological progressions in history: that which traditional positivist thinking, such as authoritarianism, prefers. A focus on connectedness or complex relationality in time and space could lead to different understandings, such as considering images as active agents (the performativity of which I spoke). Yet, there was or is – similar to geological sedimentation – no uniform epistemic change. Memory studies scholar Aleida Assmann (2021) e.g. has analyzed absurd distortions. She diagnosed a “separation mania” as underlying current, still-imperial thinking in all forms of hatred, as well as a choice between what she calls “polarising” and “solidarising” running through many current societal debates. The word and image nexus appears to be vital to push against that separation mania.

In my work on how artists have responded to Joyce’s literature, I have long tried to find a way of grasping the curiously rich directness and life-likeness evidenced in the works coupled with the performativity (or indirect efficacy) of Joyce in these writings that eschew the triumphalisms otherwise to be found in such profusion. Sarat Maharaj would say: “perfidious fidelity”, sharply honing in on the untranslatability of the other, which he posits against the regime in which he grew up: South Africa under Apartheid, i.e. separation mania par excellence (Maharaj). Recently, a new formulation struck me as highly appropriate for what I was for so long looking for: adjacency. Tina M. Campt, the author of *A Black Gaze*, coined this beautiful concept. It captures

reparative work [in our world that] is made possible through modes of adjacency, rather than identity or proximity or juxtaposition, because it is adjacency that can assert a relationality of being connected with whilst being different from something or someone else’s histories, and especially histories of exclusion, trauma, marginalisation and pain. That can assert a political relationality of solidarity without homogenising experiences of oppression. (Gardner 96)

Having thus established how and with whom I understand connectedness in relation to sedimentation in the earth's crust, I now wish to turn to my cases. Here, in my understanding, thinking, writing and visual creating have attempted to establish adjacency. There are no doubt many other good examples (such as Warburg), but my background and research track record make me turn to James Joyce (1882-1941) from British colonised Ireland, where the previous generation had (if they were lucky) lived through another policy failure, the Irish famine. I include Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), a former Nazi soldier, Joyce-reader and co-founder of the Green movement in Germany. And another work I would like to turn to, Zbigniew Gostomski's (1932-2017), comes from Poland, a nation (for nearly two centuries a non-nation) that had (and has) many "policy failures" to contend with, too.

Gostomski quotes in Polish and English a section from Joyce's *Ulysses* in his 1973 work *Pascal's Triangle*:

[E]ach one who enters imagines himself to be the first to enter whereas he is always the last term of a preceding series [...] each imagining himself to be first, last, only and alone, whereas he is neither the first, nor last nor only or alone.

This is how James Joyce's character, Leopold Bloom, gives expression to connectedness in *Ulysses*, published 1922. The quotation stems from the so-called "Ithaca" episode, the home-coming of the Odysseus-like wanderer, who had just lived through a wild, drunken, surrealist chapter, where he imagined himself becoming a woman, the Dublin mayor etc. "Ithaca" is presented in the sober form of a Catechism: the Catholic church's question and answer format that resembles traditional scientific pedagogy. It struggles to accommodate the paradox of people imagining themselves to be individually autonomous, while instead being heterogeneous, i.e. connected, and not wishing to see this. This is augmented by the "If he had smiled" potentiality, an apparently unrealised one, in the quotation. Bloom, however, does notice in the bed he is entering "the imprint of a human form, male, not his." The connectedness referred to (for good and bad) is that of Bloom's position in a line of his wife's lovers: Pascal's triangle is a "love triangle". It is also general generational and human connectedness. Some lines before, it is stated that he enters the bed "reverently, the bed of conception and of birth, of consummation of marriage and of breach of marriage, of sleep and of death" (Joyce *U* 17 2119-21).

Performing sedimentation as agent of connectedness

The space Bloom enters is implicitly thus the space of death, an entering into the earth, where our bodies partially feed new life, partially calcify, fossilize and are joining the organisms that gave us the fuel that we (both you, the reader of these lines, and I) are today using while dangerously heating the planet.

When in 1973, Polish conceptual artist Gostomski quoted Joyce's passage, it was on one of seven A4 pages, making up his conceptual artwork *Pascal's Triangle*. Five pages feature the mathematical "sedimentations" described by Pascal: triangles with small numbers at the top and larger, added ones at the bottom, as if visualizing the pressure in geological layering. The last page shows a photograph of more sediments: slag heaps from mining in then "normal" (and dirty) Eastern bloc industry: likely open cast coal mining. All three elements insist on connections, whether in the natural, mathematical or human world: a comment aimed in Gostomski's political context at overcoming a specifically Eastern European sense of Cold War helplessness and isolation. Connecting lines span everywhere: into time, space, geology, canonical literature, natural laws and mathematical equations. This spells a promise of relevance in external cultural and academic discourses (external to the Eastern Bloc and Gostomski's present time).

Some canonical texts were considered to have liberating effect vis-à-vis a regime that claimed to be unchanging: the be all and end all. The simple visual link between number triangles and slag heaps lets the economy enter – and also ensures trans-lingual comprehension (in addition to the text's bilingualism – with a beautiful spelling mistake in English). The triangle or pyramid as a symbol for hierarchy is turned to other, more hopeful uses: a sense of the individual's connectedness and – potentially – solidarity. This was years before the foundation of the Solidarność union in 1980, which helped bring about the 1989 non-violent revolution – through a different connectedness of workers, those who purportedly "owned" the means of production, but without agency. The peaceful revolution of 1989 is by all accounts Vladimir Putin's nemesis, undoing his brutal, hierarchical vision of a fixed, authoritarian world. That revolution would, thus, arguably serve rather well today as something from which to take our cue to dismantle that vision. Gostomski's tomb beautifully thematizes that both materially and through art, not all of us dies. The inscription reads "*non omnis moriar.*"

The former German soldier Joseph Beuys read Joyce formatively in the mid-1950s, when it, as I have argued elsewhere, helped him to overcome a depressive crisis (Lerm Hayes 2018). The very last multiple artwork that he created in 1985, knowing of his imminent passing, was a token of gratitude to Joyce: James Joyce with Sled, acknowledges what Beuys calls Joyce's literature's "self-changing principle [...] decisive [for him as] a dynamic medicine."ⁱⁱ Beuys came to associate Joyce with the earth: mining is a recurrent topic, such as in the Blackboards of the *Kapital Raum 1970-77* installation, where Joyce's home, Ireland, is the theme in many blackboards, too. What is more, the grand piano is silent and takes on the features of a dolmen: these 5000 year-old megalithic stone structures, to be found in Ireland and other peripheral European locations, consist of a heavy stone carried by smaller, upright ones. Either alone or in rows, they were covered by mounds of earth and formed passage tombs, such as Newgrange, which Beuys visited in 1974.

Beuys wanted to create such a "dolmen passage" on the site of the extermination camp Auschwitz – and he formulated these visual ideas in six exercise books that he collectively called "Beuys extends James Joyce's *Ulysses* at the author's request", ca. 1957-62 (briefly referred to as *Ulysses Extension*, see Lerm Hayes 2018). Rather than just using the dolmen or piano (or a similar "stag" shape) as a motif, Beuys read Joyce in such a way that the materiality of both the words and the book object become implicated, too; become performative. A book turned on its spine ends up being a flower (or "bloom"), or in Beuys' term a warmth-time-machine. Furthermore, when the book is closed, pages become (geological) layers, one above the other: "batteries" in the sense in which he also used felt layers topped by copper plates in the installation that features the materials of his proposal for the sculptural intervention in Auschwitz.

The use of felt and fat, which Beuys pioneered in sculpture around the time of his *Ulysses Extension*, emanated from Joycean word play in both German and English, but also harks back to the connection that (in my previous research) I have been able to establish in Beuys' work between Joyce's literature and his efforts of coming to terms with trauma: war and the Holocaust. Here, it is relevant that felt does not just get piled up, but it is itself, it performs sedimentation through merely flocking, layering hair from the fur of animals (mainly hares, a placeholder for human being in Beuys' iconography), pressing this – and letting time and dust act on it.

Snowfall is clearly a work of Christian iconography, composed of three former Christmas trees, like the hill on which Jesus was crucified: Golgatha. The felt layers that are the snow fold around them in a way that highlight the muffling, insulating quality of human matter and dust on the earth's surface. It is that top layer in which Beuys had to dig himself in, over and over, in order to survive. The airplane crash on the Crimea is a more exciting story, but this and other works tell of trying to be warm in the snow-covered earth of Ukraine and elsewhere on WWII's Eastern front. I have in the past interpreted *Snowfall* in relation to "The Dead", the last story in Joyce's early short story collection, *Dubliners*. There, paralysis prevails and the protagonist of "The Dead", hears for the first time of a boy, who was in love with his wife in earlier years. Even though he was ill, the boy did not cease to stand in the cold and wet to wait for her. He died "for her". The snowfall at the end of the story, extending over the island of Ireland, which the Romans called Hibernia (wintry), is a fitting image of the husband's trauma.ⁱⁱⁱ

As far as Beuys' reading of Joyce is concerned, I now think that the formative experience that he had with Joyce's writing is more owing to the "night book" of *Finnegans Wake* than earlier work (*Ulysses* was the "day book"). This 1939 emigrant magnum opus using over 40 languages demands reading groups of different people to maximize language and other knowledges (such as world history) for unravelling the work's references to the microscopic level of the portmanteau words' letters and remember the non-linear cross-references, a hypertext *avant la lettre*. Its first pages also feature a "museyroom", a passage tomb museum that makes readers enter the earth to engage with world history. Sedimentation and mining very similarly occurred, as we have seen, in Gostomski's *Pascal's Triangle* as text (from *Ulysses*), numbers and mounds of earth (slag heaps): evidence of artistic thinking that seems to be related to Beuys and current artists such as The Otolith Group, in a (our) wish to connect on geographical and historical lines, between disciplines – and especially between people(s).

Performativity in and of literature is something that Samuel Beckett memorably focused on in his 1929 statement about *Finnegans Wake*: "Here form is content, content is form [... Joyce's] writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (Beckett 14). Joyce scholar Luke Gibbons has recently established – or re-established – a

reading of Joyce that corresponds with many artists' understanding of that materially sensitive and performative aspect, which I had traced in *Joyce in Art* (both exhibition and book) in 2004. This element had also been seen by Joyce's contemporaries, but got occluded by the calcifications of canonicity in the meantime. What Gibbons is arguing persuasively in James Joyce and the *Irish Revolution, 1916-21*, is that Joyce's work emerges as prologue to and harbinger of decolonization, i.e. a mode of thinking connectedness – and adjacency – differently (Gibbons back cover). According to Gibbons,

[...] the extent to which Joyce's fiction translates the 'paralysis' of the still image into a more dynamic moving image may account for the manner in which the modernity of Dublin in *Ulysses* was perceived as moving on from Dubliners to capture the structures of experience that laid the basis of insurrection. [And:] For Joyce, everything is relational and contextual [... As Wyndham Lewis puts it:] 'The things themselves [...] lose ... their importance, or even meaning. Their position absorbs all the attention of his mind.' Joyce thus produces the paradox of a dynamic still-life. (Gibbons xvii, 87)

In that sense, Lewis, who was precisely of the different, the "separation mania" mindset, had diagnosed this well – and with terms that have a meaning in geology: the positioning (of a sediment) is all that counts. The "red thread" school of narrativity gets shaken up in this dynamic, moving constellation of connectivity.

Gibbons reminds his readers that,

Hayden White maintains, that the dissolution of narrative [that, in train with this paper's set of associations, we can liken to the ruptures of an earthquake at the bottom of the ocean that ruffles the sediment] is itself bound up with revolution or traumatic social upheavals: 'This is why it seems to me [White states] that the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism [such as Joyce's] offer the only prospect of adequate representation of the kind of 'unnatural' events – including the Holocaust' (Gibbons 109).

It is also the "antinarrative nonstories" that art can produce that renders art and the creative, curatorial and allegorical writerly responses to it respectful and necessary when facing the memory of trauma, including but also exceeding the Holocaust:

Roger Casement, executed for his part in the organization of the [Irish Revolution's] Easter Rising, features in the 'Cyclops' chapter of *Ulysses* in a manner that links his indictment of crimes against humanity to critiques of imperialism. [...] In *Ulysses*, the universalism of Homer's *Odyssey* is not conceived as an abstract model but reworked in terms of Irish historical links with the Levant and North Africa, and in a related idiom, the universalism of human rights is situated by Casement in historical challenges to empire" (Gibbons 109, xviii).

The to-ing and fro-ing between the profusions of the concrete detail (that become sedimented) and the universal, which is now thought of not as conformity, but as irreducible and changeable difference: this is where Joyce can be placed in the history of an epistemic change towards connectivity and performativity. And that reaches into real-life through match-making between art, writing and other actors, who e.g. compare methods of social justice struggles, forge unexpected empathic alliances and thought collectives (to use a term from Ludwik Fleck).

And this is what e.g. the Belo Horizonte IAWIS conference can be said to have in common with, say, a *Finnegans Wake* reading group or arguably documenta fifteen (Lerm Hayes 2022). In Brazil, the connections of which I have been speaking what Gene Ray (2016) calls the "ecocide-genocide knot" : that indigenous people's disenfranchisement and the climate emergency-hastening destruction of rain forest goes hand in hand. Both in the early twentieth century and today, people get together to repair in small steps, through taking responsibility. If Joyce, as Luke Gibbons (2023)^{iv} argues, was part of a "thought collective" that pioneered non-triumphal opposition to both British oppression and Catholic authoritarianism, and epistemically thereby enabled *de facto decoloniality* – and if none of that time's anti-imperial struggle has lost urgency today – then those reading and co-creating Joyce in the force field of art, however implicated, contradictory, aphasia-prone and shy we are, we may yet keep the glimmer of hope of the "yes I will Yes" alive, with which *Ulysses* ends, and think a necessarily different future life, again: as a potential, performative (art) history characterized by adjacency.

Notes

- i. I mean here not the annexation of the Crimea, but the offensive that began 24 February 2022. – I thank the organizers of the Belo Horizonte IAWIS conference for the invitation and my fellow speakers in the panel entitled “Sedimentation as Connectedness and Solidarity” for the serendipitous ways in which our contributions connected and fuelled an exciting discussion. The material I presented here was developed on the basis of my contributions to two volumes: Lerm Hayes 2024, and Lerm Hayes (in press).
- ii. It is expensive to reproduce Joseph Beuys’ work. Artworks referred to in this chapter can be viewed at various websites: see the links in the bibliography below (under Beuys illustrations).
- iii. Rodney Graham seems to have used “film snow” in a similar manner, and W.G. Sebald’s evocation of ash in Manchester as linked to his protagonists’ trauma as Holocaust survivors is pointing into a similar direction.
- iv. Gibbons xvii: “[...] the scale of the epic was in keeping with forces that challenged empire”.

Citation

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