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# Corporeal Connections: How Photography Can Unite Humans With The Environment

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I have had a lifelong passion for the natural world, and have spent a good deal of the past six years researching human relationships with the environment, both formally whilst studying social anthropology at University, and more informally for the last two years, since moving to Aotearoa New Zealand. A period of ethnographic fieldwork with the Irish Seed Savers Association during 2008, and the ensuing literature research concerning how humans create meaning in the environment through corporeal action, that I carried out for my Masters degree, have been critical to the development of my photographic style and ethos. I take photos of colourful and monochrome micro surfaces of the New Zealand Aotearoa environment during moments of transformation, which, when they are exhibited, are printed onto canvas and stretched over a frame, creating a sculptural effect, and so enlarged to hundreds of times their original scale. The size of the photos – some at a length of 2 metres with a breadth of 1.5 metres – are designed to corporeally dwarf the viewer, so that they become part of the environment depicted. Since new scales are possible, so are new meanings. I believe that once viewer and environment are of equal size, the body begins to create meaning, through a corporeal recognition that all entities, bodies included, constantly undergo transformative processes. Through this acknowledgement, I hope that people are inspired to feel closer to, and more connected with, the natural environments that surround and nurture them.

In order to fully understand the conceptual nature of my photography, I would like to begin by discussing the anthropological origins which have inspired my ‘visual journey’ to my current article

style. I began to use photography about ten years ago, as a means to document the artistic projects that I was working on at school and art college. At that time, I was producing mainly sculpture, and kept various photographic diaries of maquettes and other experimental processes I was working through. In 2005, I enrolled to study Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. It was during the next four years that my photography became something in its own right. I took long walks between lectures, and began to photograph small details that I found in the surrounding environments – slate tiles piled up by a building site, ice crystals in the harbour in winter, the contoured bark from an ancient pine tree near my house. These developments in my photographic style were to lay the visual foundation for my present body of work, which focuses on capturing the intricate and intimate details of the fabric of the natural world, and the discrete processes of change that these surfaces are continuously subject to.

I had always had an interest in the environment and a love of being outside, so I chose to focus my anthropological studies in this direction. During the summer of 2008, I undertook fieldwork for my dissertation project with the Irish Seed Savers Association (ISSA), County Clare, Ireland. The ISSA is an independent charitable organisation which researches, grows and saves the seeds of heritage fruit, vegetable and grain plants from all over the world (<http://www.irishseedsavers.ie>). Founded in 1991 by Anita Hayes, the ISSA now employs around eighteen staff members to tend the twenty-acre site, which incorporates the two vegetable gardens, a schools' educational garden, the office, a shop, the extensive seed bank, a horticultural therapy unit, and the largest native Irish apple collection in the world. The ISSA is the only organisation of its kind in Ireland and joins the growing number of seed saving groups around the world dedicated to this vital biological and social conservation work.

The aim of my fieldwork with the ISSA was to find out why biodiversity conservation in the form of seed saving and growing was so important to them. I discovered that while the act of protecting some of the Irish plants had connotations of conserving and celebrating Irish heritage and identity – the people, the places, the folklore – the fact that food crops from all over the world were being saved indicated that something wider was at play. From my many discussions with staff at ISSA, I learned that helping to conserve the global edible biodiversity present there was actually a creative reaction to what they saw as the dangers of modern (Irish) society, where the body has become alienated from the environment, and lacks the skills to ensure its own survival in terms of food security.

I began to see the ISSA's way of gardening – based on the complete involvement of the body in the environment – as a sort of sensory gardening, a 'skilful re-engagement' (Johnson 2009) of the human body in the landscape, where connectedness, not separateness, was emphasised. Many of the workers at the ISSA, for example, used the touching, tasting and smelling body as ways of gaining and maintaining knowledge about crop growing. For example, many staff at Seed Savers never wear gardening gloves and are not afraid to stick their hands directly in the soil. There is the general feeling that, as Peter, the garden manager at ISSA, said one day, as he showed me how to tell if a pea pod was ready and 'papery' enough for harvesting for seed,

“your eyes sense it, but your fingers tell you it”, implying that knowledge about nature is created and re-discovered through direct relational interaction between the whole feeling body and the environment. Touching relations allow one to ‘tap into’ that once-common knowledge of growing that is held within plants. Tasting foods was again a way of re-discovering growing knowledge, putting the body in contact with what was sensed as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. As we walked around the gardens, it was common to pick up several plants along the way for immediate communal consumption and deliberation on the degree of ripeness, flavour, etc. In this way, biodiversity within the environment became meaningful as the body interacted with it: as senses were activated, the renegotiation of a global human past based on interconnections – not disconnection – with, and knowledge of, the entire biotic world, was possible, therefore bolstering food security. The crucial point was that new meanings and possibilities eventuated through the synthesis of human action and environment.

In the process of developing this theory for my dissertation, I delved into the relevant anthropological literature on human-nature relations, with a special focus on works discussing how the body creates meaning in the environment. I believe that it is this theoretical grounding which has informed and inspired much of my recent photographic work on show here, all of which has been shot in Aotearoa New Zealand. For this reason, I would now like to expand upon these theoretical influences.

My photography draws deeply on the connections of people with their environments, and has as its aim, a wish to create an alternative meaning or association with the environment to that which I believe prevails in many Euro-American and capitalist societies. I consider that, in very general terms, the prevalent mentality in such societies today, regarding the environment, is one of human disconnection from, and domination over, something defined as ‘nature’. In this schema, the environment is a separate entity from humans, existing for many as both a hollow, vacant backdrop to life and a pool of mineral and agricultural wealth to be mined. In so many cases, human bodies and minds are abstracted from, detached from, the worlds of non-domesticated animals and plants, the fields and the forests, the mountains and the lakes. Indeed, as Peter told me during my fieldwork with the ISSA, children in the twenty first century are essentially “dysfunctional” beings who are “not aware of their food and where it comes from” and have little sense of their “existence” and impact on the natural world. Concurrently, as Aine, the ISSA’s Education Officer commented, rather than playing outdoors, entertainment for today’s young generation “equates to watching TV or leafing through the Argos<sup>1</sup> catalogue”.

The relationship of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, and humans and their environments, in various areas of the world, has long been an area of discussion in anthropology. Levi-Strauss wrote widely about the binary distinctions between nature and culture. In contrast, many anthropologists have sought to analyse human-nature relationships beyond the dualisms of nature-culture. For example, Descola, through his Animist approach, has acknowledged that,

especially in Amazonia, all living things, plants, animals and humans, are possessed of qualities normally attributed to humans only, such as subjectivity, mentality, intelligence and spirituality (Turner 2009:16), allowing all entities to become part of the ‘society of nature’ (Descola and Palsson 1996: 14). For the Achuar Jivaro of the Upper Amazon, cultivated plants are viewed as kin by the women who attend to them (Ibid: 7), because of their perceived spiritual and mental connection (Turner 2009: 16), and the Chewong of Malaysia believe all plants and animals to be in possession of the same consciousness as humans, allowing mutual relations (Descola and Palsson 1996: 14). The Perspectivist approach of Viveiros de Castro has also sought to blur the conventional boundaries between nature and culture by focussing, through his idea of ‘perspectival mutilateralism’, on the Amerindian perception of humanity, defined by spirituality, as shared by all creatures, not just human beings. What sets species apart, according to Viveiros de Castro, is corporeal diversity (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 464, 466)<sup>2</sup>.

In the aftermath of my fieldwork with the ISSA, I was looking for ways to think about what my informants had conveyed to me in terms of their fears about the current widespread corporeal disconnection of humans from their environment, and their enthusiasm for sensory gardening as a means to reconnect the body with nature and biodiversity, and therefore, the skills for ensuring food security. It began to occur to me that what my informants were telling me about were new meanings, new relationships with the environment, based on syntheses. At this point, I started to read about the work of Tim Ingold, a theorist who vehemently rejects dualisms such as nature and culture, and has written widely about the influence of the body and environment in co-creating meanings about the world. Ingold’s thinking has been very influential for the development of my photography, therefore I would like to expand on his ideas below.

The philosopher Descartes believed that the body and the senses could provide no true reflection of the ‘reality’ of the world, instead favouring the mind as an accurate barometer of experience (Wylie 2007: 145-6). Accordingly, Descartes set out various dualisms favouring mind over body, thought over senses, vision over touch and culture over nature (Ibid: 146). Ingold has named this ‘world versus self’ approach the ‘building perspective’ (Ingold 2000: 178), which relies on meaning about the external world being created in the mind, then imposed onto it, so that “worlds are made before they are lived in” (Ibid: 179). The main problem with this concept is that it removes the human body from the construction of meaning about the environment.

In reaction to such ideas as espoused by Descartes above, Ingold has proposed the ‘dwelling perspective’, which flouts dualisms and situates the body firmly within the environment, as the locus of the creation of meaning regarding the world. Ingold takes much of his inspiration from the relational and intersubjective approach of Gregory Bateson, which rejects oppositions between a glorified “internal mental world” and denigrated “external physical world” (Bateson 2000 [1970]: 457), and suggests that the mental world is not limited by the skin of a human. Accordingly, a human should be viewed as an “organism-in-its-environment” (Bateson 2000 [1970]: 457), where the “mind expands outwards” (Ibid: 467) so that it is “immanent also in the

pathways and messages outside the body” (Ibid: 467). Essentially, humans are part of the huge “eco-mental system”(Bateson 2000 [1972]: 492) that encompasses the entire interacting biotic life of the planet (Bateson 1980: 22).

Equally as influential to Ingold is the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, both of whom posit an approach based on rejecting Cartesian pre-formed meaning that is ‘tacked onto’ the environment. As Merleau-Ponty has espoused, meaning comes about in one’s surroundings through bodily being-in-the-world, (Ingold 2000: 168-9) since to exist is to have a body which exists as already part of the ‘fabric’ of the world (Wylie 2007: 149), therefore as the person comes into being, so does the world. Consequently, Ingold’s dwelling perspective suggests that through the body actively inhabiting, relating to and engaging with the environment, meaning is created: “the landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along it’s paths connecting them” (Ingold 2000: 193).

For Ingold, the actions of the body in the environment are crucial for creating meaning. Rather than worlds being built through ‘making’ – which implies the presence of a prefigured design which is internalised and re-imposed onto a form by a human mind (Ibid: 316, 319) – form is ‘grown’ through “the mutual involvement of people and materials in an environment” (Ibid: 347) to which they all belong, in a process Ingold calls ‘skill’. Skill involves “active and sensuous” engagement between “practitioner and material” (Ibid: 342), so that elements relate through movement which is premised on “care, judgement and dexterity” (Ibid: 353). In this way, “the world of our experience is, indeed, continually and endlessly coming into being as we weave” (Ibid: 348). The body builds up form and meaning through movement, just as a basket is woven.

Ingold’s ideas about the involvement of the human body in meaning-making about environments has been crucial to my photographic concepts. When the images are stretched onto canvas for exhibition, they are mounted over a frame 4cm in depth, which allows the pieces to stand out from the wall. This effect, coupled with the sheer size of the pictures gives the photography a sculptural feel. I believe that when faced with one of my photographs, the viewer is completely enveloped and their body effectively becomes situated in the environment where the photo was taken. Micro fragments of the environmental and elemental fabric of the universe captured during instances of change – tiny surfaces of Aotearoa New Zealand normally overlooked by humans as they rush about their busy lives – are enlarged to a scale hundreds of times their original or ‘real-time’ size. What are usually discrete, taken-for-granted scenes and occurrences in the environment become tangible and ‘perceivable’ as the viewer is reduced to the size of an ant, in comparison to the photo’s scale. Many other artists have experimented with the change in perception experienced by the viewer when faced with a large sculpture. For example, Magdalena Jetelova constructs gigantic chairs and tables which dwarf the onlooker (Walther 2000: 563), inviting them to participate in a fairy-tale world where they themselves are no larger than a mouse.

In my sculptural photographic work, because of the size of the photos in comparison to the viewer, the human body comes into the photo and makes sense of the environment from the 'inside out'. A segment of an oak tree's branch being reflected, refracted and distorted on a pond surface, as with the 'Ataata Mania' series, is no longer just a fleeting movement in the corner of the viewer's eye – it is right there in front of the viewer, overwhelming their senses, becoming part of them. The dance of colours on the water from a brightly lit fountain, as with 'Ngangana', 'Mokowhiti' and 'Hahana', is no longer just a small flash of brilliance in the dark, but a shimmering rainbow engulfing the onlooker.

This process of making sense of the photo from the 'inside out' is very important for me. It is my intention that when viewers of my artworks are absorbed into the photo, and the micro location it depicts, something will be triggered in them: a recognition that they are not so far removed from the world surrounding them. My photos especially deal with instances of transformation that the surfaces of our environment are continuously subject to. A particular interest of mine at the moment is the effect that watery surfaces of the lakes and rivers of Aotearoa have on shapes and forms in the surrounding environment. Fountains in Napier, ponds on the Banks Peninsula and sacred lakes on the West Coast of the South Island have all featured in the work discussed here. Familiar things become unfamiliar as they are distorted and reformed on the water's surface. Colours move and shift with sun, wind, cloud and current. What I am trying to capture are those moments of flux and limbo, the liminal places in between that are not here nor there, one thing or another. People undergo these discrete processes of transformation too, both literally and conceptually, with every interaction they have in the world. People, like components of the environment, are continually changing as they move through space and time, continually being distorted from their previous social and corporeal incarnation and reformed anew. We shed our skins, we change our clothes, alter our bodies, expand our minds, our senses, our being, reform our cells, our ideas, our self-image, every minute of every day.

It is hoped that this recognition that people are one and the same as their environments, in terms of being the subjects of continuous change, will help to foster a more 'meaningful' connection to the natural world. As Ingold would put it, people come to recognise that they dwell in their environments, as part of them, not as disconnected and disembodied individuals, but as one and the same thing. The bodily act of making sense of, and meaning about, the environment, through corporeally being 'in' that environment the photo depicts, is, I would say, similar to Ingold's notion of 'skill'. It is a co-creation of a meaningful environment – the body is in an environment, and makes it meaningful (meaning here being a feeling of connection and sympathy), through a corporeal and sensuous recognition that common transformational processes are at play in all elements of the fabric of the universe, of which humans are part.

I believe that the visual can be a way of articulating alternative realities to the hegemonic and normative practices and beliefs in society, such as neglect of the environment. As Baudrillard has noted, there is no 'reality' as such, simply a mass of signs that simulate various conceptions of realities (Baudrillard 1998: 166-182). Once we realise there are

“many discourses about reality” (Denzin 1995: 215), the visual lends itself to the articulation of “multiperspectival” epistemologies (Ibid: 218 and Kellner 1995: 98). It is my aspiration to continue exhibiting and sharing my photos with others, in the hope that they might find inspiration and meaning in the everyday, the overlooked, the undervalued, and the transformations which affect us all in this world.

The practice of art making a statement about society is nothing new. My photography has been deeply influenced by a legacy of twentieth century conceptual art, which I studied during my time at high school and art college, where I generated a large amount of politically-motivated artworks, centred mainly around anti-capitalist, feminist and environmental concerns. The Land Art movement of the 1960s and onwards, which, as Kerrigan explains, involved artists stating through their work “a general rejection of the traditional paradigm that the landscape is a spirit to be broken, a ‘wilderness’ to be ‘tamed’” (2005:352) and a desire to work with and protect the environment, has been very influential for me. The British ‘land’ artist, Richard Long, has always provided me with much inspiration, through his quiet sculptures which work discretely with the landscape, either creating and leaving small interventions such as footprints or stone circles in a place, or placing natural materials such as rocks in geometric patterns inside gallery spaces. Works such as ‘A Line Made By Walking’ 1967 – a line created in the grass through repeatedly walking back and forth, and then photographed – suggest a gentle appreciation for the beauty of nature, and a wish to share this with others, by bringing nature back into the gallery, as the focus of the artwork. Long’s works are created during and through his epic walks in the countryside: for him, nature is both source, inspiration and conceptual statement. The same is true for my own work: I spend a lot of time walking and kayaking in the pristine wildernesses of New Zealand, and am often struck by the totally amazing colour combinations I find when I come around a corner or stop for a break and take a deeper look at my surroundings. I have a very strong desire to share these incredible moments with other people who have not been lucky enough to witness them at the time.

My camera and macro lens is always with me when I go out into nature. When I see something that catches my eye, I simply play around with the settings on my digital Canon 500D SLR to capture an image which is as true to the natural vibrancy of the scene as possible. I never use photoshop to manipulate my photos in any way because I prefer to try and convey to viewers exactly what I saw at the time of taking the photo. I find what I encounter out in nature so stunning that I do not see a reason to try and enhance it. I want to encourage viewers to be amazed by what is in front of them in the everyday world, and how wonderful it is, if only they can take a little time to look deeper and appreciate it. When people see my photography, they are often amazed that something like water can hold so many colours and patterns, and have to ask me what the photo depicts. They are even more surprised to learn that no computer manipulation has occurred, and that only colours appearing at the time of taking the photo are present in the work.

I also like to use Maori titles for my work, because I feel that it locates the photos in a defined place. Maori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. When I review the photos on my computer, I am generally struck by the colour or form in each image. I use this first impression as a starting point for choosing the name in Te Reo Maori, the Maori language. For example, when I first looked at the photo 'Hahana' (2010), I immediately had the impression of seeing flames, so I chose a word which means 'flame/glow/gleam'. I like to use the Maori dictionary for inspiration and help with adjectives and nouns. Te Reo Maori is widely employed in everyday English dialogue and society, acting as a constant reminder of the cultural hybridity of this small nation. I recently worked at an exhibition, Shed, in Nelson, New Zealand, which exhibited the work of seven New Zealand installation and jewellery artists. One of the artists, Nicki Hastings-McFall, made some very potent statements through her work about what it is to be part of a 'land of immigrants' here in New Zealand. Of Samoan, Irish and Scottish descent, Hastings-Macfall often incorporates traditional Polynesian symbols, such as the lei, in combination with 'Western' urban materials, such as plastic sushi bottles, in an exploration of her mixed heritage.

The relationship between Maori and Pakeha (white descendants of European settlers) in Aotearoa New Zealand has not always been an easy one, and a good deal of contemporary artworks dwell on this topic, especially with reference to cultural appropriation of Maori symbols by Pakeha. The sculptural jewellery work of Jason Hall, for example, would come into this category. Hall creates pieces which draw on the unease of two cultures – Maori and Pakeha – sharing the same material symbols: who is borrowing from who? For example, 'Boundary' (2007), a work comprising several large picket style fence posts painted in red, white and black, draws on the similarities between the white picket fences surrounding colonial homesteads in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the white fences surrounding pas, the sacred spaces of Maori. In addition, while these colours make up the Maori flag, they are also said to stand for the bloodshed of the colonial occupation of Aotearoa, the charcoal from the fires of war and the lime, an element which fastens decomposition of bodies killed in battle. For me, however, the use of Maori words is more of a respectful borrowing, a way of paying homage to a land which is home to a fascinating indigenous culture which exists amongst a range of heritages. Using Maori words as titles for my artworks is also a way of motivating and encouraging myself to learn more about this culture's sacred connection to the land.

The connection of Maori culture to particular places, landforms, plants and animals is an area which has been much-documented within Aotearoa. However, I have only just begun to investigate this from an anthropological perspective. As Helen Leach describes, Maori culture has a very rich heritage of gardening, their ancestors having come from Polynesia, and before, South East Asia, where gardening is a crucial aspect of everyday life (Leach 1984). The cultural significance of native trees, shrubs and vegetables to Maori culture is an area which is receiving growing public recognition in Aotearoa. Many public walkways, owned and managed by the Department of Conservation, display signs next to trees and shrubs that were and are of

medicinal, gastronomic or spiritual significance to the Maori culture. Alongside this, the last few years has seen a rapid expansion of the number of organisations, such as Te Waka Kai Ora, that seek to promote, and educate people about, Maori relationships to, and uses of, vegetable and fruit plants. This last element of Maori culture is something that I am very keen to learn more about. I have plans to embark on a photographic project which documents Maori fruit and vegetable growers, their produce, their land, their techniques and their stories. I like the idea of developing my photographic work into a sort of visual ethnography, a social journey through art. As Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food movement, outlines in his book 'Slow Food Nation', this kind of ethnographic fieldwork, involving visual and oral elements, to document the stories, motivations and ethos of artisanal food growers worldwide, is becoming increasingly crucial in such a globalised, faceless food world (Petrini 2007).

I hope that you have enjoyed and been inspired by this glimpse into my visual world, its anthropological and artistic genesis, and its future directions.

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<sup>1</sup>The Argos catalogue is a brochure produced by the British Argos company, which details all the many products, from hair curlers to tents, BMX bikes to washing machines, that one can buy from Argos.

<sup>2</sup>The extent to which Perspectivism and Animism have moved away from employing the structural oppositions of nature and culture has, however, been debated, for example, by Turner (2009).

