

## Becoming Co-sculptural

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### Walking Is Sculpting

At the Institut für Raumexperimente, my temporary experimental art school (2009–14), the participants and I frequently did movement experiments, using the streets as our studio. These journeys most often took us through the city of Berlin, but also through Zurich, and on another occasion through Addis Ababa. On these walks, we were no longer individuals but a group of artists engaged in prototyping alternative ways of orienting within, shaping, and sharing public space. We carried mirrors aimed upwards and cardboard prosthetics and props; we used our voices to demarcate space, followed our sense of smell, practised slow-motion walking, and moved alone, in pairs, clusters, and rows, dispersed yet connected. Outside the comfort zones of the art school, the artist's studio, and traditional exhibition spaces, the friction between everyday life and artistic exploration becomes apparent. These walks were ways of sketching space; sensing the pull of gravity and the points of contact to the ground and to each other; reorganising the urban environment; challenging social norms and expectations, notions of centre and periphery; and exploring the correlation of the embodied activities and their consequences for public space.

There can be a difference between how we *expect* a space to unfold and our actual *experience* of its unfolding, just as there can be a significant difference between what we see when we are standing still and what we see when we move, whether on our own or as part of a group. The act of looking is often not enough for us to properly understand and navigate space. Our stereoscopic vision is intensified through physical movement; depth and scale are perceived with more clarity. Through moving and activating the memory stored in our bodies, we can render space in higher definition; we read and write it through our bodies.

What a great sculpture does is that it allows me, my body, to experience space in a deeper way while also co-shaping it. You could say that a successful experience of a sculpture is one that takes me on a walk, a practice in motion that both relies on the conditions of space and time and, at the same time, makes them felt, present.

### Co-sculpting

The urban thinker Andreas Ruby once told me that Auguste Rodin disliked the sequential photographic studies of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, that Rodin felt it was impossible to capture and segment time in this very scientific manner. The famous *L'homme qui marche* (Walking Man) sculpture was his response. Apparently, he assembled it from unrelated studies that he found lying around his studio. If you look closely at it, you can see that the torso twists in a

different direction from the legs and that the muscles in fact present different moments in the progress of a step, collaged together into one moment.

What interests me about Rodin's sculpture is that his collection of not-quite-right movements drives you, the viewer, to walk around it, to relate to it from various angles. You are activated by the composition. And it is not only an external type of movement: when I look at the walking sculpture, I walk with it, invisibly, on the inside. My mirror neurons fire away, in what the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese calls *embodied simulation*. 'Even the observation of the static image of someone else's action can awaken beholders' internal motor representations of the same actions'.<sup>1</sup> The movement is re-enacted internally. My body becomes invisibly tied to the sculpture that it encounters, becoming co-sculptural. Or, in the words of Gallese: 'Embodied simulation ... allows a direct apprehension of the relational quality linking space, objects, and the actions of others to our bodies'.<sup>2</sup>

It is, however, not only you and I who are activated: the narrative of the sculpture emerges from our movement – and it is in this meeting up of sculpture and visitor that the artwork manifests itself at its fullest. We move it and it moves us. And when we meet others within this space, each of our trajectories is affected by their presence; we all dance in the gravity of someone else.

Today, a sculpture can be a process, a system, or a collective movement. For decades, artists have considered sculpture to be not only objects but objects that have agency, that *do something* in the world. The consequences for the spaces that contain them are as important as the objects 'themselves'.

I can only celebrate the fact that today a sculpture can be most anything – ephemeral, transient: a plume of smoke, a burst of water, the lighting in a room, the reflections from the surface of a pond, or a set of atmospheric conditions.

Today, a sculpture can be a situation or a feeling. I once made an artwork, called *A fiercely affectionate sculpture*, which consisted of a shared emotion, congealing and dissolving again.

### **Sculpting the Future**

In 1969, utopian architect and author R. Buckminster Fuller published a small book called *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*:

One of the interesting things to me about our spaceship is that it is a mechanical vehicle, just as is an automobile. If you own an automobile, you realize that you must put oil and gas into it, and you must put water in the radiator and take care of the car as a whole. You begin to develop quite a little thermodynamic sense. You know that you're either going to have to keep the machine in good order or it's going to be in trouble and fail to function.<sup>3</sup>

Today, however, we cannot simply get away with doing service checks on earth. We have – finally – become aware that we are, inadvertently and as a consequence of our lifestyles and overconsumption in the Western world, sculpting the planet. This is a radical sculptural activity. Bruno Latour, adopting a term popular with science fiction writers in the 1950s, has called us 'Earthlings', saying that we, 'humans are not *on* Earth ... but *in* Earth'.<sup>4</sup> Or as the Danish author Josefine Klougart puts it: 'we are nature'.<sup>5</sup> The earth is not an object or a machine or an automobile from which we can separate ourselves.

Following this realisation, terms like *climate crisis*, *extinction*, *ecological collapse*, and *global warming* have become standard in our vocabulary. The philosopher Timothy Morton calls global warming a *hyperobject*, 'something that is so vastly distributed in time and space, relative to the observer, that we might not think it's even an object at all'.<sup>6</sup> This hyperobject that we are creating, and have been contributing to, mostly unawares and over more than a century, is vastly more disjunct than Rodin's *L'homme qui marche*. Whereas Rodin's sculpture offers us the opportunity to rethink the parameters for encountering a work of art, the destabilisation of our ecosystems is an imminent threat. Both, however, ask of us to *come to our senses*. It is by engaging fully with our senses that we can grasp our relation to the sculptural objects and to the earth, and make sense of and craft knowledge about them and us.

And what Rodin makes apparent, that any meeting up with *L'homme qui marche* is an *embodied* encounter, we are beginning to learn with regard to our commitment to the planet: looking from a distance and talking about it are not enough – nor, I'd say, even an option. That is why we see more and more people coming together, taking to the streets to protest the lack of climate action by governments – children and teenagers speaking up and climate activist groups staging protests and 'die ins', using their bodies as tools in public space to manifest non-violent, disruptive civil disobedience. Sculpting in the streets matters. It is urgent.

The most important sculptural project going on today is shaping the future of planet Earth.

#### Notes

1 Vittorio Gallese, 'Bodily Framing', in *Experience: Culture, Cognition, and the Common Sense*, ed. Caroline Jones et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 241.

2 Ibid., 242.

3 R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, ed. Jaime Snyder (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008), 60.

4 Bruno Latour, 'Is Geo-logy the New Umbrella for All the Sciences? Hints or a Neo-Humboldtian University', Lecture Given at Cornell University (25 October 2016), 8, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/150-CORNELL-2016-.pdf>.

5 Josefine Klougart, 'We Are Nature', in *Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life*, ed. Mark Godfrey (London: Tate Publishing, 2019), 105.

6 Timothy Morton, 'Hyperobjects and Creativity', in *Hyperobjects for Artists*, ed. Timothy Morton and Laura Copelin (Marfa: Ballroom Marfa, 2018), 4, <https://tci-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/pdfs/library/hyperobjects-for-artists.pdf>.