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Roberto Zancan, Sergio Sanna

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Performing Landscape: Maintenance Is the Project

Roberto Zancan, HEAD Genève
Sergio Sanna, Accademia di Belle Arti di Catania,
sergio.sanna@gmail.com

ABSTRACT > Spazzare o camminare sono gesti umani comuni, persino umili, generalmente non riconosciuti come atti creativi. Tuttavia, molte delle performance più incisive del XX secolo consistono nella riproduzione di atti della vita quotidiana. Queste performance acquistano significato ed evidenza estetica non per se stesse, ma perché gli artisti che le creano inseriscono questi atti in un circuito di riconoscimento artistico. Al contrario, un'azione è il processo di fare qualcosa per far accadere qualcosa, che implica responsabilità e consequenzialità. La pratica del gruppo Ground Action esplora l'arte della manutenzione nella progettazione di processi spaziali e sociali, nonché il riutilizzo come atto di trasformazione. Attraverso la presentazione di una serie di eventi e progetti, questo saggio intende dimostrare come le azioni di creazione, cura e manutenzione quotidiana di spazi ordinari abbiano il potenziale per diventare happening, coreografie di danza e teatrali e come il paesaggio possa essere creato attraverso la performance.

KEYWORDS > Performance; Maintenance; Wellness

Sweeping Up by Joseph Beuys or *A Line Made by Walking* by Richard Long, demonstrate how much large part of the most crucial performances of the 20th century consist in the reproduction of everyday life acts.

"The action *Ausfegen* (Sweeping up) took place in Berlin-West, for the occasion of the events of 1st May 1972. At first, Joseph Beuys contents himself with watching the march pass by, broom in hand, while some of his students distribute plastic bags in the colors of the Organization for Direct Democracy, the political formation he had recently created. Once Karl-Marx Square is free of people, the artist and his assistants start sweeping. The rubbish is collected in bags of the Organization for Direct Democracy, then dispersed inside the René Block gallery. The broom and the bags, along with that was used for the action, were then assembled by the artist in a display case. Joseph Beuys wanted the advent of a 'free democratic socialism' in opposition to what he called the 'façade democracies' of the Eastern and Western blocks. Through this action, he aimed to show the necessity of surpassing ideologies to bring about effective change in our societies, beyond the divisions that such ideologies engender. Surpassing the political oppositions instituted by the party system and provoking real change, through individual awareness followed by collective action, this seems to be the message expressed by *Ausfegen*."¹

Earlier in 1967 – soon after the publication of the famous Tony Smith's journey on the highway at night on Artforum, that is considered the beginning of land art – Richard Long created *A Line Made by Walking*, a straight line carved on the ground by trampling the grass. This formative piece was made on one of Long's journeys to St Martin's school from his home in Bristol. Between hitchhiking lifts, he stopped in a field in Wiltshire where he walked back and forth until the flattened turf caught the sunlight and became visible as a line. He photographed this work and recorded his physical interventions within the landscape. Although this artwork underplays the artist's corporeal presence, it anticipates a widespread interest in performative art practice. In *Walkscapes*, Francesco Careri describe *A Line Made by Walking* as an action that produces a sign that will remain imprinted only in the photograph taken at that moment and that the growth of the grass will make it disappear again.² Careri considers that trampled grass embodies the presence of absence: an absence of action, of the body, and of the object. Inexorably, however, it is precisely the action of a body and an object, something that is found between sculpture, performance, and landscape architecture (fig. 2).

Performing the act of cleaning a space in a specific context or walking up and down on a piece of lawn until the grass disappears underline the meaning of our presence and



movement in the world. At the same time, these actions express the denunciation of a political condition, or have the power to illustrate theoretical and critical concepts in the field of art. These actions acquire meaning and aesthetical evidence, not for themselves, but because the artists who create them, insert these acts in a circuit of artistic recognition. They are placed in a different context from which they belong to and they acquire a value – even economic – by imposing an interpretative code different from the original gesture.

A first step along this demonstration could be constituted by observing a work as *Gruppo di attrezzi agricoli* realized by Pino Pascali in 1968. If this important Italian artist used to display brooms and old tools for farming, it was to re-evaluate agricultural work, the actions of women and men employed in the fields to produce food products.

By doing so, it has been shown how the landscape is the product of a huge deposit of daily labors, of humble, poor people conduct to modify and manage the nature. Prune trees, cut grass, move leaves, etc. are actions of maintenance and control the vitality of nature. If we multiplied thousands of times these actions and we repeated them over the years, these acts show their strong effects.

To provide a vivid image of this effect, a sort of snapshot in movement, we could think the crucial photograms of *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) of Francis Alÿs. For this epic project the artist invited five hundred volunteers to walk up a sand dune on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, shoveling in unison, thus displacing the dune by a few inches. Participants in the project gave their time for free, reversing conservative economic principles of efficiency and production. If Alÿs defines this work “maximum effort, minimum result” and he wants to produce a metaphor for



1. Roberto Zancan, *Casablanca Sweeper*, 2015 © Roberto Zancan, Venice

2. Roberto Zancan, *Walkscape in Alberoni at Lido di Venezia*, 2014 © Ground Action, Venice

Latin American society, in which minimal reforms are achieved through massive collective efforts, for us this demonstration of a ridiculous disproportion between an effort and its effect could have also a different signification. It is essentially an action in the style of a flesh mob, an event where a large “critical mass” is so effective to arrive to “move mountains.” The landscape, if not even the topography and geography of the place are produced instantly. Their modification is perceptible without waiting for a long accumulation over time.

The act of shoveling is analogous to that of sweeping of Beuys and it is one of the most repeated actions in agricultural works. Humble banal actions are here transformed into aesthetic acts, moral meanings and political acts. They certainly have a high value. This value is recognized by the exhibition of these acts in galleries and museums. Indeed, it has an economic measure that participates in the evaluation of the work in the art market.

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore's *The Sunday Times* conducted a survey³ on a sample of a thousand respondents about the perceptions of essential jobs in keeping Singapore going, and also how much more they will pay for essential services so that workers in the sector may get a wage boost. This investigation received great attention because the artist has been considered, by far, the least essential of all possible jobs. This has greatly scandalized the art world. Institutions and artists have asked to be recognized. They have demonstrated how artistic productions has been essential to entertain and occupy people during the lockdowns. In this context our position is not that one to defend the artist, neither the institutions who display arts productions. On the contrary, we want to underline the discriminatory attitude of these answers and arguments.



3. Matteo D'Ambros, *Ground Action T-Shirt After a Day at Work*, 2020 © Ground Action, Venice

4. Roberto Zancan, *Radura in Canton, Treviso. There Is a Void in the Woods (Before)*, 2015 © Ground Action, Venice



5. Dario Rizzi, *Radura in Canton, Treviso. There Is a Void in the Woods (View from the Drone)*, 2019 © Ground Action, Venice

6. Dario Rizzi, *Radura in Canton, Treviso. There Is a Void in the Woods (View from the Drone)*, 2019 © Ground Action, Venice

The answer to the need to recognize art did not look at the whole result of the investigation, but they focused on a self-referring and in fact dangerous claim. In fact, apart from the first place obviously occupied by the medical staff during the crisis, the other two jobs that were positioned on the podium of the most necessary workers were those of the cleaner and the garbage collector. But if the doctor was considered a very prestigious job, the cleaner and gar-

bage collector were positioned also at the top of the list of jobs that nobody wanted to do.

So, with this essay that is also a sort of manifesto we ask ourselves these questions: Why must the same daily gesture, the same action have a different value depends on the field in which they take place? Can these practices of repetition, resignification, and alteration of everyday actions become a diffuse practice also to change the social and physical qualities of our everyday spaces of life?

What happen if we start to think to transform our everyday actions in social collective performances? Can we produce better and more ethic spaces by performing? Can we transform daily work into an act of artistic liberation, give a higher symbolic and social value to humble jobs, transform an employee's labors into a gesture with an aesthetic meaning?⁴

Through the presentation of a series of events and projects, this dissertation aims to demonstrate how the actions of creation, care and daily maintenance of ordinary spaces (cleaning of the streets, mowing of the grass, etc.) have the potential to become happenings, dance and theatre choreography and how the landscape can be created by performing.

It is worth explaining that Land Art and Environmental Art are not the reference. We could critically consider most of those interventions as even anti-ecological in their destroying dimension, at times in the heavy alteration of the site. On the contrary, we suggest the chance to convert a certain number of everyday actions – in other words the performance of doing something that most of the time we don't like such as cleaning – in a real choreography, in a dance process that wants to have the artwork as result, as well as a useful/functional space, or an objective transformation, or

even better a situation. For example, *The Casablanca Sweeper* (fig. 1) represents exactly the synthesis in the genuine elegance of an unaware artistic action. He was using a palm leaf, not even a broom, to clean up the dust in the main square of the African city, while he was taken in a sort of rhapsodic watching of this activity that was like a real dance which is able to provoke the same feeling that we could have staring at an art piece in an exhibition. For this reason, lots of humble and practical works like sweeping and cleaning are crucial when they are figured out in a cultural level as a creative content. By looking at them in different perspective they can present a huge potential to become something that has the qualities of most intense human activity such as acting or staging.

Ground Action is a collective founded by Matteo D'Ambros, Sergio Sanna and Roberto Zancan, which carries out site-specific projects and actions in the field of art, landscape and architecture since 2013. It is inspired by collective a participatory practices of space's modification and promotes maintenance as a form of art and design and reuse as act of transformation. Its objective is the direct and concrete execution of installations, performative actions, virtuous behavior (fig. 3).

According to these intentions Ground Action states that "maintenance is a project"⁵ in the sense of constant care that transform and not as a simple restoration of the original state of a space.

Unlike the traditional project, the result could be unexpected compared to the articulated process in which every single action is both part of a sequence and defined itself within the idea of a circular economy system. The following intervention will illustrate this attitude.

The Blower Duelists introduces a bigger

and long-lasting work that Ground Action has been carrying out since 2015 in a popular field on the banks of the Sile river in Veneto (fig. 4). Two gardeners facing each other are literary cleaning a lawn by using a blower in a collaborative way to remove the fallen leaves on the ground. The challenging act consists in giving a higher value through the same artistic representation to a boring and ordinary gestures that eventually express tension and concentration.

The void as well as the intervention is called *La Radura* and it is actually a clearing in a cultivated forest where the patient and continuous work produces a circular space by selecting carefully what to cut and what to let grow (fig. 5). Although the practice is similar to gardening, the result is not a garden at all, but the demonstration that the permanent maintenance can create the possibility for an empty space to host any kind of performance or happenings, from theatrical representation to other participatory events and even social dinner (fig. 6). In conclusion, the landscape can be made easily by maintenance through a well-organized set of actions, especially dignifying the most boring ones, those that we consider a limit to our freedom. Instead they should be considered the actions of self-liberation, able to train our body, which help to create better living conditions useful for the future generation.

¹ Philippe Bettinelli at: <http://www.newmedia-art.org/cgi-bin/show-oeu.php?IDO=150000000034295&LG=G-BR&ALP=b>

² Careri 2017.

³ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/how-the-survey-was-conducted>.

⁴ Sanna, Zancan 2015.

⁵ Ricci 2020 [manca voce estesa].