

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

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## PERFORMANCE & SPACE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

Edited by

Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Christina Zoniou, Giorgos Kondis



University of the Peloponnese

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

2025

## Embodied Topophilia and Vernacular Place-Making

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.7956](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.7956)

# **Embodied Topophilia and Vernacular Place-Making: An Analysis of British Artist Kimvi's Filmed Performance *Auntie's Tiles* in the Chinese Context**

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## **Abstract**

This essay introduces the concept of “topophilia”, using Kimvi's evocative filmed performance, *Auntie's Tiles*, as a lens to explore the concept within the realms of Chinese spatial imagination and vernacular observation. Located at the intersection of people, place, and emotional affinity, topophilia signifies individuals' profound connections with their environments, enriched by layers of tradition, intimacy, and cultural nuance. In the vivid tableau of rural China, as captured in *Auntie's Tiles*, the symbiosis between the local and the foreign, past and present, illustrates a rich tapestry of human-place interactions. The essay aims to unveil the complexities of our relationships with our environments, transcending cultural and generational boundaries and fostering a deeper understanding of embodied experiences in diverse spatial contexts within a vernacular understanding.

*Keywords:* Topophilia, performance art, China, vernacular, embodiment, Chinese spatial imagination, Shan Shui painting.

## **Topophilia**

This essay focuses on the humanistic observation presented in *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* by Chinese-American Geographer Tuan (1990), which investigates the various manifestations of this bond, ranging from the aesthetic appreciation of nature to the deep-seated sense of belonging to a homeland. He posits that topophilia arises from individual experiences and collective cultural values, making it a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Furthering the exploration of human-place relationships, Tuan's (2018) later works emphasise the significance of personal experiences and memories in shaping one's perception of place. He argues that while “space” is a more abstract concept, “place” acquires meaning and value through human experiences and emotions, with topophilia

being a vital component of this relationship. Edward Relph (1976) supports this by discussing the notions of place attachment and place identity, complementing Tuan's ideas and reinforcing the importance of emotional bonds in understanding human-environment interactions. He contends that space is not merely an empty expanse, an isometric plane, or a vessel containing locations; instead, we must understand space by how individuals perceive and experience it. In the *Place Concept* by Relph (1976), he emphasises that having a practical understanding of a place is essential to human life, referring to it as an “authentic attitude”. In this definition, one of the foundational elements for enhancing a distinctive sense of place in the rural Chinese environment is recognising how people utilised various places to meet their everyday needs. People invest in spaces to understand behavioural appropriateness, social significance, and cultural expectations. Individuals frequently visit a place setting because it offers safety, harmony, and spirituality. The fusion of human and cultural landscape elements is centred on an individual's immediate world experience. People can experience places on various scales as complete entities, combinations of natural and manmade items, activities, functions, and the meanings they assign—the unique characteristics of a place manifest in physical forms, rituals and activities that individuals repeatedly perform. Therefore, personal experience embodies the essence of a 'sense of place' (Seamon & Sowers, 2008).

### **Embodied Topophilia and Vernacular Place-Making**

Embodiment, an intricate concept interweaving our physical presence with our experiential and cognitive processes, when considered with topophilia, makes the relationship become even more profound, prompting questions about how our intrinsic bodily experiences connect with the spaces we inhabit and the places we hold personally close to us. In this way we can explore the intricate relationship of our embodiment influenced by our affective bonds with places. The term topophilia, while not in the everyday lexicon, is derived from the Greek words “*topos*”, meaning place and “*philia*”, meaning “love” or “affinity”. Topophilia, a term coined by British poet John Betjeman, describes a unique affection for specific places. W. H. Auden first utilised this concept in Betjeman's poetry collection *Slick but not Streamlined* (1948), emphasising its distinction from a mere love of nature and its reliance on historically rich landscapes. The concept gained further prominence in Gaston Bachelard's influential work *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Yi-Fu Tuan further explored “topophilia” in his humanistic geography studies, interpreting it as a deep emotional bond between individuals and their environments. In *A Reenchanted World* (2009), James W. Gibson discusses topophilia as an innate, culturally embedded connection to place, lamenting its erosion in contemporary society but noting a growing movement to rekindle these ties.

Kimvi's (2022) filmed performance, *Auntie's Tiles*,<sup>1</sup> to introduces topophilia set against the backdrop of the C-Platform Lucitopia artist residency in China. This performance is a testament to the essence of vernacular observation and the nuanced concept of place-making. Through her art, Kimvi captures moments and encapsulates the delicate connections between the foreign and the familiar, the past and the present, and most prominently, between places and people. The choice of *Auntie's Tiles* as a focal point is not arbitrary. The performance, rich in its contextual setting and layered in its narrative, offers a unique lens to understand the universality of human connection to places and traditions. It raises questions about how cultural settings realise, experience, and express embodiment and how it intertwines with our topophilia inclinations. As we journey through this exploration, the performance serves as both a guide and a mirror, reflecting broader truths about our shared human experience.

### Figure 1

*The Rural Landscape of the Zixi Qingliang Mountains Surrounding Lucitopia Residency. Image by Kimvi. 2022.*



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<sup>1</sup> YouTube link to the Filmed performance Auntie's Tiles <https://youtu.be/1RvlumjJf1I>

### ***Auntie's Tiles***

Kimvi, a British performance artist, explored what it means to search for an authentic narrative from June to August 2022 as an artist temporarily living in rural southern China. Located against the backdrop of the C-Platform Lucitopia Artist Residency (Figure 1) in the Zixi Qingliang Mountain valleys of Jiangxi Province. The residency experience catalysed Kimvi's exploration of authenticity, integration, and, in turn, the embodiment of topophilia. The artist entered a place where she is a foreigner in a foreign environment to establish the artist's sense of place is described by Burgin (1996) as "to encounter the other in one's own space is to confront one's alterity to that others's space" (p.119). To understand the foreign environment, Kimvi invited local villager Auntie Luo with whom she developed a working relationship during the residency (Figure 2), to perform a simple 20-minute action of constructing a traditional tiled roof on the Artist's back whilst the artist was lying face down on the concrete ground, outside Auntie Luo's home in the countryside of Zixi near to C-Platform residency (Figure 3). The Artist, dressed entirely in black, appears motionless. The sound of running water from a nearby artificial stream, hidden from the viewer's eyes, is audible in the background. The Artist waits for Auntie Luo's roof tiling to begin, in which her body acts as the foundation for construction. Auntie Luo places the tiles from her piggery onto the artist's body until fully covered and merged with its environment.

### **Figure 2**

*Auntie Luo Traditional Tiling Roof Demonstration on her abandoned Piggery. Image by Kimvi. 2022.*



In her collaboration with Auntie Luo, the performance focuses on the aunt practicing a craft in her environment, shifting the focus away from the artist. Kimvi highlights the critical role of kinship bonds, the nurturing labour traditionally undertaken by women, and the shared knowledge intrinsic to local customs informing our perception of the environment and community. As described by Juagdan (2023), the Mandarin term *āyí*, denoting an aunt, carries profound cultural resonance, symbolising the esteem and warmth extended to relatives and respected elder women within the broader community, underscoring the communal ethos prevalent in Chinese society. The environment, with its domestic markers present in the background of the performance, includes a closed wooden door, walls of uncovered bricks, and simple, open yet barred windows. The domestic setting of a tiled wash basin, a broom, and various large, shining ceramic pots tells that the household is integral to the quotidian. It helps us contextualise the specificities of the location and observation made by International Performance Artist VestAndPage during the 'Cine+Perfo' Performance Art Festival in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2022). Combined with the meticulous tile placement from Auntie Luo, it gives the viewer a heightened sense of presence and an intimate relationship with space. Kimvi's integration with the tiles embodies the house, the traditions, and the environment. Covering Kimvi with tiles showcases Auntie Luo's mastery and metaphorically shelters the Artist, creating a vernacular and cultural bridge between the performer and her space.

### Figure 3

*Screenshot of Filmed Performance Auntie's Tiles - The Initial Tiling Stages. Image by Kimvi. 2022*



The filmed performance of Auntie's Tiles transcends the material realms, presenting a holistic vision of place as a kind of humanity that one understands from the position of an

insider. Place, according to Lucy Lippard (1997) is the “external world mediated through human subjected experience”, a sense of place as a therapeutic remedy: a sense of place is "the geographical components of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation" supporting Kwon (2007) reflections on locational identity (p.7). The performance, *Auntie's Tiles*, creates a dynamic tableau that bridges the physical and metaphysical realms, encouraging viewers to engage in a contemplative journey. It explores the intricate connections between nature, culture, and traditions, highlighting how places shape our identities, cultural values, and visual perspectives. This journey is enriched with cultural dialogues and a deep sense of topophilia, or the love of place, inviting an intimate exploration of our spaces.

### **Vernacular Place-Making**

The discussion of "Topophilia" extends to its manifestation in vernacular architecture, fostering a deep connection with the environment, emphasizing the importance of place, local specificity, and cultural authenticity. Architecture protects our bodies and provides a space that accommodates our behaviours. The Artist attempts to embody "vernacular architecture" and to embrace the sense of topophilia through the Chinese rural tradition of roof tiling and using only materials from the area. The term "vernacular" in design typically refers to a method of construction that uses local materials and traditional techniques. Vernacular design is developed through local knowledge and practices, often passed down through generations "rather than through formal architectural or design education" (Brunskill, 1971, pp. 27-28). The Artist employed a vernacular approach to understand the culture unique to the region's people and to forge a deeper connection. Athena Steen, Bill Steen, and Eiko Komatsu (2003) comprehensively explore buildings crafted from local materials and constructed through traditional methods passed down through generations.

The Artist's rural vernacular observation and experience calls for a slower, more sedentary mode of existence, which M. Kwon (2004) describes as the "non-urban sociality of small-scale spaces and face-to-face exchanges" (p.159). This perspective emphasises the importance of place, local specificity, and cultural authenticity, focusing on the particularities that inform many contemporary site-oriented art practices. Kimvi actively collaborated with Auntie Luo, a non-performer, to create a vernacular dialogue. This choice reflects what Victor Papanek (2006) terms in *Design for the Real World* as questioning prevailing narratives and appreciating local craftsmanship. Papanek suggests that "the border between different techniques or disciplines is where most discoveries are made, and most action is inaugurated" (p.322). The Artist embodied this collaboration, focusing her physicality on an action that revolved around Auntie Luo and the material of salvaged traditional tiles from Auntie Piggery. These tiles, no longer

used and emblematic of the rural Chinese ethos of reuse, became central to sustaining the humble everyday living activities depicted in the performance. This work celebrates cultural identity, sustainability, and human creativity in adapting to diverse climatic and environmental conditions. Steens and Komatsu (2003) demonstrate that these buildings are functional and inherently sustainable, utilising available materials and designs tailored to specific environments.

The imposed collaboration between the Artist and non-performer allows for the “performance” in which there is scope for chance and improvisation. For example, the unexpected encounter with Auntie Luo's brother-in-law punctuates the action, casually walking past and asking: "Why do you need to put tiles on?" (Figure 4). Focusing on her task, Auntie Luo calmly responds: "to cover one tile after the other". From this casual conversation and observation of the passerby, the participants together produced the performed space. "The quality of this space is therefore not predetermined but arises during the performance" (Verstegen, 2009, p.9). The appearance of the chickens and the passerby add layers to the narrative, emphasising that while the performance is a moment in time, life continues around it. The performance becomes an allegory as Auntie Luo meticulously covers Kimvi. There is a resonating sentiment of protection and shelter and the transient nature of human existence, emphasising that while cultures, traditions, and humans may be ephemeral, their spaces continue to thrive, pulsating with past, present, and future stories.

#### Figure 4

*Unexpected Encounter of Auntie Luo's Brother-In-Law. Image by Kimvi. 2022*



The Artist's intention within Auntie's Tiles is to create a structure that embodies and resembles a form of traditional tiled roofs recognisable within Auntie's landscape. It is not only the physical aspect of the human body parts that resemble architecture but the extension of human emotions, sensorial impressions and human psychology. As Victor Burgin (1996) mentions, "It is our positioning within space, both as the point of perspectival access to space.... that gives the object any inherent identity" (p.129), underscoring the significance of how bodies inhabit spaces. It argued that spaces intertwined with emotions, perceptions, and memories do not merely exist as physical realms. Using Kimvi's body as a canvas for Auntie Luo's traditional tiling practice transcends mere performance, melding person and place. This act challenges traditional architectural notions, as discussed by Gottfried Semper (2010); rather than a shelter built around a person, the shelter is integrated into the being, highlighting the intrinsic connections we form with our surroundings, forming a "hearth" that is a "sacred focus around which the world took order and shape" (p.109). Kimvi, adorned with tiles that reflect the surrounding environment, illustrates how Semper's influential discourse on the selection of construction materials becomes evident: Choosing the most appropriate material for its realisation will inherently boost the building's aesthetics and significance through the material's natural representation, highlighting the significant between the internal and external worlds. In this performance, the Artist personifies the Chinese philosophical emphasis on harmony with nature. The performed metamorphosis to which both parties are integral becomes emblematic of a forming cultural bridge, as the performance attempts to merge "the inherent value of design as the primary, underlying matrix of life" (Papanek, 2006, p. 322). Vernacular practices and the embodiment of topophilia through art and architecture play a crucial role in defining our relationship with the environment. It suggests these practices offer insights into how cultural settings realize, experience, and express embodiment, intertwining deeply with our inclinations towards topophilia. Ultimately, "Vernacular Place-Making" presents topophilia as essential in creating meaningful and valued places. It emphasizes the role of personal experiences, cultural traditions, and vernacular architecture in enhancing our sense of belonging and identity through a deep, affective connection with the places we inhabit.

### **Chinese Spatial Imagination**

The performance was filmed by carefully positioning a static mobile phone camera. The intentional use of a camera phone rather than professional filming equipment allowed intimate access and closeness to the villagers, as the camera phone is a commonly seen device and is viewed as less intimidating, allowing for natural and holistic human interaction. The chosen perspective allowed us to observe the bodies in their surroundings for the entire duration of the 7:30-minute performance video; the intentional positioning of the camera and chosen

environment presented a fusion of traditional Chinese spatial elements with contemporary performance art, drawing compositional elements from traditional Chinese hand-scroll landscape paintings. The performance captured a continuum of narrative that mirrors the left-to-right or right-to-left flow of these paintings in a continuous sequence, creating a rhythm as it progresses, where the perspective is not limited to a fixed viewpoint, but allows the viewer to traverse the scene. The aesthetics of such paintings derive from a cultivated interaction between viewer and space, allowing the narrative to unfold progressively. A form of traditional Chinese landscape painting called "Shan Shui" (Bruni, 2020), meaning "mountain water," involves or depicts the scenery of natural landscapes. Shan shui painting is more like a "vehicle of philosophy" (Maeda, 1970) to connect with the mountains, forests and streams surrounding the Xi Open Air Museum. In Shan Shui, the artist's imagination produces the painting. Traditional religious beliefs, especially the 'Taoist love of nature and the Buddhist principle of emptiness' (Shaw, 1998, p.183), influence this perspective. Ancient Shan Shui prioritises a conceptual representation of nature over a visual one, aiming to convey the experience of "being in nature" rather than simply "seeing nature". This philosophy actively engages the artist on a human scale, making their body the primary instrument for exploring the surrounding environment.

As the performance progresses, questions about presence, absence, and interplay within a defined space arise. 'Does Schrödinger's cat analogy apply here—is Kimvi present or absent beneath the tiles?' (Stenke & Pagnes, 2022) (Figure 5) reflects the traditional Chinese conception of space as tangible and intangible—the tangible being represented by the tiles and the intangible by the artist's spirit. In the Chinese context, Xiaodong and Kangshua (2003, pp.112-113) mentioned the "Chinese Conception of Space" : the aesthetic appeal of Chinese architecture is not exclusively found within its spatial arrangements or physical edifice. Instead, one discovers it in the nuanced interrelation between architectural spaces and their defining enclosures, such as rooftops. The comprehension of these enclosures possesses a characteristic of provisional adaptability rather than a conclusive disposition, necessitating an emphasis on their responsive correlation with the demarcated spaces. The strategic manipulation of these enclosures emerges as a distinctive and critical element in elucidating spatial interpretations. Consequently, architecture transitions into a transformative conduit, embodying tangible spatial enclosures into perennial representations of cultural transcendence. Auntie's Tiles vividly illustrates the interplay between Chinese spatial imagination and topophilia through a contemplative engagement, valuing the spirit of a scene over its literal depiction and fostering a genuine, intimate connection with the village and its inhabitants. The performance's framing, drawing from the narrative flow of traditional scroll paintings, invites viewers to traverse the space mentally. The Chinese spatial conception regards space as physical and spiritual, which aligns with topophilia's integration of emotion,

memory, and spirit in one's experience of place. The artist's body as a medium for exploring the environment underscores a physical, personal engagement with space essential to the topophilia experience. In essence, the statements underscore a holistic, intimate, and philosophical engagement with space that embodies the principles of topophilia, transcending mere visual representation to foster a profound, affective connection with the environment.

### Figure 5

*The Artist is Completely Covered by the Roof Tiles, With Auntie's Chicken Passing Through.*  
Image by Kimvi. 2022



### Conclusion

The essay's discourse centred on humans' intricate and profound relationship with their environments, exploring these interactions' emotional and cultural significance. It uses the lens of Topophilia to elucidate how personal and collective memories, experiences, and identities become entangled with places. Invoking the scholarly works of Tuan, along with the performative art piece *Auntie's Tiles*, the essay illustrates the depth of connections people forge with certain places—a symbiosis of environment and self that transcends simple attachment, pays homage to the authenticity and place identity that are pivotal in shaping these human-space interactions. It underscores how genuine connections to place are integral to fostering a true sense of belonging, exemplified in Kimvi's performative act of constructing a traditional roof during the C-Platform Lucitopia residency, steeped in vernacular architecture and cultural remembrance. Such acts of authenticity are crucial for the creation of meaningful spaces. Moreover, the *Auntie's Tiles* discussion encapsulates the melding of discipline and

improvisation, mirroring the dynamic relationship between life and art. It resonates with Semper's view that architecture is a fundamental organising force in life, highlighting the internalisations of architecture and shelter within one's identity. The performance serves as a testament to the role of materiality and the Chinese philosophical pursuit of living in harmony with nature. The essay's contemplation extends to the performance's alignment with traditional Chinese spatial principles, akin to the artistry of Shan Shui painting, promoting an affective engagement with the landscape. The portrayal of the performance, as captured by a static mobile phone camera, advocates for a contemplative interaction with the environment. Through such engagement, an emotional and spiritual bond with the place is fostered, central to the concept of Topophilia. In essence, *Auntie's Tiles* emerges as a physical act of covering and a layered allegory for the multifaceted rapport between humans and their spaces. The performance embodies and enacts topophilia, transforming it from a mere concept into a vivid experience. It offers a compelling viewpoint for examining our connections to the spaces we consider home. Performance art emerges as an indispensable medium for exploring and understanding the nuanced relationships between humans and their environments. It breaks through the barriers of traditional expression, allowing for a tangible examination of the spaces we dwell in and the meanings we impart to them. The essay concludes by asserting that performance art, through its intrinsic versatility and interaction, is an intimate journey into topophilia, the love of place.

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