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Performing Between Terra and Aqua
Reflections on Edge, Boundaries and Drifting

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Abstract

An array of artists with multimedia and ambulatory methodologies (flanerie, psychogeography, critical art practices) have approached space, place, location, boundaries and edges in various ways at the core of their practices, not to omit an ongoing interdisciplinary scholarship of geohumanities who has also explored emerging geo-poetics and politics in the fluid and often augmented spatial realities of 21st century. The current paper explores the ideas of boundary and edge as creative spatial conditions/situations that often constitute the primal matter of contemporary art practices; ones which combine walking, drifting, site-intervention, technology. Walking and drifting in the city often have metaphorical implications of the urban space as sea, ocean with current and vortexes. Inspired by a shift in wider spatial/geo humanities towards considerations of the sea as an embodied and dynamic space – and also the author's shift in art practice from the terra to the aqua, the paper speaks both on territorial and liquid levels, identifying edge/boundary also in sea as a space of creative and immersive potential. Drifting entails a performative and spatial potential across streets and waves. There is an interesting site of creativity between city/sea, shifting the meaning of coastline into a liminal place. Reflections will be based on the author's selected series of artworks between site and sea which combine walking and sea-oriented performance, poetry and technologies; shifting the meaning of boundary and edge towards expanded spatial (media) poetries.

Keywords: drifting, edge, boundary, critical art practices, sea, performance art, media poetry

Performing Between Terra and Aqua

The text focuses on the ideas of boundary, edge and liminality as creative spatial and embodied conditions across hybrid performative art practices that take place in-between land and the water, or into/across the sea, and which highlight a shift of geopoetics from a terrestrial to a watery milieu (also Psarras, 2024). Here, drifting shapes a critical methodological scheme of performance, poetry and technology, *into* and *with* the water.

Performing Boundaries and Edges: Reflections on Coastlines, Boats and Drifting

One can think of the edge as an exterior limit of an area or surface, or a condition where we can observe a noticeable difference between two states. Derrida says, "everything will flourish at the edge" (1987, p. 81). The edge is a site of beginnings and endings understood both in mental and spatial terms. To consider the land and the sea as two different yet interconnected milieus for creation means to acknowledge the significance of the edge. Walking across a coast with our feet immersed into the seawater entails an in-between experience of a series of "edgeful intensities" (Casey, 2011, p. XX) that lead to an "augmentation of becoming" (p. 104): waves in repetition, rhythmic movements of water that instantly draw upon the sandy ground the presence of the water. This hypothetical image forms an example of how such -scapes "embody and exemplify such energies at the edge" (p. XX). Likewise, spatial thinkers like Malpas, among others, have also argued that one of the edge's qualities is its bounding process which consequently creates an opening fissure. For him, "it is at the edge that space, room, and landscape first appear" (Malpas, 2018, p. 156). We can understand edges in various categories (i.e. thresholds, limens), yet the main ones can be identified as boundaries and borders. On the one hand, the boundary is a porous condition of flows and transmissions, which can be understood in spatial and temporal ways. Various interactions are key processes of such boundaries, rendering them as "eventmental" (Casey, 2007, p. 509) and highlight their spatio-temporal character. On the other hand, borders can be grasped as "restrictive and foreclosing [...], cartographic [...], designed to distinguish and keep apart" (p. 508). Borders tend to close the edges, they extend in a continuous way leaving no gaps - often encountered in international gates and borders. To think of where the land and the sea meet is to accept such intensified flows; a negotiation of natural forces which creates a vibrant site. Others have described it as *ecotone*, meaning the transitional site between two systems as in the porous case of the coastline. Krall describes ecotone as a zone where everything "intermingles in heightened richness" (1994, p. 3).

I argue that such sites of intermixed activity can shift the meaning and the process of site-specific performance art through mediated and embodied ways. While this text focuses on the "sea as a primal matter" (Psarras, 2021, p.1) in the artistic process through performative and technological ways, it is helpful to think of drifting boats and rafts as liquid boundaries of hybrid creation. One can think of various vessels, rafts, drifting materialities and boats upon the waters of the sea as different grounds that entail a liminal condition and a universal symbol of exploration into the unknown. Foucault described the boat as "a floating piece of space" (1986, p. 27) - it constitutes a material construction of humans' intention to be on the surface; to survive. For others boats are a "mobile bridge between antagonistic parts of land and sea" (Westerdhal, 2005, p.3). The liminal ground of boats and rafts echoes how Turner defined liminality as the condition of being "betwixt and between" that alters the identity of the "liminal persona" (1967, p. 96). Both floating grounds and intertidal zones are liminal sites of human experience as the figure is "neither this nor that, and yet is both" (p. 99). What Hunter mentions as "a degree of uncertainty and opportunity" (2015, p. 301) seems to form one of the main ingredients of artistic creation in such contemporary mediated performances in the sea.

Shifting Milieu: Performance Art and Geopoetics *in* and *across* Watery Context

Humanities across the 19th and 20th centuries had considered the sea as an inaccessible vastness (Peters & Steinberg, 2014). This also echoes a "western terrestrial bias" (Jackson, 1995) rooted in the scientific and geo-humanitarian thought. Humans are deeply spatial in bodily and mental terms, and such a spatial turn has already been a central motif in literature and contemporary art, often known as geopoetics. Geopoetics refer to "a focus on embodied engagements with place and materiality expressed through poetries of multiple forms" (Magrane, 2020, p.11). However, can we argue for a critical reconsideration of the geo- on the geopoetics? Does it fall only into the bounded and land-based perspective or does it also consider the liquid surface and depths of the sea? This echoes what geographer Elden described as an "unearthing" of the *geo-* prefix (Peters & Steinberg, 2014, p. 124) which stems from gaia, meaning the ground. Nowadays this shift can be traced across academia as "blue humanities", in other words "a combination of water with human ideas" (Mentz, 2024, p. 2). Thus, it is often the idea of the ground and the ways it impacts on our experience in bodily and psychological ways. This echoes Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" which argued for a knowledge dynamically defined through "an actor and an agent - not as a screen or a ground" (Haraway, 1988, p. 592), Jue argues for a "milieu-specific analysis" as a methodological scheme to understand how experience is deeply influenced by different contexts/environments or materials - as in the case of the sea and the water. She argues

that practices often seen in terrestrial environments can be different when being situated into, upon or across the waters.

Figure 1
Objects in Odysseys (2020), still from the work. Image courtesy of Bill Psarras.

The personal turn into the sea as a primal matter of my site-performances has shown emerging schemes of hybrid practice that include performance, poetry and media arts. I bring Jue's concept of milieu specificity into such sea-oriented works to critically reflect on drifting poetics (Psarras, 2024). In *Objects in Odysseys* (2020)[1] and *Islet* (2021)[2] I explore ways that the poetic text is performed through embodied, mediated and expanded ways through processes of drifting, floating and transmission. In *OiO* the performative gesture expands into a series of events between the artist, the poem and the sea - using different media such as video, GPS, poetic text, objects and boat. The idea of a poem that expands across human and non-human worlds, drifting as a sealed message upon real waves instead of printed pages, shows an intention to reconsider geopoetics through performative, watery, and technological ways. As described elsewhere, it is to pass "from a sea of waves towards a sea of possibilities" (Psarras, 2024, p. 239). Such objects-poems drew to the idea of "poetics as a continuation of poetry by other means" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 838) - a performance open to accept the fluidity of poetic experience across the waters. In *Islet* (2021), the performative and poetic gesture took place into a boat, across the sea, while the

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[1] Objects in Odysseys (2020) - https://vimeo.com/457668737

[2] Islet (2021) - https://vimeo.com/576266776

poetic text shifts from written characters to dots and dashes of Morse Code transmission. The intention to perform the poem in a new floating ground of uncertainty and romanticism in the midst of the sea reminds us of the liminal character of the boat as a manifestation of the human fragility upon the waves, analysed in the previous section. In *Islet* (2021) the poetic gesture becomes a series of encoded light intervals which paradoxically awaited for decoding by potential receivers. In both performances, the use of different media, the body and the sea made apparent a need to question the idea of ground, of mediated poetic creation (Kac, 2007), of mediated/technological extensions as dynamic and aesthetic agents in-between grounded and sea contexts.

Figure 2
Islet (2021), still from the work. Image courtesy by Bill Psarras.

Conclusion: Gestures Made of Sea

The text tried to reflect on the creative potential of boundaries, edges and drifting process in-between terra and aqua or into/across the sea as a conceptual backbone for a methodological scheme in contemporary forms of site-performance that incorporate the live and dynamic aspect of the sea towards performative, mediated and watery forms of geopoetics. In other words, how boundaries and the "edgeful intensities" (Casey, 2011, p. 104) between coast and the sea, or between floating surfaces and the waters, can impact on contemporary critical art practices that celebrate the fluid and embodied aspect of the seas. These short reflections highlighted the ways geopoetics can shift from previous terrestrial terms towards watery and mediated constellations of practice.

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