Haunting pebbles:
land art performance documented in photos

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Biography

Achille Pedespan is an MLitt student in International Political Theory at the University of St Andrews. This year offered him the chance to explore alternative ways of studying and thinking IR.

Abstract

With the land art performance *Haunting pebbles,* I wanted to denounce the violence of border crossing in eastern Europe through the lens of hauntology. The use of an artistic performance allowed me to work on time that is passing by. This moment was the waiting for the revenant: both a spectre and the coming-back movement of a spectre – all linked to death, sea and institutional violence.

Keywords: Land art; Hauntology; Migrations; Face; Creative IR

Introduction

The land art performance *Haunting pebbles* denounces the violence of border crossing in eastern Europe through the lens of hauntology. The choice to explore border crossing with an artistic performance allows me to question the notion of time during migrations while simultaneously reflecting on the complex and problematic representations of migrants and border deaths. Ultimately, the performance is an attempt to embody the Derridean notion of 'waiting for the revenant' in the context of migration: it is both a spectre and the coming-back movement of a spectre – all linked to death, sea and institutional violence when crossing borders.

Methodology

With this creative piece, my original idea was to create something out of the scenery surrounding me – my everyday life. Living in St Andrews, Scotland, I knew that I wanted to use the sea and its elements: beaches as borders and pebbles as haunting faces. I chose to denounce in western Europe the violence of the crossing of borders in eastern Europe through a performance based on the Derridean concept of hauntology. My performance aims to illustrate the concept of "borderwork" because I denounce the process of bordering through an artistic representation of border deaths (Sinatti and Vos, 2020; Cuttitta and Last, 2020). In doing so, this performance questions the representation and concealment of deaths on border

lines while making visible the weight of violence and death in a migrant's journey (De León, 2015). My approach builds on postmodern understandings of borders: the performance aims to show that borders are no longer considered as marginal state lines opposing alterities, but as dissident 'thinking space[s]' mixing differences (Albert, 1998; Ashley and Walker, 1990; George, 1989). Thinking about borders in this way allows scholars to discuss space differently and use their thinking as a dissenting practice (Ashley, 1998; Kristeva, 1986, p. 285). Accordingly, during the performance I understood borders as a central political space. They are the place where political thinking happens and not merely a space of exclusion and concealment (Balibar, 1998, p. 220). With *Haunting pebbles*, I try to reveal that border lines are the locus of complex intertwining. Borders can be simultaneously spaces of creation and lines subjected to hegemonic controls (Diener and Hagen, 2012, p. 1; Balibar, 1998, p. 217; Ashley and Walker, 1990, p. 264). A hauntological artistic performance assembles the creative aspect of borders while denouncing the consequences of Western hegemonic politics on them.

Working on the border line

This performance finds its origin in the double presence of the concept of border in my surroundings. Indeed, the sea actualises the presence of a border and, since January 2021, the UK is officially not a member of the EU. Consequently, these two realities – material and political – underline a bordering process at work. Living on a physical maritime border, I wanted to make visible and denounce what is usually silenced, especially in western Europe, namely the dangerous reality of border-crossing in eastern Europe (the eastern Mediterranean and western Balkans in particular). Indeed, when migrants tragically lose their lives in western Europe, heads of state refuse that these deaths should be happening *there*. For instance, after the deaths of 27 migrants in the English Channel in November 2021, President Emmanuel Macron asked for a reinforcement of external EU borders with the help of the questionable European Border and Coast Guard Agency, otherwise known as Frontex (Le Monde with AFP, 2021). In my performance, I underline that crossing borders in Europe interlinks numerous migrant deaths, with sea waters and institutional violence. The performance builds on this connection between sea and violence. I work on a geographical entanglement between my localisation (everyday life by the sea) and eastern Europe because they both entail maritime and EU borders, and because deaths and violence linked to migrations are usually concealed in western Europe. This entanglement performs the idea that seas are 'divided space[s] […] marked by the existence of parallel lives' (Squire, 2017, p. 65). Due to these parallel existences, conceptualising and representing the disappearance of people becomes all the more complex. Yet, deaths on border zones also make the missing visible because they leave traces (Edkins, 2011). I wanted to explore these traces during my performance by embodying them with pebbles. Borders are usually places of exclusion and silenced stories; yet, through my performance they are no longer margins but places where the political is created, a political space *per se* (Balibar, 1998, p. 220).

Conjuring up spectres

Based on Derrida's concept of hauntology, I wanted to use performance to make these ghosts, these silenced migrants, visible. A hauntological perspective allows me to denounce the 'modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them' (Gordon, 2011, p. xv). Therefore, I wanted the pebbles to represent 'this being-there of an absent' (Derrida, 2006, p. 5). This ghostly presence is the trace of a violent domination since a haunting spectre is always the product of hegemony (Derrida, 2006, p. 46). Those particular ghosts are created by the hegemonic, western European capitalist discourse. We can think, for instance, how the picture of the dead Syrian child, Alan Kurdi, was used in 2015 by many European newspapers, or more recently the deaths of 27 migrants in the English Channel. Both these events reveal the graphic reality of migrating to Europe but also the selective representation of corpses, or else the hegemonic origin of the creation of ghosts. This hegemonic–institutional discourse is torn between care and control: its policing goal is made acceptable through a supposedly caring side; yet, it is often accused of killing (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Cuttitta, 2020, p. 10). The pebbles embody the spectres haunting the European imaginary, hidden under a pseudo-humanitarian goal and a freedom of movement based on a drastic closure of external borders.

I chose to organise my performance over two days because, according to Derrida, 'everything begins by the apparition of a spectre. More precisely by the waiting for this apparition' (Derrida, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, a hauntological perspective disrupts the usual occidental timeframe: 'time is out of joint', spectres reappear from the past but we fear their future apparition (Derrida, 2006). Waiting for a ghost is to look both towards the past and towards the future: I did not know if I was going to find any painted pebbles after the wait. The second day of performance allowed me to experience the wait for the apparition, the wait for the 'revenant' (Derrida, 2006, p. 11). Simultaneously, the pebbles as 'revenants' acquired a double meaning, being at the same time ghosts and what comes back, embodying this ghostly time entanglement.

I chose to use mainly natural materials, namely pebbles. I collected various types of stones of different shapes and colours. I thought that pebbles effectively represented the idea of hauntology: stones as tombstones, as death masks or as objects of remembrance. After the collection, I drew faces on the pebbles with crayons in a naïve style. Representing faces was a way to remind us that the usually anonymised migrants are people with 'names, faces and families' (De León, 2015, p. 5). Moreover, the naïve style can represent anyone and no one in particular, while it enhances the innocence of the face drawn. In a sense, it forces us to reckon with the Levinasian face of the other. This act is a moral imperative because '[it] is meaning, and a meaning without context […], what you cannot kill, or at least in the sense that says: "thou shalt not kill"' (Levinas, 1985, pp. 86–87). The pebbles are a representation of this moral imperative but, at the same time, reveal that it is not completed. They make us

face the violence of this impossibility: what should not be killed has been killed, and it is haunting us.

Performance
31 March 2021

Choosing how to begin the performance was complex because neither the journeys of migrants nor the hauntings of ghosts have a clear beginning or end (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016; Derrida, 2006). Consequently, I chose to begin the performance with an open-ended wait, the wait for a storm. I wanted to organise my performance during a storm in order to sow the painted pebbles in the rough sea. I made this choice because stormy weather and rough seas are linked to the imaginary of sinking. Both the wait for and the violence of the storm represent the uncertainty of a migrant's journey, which turned the pebbles into the remains of a shipwreck, the corpses sowed by the waves reminding us of the tragedy that has happened at sea.

The act of sowing pebbles reminded me of the folk tale character Hop-o'-My-Thumb, who sows stones to mark out the path he was following. Stones prevent him from getting lost and allow him to find his way again; he builds a memory line with pebbles (Perrault, 2009, p. 151). Hop-o'-My-Thumb's character may act as a representation of both migrants who voyage to Europe following a precise path full of hardships, and of my performance where stones are spectres, traces of memories.

1 April 2021

'Any conclusion is a closure [...] which must necessarily fail'; therefore, the end of the performance was not thought of as a closure but as an open ending (Fagan, 2007, p. 225). When I returned to the beach the next day, it was to face the calm after the storm. I looked for and was able to find four painted pebbles. I did not consider that this search put an end to the performance because the lost pebbles are still haunting (from) the sea. The wait for a haunting ghost never ends because a ghost 'is the future, it is always to come' (Derrida, 2011, p. 48).

Indeed, thirteen painted pebbles remain lost. Perhaps they are buried deep in the sand, perhaps they are deep down in the sea, or perhaps I just did not notice them among the other pebbles, and they are still waiting to be discovered by someone else. There are the pebbles we find, those we choose to see and those which disappear but are still haunting us, no one really sure of when they will return. Perhaps the next storm will stir them up. The performance never ends.
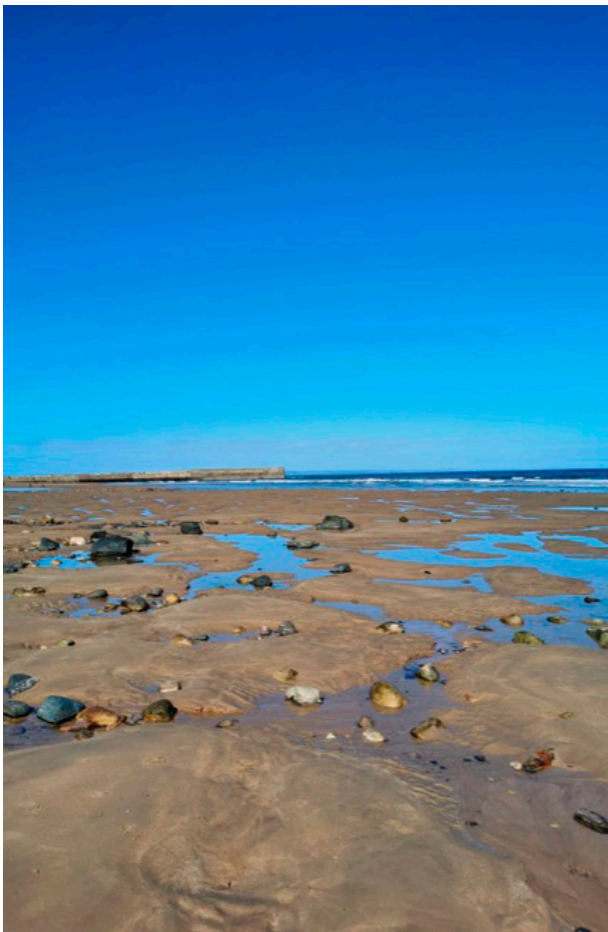
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