





FOCUS: THE BODY ISSUE

Alexandra Engelfriet, Gulgong, 2016; photo: Bronwyn Kemp



EMBODYING THE LANDSCAPE

by Sebastian Blackie

Alexandra Engelfriet, *Tranchee*, 2013, 20 tonnes earthenware clay, body-shaped, woodfired, h.2.3m, w.2.8m, d.10m
Photo: Guillaume Ramon; Le Vent des Forets, France

As I walk at dawn, I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's quote: "To live is to leave traces." Above, the first flights of the day leave their transitory vapor trails in a clear cold sky. At the river's edge where cows have trampled the bank, their hooves have sunk deep into the soft clay forming a pattern of miniature ponds and squelched up pinnacles dramatised by the low light of the morning sun. There is a powerful sense of materiality, a record of weight and force that also reveals something of the clay's nature. In places the slippery forms are cracked, a remnant of a dry summer; elsewhere they have begun to disintegrate, a crumbled sign of early frosts. This trace in the clay is interesting both in the similarity to the work of Alexandra Engelfriet and in the way that they are completely different.

In European languages the word for land refers to something to which people belong. Scape, ship, shape, sceppan and schaft all mean 'to form'. Landscape, or *landschap* in Dutch, carries in its etymology a relationship where the land forms the people just as much as the people form the land – two kinds of body in relationship. Engelfriet's practice demonstrates that it is a concept that still has currency despite the tsunami of modernity; indeed she has found a new imperative for enacting this relationship and given it form. Her performance at Clay Gulgong 2016 was particularly poignant given the geological, social and cultural history of Australia's wonderfully strange land. Engelfriet was fascinated by the colour of the Australian clay: golden in Hobart, with white kaolin and red earthenware at Gulgong which she mixed with her body, significant in a country where some of its indigenous people continue to use their skin as a canvas and the earth as their pallet.

Engelfriet's practice involves working substantial masses of plastic clay with her entire body. It is an immersive, sensual experience. A performance that might be thought of as dance, but where each movement is recorded in the clay and modified by subsequent movements. This produces both a memory and a permanent tableaux of rhythmic clay forms. Where practical, the latter are allowed to dry and fired in situ, resulting in massif fragments, dry and fragile. These sometimes remain in situ or are exhibited as separate or reassembled elements.

The locations offer different approaches. In Tasmania the site was level but at Gulgong she deliberately chose a sloping site to enable gravity to assist the performance. At her studio in rural France, Engelfriet has dug a v-shaped trench. Her performances are made in this slit in the ground overtly linking the human female body with the body of the earth. The trench is converted temporarily into a kiln and after firing the ceramic pieces are drawn out from the ground in a process that is practically driven but adds an extra layer to the metaphor. These activities have been documented and can be viewed online as still or moving images.

Seeing these performances one might ask where the art resides: in the performance, the memory of the performance, the transformation of the artist, the wet clay or fired ceramic, the photograph or film? The answer may be that it is in the encounter, with one or all of the above. The art occurs in our synapses. Engelfriet's work can be positioned by the semiotic but also in the so-called new materialism, which reacts against the supremacy of the visual. But the meaning floats in a relational sea dependent on context, encounter and the personal knowledge of the audience. In a review of a recent piece made in Tilburg, Netherlands, *Mother Fucking Earth* (Metropolis Magazine. Issue no 5 Oct–Nov 2016) by Domeniek Ruyters, she appears to have evoked a kind of Freudian terror and fascination. Ruyters writes: "The piece has something repulsive and at the same time inescapable. Mother earth shows us her insides: raw and wet." Some films of Engelfriet making, suggest something more erotic. In *Tranchée* (2013) for example, the vaginal folds of clay are formed from the fluidity of her movements (this piece remains in situ so time and weather will, inevitably, affect its reading). Other work, once fired and removed to a gallery environment evoke quite different ideas; archaeological and geological identities are revealed through heat.

In Marlou van den Berge's film *Dust to Dust* (2011) Engelfriet uses cloths to help form seven tonnes of very sloppy river-washed clay. The forms evoke decaying flesh chillingly reminiscent of killing fields. The sound track records the grisly effort required in one human being disinterring the body of another. Helena Goldwater writes of this film: "...there is a complexity in the potentiality of meaning. The corporeal and visceral come through and lead towards an intimate work but also devastating in terms of life and death..." The clay comes from the river-washed land of the Kleine Gelderse Waard. The river slows as it nears its end and unburdens its load. It is a land made from the silt of others.

Technology and social evolution may have rendered a more promiscuous relationship with the land than was formally the case but one might speculate on the significance of Engelfriet's cultural roots.

The Netherlands is a conceptual country. It has been brought into existence and sustained by conscious human will – a flat rational grid of a country, resisting nature for its survival. It is not a promised land but won by man's ingenuity. Engelfriet can be seen as penetrating beneath this ordered skin exploring simultaneously the subconscious and the internal. Claudia Benthien points out that within European languages the human skin is conceived in two ways: in one it mimetically represents the whole; in the other it is a covering that hides, disguises even, that which lies beneath. Engelfriet appears



Alexandra Engelfriet, *Tranchee* in the making, 2013, 20 tonnes earthenware clay, body shaped, h.2.3m, w.2.8m, d.10m
Photo: Christophe Beurrier; Le Vent des Forêts, France

to be dealing with both concepts. On the one hand, working sixty tonnes of clay with your body exemplifies truth to materials and process; it is a brutalist aesthetic that expresses clay's plasticity rather than its capacity to mimic. On the other, it reveals the powerful passions of nature that lie beneath the veneer of culture. In the Dutch landscape tradition, the well-ordered land is contrasted with magnificent wild skies; Engelfriet shows us that under the rational surface tectonic forces are also at work.

I repeat my morning walk a few days later. Heavy rain has swollen the river. Chaotic rafts of reeds and sedge float on the rapid current. The place where the cows have trodden the clay is submerged. The eddying brown water hints at what lies beneath. I am reminded that the second half of Benjamin's enigmatic quote is: "They (the traces) are mostly on the inside." What might this mean? Is Benjamin suggesting that the impact of our existence on earth is mostly on the inner being of those we have contact with, currents whose origins are invisible? I have a sense that the compellingly visceral quality of Engelfriet's work leaves its trace on our memory, but as I walk next to the swollen river it is the energy of her work rather than its appearance that is the memory. I have a sense of what Eugène Minkowski calls *élan vital*, a feeling of participation and of flowing onwards. At a time when the world seems to be regressing into the hierarchy of difference, this assertion that we are joined through energy is deeply important; that beneath superficial difference and a narrow egotistical sense of self there is a common body to which we belong. To quote Adrian Piper, "... a transpersonal rationality that sees and can imagine the commonality of experience." A landscape where body and land, mind and hand are not separated things joined by some articulating joint, but fluid aspects of a whole.

Gulgong Clay, installation site, 2016, Gulgong kaolin and red earthenware, h.3.5m, w.2.8m, d.10m; photo: Bronwyn Kemp; Clay Gulgong 2016, Morning View, NSW



Alexandra Engelfriet is a sculptor and performance artist from the Netherlands, now based in France. In 2016 she was invited to create a large-scale site-specific work at Clay Gulgong. The fired piece is on permanent exhibition at Morning View, Gulgong, NSW. www.alexandra-engelfriet.nl

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