

**Relationality and Resistance in Bhanu Kapil's and Florence Peake's
'Grounded' Performances**

Aurora Buccheri

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'Art must have begun as nature itself, in a dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated.' (Mendieta 71)

The mother of ecofeminist Performance Art as we know it today, Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta recognised the birth of art as coinciding with nature itself. She perceived the environment, as Stacy Alaimo frames it, not as ‘somewhere out there’, but forming the ‘very substance of ourselves’ (Alaimo, 4). Writer and artist Bhanu Kapil seems equally fascinated by this connection between the ground and the human, expressing in her ‘End Notes’ for *Ban en Banlieue* (2015) admiration for Mendieta’s *Silueta* series (99). Most importantly, she thanks another performance artist, Sharon Carlisle, for her contribution in an act which is inspirational to this entire paper. She writes:

Sharon Carlisle: who dug a rectangle of earth in my back garden and let me lie in it
[...] I wanted to study what happens to bodies at the limit of their particular life.
There was never a way to do this in writing. All summer, we analysed the erosion
[...], shed leaves and patterned/*humanized outline on the ground*. (emphasis added)
(87)

For Kapil, the exploration of life that allows her to create a ‘humanized outline on the ground’ is something that can never be done in writing. Yet her performances and the written record of them walk together side by side in her book *Ban en Banlieue*, with recurring acts of her lying down on the ground becoming the perfect point of exploration of her performative works. This essay will explore the meaningful connection between the ground and the human presence in contemporary performances from Kapil, detailed in the ‘Installations and Performances’ section of *Ban en Banlieue* and recurring throughout the text, and from artist Florence Peake’s *CRUDE CARE* (2021), performed and exhibited in Aberdeen Art Gallery as part of British Art Show 9. Performance Art puts in conversation these two works, both rooted in how they unravel and problematise a relation with the ground. Is Kapil’s contact

with the ground an act of passivity? Or is it an act of resistance? Of her body protesting *with* and *about* the ground it is touching? What point can a performance make about physical, visceral connection with the ground? And how does this connection draw us to think about social and exploitative relations with the territory? For the sake of this essay, the term ‘ground’ will be interpreted as the place where nature appears in its horizontal plane, touching with the body once the latter’s verticality is subverted (Best, 75). In relation to the acts detailed, the term ‘ground’ will adopt the meaning of natural ground (e.g. grass, earth), resources within the soil (e.g. clay, extractable materials), and man-made, urban solutions of tamed ground (e.g. pavement, sidewalks). Concepts of ground as motherland and of territory affected by diasporic and colonial significance will be excluded from the focus of this essay, for the sake of brevity and relevance to the performances chosen.

Relationality with the Ground

Relationality is at the very core of Performance Art, as the act implies the necessary meeting between two or more bodies: the artist creating and the viewer(s) observing (Jones, 2). Unlike a static work of art that can be approached at any time by the viewer, performance art, in its unique happening, brings a dynamic creation of meaning that involves the artist and the viewer simultaneously (Jones, 1). Many artists living and creating in the last three decades have introduced a third dynamic element in this relation: nature. These artists, whose legacies have influenced both Florence Peake’s *CRUDE CARE* (Aberdeen Art Gallery, 2021) and Bhanu Kapil’s *Performance for Ban* (Pratt Institute, 2013), are preoccupied with ecological sensitivity in their work. Relevant names include Ana Mendieta (*Siluetas* series, 1973-1980) and Betsy Damon (*7,000-Year-Old Woman*, 1977). Narrowing it down for the purpose stated

in the introduction, we can ascribe the environmental element featured in the chosen performances to be the ground, both natural and urban.

A disclaimer is necessary when discussing *CRUDE CARE* as a work of Performance Art. Even if *CRUDE CARE* is now a completed object accessible within the gallery space, it is important to cast its relation to the ground as part of a specific performance, and to be reminded that, without the performative element constituting its creation, the piece itself would not exist in the shape we can observe it today. The object itself consists of a rectangular bed of clay, torn apart from the inside in an act of ‘reverse extraction’ and then glazed in red and fired, resembling an open wound in the ground.



We depart from the premise that specific bodies create meaning when placed in connection to specific places (Alaimo, 62). For Peake’s performance, this means that the body is chosen because of how it is socially positioned, and that dictates how it is affected by the environment (Alaimo, 27). The making of *CRUDE CARE* involved Earl Solomon, an experienced care professional active in Aberdeen City. Solomon emerges from the clay,

fighting off and, at the same time, connecting with the very ground he is trying to break free from. The element of care and caring as a social system in place for the vulnerable is at the forefront of this piece, which we will come back to in the next section. In terms of the physical, grounded element of the performance, Solomon described the experience of being entombed in clay and emerging from it as a second birth, in his words ‘really weird’, yet ‘quite profound’.¹ Beyond the spiritual aspect of the birthing ritual, the relation with the ground unavoidably becomes physical in nature, the burial in the clay arousing fears of claustrophobia and discomfort in Solomon. Yet, in the end he describes it as a positive connection: ‘a sense of feeling at peace, at rest, just lying there with the clay on you. You felt the weight of it on you. It wasn’t restrictive, it was like you were being hugged.’² Despite the positive sensations derived by the physical contact, the specific relation between the body and the ground happens in a discursive struggle between the man and the resources he is emerging from, with the critical element becoming a key reading. Peake’s work makes a statement about the territory it was conceived in. The artist admits to starting this piece based on the geology of the North East, and her observations of how the community and the economy become one in Aberdeen’s landscape.³ Whereas, in her words, the performance involves a ‘direct physical experience with the bodies’, it also becomes a document of ‘extraction and exploitation’, with the ‘reverse extraction’ movement performed by Solomon being essential.⁴ The critical statement of the piece is strengthened by its position: attached to the ground floor of Aberdeen Art Gallery, it can make a statement about exploitation of resources funnelling funds into the art world. Famously, one of the biggest investors of Aberdeen Art Gallery (getting an entire floor named after them) is the oil company BP.⁵ Therefore, the human emerges from the bed of fertile materials both having benefited from them, and having, unavoidably, exploited them. Furthermore, the title of the work and

Solomon's fundamental involvement call us to rethink which sectors are underfunded, and which sectors accumulate wealth and influence. By setting roots on the ground, this piece comes to symbolise an inversion of the existing hierarchy. It is hard for a piece (and place) of art whose existence depends on its controversial funding to remain completely neutral. For the sake of neutrality, however, we can read the human connection with the ground in CRUDE CARE as a positive step towards change. Becoming 'intermeshed with the more-than-human world' changes the dynamics, and exploitation becomes unimaginable when we start thinking humans are made of the same resources, and when, as Val Plumwood puts it, nature is 'always as close as one's own skin' (Alaimo, 2).



Making of CRUDE CARE, with Peake emerging from it.



Peake working on RITE (2021) in her studio in London.

Bringing back Kapil's powerful imagery of human outline on the ground, her recorded fragments of various performances are essential to read the nature of Ban, and how that is rooted into the relation between the human body and the urban ground. A fragment featured in 'Inversions for Ban' reads:

Then Lie down.

Invert yourself above a ditch or a stream beneath a bright blue sky.

Then pull yourself up from your knees to clean.

Clean the street until all that's left is a ring of oily foam, the formal barrier of a bad snow. (28)

We do not know whether this performance ever took place, but we can witness the element of lying down as visualising the body as an extension of the ground and the ground as an

extension of the body (Mendieta, 72). The physical actions are rhythmically detailed: ‘lie down’, ‘invert’, ‘pull yourself up from your knees’, creating a flux of performance, in the urban space, reminiscent of Marina Abramovic’s *Balkan Baroque* (1997), its act of cleaning transposed to the socio-urban landscape. Unlike Abramovic’s performance of collective cleansing, the act of cleaning assumes a personal shape for Kapil, united to the assemblage of materials that shape Ban. Recurring elements of asphalt, of oily foam, of bitumen inherited from the city soil, keep appearing in the text in relation to the ambiguous and mystical figure of Ban. Kapil describes her as a ‘shape or bodily outline that is familiar: yet inaccurate’ (20). This inaccuracy can be traced to the very materials Ban is said to be made of, everchanging and shapeshifting, but often borrowing from the soil: ‘charcoal, the very thing Ban is made of, is so messy’ (22). The act of cleaning mentioned in the performance above also symbolises an act of regeneration, taking place on the urban ground. Ban is ‘washed off the street’ with every rainfall, but ‘by morning a stain rises up through the asphalt’ (21). In this version, Ban is embodied, but is also ethereal. The act of lying down, of existing in concrete ties her to the soil; she is, in the end, ‘a desiccating form on the sidewalk’ but also a Ban that ‘does not die’ (21). Thus, the essence of Ban, as observed by performative acts of lying down on the urban ground, is constituted by the elements that she picks up, absorbs from the very soil. Ultimately, the ground is the very point of connection between Kapil and Ban, with the writer getting physically on Ban’s level: ‘I lie down next to [Ban] and extend my own tongue to the ivy that curls down to the sidewalk’ (21). Despite this static view of Ban as rooted in the asphalt, there is more tying the ground to discourses of resistance we will explore next, as we see ‘a stretch of road’ becoming ‘the mouth of the riot’ (27).



Bhanu Kapil, Performance for *Ban* at Pratt Institute, New York, April, 2013

Vulnerability in Resistance

Performance Art was born as a need to mimic the physical movements of political protests, and to bring social issues into the sacred space of the art gallery (Jones, 4). A key exercise when looking at both Peake's and Kapil's performances is rethinking the sequence, the time structure dictating where vulnerability ends and resistance starts (Butler et al., 12). Judith Butler questions the misconception that 'first you resist, and then you are confronted with your vulnerability' (Butler et al., 12). What both these artists explore in their works is a simultaneous emergence of vulnerability and resistance. By lying down, both Kapil and

Peake make the body renounce vertical hierarchy (Grosz, 167) and often become a target for harm when, as in Kapil's case, this happens on the public ground (Butler et al., 12). Author Anima Cain, friend and admirer of Kapil, describes Kapil's performances consisting of 'lying down the ground in public' as 'deadly vulnerable spaces'.⁶ This element of vulnerability is key in framing the protests, and their physical contact with the ground Kapil lies on. When recording her performance in lieu of a memorial for Jyoti Singh Pandey in New Delhi, Kapil describes this scene:

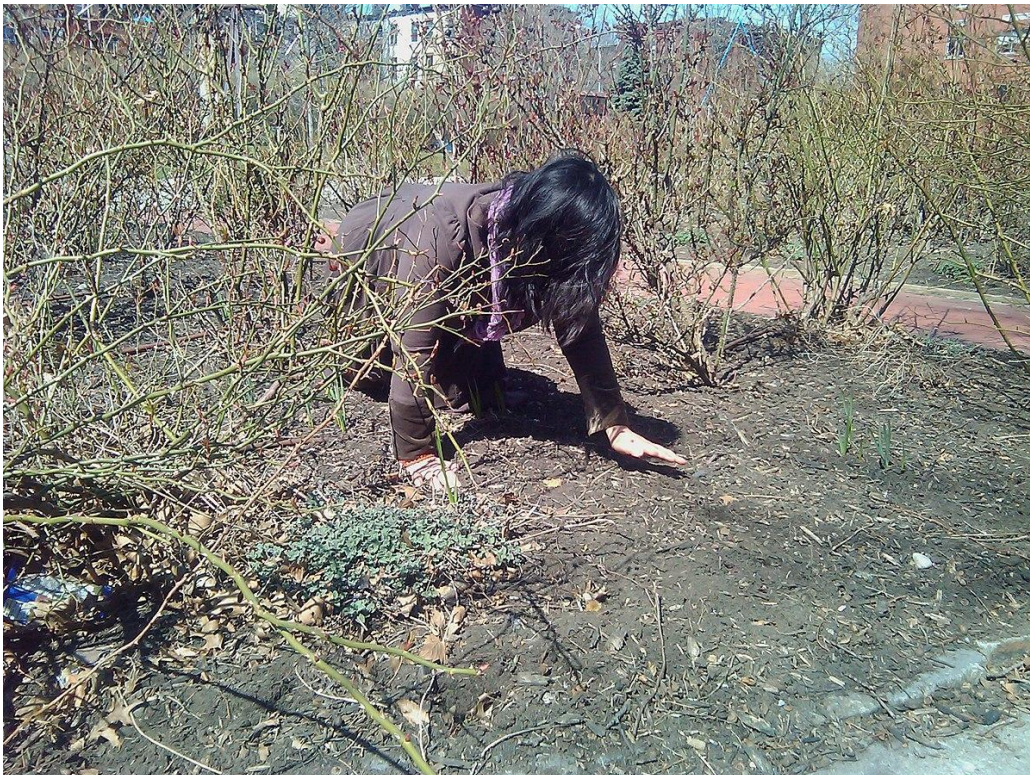
Body outline on ground ringed by candles/flowers at the site where Jyoti Singh Pandey lay for 40 minutes in December 2012. [...] The anti-rape protesters make a circle around my body when I lie down. What do they receive? An image. But what happens next? How does the energy of performance mix with the energy of the memorial? How does the image support the work that is being done in other areas?

(16)

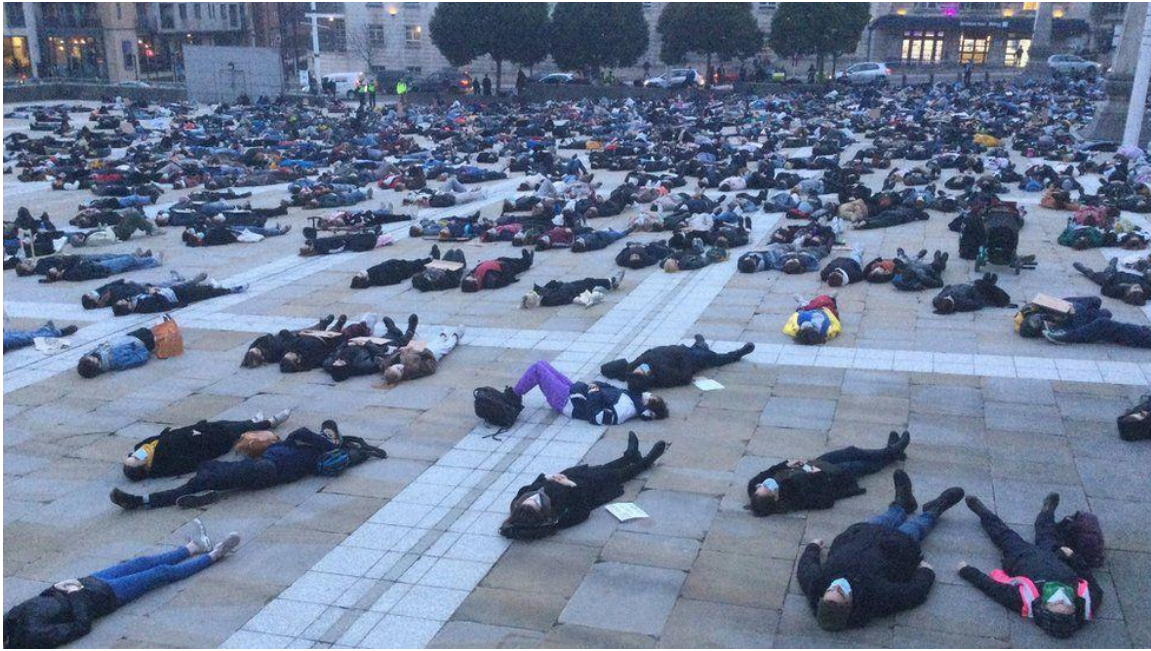
The New Delhi performance is born from and stained by the marks of gender violence. The connection with the ground is at the same time re-establishing roots on the pavement where the young woman's life was uprooted, and making a statement, with its state of vulnerability, advocating for resistance. Resisting time, for the 40 minutes Jyoti lay on the ground, and resisting being forgotten, sealing the memory in the performer's and the bypassers' minds. In her written recollection of the act, Kapil interrogates the power of the performance to enact change after the 'image' has dissolved. These questions on performativity allow us to challenge the idea of lying down as inactivity. Another entry in Kapil's text is key to unpack this dilemma, in which she writes: 'I was interested in what happens when you don't say anything at all. I wanted to lie down forever in a novel. I dragged myself off the floor of the

novel.' (99) The New Delhi performance assumes a new meaning, of bodies metaphorically stepping up by physically lying down when words cannot convey meaning and enact change. The contact with the ground, in this instance, can be seen as going beyond the memorial, and embodying a demand for better conditions. As Butler puts it, 'the pavement and the street are to be understood as requirements of the body as it exercises its rights of mobility' (Butler et al., 15). The parallel between mobility, resistance and gender violence in the streets resonates strongly with protests happening today. Wakes in remembrance of Sarah Everard have taken place across the UK, and have been predominantly met with hostility by the British Police. In this series of wakes and memorials, participants often chose to re-enact vulnerability and the deaths of women like Singh Pandey and Everard, by lying down on the ground.⁷ Vulnerability, in this powerful act, is not overcome by resistance, rather it becomes a catalyst, effectively embodying at once political mobilization and mourning (Butler et al., 14). The performative act of lying down during a protest (the 'die-in') ties together the two ends of being alive and being dead (Goldberg, 127) How can this simple act effect change? How can it become active resistance? Jesse Goldberg explores the die-in element of protests, by taking as an example the Black Lives Matter gatherings. In his analysis, the choreography of bodies on the ground forces the bystanders and passers-by to confront the matter in its physical existence (Goldberg, 128). A notion that was, until then, theoretical, that black bodies are seen by the State as disposable, appears in front of their eyes when they look at the bodies on the street (Goldberg, 128). The elements recognised by Goldberg in these embodied protests apply to Kapil's work, with one additional element of transnationality. If the bodies memorialised in the streets of Minneapolis and narrated by Goldberg remain tied to the United States, Kapil exports performances tied to Singh Pandey to another ground. This time, she lies down in the Pratt Institute in New York, a year after the New Delhi protest. In this

space, she presents a performance ‘on the Fearless One, social violence and Ban’ (18). After the symposium, Kapil ‘[performs] a wolfgirl Ban in the rose garden – face down then crawling out’ (18). It is a visually striking and intense focus on the gender and social violence, of Kapil performing face down, and crawling out – an idea of struggle, of anonymity, of resistance. Even when exported to the US, the performance’s elements translate in the new cultural environment: the language of vulnerability and gender violence is interpretable across the globe (Jones, 70). The staging, repeatedly, of the same concept is what constitutes performativity as theorised by Butler and, ultimately, the authority of the act and its political power of resistance is emphasised and keeps growing by repetition (Butler, 70).



Pratt Institute, Kapil enacting the Performance for Ban (2013): face down, crawling out.



Protest for Sarah Everard in Leeds, held 15/03/2021

In Peake's work, the vulnerable element of care is fundamental for the performance's intention and for its message of resistance and change applying to society. Peake's work, and Solomon's involvement in particular, make a statement about care work as a foundational, resistant element of society in times of extreme hardship. In being buried in the clay ground, Solomon's body both deals with the sturdy, uncut material the 'crude' element care is made of, and is, at the same time, embraced by it, 'hugged', by an activity that lies at the root of society.⁸ Opposing common belief that care is an act relegated to the private sphere, by being placed on the grounds of the art gallery space, care becomes a social imperative, an example of how systems of caring can lay a foundation for a better society, as suggested by Virginia Held, from the ground up (Held, 18). Within the performance, the concept of care, brought to the foreground, metamorphoses from a state of material vulnerability (raw, soft clay) to visible, palpable change (hard, segmented sculpture). A prolific way to envision vulnerability as a subversive catalyst for change in Peake's work is by observing the work in its physical

form: an open wound, a red scar on the ground. Petra Kuppers, who spent her life exploring how medical elements have influenced and shaped contemporary art, defines a scar as a vulnerable site, a place of mediation between the outside and the inside, that is, in this instance, the point of contact between the body and its surroundings (Kuppers, 1). For *CRUDE CARE*, this point of contact is also socially and politically enmeshed in Aberdeen's involvement in oil drilling and granite extraction. This wound, then, in which the body is placed, can summon images of exploitation, of violence, of social inequality (Kuppers, 2). Yet, at the same time, it lures the bypasser's gaze, the open wound begs to be looked at (Kuppers, 4). The scar that Peake produces is one that embodies yet resists vulnerability in the end. It does not call on the viewer to take pity and despair, instead it lures them into a positive message, one of metamorphosis and resistance. The red, clay scar *CRUDE CARE* produces is not just a site of destruction, but one of regeneration, the place in which change (of tissue, of resources, of societal systems) can happen.

Conclusion: of Temporality and Timelessness

If the essence of Performance Art is its existence in the here and now, then both works explored somewhat go against this premise. *CRUDE CARE* is safely lying on the marbled floor of Aberdeen Art Gallery, now a static work that has only the reminiscence of its coming into existence. The clay bed is the result of a moment completed in the past, yet vividly present in the here and now, with its comment on material exploitation of granite and oil affecting the future. Kapil's performative work is equally placed in time and space ambiguously. In their being recorded, the performance acts enter another timeless place, in which they can be accessed through the written word, consulted over and over on the pages

of *Ban*. Suspension of time is common to contemporary art of the last decades that is ecologically and socially attuned. Mendieta's *Siluetas* are embodied, fleeting yet photographed, making them immortal. Similarly, projects on community and environment by contemporary artist Grace Ndiritu's call for an action to save the here and now, to rebuild communities again, yet they are televised and broadcasted in loop, escaping the urgency of time. What time, relationality, and vulnerability all have in common in these performances is the visceral attachment to the ground they are dependent on. Peake's *CRUDE CARE* is much more than a red clay bed in the middle of the gallery: it becomes a token of social mobility, advocating for the support of care workers and for the preservation of the environment we all live in. Similarly, Kapil's performances are weaved in the written word with a sense of personal and political urgency: against gender injustice, against complacency, against motionlessness even when lying down. The connection of *Ban*'s performances with *CRUDE CARE* may have not been obvious at the beginning, but it all comes together when thinking forward. The two works make use of laying down, staying with the ground, to draw attention to our relation with it, and to what can be achieved if we start thinking *with* the ground. In their placing bodies within and with the ground, both artworks eventually enact a demand for infrastructures, both social and physical; they demand an 'inhabitable ground' (Butler et al., 14).

Word count: 3613

Notes

1. In the words of Earl Solomon, interviewed by the *Press and Journal*: ‘Buried alive... to create Aberdeen Art Gallery’s stunning new sculpture’, [last access 12/12/21: <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/entertainment/whats-on/3317578/buried-alive-to-create-aberdeen-art-gallery-s-stunning-new-sculpture/>]
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. ‘BP announces £1m investment in Aberdeen Art Gallery’, *Aberdeen City Council News* [last access 10/12/21: <https://news.aberdeencity.gov.uk/bp-announces-1m-investment-in-aberdeen-art-gallery/>]
6. ‘Reading Bhanu Kapil’, *The Believer* [last access 10/12/2021: <https://believermag.com/logger/2015-02-19-reading-bhanu-kapil/>]
7. ‘Leeds protest: Hundreds gather in support of women's safety’, *BBC News* [last access 12/12/21: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-56407072>]
8. ‘Buried alive’, [last access 12/12/21: <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/entertainment/whats-on/3317578/buried-alive-to-create-aberdeen-art-gallery-s-stunning-new-sculpture/>]

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