

“This is the way the world ends, not...”: towards a polis of performing ecology

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Abstract

In the opening decade of the twenty-first century humans faced a rising surplus of historical double binds that threatened no shortage of highly charged political and ethical dilemmas. For example, humanity’s success at performing survival began to outstrip the carrying capacity of Earth. And, of course, such blatant global dramas offer no obvious denouement. When all futures seem to promise only impossible scenarios, such as an end to ‘history’ or even ‘nature’, what kinds of performance paradigm might offer some glimmers of hope? This presentation approaches that prospect paradoxically by attempting to treat it lightly, as if we are always already such stuff as dreams are made on. So it delves into an end to all ethics and the onset of an especially extreme state of political exception for *Homo sapiens* as the species passes under a rainbow called climate change. For this particular specimen, on the left is a 1970s Hawaiian happening titled *H.C.A.W. – Happy Cleaner Air Week* – to the right a recent land-based installation known as *A Meadow Meander*. Between these unlikely materials it aims to conjure up a few random poles of a dynamic dispersal of Earthly doom that goes by the dubious bioethical alias of ‘performing ecology’.

Keywords: theatre, environment, performing ecology

Preamble: on less and more in early 1970s

Music Department, University of Hawaii, Honolulu. The scenario reads:

Audience moved outdoors to courtyard. String quartet plays Mozart on stage. Big white Japanese paper screens on each side. Baroque artworks back projected. Audience settles, music continues. Backstage two big motorbikes start up. Burst through screens, skid to halt on stage edge.

This was a typical late-sixties opening for a “multi-media masque”—called *H.C.A.W.*—that I was commissioned to make as finale for an Experimental Music Concert at the 1970 Festival of the Arts of this century. *Happy Cleaner Air Week* was Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley’s recent pet environmental project. Just one of several failed attempts to erase his 1968 shoot-to-kill threat to protestors whose anti-Vietnam War demonstration turned violent during the annual Democratic National Convention. Actually the bikes tore through the screens slowly. The audience shock came seconds earlier as the riders loudly gunned them up out of sight. Less was more.

North Shore Beach, Oahu. The island was main rest and recuperation site for American GIs between tours of duty in the hellholes of the Vietnam War. The freshman English classes I taught were a quarter full of young men about my age who had survived three tours and been

drafted out. They had entitlement to free university education. Mostly they were the really scarred ones who couldn't face going back to mainland USA. Twice I went weekend camping on the North Shore with a group of them. Got scared into stopping after the second one when surf-party gave way to pranks with guns and grenades. As the first live rounds were loaded and pins were pulled I was the only one to run for cover. More was less.

East-West Centre, Honolulu Campus. The research Centre backed onto a palm-grove hut where teaching assistants shared offices. From my desk I could also see the lanai above the University Theatre entrance. Someone had tried to throw me off it as I performed in a ritual-style event about American wars and African poverty. The humid fug of the paradise isles seemed perfect for stirring up latent violence. No wonder the anthropologist polymath Gregory Bateson's stint of work in Hawaii included an East-West conference on Mental Health in Asia and the Pacific. Soon after he presented a paper on the Roots of the Ecological Crisis to a Committee of the State Senate.

Introduction

That double-layered paradox is my instrument for tuning in to how we humans might best deal with accurately foreseeing when for us the world will actually end. The prospect obviously threatens to be mind-boggling. Yet, the transparent intricacy of a simple diagram depicting a frightening set of human failings could be a useful tool for learning to think beyond the unthinkable. Bateson's pictogram is a profoundly economic example among scenarios that try to get to grips with twenty-first century climate change. Something of a less-is-more triumph, perhaps. But also it is a document that could be as dangerous as the extremes it represents. For its more-is-less message could paralyse attempts at responding effectively to what it implies about *Homo sapiens*. So this threatening vision demands an approach of great caution, a roundabout route that outwits its convoluted structure step-by-step, finding ways to somehow outperform the performances it promises.

Hence, my methods in this essay will advance crab-wise through a small set of scenes drawn from performance-as-research experiments undertaken since the turn of the third millennium. The scenes were ones that at first I found mystifying for how their dynamics engaged spectators, including myself. Even though I had initiated them, I could not figure out exactly how they achieved their apparent affects and potential effects. As if one were in an event created by somebody else.

I begin with the only one staged in a theatre, as that makes it relatively easy to describe. The other three were created on a heritage site, at a zoo, and in a rural field. All four were what I have called “spectacles of deconstruction,” as they aimed to unfix key elements of dominant ethical and political ontologies through engaging contradiction and paradox (Kershaw 2007: 214-15). Each of them used significantly fewer resources than the last in searching for an aesthetics that would constitute ecologically sound events. But also they involved tricky hit and miss juggling with unpredictable performance modes in places where, more often than not, exceptions were the rule.

To evolve some stable bearings on those diversely volatile conditions I draw on Giorgio Agamben's analyses of biopolitics as a state in which human life and death routinely hang in the balance (Agamben 2004). This treats ethics and politics as relatively volatile components

of human cultural evolution, and that implies an especially challenging take on Bateson's version of the dynamics of ecological crisis. Because, viewed through Agamben's perspective on biopolitics as *the* quintessential contemporary human condition, Bateson's climate crisis diagram may indicate a *universal* "state of exception" where *all* human life faces its final moment: the end of *Homo sapiens*. So the principle conundrum in meeting that challenge becomes: what lightest of practical and critical touches might fundamentally confound the direction of its vicious spiral? Then, in an Earthly environment where survival may depend on less becoming more extremely, that translates into a seemingly absurd core question for this look into humanity's Earthly prospects: What is the smallest unit of human performance?

Setting the scene of that question in practice

Green Shade was an immersive performance experiment that investigated the survival of human groups in a post-political world following worst-case scenario global warming. It imagined humans might survive in highly specialised groups inside geodesic biomes built on high land alongside the Avon Gorge in Bristol, UK. Those open public Downs are just a kilometer from the Wickham Theatre at Bristol University: an old printing workshop converted into a flexible black-box studio (Kershaw 2007: 5-9).

Everything moveable was stripped out back to the walls. Seven areas were made into habitat-workshops by specialist teams of survivors charged with maintaining the biome's infrastructure. These were designated: energy, water, plants, animals, air, time, filtration. Energy occupied a five-meter high scaffolding Heath Robinson machine with bits of old bikes where you could lie back and peddle-generate the glow of a small headlamp into life. Water had an oil-drum fountain and an ironically simple system of tubes and bags for processing liquids. And so on. Each of the eighteen performers was in two groups, which collectively collaged together the styles of their habitats and working uniforms. No effort went into linking habitat designs; each niche had its own functional/decorative stamp fashioned from recycled materials and equipment. Spectator-visitors often closely inspected the detail of these structures and gazed intently their survival group's repair routines. They wandered freely about the larger space, sometimes leaving and returning to the event during its nine-hour non-stop shifts that ran over two days. The project aimed to devise a performance system that could sustain the intense levels of focus and energy usually found in much shorter shows. So, its aesthetics of design and action respectively refracted the more-is-less and less-is-more paradoxes of anthropogenic climate change: habitats were made from scavenged junk; actions were highly repetitive but numerous.

But, in a production that overall obviously was exorbitant in its use of time, space, people and recycled materials, what conditions might constitute its least profligate moments of performance? To answer that means looking precisely at what might seem like mundane detail. So, consider a frequently repeated action performed by the whole ensemble at least once in each of the event's nine hours. All eighteen biome survivors stand in a circle facing inwards. Each holds a meter-and-a-half long by five-centimeter diameter hazel-wood pole: so quite substantial sticks. Any performer may give a vocal signal to start. Immediately all throw their sticks right to the next person in the circle, so everyone has to quickly catch a stick in flight from their left. Repeat, more or less immediately. And repeat, repeat, repeat...

When a rhythm emerges appropriate to the group’s overall energy level another signal reverses the direction of the sticks, right to left, *without missing a beat*. The throwing continues as further signals send two or three performers to the circle’s centre with their sticks, where they repeatedly demonstrate and evolve short established action sequences of routine biome maintenance.

Stick exercises have been quite commonplace in theatre and performance training and they were utterly critical to the ethico-political modeling of the imaginary *Green Shade* biome. Because fine-tuned interactions were essential to successfully completing the short but intricate action-sequences of many ensemble-devised repair tasks required for “survival.” A disciplined spontaneity was crucial to making light work, so to speak, of the durational event’s extreme physical demands. So, ethically speaking, the project searched for styles of egalitarian embodiment that aimed to ensure a fair distribution of mutual support among the ensemble. Politically, that equates to various methods of deliberative collectivism evolved by environmental activist movements in the opening decade of the twenty-first century (Lab of ii; Occupy London; Platform—2013).

Less obviously perhaps, excessive refinement of repeatable actions that were always open to adaptation rested on the mutual creation of very simple units of performance. The simplest units of performance approximate the smallest – potentially least environmentally expensive – ones. So in the imaginary biome collective, stick throwing-and-catching was a crucial analogue of sustainable survival.

What is the smallest unit of human performance?

The minimalist element of *Green Shade*’s stick-throwing circle generated alternating flows of energy that sustained the whole event. Because the evolving intricacies of its repeated “repair” routines always raised the risk of mishaps—mistimings, misunderstandings, mistrusts—and the *uncertainty* of entropy. And this demanded inventive interactions between performers that were systemically essential. The result was a performance process that shuttled between more-is-less entropy and less-is-more inventiveness in searching for a dynamic equilibrium overall; i.e. an ecological homeostasis produced by systemic trial and error. Is that a condition through which the smallest units of particular performance ecologies might be identified?

To get a measure of that question begs reflection on elementary refractions at the atomic scale of the universe, in the shape of a thought experiment. Just as a sixteen-year old youth called Einstein performed when he imagined chasing light till his speed matched its, transforming it into a *static* electromagnetic wave. A paradox: in quantum surfing the rollers stand still (Chasing the light 2013). But worry not. The following needs no vertiginous maths as it simply mimics waves curving toward a tropical beach, taking shape through a straightforward exercise in simple parallelism.

It begins by noting that quantum theory basically accounts for the universe via three principal particles: electrons, protons and neutrons.¹ Also note that the theory posits just four universal forces: strong and weak nuclear ones, plus gravity and electromagnetism. The

¹ There are smaller entities, such as quarks and bosons, but the point of this mental exercise does without the work they perform.

energy these exhibit is discontinuous, as it is divided up into discrete packets called “quanta,” which physicists generally (and a mite confusingly) consider as synonymous with “particle.” For example, the quanta of light are called “photons,” which have the strange quality of behaving both as a *particle* – like a stream of little bullets – and as a *wave* of electromagnetism, like ripples of water lapping on a shoreline (Cox and Forshaw, 2012: 3-4).

This paradoxical quality may be key to conditions that produce the smallest units of human performance. But to establish that succinctly requires another relatively clear-cut exercise in drawing equivalence—or parallels—between quantum terminology and natural language words in English.² So think of the verb “be” as a quantum particle, and the adjective “spontaneous” as a quantum force. When these are put together in a verb phrase statement directed at another person—“Be spontaneous!”—its contradictory quality demands energy for action from that subject, but also threatens to forestall it. This quality in the *performative environment* established by the phrase *replicates* the particle/wave dynamic of light’s photons and, at least momentarily, the act of quantum surfing. Because any gap (or lacuna) between verbal command and corporeal response constitutes a stalled action of human performance whose effect may become visible to the naked eye however briefly it occurs. An absence that is palpable; a body stilled which wavers. That is to say, an exacting analogue of how photons perform discontinuity. A key paradox of performance duration and ephemerality: now you get it, now you don’t.

This thought experimental result arises because all atomic particles—including those constituting humans—are never still, whilst human action can almost always be “put on hold,” if only for an imminent moment. The difference here may be thought in terms of feedback that is positive, a force of natural energy oscillating but always driving on, like electromagnetism or gravity, say; and a negative feedback that moderates – pauses, redirects – to produce a particularly flexible *flow* of energy which is always stopping and starting, a little like a heartbeat: or A/C electrical pulses. And maybe that potential can make the question of the smallest unit of human performance amenable to an answer, or two.

On one part that has no part

To gain some analytical traction on such potential I will use this “smallest unit” idea in a brief exploration of Agamben’s claim for “state of exception” and “bare life” as key elements constituting modern biopolitics. His books *Homo Sacer* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005) discuss these concepts with wonderful intricacy and subtlety, the first with Nazi concentration camps and the second with America’s Guantanamo Bay as their quintessential twentieth-century exemplars (1998: Part 3; 2005: 3-4). “State of exception,” though, is a condition created by *any* politico-juridical system through which humans may be rendered as “bare life,” defined by their capacity “to be killed but not sacrificed.” That is to say, a life that can be violently ended by the state, its agents or anyone else because it has been determined as wholly without value, sacred or otherwise. Agamben makes large claims for the nature of this condition, and in uncompromising terms: “At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested” (1998:

² This exercise borrows methods from J. L. Austin (1962).

9). Much follows for Agamben from that paradoxical process of an exclusion which is an inclusion, including that bare life becomes a “place for the organisation of State power and emancipation from it,” that “man (sic) as a living being presents himself no longer as an *object* but as a *subject* of political power,” and that “the bare life of the citizen [is] the new biopolitical body of humanity” (Agamben 9). In other words, it can produce a fresh kind of polis that potentially may occur anywhere, perhaps at any time.

I am interested in how the processes creating “bare life” and any “state of exception” might figure in light of worst-case scenarios for climate change, which often imply total breakdown of political order.³ I think it rather important that humans can figure elementary *simple* ways of preventing such futures. An easily accessible flesh and blood equivalent to renewable high-tech principles, say. This is why I have risked my thought experiment in quantum equation making, as somehow humans must feel and think beyond such extremes so as best to perform forestalling them. To achieve that it seems patent we live through performances that are ever more economical, i.e. increasingly minimalist in their use of resources... smallest units of human performance. Doing much less to achieve more. But, like all conundrums, this possibility requires oblique treatment to sniff out its most pungent implications. So next I hazard a pithy gaze at deliberately reductive moments of performance in two more practice-as-research projects that were down to me, so to speak. Moments that I still struggle to comprehend because they were, at least for me, especially paradoxical.

The Iron Ship and a Last Mermaid Alive.

The Iron Ship was an environment-specific extravaganza with around 50 student performers and 20 professional support staff staged on the nineteenth-century Bristol-based heritage ship the *SS Great Britain*. The show promenaded 130-160 spectators on and around the whole environment of the ship in each of six performances. Thirty of them participated in a reception research study that posed the question: How could performance best democratise such a site by opening it up as embodying many histories, some of them certainly in conflict?

The opening act, staged in a large dockside shed decked-out as a theatre, was a jocular surrealist vaudeville featuring a mix of historical and mythical figures: engineer-designer of the ship Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Mrs Brunel, Queen Victoria, Britannia, Neptune and others. The spectators were next led to the dry dock where the ship’s massive stern towered above them: a niche for the Last Mermaid Alive and two Spectres of her doomed species. The Spectres ranted against the ship’s heritage of toxic seas and the Last Mermaid sang a lament for her dead sisters (PLH 2016 – video).

Who would be a mermaid fair
Singing alone, combing her hair
Under the sea on a golden throne
With a comb of pearl, I will smooth my hair
But at night I would wander away and away
On a shipwreck and in and out of the rocks.

³ An example of this is Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (McCarthy: 2006).

Popular demand for the show produced two audiences for this scene split vertically between the dockside and dock bottom, where the Last Mermaid was lodged between the ship's huge propeller and rudder. And that unexpected spatial bifurcation was clearly matched by audience reception, the Spectres' rant prompting wary glances and some shuffling feet while the lament met a mostly still and almost reverent silence. So an incidental scenography seemed to refract an especially dynamic performance process. A state that inevitably had unpredictable historical and enviro-politico resonances.

Spatially, the dockside spectators were aligned with dominant Victorian visions of industrial progress and Empire. Whereas the dry-dock bottom spectators, cheek-by-scale with fishy hybrids, implicitly were allied to artisan shipbuilding labour and lonely sailor dreams. But also the scene's performative minimalism produced a tightly focused point through which the groups could constitute a single spectatorship, maybe even a quasi-polis. I suggest that dynamic resulted from the Last Mermaid becoming an imaginary *singularity*, understood in the quantum mathematical sense as a point whose significance is refracted in every vector of its environment by a diversity of relative interpretations: at once the same but always different (Kershaw 2011: 126-33). Awash with paradoxes, the living dying Last Mermaid was a spectacular minimalist example of less-is-more.

A particularly simple ambivalence was crucial to that potential. Perched between rudder and propeller, metaphorically caught in the wake of a pollution that could *actually* still be poisoning the actor, the performer/mermaid was also in reality set safely in the best spot for delivering the lament. At that point the acoustic of the dry dock had a remarkable cathedral-like quality, demanding a pitch-perfect response from the unaccompanied performers: a precise tuning-in to its environment. Yet that exacting in-betweenness also was a space of extreme political and environmental double binds – rooted in modernity – which created the conditions for an especially virulent state of exception.

Agamben describes how the law has come to produce an impossibly unethical ambivalence for humans through the figure of an “open door” to a city's, or any other, jurisdiction. He argues that an immigrant standing outside such open doors “... is delivered over to the potentiality of the law because law demands nothing of him and commands nothing other than its own openness.” That opening always already makes such a figure an exile *for* the city, because the law “applies to him in no longer applying, and holds him in its ban in abandoning him outside itself. The open door ... includes him in excluding him and excludes him in including him” (1998: 50). That is the full paradoxical force of the sovereign state of exception; currently, it exists for many millions besides the “illegal combatants” of Guantanamo Bay.

And it may be spreading everywhere through the increasingly *denied historical process* of ecological degradation in late-modernity (Washington and Cook 2011). This was the “open door” of the Last Mermaid's young performer's actual future. So the figment she performed also implicitly indicates the possible fate of her species: the mermaids' lament becoming an imminent epitaph for herself and, by extension, *Homo sapiens*.

I describe the scene's dramaturgy in these extreme terms as they indicate its paradoxical potential as a smallest unit of human performance. For at *any split second* in singing the song even the slightest vocal falter would imply an encroaching *permanent* stopping point—a death—if only of the theatrical kind. A momentarily broken voice implying a future totally

fractured. (cf Kershaw 2007: 93-700) And yet: *because* the dry dock acoustics were excellent and usually the performers sang with perfect pitch, often there was an achingly poignant note of hope in their voices. In the exceptionally challenged environment in which humanity currently survives, the singularity of that performance potentially was profound in its ramifications.

Being in Between a couple of human/gorilla primates.

Next comes a scene from *Being in Between*, a three-day performance event I initiated in Bristol Zoological Gardens, England, in 2005. It aimed for a part-improvised dance-like performance style that never mimicked the captive animals, but encouraged spontaneous interplay with them as they were gazed on by visitors, zookeepers and gardeners. The daily six-hour scenario included 15-20 minute sessions with various simian primates, including a group of African lowland gorillas. The two performers worked never deliberately to distract visitors' interest in the monkeys and apes. To achieve that, they usually positioned themselves, at least to begin with, in view of the animals but behind or alongside visitors standing close to their glass-fronted enclosures. They also wore simple costumes that created a spectrum of invisibility to high-visibility as people approached the enclosures: everyday casual clothing, zookeeper uniforms, bushranger khakis, "feral-human" body stockings. The primates responded to their movement sequences with an increasing synchronicity that attracted visitors' attention, so often they became oblivious to the performers (Kershaw 2012a).

The Gorilla House was exempt from this systemic invisibility as visitors were held back behind a rope cordon, with the performers between them and the animals' enclosure. The latter had trained to be alert to the gorillas' mood changes, avoiding eye contact and loud noises, so their movements were always slow, evenly paced, tentative, carefully executed gestures, traverses and poses. The three adult gorillas often watched these improvisations, sometimes shifting position to keep them in sight. In two of the three sessions one of the females stood upright against the glass screen to gaze at the humans performing, a stance unusual in these lowland creatures.

After twenty-minutes, the performers left the Gorilla House. Then, as the visitors moved outside, they slowly crossed the gorillas' island and sat down where two of them usually rested. For another fifteen minutes they simply gazed out at the crowd across the moat. Yet, this minimalist spectacle prompted a riot of visitor reactions: puzzlement, anger, amazement, amusement, fascination, and more. Bald questions were common: "What are they doing?" "Why are they there?" A couple made a one-upmanship joke:

HER: What would you rather have, gorillas or people wrapped in blankets?

HIM: I want gorillas wrapped in blankets. Always want my cake and eat it.

Two children of about four and six and years old created a short narrative:

GIRL: I can see a lady... Oh yes there they are. I can't see any gorilla.

BOY: I can see a goo. See, goo.

GIRL: Oh yea.

BOY: They have towels round them. (points at moat) They must have had a bath in there.

It was obvious that spectator perceptions were challenged, resulting in many spontaneous reactions. Could be because the scene also was awash with contradictions and paradoxes. Humans doing *nothing* spark a multiplicity of responses. Sitting on an island *standing* in for a habitat. Not *imitating* animals by becoming their surrogate.

So did the visitors' reactions express some *emergence* of the nonhuman in the human by means of performing? If this was a smallest unit of human performance, what exactly was its nature? How was its capacity to perform less-is-more relevant to any future ecological state of exception?

Again, answers must attend to immediate environmental conditions. Certainly this performance had to adapt to laws that determined the zoo's rules, particularly in gaining access to Gorilla Island. The Wellington boots and draped blankets were not costumes as such, but rather a shield quickly donned to reduce chances of the gorillas contracting human diseases. So their resemblance to disaster victims and refugees in camps was coincidental. However, the performers' sitting posture was modelled on that of the gorillas. In such mundane performative detail lies the relevance of the event to contemporary geopolitics and a polis shaped by ecologically tuned creative action.

Because, on one hand, the *gorillas* are subject to principles very similar to those applied at "detainee" centres or camps, such as Guantanamo Bay or a Soviet Gulag. Their "in the wild" existence is annexed to make bodies ultimately defined by a sovereign ban of the state. They are its biopolitical creatures. Living a "bare life" *doubled* by incarceration, non-human primates virulently included by exclusion. From this angle, the violent histories of human mistreatment of other-than-human primates were rehearsals for *Homo sapiens'* contemporary biopolitics. *But*, on the other hand, in recent years a singular justification for maintaining this zoo animals' state of exception is conservation of their bodies to guard against extinctions resulting largely from human degradation of Earth's biosphere. One profoundly paradoxical outcome follows from this. For the gorillas' "bare life" on "their" island may ensure—in total contrast to human states of exception according to Agamben—a singular effect. As an already endangered species, in principle they *cannot* legitimately be killed (or sacrificed) in the states of exception thus created by some twenty-first century zoos. In this specific sense, the gorillas at Bristol were "freer" than many, possibly millions, of humans. Maybe even, in light of Agamben's more general definitions of biopolitics, almost all of them.

This paradox begs the question of how such contrasting outcomes for these species—human and other-than-human primates—became a growing norm, perhaps to be routinely exposed only though the ambivalently oppressive conditions of contemporary zoos. Again, it is the performative details that matter most here. For the human performers on Gorilla Island, their appearance and apparent inaction was intensified by a total lack of information for visitors about the scene. Possibly also the zoo's permanent signs and information boards about the gorillas heightened that discursive isolation. So a simple ruse of performance triggered the extremely diverse visitor reactions. Namely, the creation of an *absolute gap* in the zoo's explanatory field confounds reception as it collapses difference between entropic noise (what's going on here?) and barely interpretable signals (they've had a bath!); and vice versa (Silver 2013: Ch 12). In effect, that models a temporary but unstable *subtraction* of politico-judicial forces for the humans, a more or less fleeting suspension of any general state of exception. As if there could be a *creative* possibility of random and unannounced

visitors being *welcomed* as witnesses at Guantanamo Bay and other such places of incarceration beyond legality. Perhaps.

There has to be a "perhaps" because such fantastic ambivalence implies an apparently *accidental* profundity, a chance at any point for something to appear out of nothing, and vice versa. A prospect that, somewhat riskily (to say the least), suggests a further thought experimental *aesthetic/artistic* analogue to some especially advanced scientific knowledge in physics. Put bluntly, could that human cultural/politico-juridical subtraction be said to have any legitimate likeness to the Higgs field, a quantum vacuum in the universe that may reinforce scientific speculation on the co-existence of multiple universes? (Atkins 2003: 265-66)

In the field of theatre studies this is a commonplace metaphor: think Shakespearean and/or Beckettian "worlds." But, given my invocation of such sophisticated quantum physics experimentation, a detailed working through to validate this *performance* analytical conjecture will have to wait for another occasion. Meanwhile, this brief and minor key preview of such a weighty prospect takes us back to my query regarding a polis of eco-environmentally attuned performance. Because the absence/lacuna/gap/subtraction/etc. performed on Bristol Zoological Gardens' Gorilla Island by the *Being in Between* artists implies a radical deconstruction of ancient dichotomies *and* identifications affective in the "bare lives" of humans and other animals. For Agamben, this is where states of exception reveal that "the law is not justice, but only the gate that leads to it." And so the condition of a state of exception can work beyond what he calls "this spectral figure of the law." That is to say, an opening whereby justice might be reinvented fundamentally. Thus, writes Agamben, anyone seeking justice needs must devise a strategy "to 'study' and deactivate [law] ... to 'play' with it" (2005: 64).

To play with the law-as-spectre means posing again the age-old question of what *Homo sapiens*' homogeny fundamentally constitutes. An animal but not-animal? A paradoxical primate who can create a profoundly ludic polis? If so, what had the performers happened upon on Gorilla Island by 'performing nothing'?

Let us extravagantly assume it was an active quasi-quantum vacuum, and that the scene emerged as aligning them *wholly* with the gorillas' state of exception, so neither kind of primate *could be legitimately killed*. Might then the outcome have been a compelling process of cross species identification primarily achieved through an atomically elementary less-is-more event? Like travelling at the speed of light?

A Meadow Meander

My final performance-as-research example appeared by serendipity in May 2011. It is a simple but unusual country path in an ordinary meadow located where two valleys join to form a microclimate in rural South West England. For years, this field had been close grazed continuously by sheep, but when allowed to grow it regenerated with a keen diversity of grasses and wild flowers, providing habitats and succour for a wide range of animal and insect species. I called the path a "meadow meander" because it was all twists and turns looping back and around to end up where it started. But, to begin with, I had no *plan* that it would mimic a major ecological feature of planet Earth. Its shape emerged simply from a springtime motor- and hand-mowing regime aimed to encourage the field's grassy growth

and, as far as possible, avoid damaging any creatures that might use it to make a living. From that perspective the joke is Kershaw was just messing about in a field. An irony faintly reflected in the name invented for the whole “performance conservation” project of encouraging the microclimate’s intrinsic diversity: Earthrise Repair Shop (ERS 2013).

Once the meander idea had occurred, I used fence stakes to mark out a grid based on the standard Mercator map projection of Earth. They made a scale guide for accurately mapping the ecological feature into the lengthening grass by very slowly treading its shape in the sward so that micro-creatures might avoid getting crushed. The path was readily accessible and its route easy to follow by the lay of the grass. However, by early summer its overall pattern was hidden at ground level by the height of its growth. Yet, if the global feature could be schematically outlined on the actual Earth’s surface one could see it without a telescope from the moon.

In summer/autumn of 2011, visits to ERS by about twenty artists, scholars, friends and family included try-outs of the first Mercator meander. Two or three knew what it represented in advance. The rest said no thanks when asked if they wanted to know because they liked a guessing game, but always they were told its “secret” afterwards. In July 2012, it was recreated for the 18th Performance Studies international conference and first LUDUS Arts Festival in Leeds, UK. The site was St George’s Field, for 120 years the main cemetery for the city: 93,000 people were buried there, but now it is a University-owned, landscaped space for contemplation (St George’s Field 2013). For four days the path was freely available to conference delegates and general public. Visitors were greeted by “meadow minders” who presented it as a puzzle path modelling a global ecosystem, the identity of which would be revealed as an “open secret” after they exited. About 250 people from a diverse demographic used it, with 20% providing feedback in permanent media.

Together the Leeds and ERS locations offer an instance of invariance—the Mercator grid and path pattern—plus diversity—clear timespace differences—which may serve as an experimental matrix for analysing the meander’s ecological dynamics. The constant for both was the *subtractive* qualities created by the invisibility of its shape. The “open secret” spoof introduced at Leeds reinforced that by giving exiting visitors a sealed envelope with information about its model and asking them to “spread the word” whilst never actually naming it, presented simply as a way of not spoiling future users’ enjoyment. The variants between sites were their obvious geographical and historical differences: urban ex-cemetery coded primarily as C20th “cultural-historic” amenity; rural topography shaped by many millennia, but over-coded by relatively recent field-and-woodland “countryside” conventions (Rackham 1990). So my research method relied on a relativistic invariant in an environment of distinct variables, key factors determining experimental set-ups in many scientific disciplines. (Crease 1993: 79-86)

That general analogy informs my final (micro) thought experiment, which focuses primarily on the organisation of *ephemeral and material performance vectors* at the two sites. For example: physically, the materiality of the meander’s continual curves and uneven surfaces – produced at ERS by shallow slopes, at Leeds by subsidence of graves – demands more or less frequent somatic adjustment to the pull of gravity (like a levelling roller-coaster ride); whilst perceptually the evanescent lacuna of the eco-feature it models invites multidimensional and unpredictable responses from its users (like runes on weather-worn

rocks). Yet, these and other vectors, of course, are partly conditioned by the meander users' experience/knowledge/imaginings of the paths' specific locations. My method for distinguishing those dynamics involves scanning the feedback materials—writings, images, recordings, etc.—for patterns of response in and between the reported reactions of individual meander visitors. Thus I invite readers to try out that associational approach on the following table of select writings prompted by the two meanders. What dynamic patterns of performance may be embedded in this rudimentary presentation of meadow meander musings?

Earthrise Repair Shop, Devon, 2011	St George's Field, Leeds, 2012
<p>1. He'd tried to work out where the continents were but quickly gave up; on his circuits alone he talked about the curves and sense of flying... about the steep turns and feelings of being pushed and pulled along as he travelled the route. He wanted to run it and set off at pace, leaping over [an obstacle] as if in a race.... He seemed to gain a sense of immersion, talking about the enormous energies of the system, wanting to experiment with the forces it produced in his body.</p> <p>2. I remember a motorway feeling. Running, rushing, gushing, around and around and around. I'm also walking-crawling very delicately and slow. The wonderful feeling that it's impossible to get lost. The infinite following along. There's also a sense of fragility of the whole thing. A sense that it needs care. And at the same time I have the urge to not follow the path, to make new ones, to destroy it all, to play in the meadow as a meadow disregarding the path-making that has been going on. I don't do this, but I'm tempted to trespass, to burst the boundaries.</p> <p>3. The maze pushes the focus outwards. It allows little introspection. The maze slopes and constantly challenges the body to shift its centre of gravity in response. The maze is somatic. The maze 'empties' the mind – by shaking the brain it opens up coagulated gaps, rendering them vulnerable to an outside that rushes in... The maze strips and rips the shape from the experience... refuse[s] to be employed for anything, avoid[s] signing up to convictions... plough[s] on without decision, enigmatic -- as if... things are gathering towards a spasm that never comes. Relax. Don't do it. I am not very affected by this. Except for this prosthesis that I have now got attached to me. Thrashing about,</p>	<p>1. Encountering/sensing a bounded system, individual elements ,, assume increasing importance as waymarkers (like the posts)... knowledge, understanding, familiarity, variety, complexity and diversity are more available ,, Can one trespass within a meadow, walking against the fall of the trodden grass feels to go against the grain... ? What keeps one on the beaten path? What must be destroyed to make [it]...? Memories of walking through fields of crops – some kind of minor crime, a small infraction against non-nature. The ecological— not just... that the part connects to the whole... [or] systems are mutually interdependent, but also... to become intimate with the part ... (like our 'local cluster' of galaxies within a cosmological perspective). A connection to the 'bigger' arising out of a practice of intimacy with the local.</p> <p>2. <u>Lines of flight</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sense of freeness - sensation of fish, flocking, streaming, flowing - recognition of a pattern but just marginally, unconsciously <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > no straight lines, play of length and curves > infinitesimal calculus, Leibniz ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - suspension of order, repose, regeneration - love - going beyond the field looking for relational emergence - felt intensity <p>3. A soothing experience. I got caught up in the flow and struggled to extract myself. The wind felt like it was blowing me along and at junctions I was caught in the cross stream. The metaphor... is visually experienced at the same time as the very simple connection with grass(es), I felt pulled back and forth between a</p>

<p>4. What is real? What is really there? How much time does imagination need to go through the body? What would it be like to be in the meander when there's a lot of snow? When there is actually water? Why am so stoic about the real, is this narrow imagination?... I sometimes feel brutally attached to the 'real'. Don't want no [meander] in the grass, want to eat the grass that's there. And I remain fascinated and drawn to further exploration of this meander. There is a place where I can find all the world's... to explore. Fit to my size. And there's someone who maintains and guards their presence in the grass. Who insists for the time being that some of the grass is lying and some of the grass is standing. Who cares for the pathways now and some day will let them go again.</p> <p>6. I began by walking ... at an even, brisk pace. Very quickly I was able to look around and began to notice rather large features that I had previously ignored: I was amazed to notice that there were power-lines hung across the meadow on tall poles. Through trees I glimpsed a building on a far horizon... it rained, the sun shone, the butterflies (meadow brown and cabbage white) retreated and reappeared according to the light, I trampled the grass that had been trampled, I followed the lie of the stalks... what had seemed enigmatic became a simple spectral flow... Only when I attempted to follow the circling of a buzzard while walking very slowly did I become giddy and stumbled. At one point, in response to the dip of the ground, my skeletal frame crunched, then realigned itself...</p>	<p>literal sensory experience and the urge to map the path onto... the soothing grass stems, onto waves and currents. An inspiring and provoking parallel mode of experience.... It also kept reminding me that I was performing (on/at) the landscape and it was performing me.</p> <p>4. The other man's grass? Was wondering if species diversification wasn't related to simply leaving land untended, or to the fact that perhaps grass manes have thrived on human re-mains on which I've walked over the tombstones just before reaching the meadow. Right now there's sun, rain, and an open envelope. Liquid secret and sky. Thank you for a moment of sensuous meditation.</p> <p>5. breeze . wind . pollen . fresh scent . damp . pause . reverse . trampled . green . pink . contemplative . relaxed . ecologies . reflection . white . dark clouds . drizzle . itch . moisture . tranquillity . stop . bodies . pause . breathe . 1-2-3 . pause . sensitivity . chirp . awareness . realization . perspective . reality . grass . pause . exit .</p> <p>6. I held myself back from lying down in the long meadow grass, so I wouldn't make new paths, but that was my desire – to stack my body on the bodies beneath – to relax, to rest, to enter the space of oblivion and laugh.</p>
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Comments on tension between feeling constrained or trapped yet secure and safe feature strongly in the feedback; likewise remarks about becoming immersed in its gnostic qualities or gaining various kinds of perspective on its "nature" figure frequently. These dualistic "forces" seem to be refracted severally as between, for example, past and present or historical and timeless or local and global or particular and general aspects of its natural features. Slippages or transitions or even collisions between awareness of self and other, between

somatic and cognitive processes, across spatial and temporal dimensions appear quite profuse. Binary shifts of different kinds that perhaps multiply diffusely to generate contradictory and sometimes paradoxical experience, as if the path were a labyrinth both of contemplation and disturbance, simultaneously holy retreat and Minotaur's lair. Maybe even some forms of heavenly bliss and hellish horror. Yet always accessibly open to interpretation in performing between ordinary knowns—grass, path, field, boundaries—and extraordinary latent unknowns.

So, the obvious simplicity of meadow meanders seems capable of generating an overall complexity of affect and effect that may be detected in visitor feedback as a kind of “soma-cognitively” generated ecological animation. As if the materiality *and* ephemerality of performance *per se* simultaneously infused engagement with the meander's ambivalence and somehow positively multiplied it. So that users potentially could experience both performing and *being performed by* the environment of path, meadow, field, earth, water, sky and perhaps even – however fragmentally and fleetingly – land, territory, region, continent, oceans and beyond: a patent, and possibly profound, ecological dynamic.

This expansive vector of meander “energetics” often seems to transpire from the secret or lacuna of its model, a puzzle or riddle or conundrum embedded in the unavoidable act of acquiescing to, or testing of, or simply forgetting about its simple “rules” of use. Becoming integral to an experiment in environmental exploration that, at least metaphorically, paradoxically knows no bounds.

Here, my experimental analysis slips into a quantum field conceit in hope of touching meaningfully on cosmic forces, if only by proxy of knowing analogy. Because the meander's precipitates *may* correspond imaginatively to the “phase transitions” of elementary physics, shifts at the sub-atomic scale as common as water turning into steam or ice, but also maybe newly setting up the “nature” of the universe, or universes. Enter the Higgs field/vacuum, where it takes the “big science” of extraordinary particle collision machines to distinguish brilliant lab technicians from extraordinary Nobel Prize winners (Jamieson 2013). Readers likely will be familiar with the scientific view that the cosmos contains an unchanging amount of energy (Atkins 2003: 97), but “add the Higgs field to the void and the overall energy is reduced” (Close 2009: 125). Because this super-void is highly active, as from it emerges the Higgs particle or boson that has the amazing capacity to add mass to a goodly range of other atomic entities, including particles W and Z which weigh in at 90 times heavier than a proton (Atkins 2003: 191). This is known because the latter were identified in 1983 by the CERN accelerator, near Geneva. But it took a power upgrade completed in 2012 to show that the mass-generating Higgs' bosons actually exist. The universal void is not empty after all, as those remarkable materialising particles conveniently (for humans) help balance out the energies of the universe.

My thought experimental analogy suggests, perhaps too simply, that the subtraction performed by the growth of a meadow meander's flora has some valence equivalent to the particle mechanism predicted by Higgs, and others (Higgs 2013). It suggests that the path's expansive potential may emerge from a “void”—or quasi-vacuum—produced by the ground-level invisibility of a route that goes nowhere to a latent “everywhere” opened for use by visitors. A ruse of performance like that produced by the primate human-simians on Gorilla Island, yet perhaps principally created through an ecological dynamics arising from routines

that energise *homo sapien*’s soma-cognitive immersion in spacetime? If so: “Might [this meander]... make some of the features – the forces – of the global ecosystem that it models materially transparent, palpable to human senses, doing for bodies what the Earthrise image from the Moon does for vision?” (Kershaw 2012: 16) Could such apparently simple phenomena then foster eco-systemic affordances that present an emergence of microcosmic-scale smallest-unit-of-human performance ecology actions? Well, maybe.

There has to be a “maybe,” as this transit into thought experimental territory speculates merely on exactly *how* such reflexive dynamics are refracted by the complex simplicities of a meander environment. The *why* of a unidirectional path in an ordinary wildflower meadow or cemetery field remains opaque. No more than an experiential *hypothesis* that turns out unexpectedly productive simply through assuming some “natural” lacuna or quasi-vacuum can *give way to* a mass of paradoxical binary dynamics. Because this analogical articulation of meanders to the Higgs field lacks the observable substance of homological descent, such as the five-digit link between bat’s wings and *homo sapiens*’ hands. So, they *may* share a frontier between unknowing and knowing how existence unfolds in appearances apparently from nothing... or the multiple universes of everything. But the frontier assumed might itself be more chimerical than chemical, more aesthetically fanciful than scientifically factual.

Yet, also the mechanisms of human reception depend, after all, on the mass-less protons that reach human eyes from distant stars, as well as our local Sun. We Earthly creatures of course are made up of atomic entities that contemporary particle physicists have conjured into becoming through experimentation. While as well—to make one final backwards-in-spacetime leap—key classical differences that were critical to an effectual Athenian polis may still have elemental relevance to forestalling any universal state of exception threatened by anthropogenic climate change.

To understand how that might work requires an uncanny grip on the impact of twenty-first century biopolitics as fundamental to its posthumanist nature. Agamben provides this in the finale of *Homo sacer* when he notes that:

Every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we *no longer know anything* of the classical distinction between *zoê* and *bios*, between private life and political existence, between man as simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city. (1998: 187, emphasis added)

This difference ensues from a distinction he makes in sentence two of that text, between *zoê*, defined as “the simple fact of living common to all living things,” and *bios*, defined as “the form of life or way of living proper to an individual or group” (1998: 1). The formulation fairly obviously echoes the etymology of ‘ecology’ in Ancient Greek distinctions between οἶκος (*oikos*, ‘household’) and λόγος (*logos*, ‘study’), which implies both “study of the house” and “study in the house” of nature. Clearly indicating that organisms – including humans – are *both* a part of and apart from environments, more or less consciously alert to themselves as agents in/for environments (Kershaw 2007: 16-17). It took the European Renaissance followed by Western Modernity to fully turn this paradoxical doubling into *common normative binaries*, as between culture and nature, male and female, conscious and unconscious, human and animal, and all the rest.

And on that hinges an *animal* tragedy for *homo sapiens* of stupendous proportions.

Because it is in the last of those binaries – between humanity and animality – where Agamben locates the nadir of humankind’s historical possibilities. As he writes in *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002):

What is man, if he is always the place – and, at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. (16)

Coda

My search for the smallest units of human performance has traced a route from stripped back theatre in which humans were the only animals, through restored ocean liner where humans pretended to be half animals and an island zoo on which humans did nothing to become surrogate animals, to path in a field where humans accidentally animated the invisibility of other animals. The animal banished, the animal disappearing, the animal usurped, the animal obliterated. Such acts of denial, the absolute refusal of the animal within and without individuals of *homo sapiens*, presented an assumed but utter right of humanity to do with other animals what they will. A polis of a human-made state of total exception for the animal other becomes the unassailable rule. The always already doomed animals performing as substituted figures in a divided universe where even atomic elements become playthings of human desire, and hubris. A *bios* of humanity that subjects the *zoê* of all else to an ultimate and inescapable state of exception, because *that* may now be *homo sapiens* final self-devised condition for the future. Wrought desperately in the simple image of a hopelessly vicious more-is-less and less-is-more Earthly spiral. Perhaps.

Perhaps again, but positively this time, because in the graveyard meadow meander field the artist-scholar who *resisted* stacking himself on the bodies beneath to enjoy a laugh of oblivion was perfectly matched by a second scholar-artist. The latter reported that he:

[...] lay down for a while in the wet grass. Microscopic view of raindrops on separate blades. Insects crawling on them and buzzing around (really tiny ones I’d never have noticed any other way). A sense of just ‘live and let live’, with the things around me—except of course I probably killed a few things just by standing up and making off again... (cf. Bottoms 2013)

But, of course, the meadow grown by humans *not* intervening in its natural state was habitat for countless other creatures still multiplying even as he left the meander. Letting go to a profound sense of just “live and let live” for all creatures great and small. Or not?

Acknowledgements

- 1) Parts of this essay have been published previously by Cambridge University Press, Manchester University Press, Palgrave Macmillan and Routledge (see Kershaw in reference list). I am grateful for permissions to reproduce extracts here.
- 2) The four events discussed involved far more creative individuals than there is space to thank properly here and of course of course I am deeply grateful to each and every one, but especially my co-directors John Marshall (*Iron Ship*) and Sandra Reeve (*Green Shade/Being in Between*).

- 3) Financial and in-kind support for productions gratefully received from: Arts and Humanities Research Council; University of Bristol; University of Leeds; ss Great Britain Project; Bristol Zoological Gardens.

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