



Terrain

Martin Healy

'Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it. It causes every merely calculating impotency upon it to turn into a destruction. This destruction may herald itself under the appearance of mastery and of progress in the form of the technical-scientific objectification of nature, but this mastery nonetheless remains an impotence of will.'

Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

TERRAIN, as rich a metaphor as can be, brings to mind all sorts of meanings. To find your terrain is, in many respects, to find where you feel most comfortable, most at ease in your surroundings. To move within a certain terrain is to move on ground that is recognisable, doesn't alter too much, and makes sense. But what does it mean to find your terrain as an artist? To find the ground you move on? While it might be apt to say that an artist should strive to make any sort of comfortable terrain a problem — to find one's terrain can also be an allusion to the refinement of a process, the distillation of ideas. To find one's terrain is to move along ground that is uneasy, at times terrifying, but which consolidates the truth of one's practice as an artist.

Terrain is Martin Healy's first solo exhibition in the city from which he hails. One might say that the city is Healy's terrain, a place where ideas of home, youth, earth, the stars and the sea resonate obliquely: becoming, in essence, metaphors for the space of our dwelling. Terrain is where earth and world meet. And yet, by calling the exhibition *Terrain* Healy is not simply invoking the personal, making reference to the way in which space becomes place, time becomes memory. He is also making reference to this public exhibition; this showing of work that is itself an exploration of terrain, of spaces that gather meaning, of earth that becomes world, and of methods of working that — in their many strands — coalesce as art. But art as we understand it today is, of course, many things and the artist who uses photography and film, like Healy, can often struggle to hold up their work against its surrogates in the form of television, mainstream cinema, YouTube, etc. From the perspective of Healy's development as an artist, comfortable in battling away the crude incursions of the culture industry, he has found — I temper to say — his terrain. It is in this sense that the centerpiece of *Terrain* as an exhibition, *Harvest*, a new fifteen-minute film installation shot in Dublin's Botanic Gardens, returns to the setting of *Facsimile*, one of Healy's earlier works, and sits, in the process, on this recognisable terra firma.

The terrain on which *Harvest* rests forms part of a greater ground of practice in contemporary art, a current or trend defined by the measured and considered use of moving image to build model environments from the hard stuff of the real. This is a current, if not necessarily a wave, of film that exists in the in-between world of documentary and art. In such films, real people (and in all Healy's films the protagonists are male) play themselves, without actually engaging in dialogue. They work in silence. This 'current' coaxes us into imagining who the person is, leads us to question why they are acting in the way they do, in a place that has no name. The unnamed place of *Harvest*, just one example, could be a botanic garden in a not-too-distant future, when the only cultivated plant life is that 'listened to' by man. There is an uncertainty, a rift that is integral to the work. Like the classic of this current, Ben Rivers' *Two Years at Sea*, the location brings an interminable, call it a daunting, pressure to bear: the sumptuous beauty of the landscape heralds, at the same time, a suspicion that the land has been exhausted of life, evacuated of its people. *Harvest* cultivates a similar sense of unease — the premonition of today's eco-political concerns Healy sources in early science fiction — around a point in time when plant life has become, among other things, a rare commodity; something to be fed and watered in the hope of revealing the essence of the natural world. These plants, once the terrain of the 'beautiful', might well be the end point of a ravaged earth, when climate change has reconfigured nature beyond all recognition.

This pressure manifests in others ways. Because these silent protagonists are not invented characters; they are not actors. The tasks they undertake to fit the conventions of a narrative are minor deviations of reality. Hence, it's not that Healy hires the protagonist of *Harvest* to attentively water the plants, while walking around *as if* doing his job. This is his job. The protagonist, like the protagonists of all the films in this current, shapes his space into a model environment that exists for the film; model environments which Ben Rivers calls a 'just for itself reality.'

The protagonist performs as himself in a model environment, intervenes in his own life, and in the process brings the discourse of performativity, ontology, to bear on the documentary process; the study of which is not necessarily new as far as studies of documentary go (Thomas Waugh has written a book on the topic). What is new about the terrain Healy's lens-based work moves through is the silence of his protagonists. The protagonist of *Harvest* simply listens, having built a technology to unearth the earth's imperceptible sounds, but he himself maintains a hesitant silence. He might believe there is something revelatory in the objects he cultivates (more than science would have us believe), that the earth can radiate its positivity in the form of sound. But his deliberately engaged movements, perhaps deadened by routine, are suspiciously ambiguous. There is a lurking suspicion the model environment is not the pastoral utopia it appears to be, when man and nature fuse in rapacious symbiosis — listening to one another — and that here is a last man trying desperately to reach an earth that has, in all senses, retreated in terminal illness; it is not pronounced dead but the body of the earth is kept artificially alive in hope of resurrection.

The relationship between man and nature, around the harmonic rhythms of the natural world, constitutes the main concern of the utopian pastoral; the challenging of which is the final characteristic of this current, otherwise conceived as the terrain Healy navigates as an artist. The protagonist of *Fugue*, the second film installation in this exhibition wanders through a forest, before perceiving on the horizon a majestic garden city. Once again, Healy invests a real location, Tapiola in Helsinki, with a pastoral utopian and, to some extent, sci-fi aesthetic. In the 19th century Pre-Raphaelite tradition the opposition between the city/country, rural/urban is put into relief, giving verse to a harmony of brief momentary synthesis: the pastoral utopian. *Fugue* operates according to similar aesthetic principles. As the silent protagonist moves from woods to the city, from rural to urban, a similar synthesis seems to have formed. However, as the film progresses, we are left uneasy as to the effect of this. There is something disconcerting about this perceived synthesis of earth and world. Silence begets skepticism. The utopian pastoral future the protagonist appears to awaken in, could just as easily be perceived as a world in which the primordial earth has been fully domesticated as a resource; shorn of its mystery and 'life.' If this is the case, we are left wondering if the gardens the protagonist gazes upon in *Fugue* are the same as those the protagonist of *Harvest* is labouring in? Are these films visions of a distant future, when climate change has reduced the earth to a commodity we must tend to, desperately seeking to connect with the mysterious part of ourselves we call nature?

There are those who look to art for confirmation of beliefs and truths. The film works that I assert Healy has made his terrain, along with artists like Ben Rivers, Ben Russell, and Lois Patiño, are unabashedly ambiguous; inspired perhaps by the quasi-documentary experiments of Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami, whose films Laura Mulvey suggested work according to a now famous 'uncertainty principle.'

The 'current' is marked by a similar uncertainty principle, call it a rift. This body of films, works of art, could be dealing with the earth's revenge on its domestication as 'world', when humanity's greed in trying to instrumentalise nature has, arguably, reduced the earth to a depleted resource. Or they could be an insight into a model environment at the end of history. There is an uncertainty. In Martin Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," a similar concern is brought to bear on Van Gogh's masterpiece *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), a painting Heidegger believed amplified the tension between earth as a source of meaning, and harvesting the earth as replenishing the world. For Heidegger, Van Gogh's painting manifested the vital rift between the earth considered as the wellspring of Being and the world as that which brings forward into being. The painting engenders an experience of what being in the shoes of a peasant toiling the 'earth' is like. That is, what it is like to world the earth.

Harvest, and *Fugue*, take this vital rift as a concern. But what gives *Harvest* its uncertainty principle — one particular to the 'current' of films I'm describing — is that the protagonist might be in harmony with an earth he is seeking to instrumentalise, or he might be a last man frantically seeking to reconnect with a lost nature. *Harvest* and *Fugue* make this uncertainty a vital aesthetic principle, using the documentary form to encourage thinking about the problems of the here and now (is this not an exemplary way of critiquing our current neoliberal endpoint/'utopia?'). It is for this reason the 'sound' reaching a sublime crescendo in *Harvest* is such an important moment of the film: it seems to bring the protagonist ear to ear, face to face, with the earth he wants to instrumentalise. Medea's cry — 'earth, speak to me' might well, at this moment, be met. But when the earth is mediated as a recording of sound, it is the 'impotence of will' Heidegger speaks of, when deploring humanity's attempts to reduce the earth to a mere resource, which is emphasised. This is indeed the paradox *Harvest* so eloquently reveals to us: the more humanity tries to instrumentalise nature, make it speak in a language we can understand, the more it loses touch with the essence of nature. The protagonist of *Harvest* is thus a cipher not just for man but humanity itself.

We thus come to *Terrain* as an exhibition about earth and world, art and truth when the politics of ecology and environment have never been more pressing. It is, therefore, not overambitious to claim that in this exhibition Healy offers something of a reply to a probing question posed by art theorist T.J. Demos: "if ecological imperatives are frequently invoked by governments, corporations and certain strands of environmental activism in the name of a post-political 'green' consensus for which nothing less than the life of the planet is at stake, how might critical art contribute?"¹

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¹ Demos, T.J. *Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology: An Introduction* in: Third Text 27: 1. Pp. 1.

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