



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 2/ Issue 1/June 2021

Ecocene Arts



The Earth Project

Esteban Pérez

Vancouver, BC, Canada
esteban02rafaperez@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-7369-4304

Pérez, Esteban. 2021. "The Earth Project." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 2, no. 1 (June): 102-08. <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.28>.

Artwork/ Received: 29.03.2021 /Accepted: 05.05.2021

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



The Earth Project

by Esteban Pérez



About the Artist

Esteban Pérez (b. 1992 in Quito, Ecuador) graduated from Emily Carr University of Arts + Design with an MFA degree in 2021. His work has been part of exhibitions such as: *Radical Reworlding* (AHVA Gallery UBC, 2021), *Triplete* (No Lugar, 2018), and *Premio Brasil* (Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, 2017), and in 2019 he had his first solo show *Transitory* (*Más Arte*, 2019). In 2020, he was the recipient of the Audain Travel Award in Vancouver. In the same year, he won the 2nd Place Award in RAW, an MFA online exhibition, organized by the University of Montana, USA. He was selected for the Premio Brasil—Arte Emergente (CAC), an award funded by the Brazilian embassy in Quito for the promotion of Emerging Artists.

The Earth Project

Esteban Pérez

Earth Project (2021), a performative, sculptural, and time-based artwork is informed by decolonization, the Western concept of property, and Andean Phenomenology. This last influence, an intricate ecological worldview from the Andes region, does not separate the material world from religious-spiritual dimensions. As an indigenous way of knowing and understanding of the world that delinks from individual subjectivity and the biological body, it strives to reach out toward the body of mountains, rivers, stones, and the Earth body of *Pachamama* or Mother Earth (Gómez-Barris 2017, 49). In other words, for Andean Phenomenology, nature is seen as an entity with subjectivity.

As an Ecuadorian artist studying in Canada, I am interested in the effects of nations and borders, and their restrictive methods for regulating human movement. Indeed, the designation of a “First World” country is rooted in a colonial matrix of racialized violence.¹ Particularly confounding are the inherited hierarchies that continue to haunt our daily lived experiences. For instance, why does the settler get to decide who enters its land? With *Earth Project*, I contemplate why a person with an Ecuadorian passport cannot freely travel throughout the world while a person from a First World nation holds a “stronger” passport or “possesses stronger credentials” that allow them to travel without any restrictions. My intention with this layered artwork is to challenge such roles and agency, seeing what happens when a person from the southern hemisphere takes on an extractive gaze. What insight might it suggest with regard to extracting from the land of opportunities? And could this be understood as a method for decolonizing the Earth. With this artwork, I sought to move beyond the extractive gaze by acknowledging the Earth as another collaborator or actant in my practice. I see this artistic approach as the opposite of the extractive gaze where land and nature are seen as commodities or objects that are exploited for the benefit of the settler nation’s interests.

The piece began with a simple gesture. To dig a hole in the earth, put the earth in a box and send it to Ecuador, my motherland. The project originated from feelings of anger and frustration when entering a new country, in this case Canada, and the requirement

for yet another visa. Coming from a developing country and therefore acutely aware of the complex meaning of borders, I recognized that I needed to ask for permission from the first habitants of these lands, the Musquem, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh Nations. That feeling of frustration shifted toward a sense of deference and respect.



Figure 1. *After the protocol*, 2019, Injekt print, 30x45cm. Photo by Rosalina Cerritos.

As someone new to Canada and learning about ethical protocols for making art, I discovered that in order to realize the *Earth Project* (2019, ongoing), I needed to ask permission of the First Nations peoples. A significant and challenging task, I connected with Aaron Nelson-Moody, a.k.a. “Splash,” who agreed to work with me. In this important step in the artistic process, I found immense gratification coupled with a strange reconnection and regrouping not only with the Earth but also to Andean Phenomenology, which gives Earth, water, minerals, land, soil, and air due respect as part of an integrated totality that must be taken care of by the human species (Gómez-Barris 2017, 48).

Working with Squamish protocols, “Splash” sang a song connecting us to the Earth and his ancestors. After the protocol, we proceeded with the collection of earth. We then carried the box full of earth through the forest and out into the city. I recognize the Earth as an element with agency in my work. This idea informed not only the collaboration

with *Splash* in the forest but also a related performative, sound-based sculpture called the *Earth Synthesizer* piece (see Fig. 5), where I sought to simply listen to the Earth.



Figure 2. *Digging a Hole in the Earth* (Still from Video) 2019, Performance, Video 3:46 min. Video by Rosalina Cerritos.

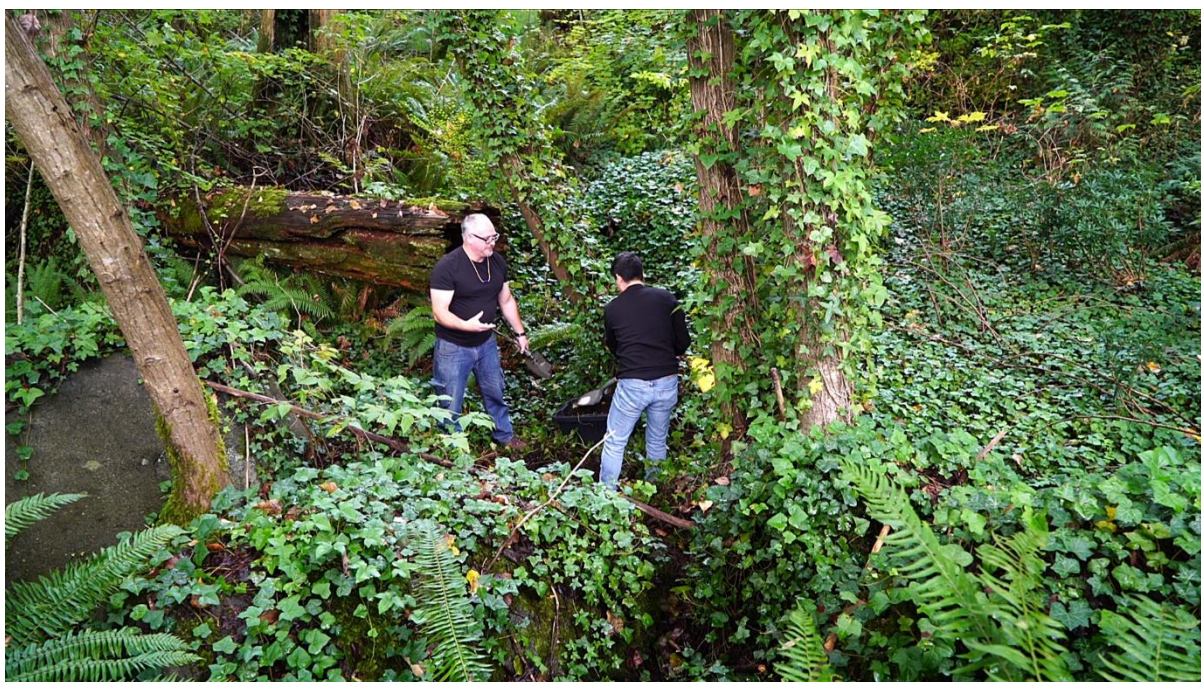


Figure 3. *Digging a Hole in the Earth* (Still from Video) 2019, Performance, Video 3:46 min. Video by Rosalina Cerritos.

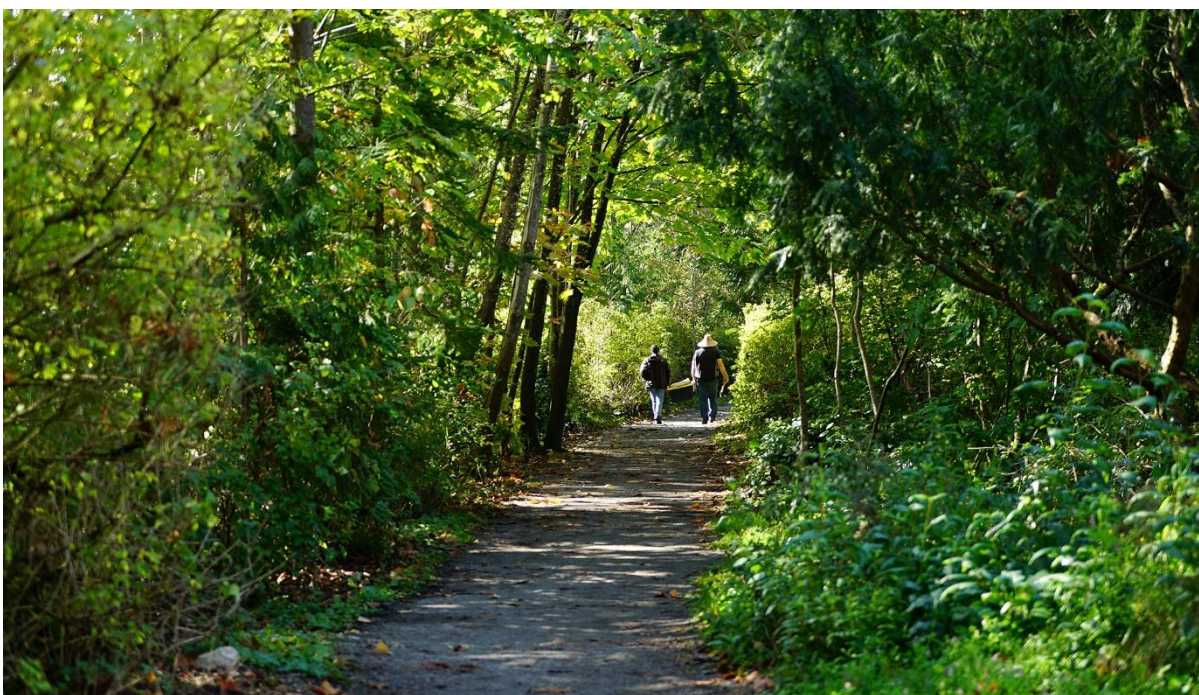


Figure 4. *Moving the Earth*, 2019 Injekt print 61x35cm. Photo by Rosalina Cerritos.



Figure 5. *Earth Synthesizer*, 2019. Sound Object/Installation.



Figure 6. *Artist Talk*, grunt gallery 2020. Talk and discussion on different ideas about earth and land.

The *Earth Project* (2019, ongoing) began with a curiosity towards borders and human movement that morphed into an engagement with a local indigenous artist and the land beneath our feet. Spending time in the forest with a Squamish artist allowed me to better understand the anthropocentric worldview that I inherited from my own colonized upbringing. I am a mestizx man from South America and that experience and upbringing has influenced the construction of my worldview. Because I come from Ecuador, a country with a considerable percentage of Indigenous population, I have always been exposed to Indigenous epistemologies. I learned through my own migration to Canada how indigenous values inform a deep sense of relationality and connection with the land that sustains us. Slowly, I am learning to decenter and deconstruct the privilege hierarchy that positions the human over the nonhuman. Land, plants, trees, or the more than human world do not answer to the social hierarchies of power that make an imaginary land division into Nation-states and property, even though the asymmetrical matrix of power that splits land is imaginary. The exclusion and oppression are real for the people on the other side of the benefit line.

The *Earth Project* (2019, ongoing) proposes other ways of perceiving nature as an attempt to decolonize our gaze towards the more-than-human world. Some of my most important encounters with other kinds of beings come on my walks through the forest and the beach shore. I move my attention to nature's subjectivity and to stop treating humans as exceptional or fundamentally separate from the rest of the world. It is important to develop a more robust relationship between human and nonhuman beings. For this, it is necessary to understand that nonhuman life-forms also represent the world. The first step toward understanding how nature represents itself is to discard or unlearn our ideas about what it means to represent something. In our current time it is urgent to stop portraying humans as separate from the worlds they represent, and to move towards a monistic worldview, where both human and nonhuman represent each other simultaneously.

Notes

¹ As defined during the Cold War, the term "first world" referred to a country that was aligned with the United States and other Western nations in opposition to the former Soviet Union and its allies. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this use of the term has largely evolved. More recently, the term "first world" has been used to describe a developed and industrialized country characterized by political stability, democracy, the rule of law, a capitalist economy, economic stability, and a high standard of living (Kenton 2019).

Performance: <https://vimeo.com/384156722>

Interview with Aaron Nelson-Moody: <https://soundcloud.com/esteban-perez-670580920/interview-with-aaron-nelson-moody-aka-splash>

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/user107389092>

Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/esteban-perez-670580920>

References

- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gómez-Barris, Macarena. 2017. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kenton, Will. 2019. "First World." *Investopedia*. Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/first-world.asp>.