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Giuseppe Penone's Earth Beings

1. *Tirakuna*

Marisol de la Cadena proposes to translate the Quechua word *tirakuna* as “earth beings” (De la Cadena 2015). *Tirakuna* is the plural of earth and accordingly, “earths” would be the literal translation. *Tirakuna* are for Andean societies what European colonialists considered *huacas*, that is idols and pagan fetishes. Assimilated by the Inca empire into a complex system of religious state ideology and architectural sites, and then subjected to centuries of Christian inculturation, these mountaintops and hillsides, lakes and trees, ridges and ravines, stones and springs are still approached by indigenous societies not as the ontological province of “natural resources” or “sacred things” but as bewildering entities.

In the rituals, narratives and struggles of Andean communities, earth beings still frighten and preannounce, protect and punish, deceive and heal, sharing emotions, feeling and expression with humans beyond the epistemic threshold of purely physical matter. As we learn from the work of Waskar Ari (2014), earth beings are also at the center of the “earth politics” of indigenous decolonial movements in Bolivia and other South American countries. Earth beings’ eccentric personhood and agency belong to ecopolitical modes of existence, they form odd earthscapes that defy the ethnographic categories of “traditional ecological knowledge” or “sacred ecologies.”

When they find their way in the world of jurisprudence, as in the 2010 Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth, earth beings are translated into “rights of nature,” they claim their inherent rights of existence and wellbeing, and accept duties and liabilities, constraints and lawfulness. Inscribed in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, and slowly spreading through court decisions and state laws in Colombia and New Zealand, Mexico and India, Spain and Guatemala, earth beings are giving birth to a vast body of Earth jurisprudence, a corpus of non-anthropocentric legal principles spanning continents and cultural geographies (<http://www.harmonywithnatureun.org/rightsOfNature/>).ⁱ

The question I wish to address is whether earth beings are exclusively a province of nature, a contextual and pre-modern relation with the environment, or whether they exist beyond Andean cosmo-visions and the categories of anthropology and jurisprudence. Are earth beings just fuzzy beings, since ecosystems are isomorphic with physical nature and we shall not multiply entities, generate chimeric objects, fetishize indigenous fetishes, and invent second, third and fourth natures?

2. Cosmic Vision

The tree, lost and consumed all emotional, formal and cultural meaning, appears to be a vital element in continuous expansion, proliferation and growth (Penone in Celant 1989, 30).

On the sidelines of major social conflicts, while the political history of 1968 was unfolding with struggles and occupations, the sculptor Giuseppe Penone searched for the ground zero of artistic signification in his native Piedmontese landscape, in a snowy winter of 1967-1968, making experimental pieces through minimal and unusual interventions with saplings and streams in a forest near Garessio, Cuneo—his series *Alpi Marittime* (Maritime Alps) (1968-1978).ⁱⁱ These intimate gestures—grasping the trunk of a young tree, lying down on the ground with his arms stretched, braiding and hugging trees, enclosing trunks in a spiral of copper wire—have come to be recognized as a turning point in twentieth-century art.



Now that half a century has passed, one can realize that these artistic actions disclosed an unprecedented “state of nature,” populated by enigmatic earth beings: a graft in the vegetal processes of growth and formation, a subjective poetics of the impersonal, a materialistic animism (Grenier 2004).

If art has a social function, it is that of indicating a change in reality [...] this artwork has a political value (Penone in Busine 2012, 16).

The photographic documentation of these interventions and subsequent works, accompanied by Penone’s reflections, is a privileged place to access earth beings. Whereas Penone claims the political value of a bodily relationship with the vegetal and mineral world, his casts, breaths, traces and imprints are mostly interpreted as a myth-inspired phenomenology of the body,ⁱⁱⁱ a nostalgic return to the artisanal dimension of the artwork and betrayal of the demystifying function of anti-art.^{iv}

In an age dominated by planetary doomsday ecologies that prescribe resilience and adaptation,^v I propose to return to Penone’s earth beings, to his “vegetal gestures” and his fossilizations of action. And to rediscover the political naturalism that accompanied the struggles of 1968, delinking from the Anthropocene and the world ecologies of the global environment.

Our culture has divided the ways of thinking, the human being from nature. I do not think we can make this clear distinction, there is a human matter and a matter called stone and wood, they produce cities, railways and roads, like riverbeds and mountains. From a cosmic point of view the difference between them is irrelevant. They are composed of small and big signs. They cut the forests down and there will be no oxygen, but it will be another gas, it does not change much: the oil produced through millennia is consumed and, in two-three hundred years, it will no longer exist (Penone in Celant 1989, 19).

It is important to distinguish Penone's “cosmic point of view” from the ways in which the planetary environment is apprehended as a unified ecosystem, characteristic of the cybernetic episteme of the Cold War. “Cosmic” is for Penone the geological and vegetal temporality, the

geopower that fluidifies matter, making even solid elements malleable, such as the river with the stone, or the plant with bronze. Penone defines this method of relationship with natural forces as a “pragmatism of matter,” which differs from the usual forms of human contact with the environment: destruction, conservation, adaptation, nostalgia, terror. In Penone’s work there are heterogeneous natural materials but not a systemic totality that organizes them. There are materials but not materiality.^{vi}

My work with trees [...] I did not do the work in a romantic or pietist sense, I did it as a simple action of sculpture [...] without drama or mythology (Penone in Celant 1989, 19).



Giovanni Anselmo, *Linea terra*, 1970



Pino Pascali, *1 mc di terra*, 1967

Since the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 and the 1966 photographs of the Earth taken from space, our relations with nature and ecological sensitivity have been channeled into planetary affective and cognitive modes (Höhler 2014). The apocalyptic fears of philosophers—such as Hanna Arendt’s and Martin Heidegger’s panic about the “loss of the Earth”—have not escaped the globalization of nature produced by the military colonization of space and planetary communication and transportation networks. It is in this context that Marshall McLuhan affirmed in 1974 that the birth of the ecological age coincides with the death of nature.

While ecological globalization was spreading, artists close to Penone refused to speak the language of environmental management and green capitalism (Luke 1997) and discovered relational, contingent and multidimensional environments. Giovanni Anselmo glued earth on

the wall to form a line parallel to the ground plane (*Linea terra*, 1970). “This ‘ground line’ is no longer the earth we walk on but the point where the earth connects in that moment with me, with my intervention, my energy, my considerations, and therefore stands high on the wall. It is earth + glue + wall + me +” (Anselmo, in Ciglia 2017). Pino Pascali’s *I mc di terra* (1967) enunciate the principles of a counter-geopoetic. In contrast to the spherical planet of one-world ecologies, Pascali exhibits an earth parallelepiped hanging on a wall. A tactile, fragile and perturbing earth being; an archaic totem but also an elementary nature ironically serialized in angular forms.

3. *Nature in General*

There is an underlying pragmatism in my work, which is based on action, the relationship of myself with matter (Penone in Busine 2012, 21).

Penone prefers patient contact with a tree and a stone to ecological systems. Sculpture is an obsessive exploration of processes of transformation of matter, indifferent to the ontological, ethical and political divisions between human and non-human, organic and inorganic, vital and inert. What is left behind is the “dominant tradition of ‘humanist’ materiality” (Pinkus 2009, 65), the cultural constraints of socialized matter, the enslavement of matter by ideological structures of meaning and reference.

The interest in the tree, in this form, is certainly an interest in nature in general, but it is not necessarily idealizing towards nature. I work following matter, using the possibilities of matter [...] If in my actions I can have a time that has the slowness of the growth of the tree, then a relationship will be created between the forms. And the tree will create the sculpture, it will create the imprint of my hand in the matter (Penone in Busine 2012, 20-21).

Penone’s “nature in general” should not be confused with the universal nature of general ecologies (Hörl 2017). In order to break away from the states of nature of globalized nature, Penone singularizes the relationship with things and de-humanizes the times and methods of sculptural action, to the point of allowing individual materials to produce the work, as observable in the bronze hand incorporated by the tree in *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* (It Will Continue to Grow Except at this Point) (1968-2003).



As the title of this work suggests, the gesture with which Penone clasps the trunk of the sapling anticipates a modification in a time to come. The photographic documentation of this apparently intimate and impolitic action announces the production of a future earth being. Penone replaces his hand with a steel cast, and later with a realistic bronze cast of his hand and lower arm. This concatenation of actions extends the horizon of production and reception of the piece, releasing a “time that has the slowness of tree growth.” The interrupted tree responds with a counter-action, “continuing to grow” but naturalizing itself in another way, because “in that point” Penone’s action has altered its lines of force.

We can now understand what “nature in general” means. The tree that wraps the hand is nature as much as a depleted agricultural land or a city asphyxiated by pollution; and nature is an environmental devastation and the metal prosthesis of Penone. Within this nature in general a multiplicity of connections between forms can occur, from which earth beings appear: interrupted trees that desperately continue to grow.

One of the problems of sculpture is contact, with the mere idea one cannot achieve it, you need the action. Action is transmitted through a contact (Penone in Celant 1989, 19).

Tactile experience and physical contact give the true dimension of things (Penone in Marks 2015).

In *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto*, the hand “sinks into the trunk of the tree,” the touch triggers the hallucination of an “unfolding of the skin in space” that for Penone is a

“vegetal gesture.” The body of the tree and the hand come into contact in heterogeneous but communicating areas: in the place and time of Penone’s gesture, in the imagination of the future growth of the tree—which makes it an “ideal fluid element ... the tree as a form to be traveled in the magma fluid of the wood, inch by inch” (Penone in Celant 1989, 19)—in the interruption of its growth operated by a metallic hand that repeats and prolongs the old gesture, in the counter-action of the tree on the sculpted hand. *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* is multiplied and diluted between immediate action and its documentation, sculpture and poetic imagination. The work marks a turning point. From now on, nature in general explodes in sequences of vegetal (*Gesti vegetali* 1982-; *Propagazioni* 1995), animal (*Pane alfabeto*, 1969) and mineral (*Essere fiume*, 1981-; *Anatomie* 1992-; *Idee di pietra* 2018-2018) encounters that trigger inversions, intensifications and delays.



There are the ricochets, the moments of shock, the friction ... a whole series of things that are very similar to what occurs in making sculpture (Penone in Marks 2015).

In *Essere fiume* (Being the River) (1981-), a boulder carved by the river and taken from a riverbed is placed side by side with another stone extracted by Penone from a slab of stone at the source of the river, and then sculpted to replicate the “natural” one. Earth beings emerge from these divergent temporalities and causalities, synthesized by Penone in a single assemblage. We are facing two rocks, one of which is the recapitulation of the other, as well as a single state of nature. Whereas in *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* we witness a vegetal germination of forms through inhuman timescales, in *Essere fiume* the work springs from an aggressively anthropic action: Penone’s chisel makes nature. The reversibility

of the river's causality shows the unity of sculptural action: geological-vegetal and human creation can be exchanged. The mimesis of natural processes has replaced the logic of representation.^{vii}

With tautology we escape the problem of representation. We approach other problems, which are those of magical evocation, not representation: matter is there, it has a value as such and represents itself... I have spoken of imprint in the sense of an image that is automatic, that is animal, that is not determined by culture (Penone in Busine 2012, 11-16).

Casting, impression, *frottage*, percussion, immersion, excavation—the Avant-garde repertoire of indexical techniques—are Penone's favorite methods to produce earth beings with plants and stones, bodies and clay. Sculpting is not about representing the object but rather bewildering it, extracting “the radical logic of its existence” (Penone in Busine 2012, 17). Penone follows the logic of the material, reducing the art process to an interplay of actions and specified matter. Earth beings emerge from contact images, they are a by-product of contact practices.^{viii} “Now, I think that art is something that changes the reality of the object” (Penone in Busine 2012, 17). Sculpture is a ritual of unexpected couplings,^{ix} a succession of actions, magic evocation that rediscovers the forces of presence (“It is absolutely not a transcendence, if anything the opposite is true”) (Penone in Busine 2012, 17).^x

4. Counter-nature



The mirrored contact lenses cover the iris and the pupil, wearing them I turn myself blind (Penone in Celant 1989, 58).

In *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (Reversing One's Eyes) (1970) a figure and a blurred landscape appear in the mirrored contact lenses placed on the artist's eyes, fixed and transmitted by photography "before the author has seen it" (Penone in Celant 1989, 58). The lenses act as a "point of division, of separation from what surrounds me" (Penone in Celant 1989, 58).

Duchamp shows the way: this counter-nature is an answer to the *Great Glass*, a crepuscular ready-made.^{xi} Penone's sculpture follows the same assumption: remaining faithful to materials and seconding the madness of their metamorphoses is possible only if one blocks the vision oriented toward cultural memory, neutralizing the symbolical and mythological dimensions of earth beings.

Your work with trees is almost the opposite of ready-mades. You start with the industrial object and with a process of re-naturalization, you return to the natural object ... How come the ready-made, the prefabricated, industrial object, has never interested you? ... Americans do not understand what you do (Buchloh in Busine 2012, 14-19).

To Benjamin Buchloh, an art critic used to the postminimalist aesthetics, the earth beings encountered by Penone are unintelligible. What does not fall within the parameters of ecosystemic planetarization, or its dialectical critique, is perceived as a nostalgic return to the artisanal world. Filiberto Menna, an art historian who has followed the development of Arte Povera, introduces us into the heart of the matter: "We give new shape to the state of things under the sign of nature" (Menna 1968, 196). Like Robert Smithson's Earthworks, for example the *Spiral Jetty* built in 1970 in the Great Salt Lake of Utah, Penone reactivates the presence of matter. And yet, unlike these imposing environmental interventions, carried out in the wilderness using industrial technologies and evoking the archaic rituals of state sovereignty (Taussig 1997), Penone affirms a symbolic autonomy from power and avoids avant-garde primitivism and engagement with technology.^{xii}

Duchamp's ready-made is a shift, but it is also an indication [...] I find Duchamp's reversal extraordinary, which is to say: "These materials, which are the product of man, become an almost natural matter" (Penone in Busine 2012, 13, 19).



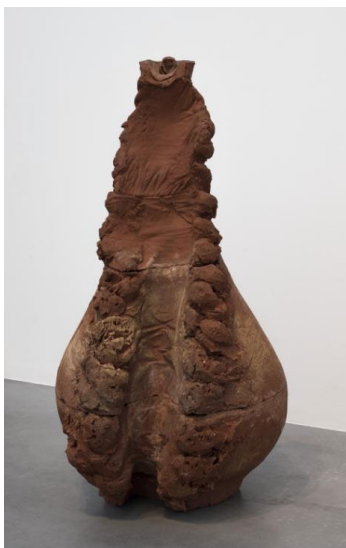
The exploration of the ecopolitical states of nature unlocked by the logic of ready-made does not only involve Penone but also other artists of the Arte Povera movement. In *Pietra alleggerita* (Lightened Stone) (1969) by Giovanni Anselmo, a rock hanging on a wall by means of a cable functions as a sensor of the relationships between perception, geophysical forces and imagination: "I bring the force of gravity back into play. A stone weighing about 75 kg. and hanging as high as possible, hooked with a steel cable to a wall. By a certain physical law, the stone, removed from the center of the earth, is imperceptibly lightened, and it is therefore to be thought that, transported higher up in a certain point of the universe, for example between the sun and the earth, it totally loses its weight and can perfectly identify with the idea of flight" (Anselmo 1971, 55).

Capturing the green of the forest. Following the green of the forest with gesture. Rubbing the green of the forest. Overlapping the green of the forest to the forest. Imagining the thickness of the green of the forest. Working with the splendor, the consistency of the green of the forest. Consuming the green of the forest against the forest. Repeating the forest with the green of the forest (Penone in Celant 1989, 130).

There is no nature for Penone to preserve or represent. There is a forest, the result of centuries of environmental disturbances. Penone disfigures it by working it, imagining it, consuming it, repeating it as in his series *Ripetere il bosco* (Repeating the Forest) (1980-2014). By rubbing the green leaves on the bark, the color of the forest is emancipated from historical memory and re-naturalized through a series of actions.

Fossilizing certain and possible gestures that have developed in a given space slows down their use and refers back to the space itself. This brings man closer to plants forced to live eternally under the weight of the “gestures” of their experience (Penone in Celant 1989, 127).

Two forces learned from the mineral and vegetal world guide Penone’s sculpture: *fossilization*—the organic turning into mineral, the solid becoming of the fluid and gasses, the stiffening of light elements, which thus acquire an extended duration—and *metamorphosis*—the grafting, mutation and hybridization of substances. Through these methods nature in general is revealed as a world-matter in which the exclusionary opposition between life and non-life, design and formlessness, velocity and slowness is not relevant.



So in the “breathes of clay” series, the contact of Penone’s breathing with his own body is solidified into large terracotta sculptures (Penone in Celant 1989, 90). And, in the “vegetal gestures” of the 1980s, anthropomorphic bronze models intertwined with plants produce a drama of growth and oxidation, contortion and rigidity.



When a forest is destroyed by man or by a natural catastrophe like a hurricane, a mass of trees and tree fragments appears to us, which retains its shape but tends to become timber due to human or natural causes (Penone in Celant 1989, 49).

In various works Penone finds the tree inside a beam, or the young plant in the felled tree, by searching inside the wood-memory of the plant, thus countering natural and industrial processes, reversing the effects of time and reactivating the past in the present. In *Cedro di Versaille* (Versailles Cedar) (2000-2003), Penone carves meticulously a young tree from inside a two centuries old cedar tree struck down by a storm in the park of Versailles. His sculptural action follows the internal structure of the plant and restitutes an earlier stage of life to a dead tree, revealing a virtuality concealed by the forces of growth and time. In this earth being, socialized matter defeats vegetal life, human technique collaborates with nature to undo its own entropic tendencies.

5. *Microphysics of Nature*



The books written in the matrix of iron wedges and embedded in the bark, are assimilated, transcribed and remembered by the trees, intermediaries between the author and the reader of the wood of forests, avenues, woods, gardens, parks, orchards ... (Penone in Celant 1989, 42).

In *Scrivo, legge, ricorda (Writes, reads, remembers)* (1969), Penone does not shy away from the violence that, like a shadow, accompanies the interactions between humans, the vegetal and the mineral world. He hammers an iron wedge inside the body of the tree, suggesting that the hard and geometric shape will generate a cultural and unnatural concatenation. Once again by contact, in this case after a ruthless gesture, we witness the translation of the technical-destructive modes of communication typical of human beings, to the distinctive biosemiosis of earth beings: the tree transcribes Penone's impetuous gesture, it endures by assimilating in its wounded trunk the letters carved on the iron wedge. According to its own laws of development, the tree "reads, writes and remembers"; it becomes a material memory, an intermediary between those who have produced his world and those who try to decipher it.



Giuseppe Penone, *I Have Interwoven Three Trees. Alpi Marittime (Maritime Alps)* (1968-1978)

The young trees intertwined in the forest of Garessio in 1968 are the inaugural auspices of the Penone's microphysics of nature. The extreme reduction of the cultural and semantic coordinates of this piece suspends both the art-historical succession of forms and the environmental end of nature. Penone stages an elementary theater of matter, a reluctant and fragile set of earth beings, a vegetal and mineral world that does not lead to a system. A state of nature that resists the management of the planet as an environmental resource. Stones, trunks, leaves, potatoes, earth, clay, bronze, iron, ropes, skin are situated in a nature in general that records and changes, witnesses and waits.

Bronze casting is an ancient art which has its roots in an animistic conception of reality. The similarities between bronze and plant-life are astonishing and must assuredly have had a great importance in the development of the technique of casting (Penone in Maraniello and Watkins, 2009, 258).

The technical convergence of bronze casting and plant-life discovered by Penone transforms his sculptures into earth beings. These works function as “zones in which critical thought, there raised to incandescence, is transformed into refoundational action” (Rémi Labrousse, *The End of the Neolithic*, in Basualdo 2018, 111). The “animistic” quality of these European *tirakuna* has nothing to share with avant-garde primitivism. What sets Penone's earth beings apart is their “presence effect”: meanings and interpretations are secondary to action and contact, as it happens in “presence cultures” that foreground materials and bodies, layered and heterogeneous spaces (Gumbrecht 2003, 80-). The result is a re-enchantment of minor technologies,^{xiii} the aesthetic and political autonomy of earth beings.

Earth beings take many forms, their present is the topology of metamorphosis. When European missionaries encountered *tirakuna* in South America, they were shocked at their heterogeneity: locals called *tirakuna* built structures and natural formations, associating shapes and forces, small plants and high mountain tops. The European episteme and the Catholic state of nature did not allow missionaries and colonial functionaries to sort out this apparent confusion. These people must have been “animist”, their odd natures “sacred” fetishes.

A few hundred years later, we can step back and commit ourselves to a radical deschooling. Penone's earth beings show that socio-natures can be culturally, politically, aesthetically and

scientifically odd, startling and recalcitrant; they resist inclusion by everyday perception and global environments. They appear at the intersection of human actions and do not belong to the Anthropocene. Instead, they question the cultural logic of neoliberal ecologies and allow us to “glimpse the emergence of another rationality not only opposed to social and economic injustice but reconnecting us with nature and reinventing what it means to be a human being” (Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Technology, the Body, and the Construction of the Commons*, in Luisetti, Pickles, Kaiser (2015, 211).

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Notes

- ⁱ One example: in 2019, the “Punjab and Haryana high court declared Sukhna Lake a ‘living entity’ or ‘legal person’ with rights, duties and liabilities of a living person, and all citizens of Chandigarh as *in loco parentis* to save the lake from extinction” (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/chandigarh/sukhna-lake-is-a-living-entity-with-rights-hc/story-Jrt8vKUy8kqIUwWaLpcYtM.html>).
- ⁱⁱ These pages on Penone are based on my essay *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto. Giuseppe Penone contronatura*, in Contarini and Milanesi (2019).
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Salvatore Settis, *Sculpting Time*, in Basualdo (2018) and Grenier (2004).
- ^{iv} "Benjamin Buchloh: But at the same time, isn't this a return to craftsmanship as opposed to industry? Because that was reactionary anyway! Giuseppe Penone: I don't know if artisan work can be considered reactionary ... Benjamin Buchloh: Is it in any case a return to the

authenticity of the hand or of the artisan process? Giuseppe Penone: No, that's not the idea" (Busine 2012, 24-25).

^v See Luisetti (2018).

^{vi} See Tim Ingold's distinction between materials and materiality (Ingold 2011, 19-32).

^{vii} On mimesis as an alternative aesthetic and anthropologic principle, see Taussig (2018).

^{viii} On contact see Didi-Huberman (2008).

^{ix} See *Potatoes* (1977) and *Alphabet Bread* (1969).

^x See Cimatti (2018, 130-136).

^{xi} See Cannamela (2019).

^{xii} On symbolic autonomy from power see Muraro (2009).

^{xiii} On re-enchantment as a radical political strategy, see Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Technology, the Body, and the Construction of the Commons*, in Luisetti, Pickles, Kaiser (2015, 202-215).