

Sounds dirty: earth/water/wind in Lindi Arbi's *Last One Standing*

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Maureen de Jager



LEFT: Lindi Arbi,
Casting of stairs used in
Last One Standing,
Polyurethane, 2010

ABOVE: Rachel Whiteread,
Untitled (Stairs),
Mixed media, 2001

RIGHT: Lindi Arbi,
Photograph taken during the
performance of *Last One Standing*



Frustrated by the bureaucracy impeding her South Korean residency, 2010 Spier Award winner Lindi Arbi threw her materials down the stairs. Picture it: 40kg of expanding polyurethane bubbling and puffing, filling out the negative spaces like an abject Rachel Whiteread (see, for instance, Whiteread's *Untitled (Stairs)*, 2001). Then she took this inverted staircase to the beach and wrapped it in plastic, for her altogether uncanny performance, *Last One Standing*. In the resulting video – a collaboration between Arbi and Korean film-maker, Junebum Park – we see Arbi and her assistants tethering and securing the ominous wrapped staircase. Some time later, the tide comes in and the parcel is adrift. Then the tide goes out and the parcel is beached in glutinous mud.



ABOVE: Lindi Arbi,
Photograph taken during the performance of *Last One Standing*
BELOW: Lindi Arbi, *Unearthed*, Polyurethane and soil, 2009



In the context of this colloquium, I introduce *Last One Standing* to reflect on the status of mud, matter and real dirt in a glib technocracy – the kind of dirt so dirty that it resists being sampled and streamlined into the synthetic. How does technology cope with excessive materiality, I ask, and what happens to the dirt on our hands, the dust in our eyes, when its matter is mediated and dematerialised? In short, how does experience shift when mess goes spectral? In response to these concerns, my investigation unpacks the relationship between Arbi's performance (as an embodied, corporeal engagement with the material world) and its afterlife as video (as a spectral projection distilled from 20 hours of footage).

What is immediately notable about *Last One Standing* is its exploration of materiality, and of the impact of nature as an unpredictable shaping force. As such, the work is not without precedent in Arbi's oeuvre. Arbi's entry to the 2010 Spier Contemporary, for which she was awarded the residency to South Korea, bears witness to a similar fascination with matter, process and excess. It began as a self-portrait cast over a 1960s shop mannequin, which was then buried twice: firstly, in a cumbersome block of flesh-like expanding polyurethane, from which it was partially excavated; and then, secondly, in a muddy grave on the outskirts of the Grahamstown New Cemetery at Waainek.

Together with a number of other works made for her Rhodes MFA submission, Arbi's self portrait lay interred in its grave for a full eighteen months, before being carefully exhumed. During this time, the earth had worked its way into crevices and cracks leaving an unlikely patina of dirt; in places, plant life had tentatively taken root. Besides engaging Arbi's predilection for processes beyond her control, the literal burial and unearthing of her MFA sculptures enacted a poignant narrative of personal loss, related to the sudden and unexpected loss of Arbi's husband in February 2000, and her ensuing loss (and redefinition) of self in the shift from wife to widow.

In *Last One Standing*, motifs of burial, excavation and loss resurface, although the catalyst here was Arbi's unearthing of a buried, repressed and hidden history surrounding the South Korean Gyeonggi Creation Centre (GCC) that housed her during her residency. As Arbi discovered, the site for the GCC – the Seongam buildings on Daebu Island – had once been an orphanage/prison where children were detained and brutally tortured.



ABOVE: Gyeonggi Creation Center, Daebu Island, South Korea (photo: Lindi Arbi)
CENTER: View from the GCC building across to mainland Korea (photo: Lindi Arbi)
RIGHT: The basement below the GCC studios (photo: Lindi Arbi)



According to the GCC website (http://gyeonggicreationcenter.org/GCC_Page/en/local/island/island_04.html), 'In 1941, when Imperial Japan was facing its demise, hundreds of vagrant children from around the nation were committed to this facility'. The children lived in fear of being drafted and 'sent out to the front line as human shields'; in the orphanage itself they were subjected to 'ruthless restrictions', 'inhumane labor' and 'starvation'. As a result, numerous inmates attempted to escape to the mainland by building rafts out of scraps or trying to swim, and countless children lost their lives in the process. 'When their bodies would wash up the shore,' says the website, 'the islanders buried them on the mountainside'.

Arbi elaborates:

Mainland Korea appears deceptively close when viewed from these buildings on Daebu Island. Children caught attempting to escape by swimming to the mainland were stripped of their clothing, thrown down the stairs leading to the basement and tortured. This torture took place in the same building where artists-in-residence now stay in freshly refurbished apartments and studios (interview with De Jager, 5 April 2011).

Ironically, says Arbi (interview with De Jager, 5 April 2011), GCC's disturbing history was uncovered – and reluctantly acknowledged – only after 'extensive "digging" by artists who were prompted by a pervasively dark and unhealthy atmosphere in the space'. Like many of her fellow artists-in-residence, Arbi experienced overwhelming bureaucratic 'negativity towards creativity at GCC, specifically concerning the history of Seongam'. When she began her residency in September 2010 there was no published information available on the history of GCC, and the website made no mention at all of Seongam's former status as an orphanage/prison facility.

Members of the GCC administration admitted to the Seongam buildings' past only after a group of artists confronted them with irrefutable proof, based on 'sensitively conducted private interviews with islanders and the discovery of photographic evidence'. And in April 2011, presumably in response to increasing pressure, the GCC amended their website to include the brief synopsis of Seongam's history referred to above. For Arbi, (interview with De Jager, 5 April 2011), it is 'a triumph of collective creative energy that GCC have published this information on their government-owned website'. 'Relative to my experience around making art at GCC,' she claims, 'they would have preferred not to acknowledge its existence'.



ABOVE: Lindi Arbi, Film still from *Last One Standing*

In light of the above, *Last One Standing* may be seen as itself an acknowledgement of existence; it pays homage to the unearthed history of Seongam's lost and disavowed orphans. Although, in the video, we never actually see the staircase sculpture unveiled from its plastic shroud, the cast made by Arbi and used in her performance is of the very staircase leading to the basement where foiled escapees were detained and tortured. The beach where Arbi's performance takes place is the same beach where the escapees' makeshift rafts would launch, and where the children's drowned bodies would sometimes wash ashore.



ABOVE: Lindi Arbi,
Photograph taken
during the
performance of
Last One Standing

RIGHT: Shiraga Kazuo,
Challenging Mud,
Performance, 1955



But *Last One Standing* also exemplifies the very process of wrestling with buried history, of dredging up the past through the sediment of repression, and of grappling with the reluctance of the keepers of history to ‘come clean’. In effect, it stages a struggle with unwieldy matter – death, loss, denial, a history forcibly kept under wraps (much like the staircase sculpture itself), the heft and weight of dirty secrets covered over and laid bare in the ebb and flow of a muddy sea.

As such, it seems apt that Arbi and her performers often found themselves stuck in the mud, quite literally, and at the mercy of a visceral, hostile and uncondusive environment. Although she had drafted a storyboard based on the history of Seongam, Arbi soon had to relinquish her status as director when ‘the environment took over this role’. Says Arbi (interview with De Jager, 5 April 2011), ‘The wind was howling, the temperature was zero, the mud was dangerous and it was impossible to communicate effectively’. Once ‘plunged into the performance’, Arbi and her performers were thus both conditioned and overwhelmed by the raw and unpredictable materiality of their context.

Arbi *et al*’s corporeal tussle with matter is a fitting metaphor for their struggle with an unwieldy history; and prompts a passing comparison with such early performances as Shiraga Kazuo’s *Challenging Mud*. Produced in 1955 under the auspices of the Japanese collective Gutai, *Challenging Mud* exemplifies Gutai’s ambition to ‘engage a radically physical relationship to the material world and the production of cultural work’ (LaBelle 2006:37). Lying in the centre of a thick pool of mud, Shiraga ‘wrestles against the material, caught in the viscosity of the mud, moving against its density: ‘What remains are pockets and impressions left in the mud’s surface as indexes of struggle or marks of physical expenditure’.

But the comparison between the two performances extends beyond this immediate similitude. Like *Last One Standing*, Shiraga's 'radically physical' engagement with matter endures, paradoxically, in a rather mediated and dematerialised form (in this case, as a series of photographs, many of which are available on the internet). To be specific, Shiraga's performance survives as a visual *representation* of the act of 'challenging mud' which – for all of its photographic fidelity to the properties of muddiness – is comparatively rather *clean*.

Similarly, Arbi and Park's video, despite its pervasive allusions to 'real' dirt, exists as a visually 'clean' recording of a distinctly messy performance. We can see that the terrain is muddy, the tethered sculpture is muddy, even the palette seems a dull, muddy grey. But because the performance was recorded in high definition, we can also (somewhat ironically) see these things very clearly – in incredible detail, and without the disturbance of wind in our eyes. In effect, we can see mess and its antithesis all at once, for the scene may be muddy but the picture is crystal clear.

In the case of both performances, the surviving records/documents/representations thus seem to present us with a markedly sanitised version of events, despite their ostensible fidelity to the 'real' material world. This paradox attests to the uncomfortable relationship between actual dirt and (the mechanics of) its representation, which is further underscored in a still image isolated from the incidental flow of *Last One Standing*: it shows the legs of a camera tripod, positioned in the muddy mise-en-scène, with plastic-bag 'socks' to protect it from the mire.



LEFT: Lindi Arbi,
Film still from *Last
One Standing*

In effect, the prophylactic measure of 'tripod socks' sums up technology's aversion to genuine dirt. It also alludes to the gap – the necessary buffer – between the means of making representations and the immediacy of unchecked mess. It mirrors the position of Shiraga's documenter who, for all of his eagerness to get in on the action, must nonetheless endeavour to keep the camera equipment aloft, at a slight remove from Shiraga's unfettered immersion.



LEFT: Lindi Arbi,
Photograph taken during
the performance of *Last
One Standing*

RIGHT: Shiraga Kazuo,
Challenging Mud,
Performance, 1955

BELOW:
Damien Hirst,
*Let's Eat Outdoors
Today*, Installation,
1990-1991



By extension, it may be argued that the recorded image – the visual representation – positions us, as viewers, at a similar remove: voyeuristically close to the action but not quite in it. Like Damien Hirst's notorious box of flies (a decidedly 'indoor' work titled *Let's Eat Outdoors Today*, 1990-1991), visual representations pretend to grant us access to the grittiness of real matter whilst sparing us the embarrassment of actually having to pluck flies from our hair. They make the material world seem incredibly close, *almost* immersive, and yet distant enough not to unsettle our perceived 'boundaries of singularity' (LaBelle 2006:245).

This is partly because, in the words of Brandon LaBelle (2006:230), 'the eye apprehends, through frontal perception, the world and its objects as sights to be registered within a total field of vision that is always out there, outside my own body'. So even when looking is self-conscious and self-reflexive, it still presupposes a

‘looking at’, where the subject of my gaze is outside me. If one follows the logic of LaBelle’s argument, visual perception assumes a screen between self and world, which visual representations of the material world simply work to reinforce. Given the fact of frontal perception, we look at the world as if behind glass – even and especially when the images of that world appear mimetically transparent, faithful to the real and complicit in ‘a narrative of immediacy’ (Reason 2006:77).

But if *Last One Standing* and *Challenging Mud* are similar in their ‘sanitised’ visual treatment of dirt, then they are also very different – not only in the sense that the former uses video rather than still images, but also, importantly, in that *Last One Standing* includes sound. Rather than being a benign accompaniment to the visuals, the sound seems to work at critical cross purposes. For the clarity of what we see is distinctly at odds with the deafening, distorted crackle that we hear: a ‘bad’ recording of the gusting wind which, for most of the video, drowns out almost everything else. In effect, the soundtrack captures the wind not as a sound but as a presence – as a series of waves which assault the recording equipment and then, in turn, assault our ears. Being a register of impact, this ‘dirty’ sound ruptures the sanitising screen of the synthetic: it reaches us materially.

For LaBelle (2006:230), the capacity of sound to violate borders is precisely what gives the acoustical an incisive edge: ‘the ear experiences, through an immersive “all around” perception, the world and its temporal aural movements as sounds to be understood within a total field of hearing that is immediately here and there, out and in my own body’. Whereas sights are always, to some extent, ‘out there’, sounds necessarily transgress the inside/outside divide: they are ‘vibrations between, through, and against bodies’ (LaBelle 2006:xv). They leak out of us, they leak into us. So where visual perception seems to maintain the integrity of the aloof seeing I/eye, the act of listening, in the words of LaBelle (2006:245), ‘breaks apart the shell of the subject, eases the borders of identity, and initiates an interdependence whereby one is constituted by the whole environmental horizon’.

Despite the dangers of oversimplification, LaBelle’s differentiation between seeing and listening is useful in understanding how these two components collide and collude in a video such as Arbi and Park’s *Last One Standing*. In its clarity, the visual recording provides a meaningful residue of the performance



ABOVE: Damien Hirst,
Let's Eat Outdoors Today (detail),
Installation, 1990-1991

and a rich, evocative screen for projection. And yet it is the sound, more so than the visuals, that approximates the hands-on, dirty matter of corporeal engagement – that escapes from the screen and registers ‘in the vibratory waves of tactile experience’ (LaBelle 2006:xv).

As a trace of its environment, the sound in *Last One Standing* is also a vital portal from now into then; from Grahamstown to South Korea. It resonates across timespans and continents. Being able to slip through the net of its own containment, recorded sound carries with it the weight and mass of history as intrinsically active, open and dynamic. For sound is always both a spatial and a social event: continuously shaped and reshaped by the materiality of contexts and the presence of other bodies.

In its elusiveness, sound is also boundless and enduring, quite possibly the ‘last one standing’ in a showdown with the visual. According to performance artist and writer Matthew Goulish (2000:63), ‘Marconi, inventor of the telegraph, came to believe at the end of his life that once a sound has been generated it doesn’t die, but simply grows fainter and fainter, and given a sensitive enough ear and the right place to listen, one could hear it forever’.

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