



QUEERING THE ANTHROPOCENE: HYDRO-INTIMACIES, ECOSEXUAL RITUAL, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF HUMAN–NATURE RELATIONS

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Abstract: Environmental performance art has shifted from monumental land interventions to relational, eco-queer practices. Through ecosexual rituals, Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle reimagine Earth as lover rather than mother, enacting queer ecological, posthuman, and new materialist theories. Their water-based performances model reciprocal, sensual, and ethical human–nature relations in the Anthropocene.

Environmental performance art—an interdisciplinary practice intertwining body, time, and place—has undergone a significant evolution from monumental land interventions to contemporary, collaborative, and ethical engagements with the more-than-human world. Emerging in the late 1960s alongside Land Art and the environmental movement, early practitioners sought alternatives to the commercial gallery system by working directly with expansive landscapes. Artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer used earth as their medium, producing massive, enduring interventions like *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and *Double Negative* (1969). Although these works invoked geological time and challenged conventional art contexts, their scale and reliance on industrial machinery often reproduced the extractive, colonial impulses they critiqued. As William Malpas observes, Land Art embodied “a paradox, both celebrating and conquering nature” (Malpas 112). In this phase, the human body functioned largely as an absent architect—an overseeing mind rather than an embedded presence.

A pivotal shift emerged in the 1970s as feminist, conceptual, and body art converged with ecological concerns. The focus moved from imposing forms on land to immersing the vulnerable human body within it. Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas Series* (1973–1980) exemplifies this transformation: by pressing her body into earth, mud, and foliage, she enacted rituals of belonging and ephemerality tied to displacement, gender, and spiritual reconnection with land. Joseph Beuys’ *7000 Oaks* (1982) expanded environmental performance into social practice through a mass tree-planting project that framed ecological repair as “social sculpture.” This period aligned closely with ecofeminist thought; Val Plumwood’s critique of the “rationalist duality of culture/nature” (Plumwood 41) illuminated how artists were challenging hierarchical separations by foregrounding bodily vulnerability as an index of environmental crisis.

In the 21st century, environmental performance art has become increasingly participatory, intersectional, and explicitly responsive to climate change and environmental injustice. Artists no longer solely represent ecological issues but enact speculative modes of care, resilience, and relational ethics. The *Ecosex* movement led by Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle reframes Earth not as a passive mother but as an active lover, proposing a relational paradigm grounded in pleasure, reciprocity, and responsibility through works like *Marriage to the Sea* (2008/2010). This queer ecological practice resonates with Grant Kester’s theory of “dialogical” art, which emphasizes collaborative processes over discrete objects (Kester 9). Other contemporary artists, including Tomaž Furlan and Rubenstein & de Soto, foreground communal labor and resource consumption, reflecting broader concerns about sustainability.

Indigenous artists such as Rebecca Belmore have further reshaped the field by foregrounding land as a sovereign, living entity. Their work links environmental degradation to colonial violence, challenging Western property regimes and centering Indigenous relational ethics. These contemporary developments are strengthened by posthumanism and new materialism, which decenter human agency and recognize the vibrancy of nonhuman forces (Bennett vii). Within the context of the Anthropocene, environmental performance becomes not merely critique but a form of collective rehearsal for more equitable, interdependent modes of living.

Across its trajectory, environmental performance art has shifted from monumental gestures to ethically grounded, socially engaged, and relational practices. Today's artists understand the body not simply as situated in the environment, but as environment—entangled within ecological, political, and social systems and participating in the urgent performance of living on a damaged planet.

Tracing the solo evolution of Beth Stephens reveals a coherent trajectory in which the artist consistently uses her body as a critical site for interrogating systems of power. Her work progresses from feminist and queer engagements with the socially constructed body, through explorations of techno-industrial entanglements, and ultimately toward an ecological praxis that reframes Earth itself as an expanded body. This arc demonstrates a logical deepening of her longstanding commitment to embodied critique.

Stephens' early work in the 1980s and early 1990s positions the body as a locus of political conflict. Influenced by feminist and queer theory, she drew from the legacy of Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta to interrogate how gendered bodies are socially regulated. Her durational and often transgressive performances made visible the disciplinary forces acting upon the female body. Amelia Jones' observation that 1970s body art used the body as a medium to critique patriarchal culture applies directly to Stephens' foundational methodology of "theory made flesh" (Jones 34). This emphasis on embodied experience as political tool established the analytical framework she would later extend to environmental issues.

By the mid-1990s, Stephens pivoted toward exploring the body's relationship with industry and technology. Works from this period expose the tensions between organic and mechanistic systems. *The Love of the God* (1996)—in which Stephens wrestles a 1950s John Deere tractor—functions as a potent metaphor for the violent, gendered, and unsustainable relationship between humans and industrial machinery. Stacy Alaimo's theorization of "material entanglement" between bodies and technologies illuminates this performance as an early environmental critique expressed through struggle (Alaimo 22). Similarly, *Virtual Love* (1998) engages digital and biotechnological culture, interrogating boundaries between natural and artificial environments. This phase marks Stephens' recognition that social oppression and environmental exploitation are entwined, echoing Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentric "hyperseparation" between humans and nature (Plumwood 41).

In the early 2000s, Stephens' work increasingly merges embodied critique with ecological consciousness, forming the philosophical basis for *Ecosex*. Her evolving praxis resonates with Donna Haraway's imperative to "make kin" with nonhuman beings as a strategy for planetary survival (Haraway 15). Through the *Love Art Laboratory* (begun 2005), Stephens began reframing the body-world relationship as one of intimacy rather than domination. Her transition from wrestling machines to marrying ecosystems signals a conceptual shift from resistance to relationality.

Stephens' mature environmental voice is particularly evident within the *Ecosex* framework, even as she maintains distinct solo concerns. *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* (2013)—deeply rooted in her Appalachian upbringing—mobilizes love as a counterforce to mountaintop removal mining. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," describing environmental harm unfolding gradually and invisibly, becomes viscerally legible through Stephens' personal narrative (Nixon 2). Her scholarly contributions, including work in *Queer Ecologies*, explicitly articulate *Ecosex* as part of a broader interrogation of naturalized heterosexual and human-nature binaries (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 5).

Stephens' career thus forms a coherent arc: from questioning patriarchal control over the body, to critiquing industrial control over human-earth relations, to ultimately reimagining the Earth as an expanded, beloved body. Her work constitutes an evolving praxis of embodied theory that culminates in a radical, queer ecological ethics.

The collaborative artistic praxis of Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle constitutes one of the most compelling intersections of contemporary art, environmental theory, and queer politics. Their early work with water ecosystems—specifically *Watering the Love Seeds* (2008) on the Dora River in Italy and the *Marriage to the Sea* ceremonies (2008/2010) performed in both the Mediterranean and the Sea of Cortez—marks a decisive shift in environmental performance. These works do not merely represent ecological concern; they enact a theoretical transformation in which Queer Ecology, Posthumanism, New Materialism, and Biopolitical critique converge into embodied, ritualized forms. In engaging polluted rivers and vast oceans as lovers, partners, and co-participants in artistic events, Stephens and Sprinkle stage a radical reframing of ecological ethics that is sensual, communal, and resolutely anti-anthropocentric.

The conceptual foundation of their practice is articulated in the *Ecosex Manifesto*, which proposes a shift from the metaphor of “Mother Earth” to that of “Lover Earth.” At first glance, this transition appears whimsical, even playful, but its philosophical implications are profound. The mother metaphor, ubiquitous in Western environmental discourse, casts the Earth as a nurturing, forgiving, and infinitely giving figure, often reinforcing a passive, feminized nature subordinated to human need. It sustains a dynamic in which human subjects—particularly those positioned within dominant patriarchal and colonial social structures—are entitled recipients of care rather than responsible agents within ecological systems. By contrast, to conceptualize Earth as lover is to invoke reciprocity and relationality; it demands attentiveness, desire, and a commitment to mutual flourishing. As the manifesto asserts, falling “fiercely, madly, and passionately” in love with the Earth carries an ethical weight distinct from filial affection. Lovers fight for one another in ways children often fail to fight for their mothers. This queer re-gendering and re-sexualization of the environment challenges entrenched heteronormative ecological narratives and becomes the entry point into the duo’s broader theoretical project.

Their performance *Watering the Love Seeds* provides an exemplary model of this intellectual and artistic shift. Staged along the Dora River, a site heavily affected by industrial toxicity, the artists did not invoke a romanticized image of nature but instead engaged a damaged ecological body. Adorned in wedding garments fashioned from recycled materials, they enacted rituals rooted in queer sensuality and communal care. They planted symbolic “love seeds,” blessed polluted waters, and invited public participants to join them in a vow of affection toward the river. This performance challenges conventional environmental activism, which often relies on strategies of moral urgency, scientific documentation, and appeals to untouched wilderness. Instead, Stephens and Sprinkle offer a reparative ethic grounded in desire, humor, and ritual—modes traditionally excluded from environmental discourse.

This project resonates deeply with the principles of Queer Ecology, a theoretical field articulated by scholars such as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. Queer Ecology interrogates the ways in which nature has been historically framed through heterosexual, reproductive, and patriarchal norms, arguing that such frameworks distort ecological understanding. As Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson note, queer ecological critique involves “interrogating the naturalization of heterosexuality and the heterosexing of nature” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 5). Stephens and Sprinkle operationalize this interrogation by appropriating the institution of marriage—a heteronormative, legally sanctioned ritual—and queering it into a multispecies union. José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification” is particularly useful for interpreting this strategy: marginalized subjects seize dominant cultural forms not merely to parody them, but to repurpose them for new political and relational imaginaries. The ecosexual wedding, in this context, becomes a site of disidentification, in which marriage is redeployed to recognize and sanctify the relationship between humans, rivers, and the broader community of life.

Furthermore, *Watering the Love Seeds* confronts what Rob Nixon terms “slow violence,” the gradual, often invisible harm produced by pollution and environmental degradation (Nixon 2). Slow violence is typically difficult to visualize or ritualize, yet Stephens and Sprinkle make it both legible and affectively potent. Their symbolic gestures of care do not “fix” the pollution, nor do they pretend to; instead, they frame remediation as an act of love rather than pure activism. Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality,” which emphasizes the constant exchange of material forces between human bodies and non-human environments, illuminates this dynamic. In Alaimo’s terms, bodies and ecologies are not discrete entities but permeable systems “interconnected, interchanges, and transits” (Alaimo 2). By vowing to love a polluted river, the artists acknowledge that they themselves are bodies composed largely of water, materially entangled with the river’s toxicity. The performance thus insists on a relational ethics in which the damaged is not abandoned but embraced.

If Watering the Love Seeds renders Queer Ecology tangible, the Marriage to the Sea ceremonies extend the duo's praxis into the realms of Posthumanism and New Materialism. These elaborate public weddings, performed with ornate costumes, officiants, witnesses, and vows, treat the sea not as a backdrop but as an agential presence. Wading into the ocean, exchanging rings, and inviting the public to join in vows of ecosexual love, Stephens and Sprinkle enact a performative redistribution of agency from humans to the more-than-human world. This resonates with Rosi Braidotti's articulation of posthuman subjectivity as a "non-unitary, multi-layered, dynamic subject" formed through entanglements with non-human others (Braidotti 49). By treating the sea as a marriage partner, the artists destabilize anthropocentric assumptions about agency, personhood, and relational obligation.

Moreover, their ceremonies engage Jane Bennett's New Materialist theory of "vibrant matter," which attributes vitality and quasi-agency to non-human entities (Bennett vii). In Bennett's formulation, matter is not inert but active, shaping human life as much as it is shaped by it. The sea exemplifies such vibrancy—its tides, currents, and material forces continually condition climate, geography, and human survival. The act of marrying the sea makes this vitality palpable; it is an embodied recognition of the ocean's dynamic power and a gesture of kin-making rooted in reciprocity rather than dominion. Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" further elucidates the performance, suggesting that entities do not pre-exist their relationships but are constituted through them. When Stephens and Sprinkle immerse their bodies in the sea, taste its salt, and speak vows into its waves, they enact an intra-active relational process in which human and oceanic identities co-emerge.

These ceremonies also operate as performative utterances in the sense articulated by J. L. Austin—speech acts that do not merely describe reality but create it. When the artists declare themselves "married" to the sea, they enact a world-making gesture that expands the category of kinship. Donna Haraway, in **Staying with the Trouble**, emphasizes the importance of "making kin" as a strategy for navigating ecological crisis, insisting that "it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas with" (Haraway 34). The ecosexual weddings are precisely such ideas: they generate new forms of relationality, new ethical commitments, and new communities bound not through blood or reproduction but through shared ecological interdependence. The wedding ritual, reimaged as a multispecies covenant, becomes an act of ecological imagination.

Underlying both Watering the Love Seeds and Marriage to the Sea is a critique of biopower—a concept Michel Foucault uses to describe the ways modern states regulate bodies and populations through discourses of health, sexuality, and life management (Foucault 140). Traditional environmentalism often reinforces biopolitical dynamics by framing nature as a resource requiring management and humans as rational actors responsible for stewardship. Stephens and Sprinkle reverse this dynamic by queering both sexuality and ecology. Their erotic engagement with the environment refuses the normative reproductive sexuality that biopower privileges and instead channels erotic energy toward multispecies flourishing. In doing so, they transform sexuality—a primary site of social regulation—into a tool of ecological resistance. Their praxis challenges both the disciplining of sexuality and the exploitation of nature, offering a counter-biopolitics grounded in pleasure, desire, and relational care.

Taken together, these early water works articulate an innovative ecological ethic in which theory is not merely referenced but enacted. The performances do not simply symbolize Queer Ecology or Posthumanism; they embody these theories in ritualized, participatory forms that make them accessible to broad audiences. By queering the institution of marriage, sanctifying polluted waters, and entering into reciprocal covenants with oceans, Stephens and Sprinkle demonstrate that ecological transformation requires more than data or policy. It requires a reimagining of desire, kinship, and erotic relationality. Their praxis insists that ecological sustainability cannot rest solely on fear, guilt, or scientific rationality; it must also be rooted in love, humor, erotic charge, and the joyful creation of new forms of relational life.

Through their hydro-affinities, Stephens and Sprinkle stage a profound theoretical argument: that the path toward ecological flourishing necessitates a radical reorientation of human subjectivity away from dominion and extraction and toward forms of intimacy grounded in reciprocity, pleasure, and mutual becoming. By transforming polluted rivers and vast oceans into lovers, collaborators, and kin, they model an ecological ethics that is sensual, performative,

The early ecosexual performances of Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle offer not only memorable images—wedding dresses in polluted rivers, seafoam as a kind of bridal veil—but also something more ambitious: a testable ethical proposition about how humans might reimagine their relationship to the planet. Their ecosexual praxis suggests a hypothesis that can be stated with surprising clarity: if humans begin relating to ecosystems not as exhausted mothers but as beloved partners, then our environmental ethics may shift from passive lamentation to active, passionate reciprocity. It is a hypothesis grounded in queer ecology, posthumanism, and new materialist theory, and it is enacted not on the page but through performances that merge humor, sincerity, eroticism, and ritual. In other words, Stephens and Sprinkle use wedding ceremonies as experimental apparatus—an unexpectedly effective laboratory for reconfiguring environmental ethics.

Their approach begins with a foundational conceptual swap: the replacement of “Mother Earth” with “Lover Earth.” Though it may seem like a minor metaphorical adjustment, it carries significant theoretical and emotional weight. The figure of Mother Earth, while nurturing, risks locking humans into a childlike posture—dependent, self-centered, and not especially accountable. Mothers are expected to forgive; lovers, by contrast, expect reciprocity. Treating the Earth as a lover implies responsibility, desire, and the mutual obligations that come with adult intimacy. It is a relational shift that resonates with Donna Haraway’s insistence that “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” (Haraway 12). Stephens and Sprinkle simply propose a very different story—one where saving the planet is less about scolding and more about seduction.

This reframing is put to the test in *Watering the Love Seeds* (2008), a wedding-like performance dedicated to the Dora River in Turin, a waterway so polluted that any romantic overture toward it might be considered either wildly hopeful or delightfully queer. Traditional environmentalism tends to approach damaged ecosystems as problems to be solved through cleanup initiatives or policy adjustments. Even in its empathetic forms, environmental discourse often casts polluted rivers as tragic victims. What it rarely does is fall in love with them. Borrowing from queer ecology’s insistence that nature has long been “heterosexed” through cultural narratives (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson), Stephens and Sprinkle treat the Dora not as a pitiful object but as an injured beloved whose wounds demand tenderness, not pity.

This queer ecological remediation operates through theatricality, camp, and ritual. The artists, dressed in wedding garments crafted from recycled materials, engage in vows and gestures of care that verge on the absurd—but it is precisely the absurdity that works. José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification helps explain this move. By appropriating the deeply normative form of the wedding, the artists simultaneously inhabit and subvert it, transforming it into a queer rite that validates a non-human partner (Muñoz). Through these gestures, the audience is nudged away from the emotionally distant frameworks often used to discuss pollution toward a more embodied relationality—what Stacy Alaimo describes as “trans-corporeality,” the recognition that human and non-human bodies are mutually entangled (Alaimo 2). Indeed, what better way to highlight this entanglement than promising eternal devotion to a river whose toxins, in some form, will inevitably circulate in our own bodies?

Underlying the humor is a serious proposition: such performative engagement can generate a more durable ethic of care than conventional environmental messaging. By framing the polluted river as a lover rather than a casualty, Stephens and Sprinkle challenge Rob Nixon’s notion of “slow violence”—the gradual, often invisible harm produced by environmental degradation (Nixon 2). Their wedding makes this violence visible, intimate, and emotionally charged. It is difficult to ignore the suffering of a lover once you have publically committed yourself to them, even if the commitment involved biodegradable confetti.

Their second major water-based intervention, *Marriage to the Sea* (2008/2010), extends the hypothesis from queer ecological remediation to posthumanist reconfiguration. Here, the artists literally marry the ocean in a performative ceremony complete with officiants, rings, and witnesses. While the gesture is humorous—saltwater as spouse raises obvious logistical complications—it is also a test of post humanist theory. Rosi Braidotti argues that posthuman subjectivity decouples agency from the strictly human domain, framing subjects as “non-unitary” beings enmeshed with the non-human world (Braidotti). By entering into a marital contract with the sea, Stephens and Sprinkle enact this decentring of the human in a way that participants can feel on their skin (often quite literally, as waves splash around wedding guests).

The ceremony also draws from Jane Bennett's new materialism, which posits the "vitality" of non-human matter—the idea that things possess trajectories and tendencies of their own (Bennett viii). The sea, of course, makes an especially convincing example of vibrant matter, especially when it decides mid-ceremony to knock over the bridal party with a rogue wave. In these moments, the ocean behaves as an unruly spouse with agency rather than a passive backdrop. The ritual thus becomes an exercise in Karen Barad's "intra-action," where beings become through their relationships rather than preexisting them (Barad 33). Stephens and Sprinkle do not merely declare the sea a partner; the ceremony is the mechanism through which that partnership is constituted.

Crucially, this marriage is not simply symbolic. Drawing from J. L. Austin's notion of performative utterances, the artists treat the ceremony as a genuine world-making act. Performing marriage with the sea invites participants to imagine it as a legal and moral subject, a move that anticipates real-world political shifts, such as the granting of personhood to the Whanganui River. Ritual becomes activism, desire becomes ethics, and a joke becomes a jurisprudential experiment.

The broader ecosexual hypothesis emerges from the fusion of these two pillars—queer ecological intimacy and posthumanist agency. If humans treat ecosystems as lovers, the theory suggests, they may be more likely to protect them passionately rather than perfunctorily. And if rituals can help communities perceive non-human entities as partners, such perceptual shifts may lay the groundwork for legal and political transformation. The hypothesis yields concrete predictions: participants in ecosexual ceremonies may engage in more environmental activism; audiences may become more comfortable attributing agency to non-human entities; and public support for ecological personhood may rise alongside the spread of the "Lover Earth" metaphor.

Ultimately, Stephens and Sprinkle's work is an experiment disguised as a wedding reception. Their performances suggest that ecological transformation need not be dour or moralizing—it can be playful, erotic, and even a little weird. In the era of the Anthropocene, perhaps the planet does not need another scolding lecture. Perhaps what it really needs is a good love story.

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