

DECAY – Autogamy

“At the center of standing, you observe some small movements. I call this the small dance. This seems to be a reflexive action, especially around the joints, to keep you upright even though you’re very relaxed. You could decide to fall.” -Steve Paxton, *Small Dance*

Most of the footage from Autogamy was shot as part of my daily forest-based movement practice engaged in during the first year of my project (2021-22). My time spent in the forest discovering improvisational relationship with place, memory, intensity, creativity and grief led me to stage several movement experiments, including a self-burial ritual. I filmed this in stages with the assistance of my now wife, Joanna Delves, who operated the camera when I was unable to do so. Both practice and the burying experience overlapped the production experience: for instance, the locations and more-than-human “collaborators” were often involved in my daily practice; meanwhile, the performance remained highly improvisational throughout. I planned, set up, and directed various shots and angles from the cold, muddy ground.

The initial (trial) burial experience took place in winter. Shortly after I made the following journal entry:

* 19/01/22 - BURIAL * Just emerged from of a hot bath after spending the afternoon lying in a puddle of mud and attempting to bury myself in front of the lens. A taste of shit and piss still lingers. My back stiff and my fingertips numb as I type these words. Joanna was wise enough to make me light a hot fire before we went out. Unlike my normal bath routine, I sat in the tub from the moment it began to fill, splashing what may have been scalding water on my face. Something here made me remember how my wrist in the puddle felt several times colder without the wet flap of sleeve that “protected” my arms. So much dirt in my eyes I had to yank my contacts out. They floated there in the bath with me. A little bit of time in cold mud feels like a lot of time. Clawing through the mulch and piling it on my face actually functioned as a kind of distraction. My body was already shivering uncontrollably. The fall itself, I can’t even remember. I’d blanked my mind. Was already that cold. Freezing before I hit the water. Trusting in the pillows buried there. Afterward, the barefoot scramble down the hill felt dreamlike. Trying to unbutton my shirt, the whole long way. Last two buttons I just had to pop. I ran naked up the stairs. Total desperation. Led

by the skin. Now I know what I only suspected before: to be buried in the cold cold ground is not pleasant. Shooting was cut short. A quarter of the planned shots scrapped. Had to get out.

We shot the burial 2 months later. Again, I journaled as soon as possible after the experience:

* 25/03/22 - BURIAL 2 * Warmer under the mud Colder coming out Stiff, legs stiff, difficult to stand. Need help getting up The stiffness - not accustomed to keeping a single part of the body perfectly still for so long, even lying down... there must be so many subconscious micro-adjustments and movements throughout the day. The mud teaches me this. Cast in mud, constrained. Mud in the eye made the entire experience many times more unbearable... once it was gone all was well Packed, the heaviness of the earth Watching the trees above (parallel vs perpendicular, horizontal and vertical), looking up like a child, the high trunks of grown-ups Floating leaves in the tub Mud and shit, the earth out here seeps with animal shit, bug shit, ground up insect bodies Walking barefoot through the forest was a piece of cake after. Like not feeling the scalding water, not feeling the stabbing stones Interesting how easy it was to breathe with a face covered in mud Gnats and flies, midges and bees passing overhead and swirling around my face, gotten used to The taste of mud. Places on the body where the mud seems to crawl. Places where you don't notice at all Can't get over the stiffness. Too still, unnaturally still What we call stillness is still a dance of micro movement.

Autogamy marks the peak of my experiments with grieving viscerally in the forest through extreme conditions. It did not necessarily generate the kind of outcomes I suspected it might, but it got things moving in a direction where Carrion Ecologies would take over. It let me mark my practice and its expression as a still predominantly anthropocentric form, allowed me to reflect and pivot. Autogamy now reads less as an act of burial than as a rehearsal for the decay of a practice still centred on the human body—a necessary exhaustion that made space for the non-anthropocentric processes that followed. The experience itself remains with me, however, and it did instigate in me a new and lasting sense of closeness to the forest and forest processes. Now that I'm under the earth, I remember thinking, what grasses, fungi, and flowers will grow? Who will eat the grass? When they die, what insects will decompose them and when their molecules sink again under the earth, will I be, in a way, reintroduced to myself?