

## **Being on the Beach** **Exploring Sensomotoric Awareness in a Landscape**

Grete Refsum and Ingunn Rimestad

### **Introduction**

This text is a retrospective reflection about of what may be understood as an artistically directed event of experiencing nature on a beach. It accounts for a collaborative, site-specific art experiment that was realized during the *Aesth/Ethics in Environmental Change* workshop on Hiddensee in May 2010. Initiated by the undersigned visual artist and dancer/choreographer, this particular event is one branch of a broader, ongoing artistic research project on presence and sensorimotor awareness related to nature and the environment.

Traditionally, visual artists have interpreted the world as they perceived it through form – basically in paintings and sculptures – while dancers and choreographers have been the producers of pleasurable entertainment, delivering gracious movements within performances. Today, in a world overflowing of goods and wastes, with an ecological crisis that reveals itself through climatic change, artistic expressions may take new directions.

The project *Being on the Beach* is an artistic response to the current situation. It builds on the notion that there is a need for culturally enhancing the respect for nature and changing our lifestyle. Two premises underlie the project: a) there is a connection between sensitivity towards the environment and the respect granted it; and b) body awareness and stable grounding are central in the individual's ability to adapt and change. The presupposition of the project is that increased sensorimotor awareness and improved grounding will help the individual to respond more respectfully and adequately to environmental challenges.

How can we become more grounded and bodily aware of what we feel, see, hear, smell, or even taste? The project applies artistic methods for exploring how we can perceive a landscape more intensely, choosing the beach as site. It aims at contributing to deepen the individual's self-understanding as a part of the environment.

A beach represents a border area. Physically, the beach is situated in between fluid water and firm land. Its area is unstable, oscillating in size according to the water levels. On the beach, slow geological processes are made visible; the perpetuate building up and breaking down of land unfolds comprehensibly. A beach receives and gives back – sediments and objects – from two sides: from the land to the water, and from the water onto the shore. Culturally, the beach is a space where many activities take place, spanning from the labourious to the leisurely. The beach can be a metaphor of life and a place for existential reflection. *Being on the Beach* therefore resonances several layers of meaning. In this particular context, the beach serves as a concrete landscape to experience, and a point of departure for approaching the conference theme of existential reflection on the environmental crisis.

The text firstly, presents the background of the project, its artistic context and the collaboration of the artists. Secondly, it accounts for the preparatory work of the event, analyzing a beach. Thirdly, it treats the planning and realization of the Hiddensee event and the responses to it. The paper rounds off by encircling the beach activity undertaken as art category, and its possible further developments.

## **Project Background**

### ***Artistic Context***

In contemporary visual art and modern dance the various artistic expressions reflect the time in which they were created. Since the 1960s on, many visual artists literally left the gallery spaces. They started to look for new sites and frameworks in ordinary and everyday spaces, including nature, in which they might discuss contemporary problems. Concurrently, they began to dematerialize and deaestheticize artworks as products. By doing this, art moved from being a noun and an object to becoming a process and an activity.<sup>i</sup> Some artists started to experiment with their bodies.<sup>ii</sup> Furthermore, the audience sometimes was invited into the art projects as participants.<sup>iii</sup> Personal body positions and various activities – so-called performances – thus became included in the concept of art.

The same development occurred within the field of modern dance. Dancers and choreographers began to work in new arenas and spaces. Also here, onlookers were invited into the actual performance. Thereby, the borders became blurred between an artwork made by professionals and the contribution of the audience.<sup>iv</sup> In these kinds of work, focus is on sharing, rather than showing off something that should be admired. The American dancer and body therapist Anna Halprin (1920-) invites participants to interpret for themselves, saying: “I don’t want spectators, I want witnesses who realize that we are dancing for a purpose to accomplish something in ourselves and in the world”.<sup>v</sup>

The *Being on the Beach* project builds upon and extends these artistic traditions of visual art and dance, being a practice and a process that aims at inducing new insights of who we are within ourselves, in our given world, and together with other people.

### ***Collaboration***

*Being on the Beach* is an interdisciplinary, collaborative project between the visual artist Grete Refsum and the dancer and choreographer Ingunn Rimestad.<sup>vi</sup> In her later work, the pioneer Swedish dancer and choreographer Birgit Åkesson (1908-2001) emphasized seeing as foundational in the work of a dancer. Dance should arise from seeing the reality as it reveals itself.<sup>vii</sup> Swedish-Norwegian philosopher Bengt Molander expresses the same idea in more general terms. According to him, attention or awareness in the moment of action constitutes the basis of how professionals work.<sup>viii</sup> This is what Refsum and Rimestad experienced, recognizing that their methodical way of working rested on the same basic factors of looking, being present in the moment and responding to the situation at hand. Their responses differed according to their training: Refsum reacts primarily with her hands, starting to construct something in space, while Rimestad starts moving, involving her whole body into some spatial structure. Together, they decided to join forces, starting to experiment with objects and body awareness, figure 1.<sup>ix</sup> The invitation to the conference on Hiddensee became a trigger to continue and extend this collaboration into a beach project that would involve the conference participants.



1 Workshop on body awareness using stones, Granavollen, Norway 2009 (photo: Anna Widén)

Beaches are rich in artistic references since many artists have worked on beaches and with beach motives. Refsum and Rimestad live close to the sea and are acquainted with beach areas since childhood. Both have individually worked site specifically in nature and related to the beach,<sup>x</sup> or water.<sup>xi</sup> Starting a joint project, we asked: what is a beach? What is there to see and to find? How does a beach affect us? We decided to go and have a look at a beach together: to be there and see what happened, trusting our different artistic methods and competences.

## Preparatory work

### *Eastern Quay*

We went to *Østre brygge*<sup>xii</sup> on *Brønnøya*<sup>xiii</sup> in Oslofjorden, Norway. The reason for choosing this particular beach was one of convenience: it is a communal beach nearby Refsum's cabin. Our foundational and repetitive question was: What catches our attention? We sought both outward experiences and inward responses, movements, associations, images and thoughts.<sup>xiv</sup>

Eastern Quay is a small beach edging the shallow fjord water and land. Arriving on a grey, week day in April, with somewhat misty weather and approximately 10 degrees Celsius with almost no wind, we had the beach to ourselves, figure 2.<sup>xv</sup>



2 Eastern Quay, entrance towards the South, Oslofjorden, Asker in Norway

On our day of visit, Eastern Quay offered a pleasant calmness, with the intense light of spring. As a start, we for a while stood upright, taking in the view of the sea and the bright daylight.



3 a and b. Eastern Quay towards West, Shallow water towards East

We closed our eyes and became aware of the air as moist and slightly cold against the skin of the face. Subtle sounds became audible. Gradually, focus shifted to our standing: how our feet met the ground. We stood on small stones, wearing hiking boots on a slanting ground. The uneven ground represented an unpredictable foundation that our bodies had to counterbalance into stability.

When opening the eyes, the landscape looked differently. Now, we actually started to *see* the beach and its environment, registering the strong light and the directions of the beach, its width and breadth. At this stage, we started to document by taking photos (4).



4a and b. Directions along the coastline and perpendicular to the water

We recognized different zones of materials and the tide line. Close to the sea, there are small stones, further away from the water, there are: sand, pebbles, shells, pieces of wood and vegetation, transitioning into the woodland (5).





5a and b. Zones of materials



5c and d. Shell sediments defining the upper tide level, detail

Next, we started to pick objects of interest. Geologically, Eastern Quay consists of eroded Ordovician limestone rocks, more than 400 million years old, the pebbles of which often take peculiar, longitudinal shapes (6).<sup>xvi</sup>



6. Ordovician limestone pebbles

Knowing this added a conceptual dimension to the experience of being right where we were. The mind was tuned into geological time and evolution, which from the human perspective, opens into eternity and awe.<sup>xvii</sup> At this stage, we felt that we had gained the information we needed. This is the way artists work; they use and trustfully follow their senses in what to do and how to act, until they feel satisfied.

### ***Summing up***

In general, a concrete experience on a chosen spot results from the interplay between the person present and the environmental factors. A person encounters an environment bodily and mentally, clothed more or less for the conditions and with the luggage of her/his life: previous experiences, thoughts, emotions, sensitivity, and moods. The environmental conditions are characterized by its natural conditions in combination with: season, time of day, weather, wildlife, vegetation and cultural aspects.

Our beach visit was in spring, out of the bathing season. We were clothed for the weather and just followed our impulses, simply standing upright, closing and opening our eyes. From this modest activity, we experienced how the process of becoming bodily grounded, while shutting out vision, made us more receptive to the reality around us. When we opened our eyes, we were able to relate more deeply to the place.

This is the methodological framework we brought with us to Hiddensee.

### **Hiddensee**

#### ***The Beach***

The Hiddensee island lies as a narrow shield, protecting the German mainland towards the Baltic Sea. Here, the environment is in visible flux, the island diminishes and grows on different sides as sand perpetually is washed away in one place and sedimented in another. Its Northern coastline is protected from deliberately being washed into the sea by a barrier of huge, black stone blocks (7).



7. Protecting stone blocks

Our proposed task was to organize an art event on a local beach that involved the conference participants. We chose to work on the beach area that lay next to the biological station where the conference was held. Convenience and accessibility were again decisive for the choice. Small pathways led down to the sea through narrow openings in the vegetation (8).





8. Entrance to the beach, Northern Hiddensee, 25 May 2010

Obviously, there is a risk of exposing oneself to the seemingly endlessness of the ocean and the void of the sky. Working on sensomotoric awareness in such an environment may reveal strong emotions, ranging from fragility to robustness. On our first day of arrival, the natural forces were dramatic with hard wind and showers of rain, orchestrated by the thundering sound of breaking waves onto the shore. It was challenging to encounter these surroundings. Documentation by photographing was out of the question. Our immediate response in this environment was that we needed time to adapt.

The task of a dancer is to keep contact with and balance between several spaces: the inner personal space, the space of the scenic character to be performed, the performance's space, and the space of the outer surroundings. The challenge is continuously to coordinate these spatial layers, articulating them through body work. Essential is the dialogue with the air, its temperature and humidity, how it is breathed, transpired into the lungs, and expired. The dancer has to meet and balance that which is given with what is made out of it by choice, spontaneously or controlled.<sup>xviii</sup>

We had two days for preparing the art event. Fortunately, the weather improved on the second day. Still, we had to wear all the clothes we had to keep warm: double clothing with rain costume on top. Such a dressing does something to the bodily experience; it would have been different wearing a bikini on a hot day (9).



9. On the beach, well dressed

We now were able to ask: what catches our attention? The sensation of the air was predominant. The wind and the waves sent powerful impulses that were perceived as different aspects of energy, expressed in sound, pressure, and visual images. We could tactilely feel the air by the wind, hear it as sound, and watch the effect of its force on the waving sea surface, and the flat grass and creeping bushes on land.

Our first impulse was to stand up against the wind, facing the sea. Then we spontaneously let the body respond. Summing up, we:

- Stood against the wind
- Leaned onto the wind forces
- Let the wind move the body
- Moved efficiently in dialogue with the wind
- Found our way through the wind's resistance

Various body directions in space were addressed:

- Facing the sea
- Turning the back on the sea
- Standing sideways, in two directions
- Facing the ground
- Facing the sky

These responses were intertwined with different body positions, eyes open and eyes closed:

- walking
- standing
- shifting from side to side
- rotating
- bending down
- sitting
- rolling over



- lying

We noticed that when we turned our backs to the sea, the sound became more striking, even when the eyes were open. In this position, the movements of the swaying grass caught interest: its degree of toughness and resilience, mobility and availability. The question arose: can our bodies tune into similar qualities?<sup>xix</sup> Our standing then became essential, and the attention moved to the feet on the ground and to the arms hanging. The effect of the gravity and the wind became dominants to be explored. To balance the wind pressure and finding stability on the ground was a challenge. Wet sand is hard and one can easily find support for standing. Dry sand, however, represents an unpredictable ground.

Having grounded ourselves, we were able to distinguish different materials on the sloping beach ground: sand, stones, shells, grass, and wastes. In the dry sand, marks of footprints left an ornamental structure that caught the attention of the eyes (10).



10. Sand marked with footprints

We now recognized stones, pebbles and flints, and started to collect interesting pieces, make patterns, and build structures (11).



11 Pattern making

Next, the beach in itself came into focus. We found openings in the breakwater, with small bays (12).



12 Opening in the stone breakwater; small bays

Three zones and their transition areas became clearly distinguishable: vegetation/sand, sand/shells or stones, shells or stones/sea, each offered different micro locations of ground, stones or shells, and wastes of various kinds, natural and artificial (13).



13 Zones and transition area; vegetation/sand





Figure 13b c The meeting between water and land in a bay

In the bays, zones of concentrated materials created clear structures (14).



14a-b. Longitudinal and perpendicular directions with zones

Looking more closely, we found waste materials and remnants of fish and birds, figure 15.



Figure 15a-b. Details: Shells, pebbles, sea weed, waste, with the tide border

### ***Plan of Event***

After having exposed ourselves to the beach, we entered into a reflective conversation with the situation about how to structure a possible event.<sup>xx</sup> We agreed on the following structure and that Rimstad should lead and instruct the group:

1. Walking together in silence down to the beach, approximately 200 meters.

2. First stop: the transition area between grassland and sand.
3. Choose a partner: walk in couples to the nearby bay, one leading, the other with eyes closed.
4. Arriving in the bay area: find a spatial position, face the sea, close the eyes.
5. Stand, balance and listen outwardly with closed eyes.
6. Open the eyes: what catches your attention?
7. Turn towards the landscape, with the back to the sea. Position the body, stand for a while with eyes closed.
8. Open the eyes: what catches your attention in this direction?
9. Go and collect eleven objects.
10. Return with your findings.
11. New task: walk somewhere, decide a place to stop, stand still and leave one object. Repeat this pattern until all objects are given back to the beach, then return.
12. Find a place to stand along the bay, face the ocean, eyes closed.
13. Open the eyes, find your partner, shift the role of seeing, and walk back to start.
14. At the transition area between grassland and sand, everyone opens their eyes, and the event ends.

### ***The Event***

The realization of the event took place in the evening on the second day of the conference. A group of approximately 30 persons wished to participate.

1. The group needed time to adapt to the first instruction of walking in silence.
2. Arriving at the beach, we saw that the bay we had planned to go to was occupied by a playing family. We instantly shifted to another bay further away, which made the walk a little longer.
3. People walked at different speed, most of them quicker than anticipated, Rimestad kept contact in front of the group, Refsum lagged behind, figure 16.



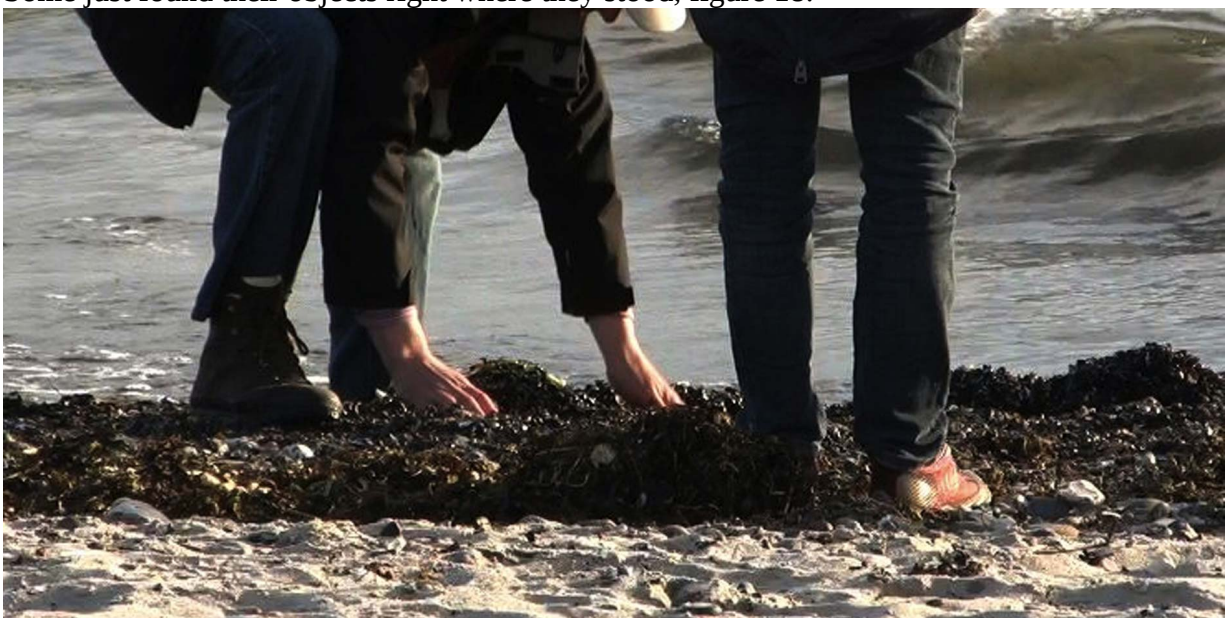
16. Entering the beach and walking in couples, one seeing, one with closed eyes (videostill, Sigurd Bergmann)



4. Surprisingly, people placed themselves further away from the water than planned, on a contour line close to the grassland.
5. The group reacted differently to the challenge of standing still with eyes closed. Some seemed comfortable in the situation, others uneasy.
6. After the eyes were opened and the awareness of the attention was established, the group had to be moved closer to the sea. People were invited to come to the contour line defining the bay.
7. Standing with their backs to the sea, eyes closed, the participants appeared more at ease.
8. Now, the group seemed comfortable with the event structure.
9. When the new task of picking objects was given, people eagerly went off (17).



17. People going off to pick objects on the beach (videostill, Sigurd Bergmann)  
Some just found their objects right where they stood, figure 18.



18. Picking objects at the shore (videostill, Sigurd Bergmann)

10. Returning, the group gradually and spontaneously formed a circle. While the early returners waited for the others to arrive, they were asked to share their catches with each other. Holding the objects in their hands, this exchange became lively: the collection comprised everything that possibly was on that beach, ranging from objects of beauty to remains of fish and rubbish. People talked quietly, exchanging delights, ideas, and findings.
11. The instruction to return the objects to the beach was carried out most differently (19).



19. Example of findings returned (videostill, Sigurd Bergmann)

- Some walked further off and spent much more time than others. At this stage, the participants seemed to have established personal spaces in which they acted.
12. The process of gathering the group became time consuming, because now the participants operated within individual time. When returning, the participants positioned themselves with clear distance to each other, randomly shaping a curve paralleling the bay.<sup>xxi</sup> The wind hampered the communication in such a big group. The instructions, therefore, had to be communicated individually: “face the sea, eyes closed”. Those who returned early had to stand for quite a long time (20).





20. The group facing the sea, eyes closed (videostill, Sigurd Bergmann)

A few left after some time.

13. When the group was gathered, standing with eyes closed, the final instruction was given. The partners quickly found each other and walked back to start. The quality of the return radiated focus and calmness. Those attending seemed more grounded and present in the situation than in the beginning.

14. The event ended in the transition area between grassland and sand by a short: “Thank you!”. Surprisingly, half the group remained. Small clusters of people stayed, some in silence, some talking quietly, everyone just *being* there, figure 16+.

### ***Participants’ Responses***

We got several oral and three written responses to the event.<sup>xxii</sup> One respondent comments (no. 1): “As we walked in silence a certain tension that builds up by talking, was released. Pleasant the silence. And yet we were still sharing something together with this special group, but now in silence and perhaps we were sharing something deeper that we cannot reach in talkmode”.

Concerning the returning of the collected objects (no. 11), some were quite reluctant to do so, but due to opposite reasons. One had sought the most beautiful objects that had become a personal treasure. Another had selected rubbish in order to clean the beach and would absolutely not return it.

Of those who withdrew early (no. 12), one experienced increasing fatigue as the final sequence lasted. Another could not bear to look at the black, stone breakwater. It came to represent a scary metaphor of the formerly in-walled Eastern Europe, figure.

One written response is most detailed in describing the experience of the event as a whole. The instruction to walk slowly calmed the respondent down and made this person more sensitive to the environment. Likewise, closing the eyes made the respondent more aware of the grounding of the feet and the sounds of the sea. This respondent also noticed how the sounds changed

along the beach while walking. The experience of standing with closed eyes revealed a new experience of the sea. Both the grounding in the sand, the smell of the sea and the light of the sun are noticed. When opening the eyes, it was registered that the waves and the light made a new and different bodily impact. The practice of finding and replacing objects was enjoyed, and something this person was used to do when out in nature. To be led and then to lead the partner back was also appreciated. This response ends by saying: "it was a beautiful experience that sensitized me to this beach and to my body and awareness on that beach".

Another respondent writes: "The exercise slowed me down, it made me present and open. I felt more life streaming through and out of me".

### **Rounding Off**

Art project hardly reaches conclusions. *Being on the Beach* exemplifies a contemporary art work that is interdisciplinary, collaborative, and participatory, aiming at contributing to improve community and individual life. The work blends elements from: performance, land art, ritual, environmental study, and just taking a walk on the beach. It represents an example of relational art in which art may be a social experiment and a state of encounter.<sup>xxiii</sup> The main focus in *Being on the Beach* was to organize an opportunity to explore personal sensation in nature.<sup>xxiv</sup> From beginning to the end, the work was experimental. By structuring the process of the event through this retrospective analysis, the understanding of what actually happened becomes clarified; extending to our personal theory of practice, and knowledge.<sup>xxv</sup> Theorized and set in context as in this text, we hold that such a work can be defined within the scope of artistic research.<sup>xxvi</sup>

*Being on the Beach* is a work that operates on a scale, ranging from simplicity to complexity. Within the set framework on the beach, we hoped to find a way of concretizing the individual's encounter with nature on two levels, both as personal and as shared. The beach is a restricted place in the world, like our body is a restricted volume in space. These outer restrictions make it possible to concentrate the attention on separate elements: tactility through air and wind, sound through water and waves, light from heaven and sun, our foundation related to recognizable qualities: sand, pebbles, stones, shells, grass, and wastes. It is essential to the work that everyone participating is creative and needed for the event to happen. Each one of us is individual and outstanding in her/his own way, and together. We wish to stress that the participants are key and make the difference. This nears the event to ritual and liturgy, which was mentioned in the oral responses.<sup>xxvii</sup> On future occasions, it would be interesting to collaborate with theologians and explore the possibilities of communal actions.

By inducing personal experiential knowledge of our body in relation to a landscape, *Being on the Beach* hopefully may contribute to produce meaning by creating continuity and connections between inner and outer life. Standing firmly on the ground, being in the present, we may be better equipped for moving into the uncertain future.



<sup>i</sup> Kwon.

<sup>ii</sup> One example is the American visual artist Bruce Naumann (1941-). In the late 1960s, he started to experiment with his body, documenting the projects in video and photo, see: [http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi\\$artistdetail?NAUMANB](http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi$artistdetail?NAUMANB). Complete works see: <http://www.pkmgallery.com/artists/bruce-nauman/biography/>

<sup>iii</sup> The American Japanese visual artist Yoko Ono's (1933-) *Cut Piece* from 1965, has become iconic, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2IggYiaywU> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zfe2qhI5Ix4>

<sup>iv</sup> In the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukele's *Maintenance Art* from 1973 on, she washed the stairs outside a gallery. Some people watching her in work actually started to help, giving her a hand, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJ9GW1FZz1g>

<sup>v</sup> Halprin, 249. Cf. <http://www.annahalprin.org/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Dance performances are by their very nature interdisciplinary. Choreographers work not only with dancers, but also with composers, musicians, costume and lightening designers, scenographers, technicians and others. In this case however, the interdisciplinarity is on the conceptual level, not only the performative.

<sup>vii</sup> Åkesson, 54. This attitude seems quite similar to the ideas of the American painter Agnes Martin (1912-2004).

<sup>viii</sup> Molander, 119.

<sup>ix</sup> The workshop *Body Awareness and Objects* was part of *Verksted på Vollen* (English: Workshop in the Fields) 26-29 March 2009 at Granavollen, Norway, see: <http://www.verkstedpavollen.no/>. This work was continued in Iceland at the conference *Religion and Politics of the Body*, The Nordic Society for Philosophy of Religion (NSPR), Reykjavik, June 26-28 2009.

[http://www.verkstedpavollen.no/pdf/2009%20Reykjavik\\_Refsum\\_Rimestad.pdf](http://www.verkstedpavollen.no/pdf/2009%20Reykjavik_Refsum_Rimestad.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> See Refsum's contribution to the World Beach Project:

[http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/textiles/lawty/world\\_beach/map\\_gallery/index.php?section=2&postIndex=530](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/textiles/lawty/world_beach/map_gallery/index.php?section=2&postIndex=530)

<sup>xi</sup> See Rimestad as Water Queen in the performance *Juv* by Dansdesign, Norway 2006:

<http://dansdesign.com/blog/Gallery/index.html>

<sup>xii</sup> "Østre brygge" means Eastern Quay in English.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Brønnøya" means Well Island in English.

<sup>xiv</sup> This approach is inspired by traditions of body movement and sensory awareness established in Europe and the US in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Adler, Brooks).

<sup>xv</sup> If nothing else is said, the photos are taken by the authors.

<sup>xvi</sup> Additionally, Eastern Quay is rich in rhombic porphyry pebbles in a great variety that stem from later, local volcanic activity, some 250 million years ago. The geology of the Oslo Graben, see online:

<http://www.mantleplumes.org/Norway.html>.

<sup>xvii</sup> The cultural history was not considered.

<sup>xviii</sup> Eriksen, 77.

<sup>xix</sup> This is one of the principles taught in the Chinese *Tai Chi* practices to which both Refsum and Rimestad are acquainted.

<sup>xx</sup> Schön, 93.

<sup>xxi</sup> This is a natural grouping, a positioning of non-contact, or at *personal distance*, according to the term of the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall (Hall, plate 4).

<sup>xxii</sup> The event was documented by video. To some this was disturbing, and we promised not to publish any material that may identify the participants without explicitly getting personal permission to do so.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Bourriaud, 18.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Although the artistic expression of the event may seem foreign, the preparation of the event builds on traditional qualities of art as expressed by the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952): "For art is a selection of what is significant" (Dewey, 216).

<sup>xxv</sup> Jarvis, 145.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Refsum, 17-19.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Macmurray.