

Maria Rebecca Ballestra: Absence Between Nature and Human Being in *Echoes of the Void*

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Abstract Maria Rebecca Ballestra (1974-2020) was an Italian artist whose work focused on ecology, climate change, and the Anthropocene. In *Echoes of the Void* (2015-20), one of her latest projects, the absence of humans is central: photographs of the world's largest deserts convey a sense of emptiness and highlight Nature's persistence. The work challenges conventional perceptions of deserts as empty, isolated spaces, instead presenting them as sites that disorient, test, and accompany the individual. This paper examines how her work explores the dynamics between Nature and Humanity.

Keywords Deserts. Absence. Human-nature relationship. Ecology. Climate change.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Silence, Emptiness, and the Desert's Significance. – 3 Echoes of the Void: From Sonora to Gobi. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This paper examines the path that leads Rebecca Ballestra to her engagement with the desert, a space that emerges as both a tangible and conceptual starting point in her artistic practice. Central to this analysis are the themes of void and absence, which in Ballestra's work are not merely spatial conditions but critical metaphors for the fragile balance between natural ecosystems and anthropic intervention. The desert – conceived as a locus of emptiness and temporality – emerges

as a privileged site for questioning the dynamics of human domination over nature. Here, the notion of time interacts with environmental transformation, revealing the profound interdependence between ecological processes and socio-economic forces. Through this lens, Ballestra's practice interrogates the disappearance of the desert and its substitution with artificial landscapes. It exposes the tensions between presence and erasure, permanence and change, that underpin contemporary debates on sustainability and territorial exploitation.

2 Silence, Emptiness, and the Desert's Significance

Appartiene veramente al suo tempo, è veramente contemporaneo colui che non coincide perfettamente con esso né si adegua alle sue pretese ed è perciò, in questo senso, inattuale; ma, proprio per questo, proprio attraverso questo scarto e questo anacronismo, egli è capace più degli altri di percepire e afferrare il suo tempo.

(Giorgio Agamben, *Cos'è il contemporaneo*, 2008)

As this notion of the 'untimely' figure, proposed by Agamben, suggests, distance from one's own time can enhance its perception. In this spirit, Maria Rebecca Ballestra (1974-2020) used her travels, site-specific installations, and environmental works to engage in a profound dialogue with nature, memory, and cultural identities, offering the audience a more intense and aware perception of present-day issues, from the environmental crisis to the human-nature relationship.¹

Among her most significant works, *Journey into Fragility* (2012-15) is an artistic twelve-stage intervention. The project explores the relationship between humanity and nature, drawing on the key principles of the *Carta di Arenzano per la terra e per l'uomo* – a manifesto written by Massimo Morasso² to foster dialogue on the environmental crisis and the value of life on Earth. It unfolds across twelve stages in Ghana, Switzerland, Madagascar, the United Arab Emirates, China, Singapore, Costa Rica, Wales, Iceland, France,

¹ Most of the references come from unpublished material by the artist, donated for study to the Archivio di Arte Contemporanea (AdAC) of the University of Genoa by Gianni Renosi, the artist's husband, to whom I extend my gratitude for his dedication, attention to detail, and support throughout the research process.

² Massimo Morasso (1964) is an Italian theorist, poet, and literary critic. In 2001, he wrote the *Charter for the Earth and for Humanity*, an environmental ethics document consisting of 12 key points, which was also endorsed by several Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize.

Brazil, and, at last, Nowhere, a place without any geographical coordinates and borders.³

One of the most remarkable works of Maria Rebecca Ballestra for the purposes of this paper is *Time to Leave*; a project developed in Iceland on glacial retreat and melting, a crucial issue for the future of the Arctic. In this artwork, the artist highlights the extinction of the *Pinguinus impennis* through an empty plexiglass box bearing only the species' name, drawing attention to the disappearance of natural resources and showing how void can be meaningful and full of significance. The absence of the animal functions as a powerful signifier, materializing loss while inviting the viewer to meditate on disappearance, fragility, and the impermanence of life. The void is not neutral; it is charged with ethical and existential implications, offering a silent critique of human actions and their irreversible consequences.

Echoes of the Void (2015-19) emerged as a natural continuation of *Journey into Fragility*. The artist chose to focus on ten representative deserts of the world.⁴ The aim of the project was to identify new ways of interacting with the environment.

As explained by Camilla Boemio in ROAR (Greaves 2019, 12):

Ongoing climate change and the new desertification will lead us to re-examine the world as we know it. A new natural order is starting in these inaccessible areas, forgotten by most and dismissed as marginal. Ballestra's practice provides an objective lesson on possibilities and artistic commitment, placing itself in a radical perspective through an exploration of the desert. It is this spirit that Ballestra seeks to channel, by juxtaposing works whose intellectual rigour and experimental ethos are inextricable from their physical expression. Her *modus operandi* is rich in concepts articulated via non-linguistic modes, and the research teems with intricate patterns and esoteric geometries.

The artist frames the desert as a harsh, hostile environment where life struggles to survive, and where desertification – driven by modern lifestyles – now increasingly affects people and ecosystems. Despite this, deserts have always held a unique fascination: since ancient times, humans have travelled and settled in them, developing complex cultural traditions.⁵ Although conventionally conceived as

³ For more details cf. Valenti 2015, 97-9.

⁴ The project was promoted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice in partnership with local institutions, with a particular focus on artist residencies.

⁵ Ballestra, M.R. *Maria Rebecca Ballestra: Waste Land* (2015b). AdAC, Archivio di Arte Contemporanea, digital document, n.p.

an empty place, it is in fact abundant in both physical and spiritual resources.

The desert, as the memory of our planet and a symbol of adaptation and regeneration, keeps seeds dormant beneath the soil for long periods, which sprout with the first moisture. It is also a place of altered perception, where one can lose orientation and see mirages.

Ballestra demonstrates how environmental issues are intrinsically linked to culture, both in the understanding of others and in the continuous creation of new forms of expression and an ever-expanding consciousness. Living in or retreating to the desert has long represented an ascetic choice, a way to overcome the ultimate physical barrier. Across many religions, the desert holds a profound symbolic role: it is a place of trial, temptation, and enlightenment; of wisdom, purity, and revelation. It is the land of prophets, where encounters with the inner self take place.

The two largest deserts, the Arctic and the Antarctic, are paradoxically our main water reservoirs, threatened by globalised modernity.

Among the most renowned deserts are the Kalahari, the Sahara, and the Gobi. Initiated in 2015 and completed in 2019, the project explored the human-nature relationship through contemporary art, examining deserts from multiple perspectives: geological, cultural, spiritual, environmental, and political. As stated by Mencarelli:

Echoes of the Void rappresenta un passaggio successivo rispetto a *Journey into Fragility*, perché concretizza la struttura della metafisica del reale, in quanto possiede anche una dimensione profondamente spirituale, che non era presente nel Progetto ispirato alla Carta di Morasso. *Echoes* ruota attorno al rapporto paesaggio identità a livello simbiotico e spirituale. (2019, 161)

The artworks made at the end of each trip were created during art residencies, in collaboration with scientific and humanist researchers, as well as together with the participation of local artists. In Rebecca Ballestra's work, identity shifts from a cultural dimension to a personal one. It moves from elements rooted in a people's tradition to an intimate relationship with space and time, with Nature, and with the constant transformation of life. As she said in an interview with Arianna Testino:

Vorrei utilizzare prevalentemente strumenti tecnologici (video e audio) e performativi per realizzare delle opere 'effimere'; vorrei che del progetto rimanessero soprattutto delle 'tracce' più che

delle 'opere'. Come evoca il titolo stesso del progetto, degli 'echi' dei paesaggi.⁶

We thus perceive a dimension in which, while the desert may be regarded as eternally unchanging, it is at the same time in constant motion shaped by human influence. She also explores a personal journey that navigates between inner emotion and external experience, blending introspection with physical travel. As Ballestra states:

Pensiamo al viaggio come a un'azione fisica, ma il viaggio è molto più; il viaggio può essere sciamanico, spirituale, mentale. È per me molto importante lo spostamento fisico del viaggio rispetto al solo viaggio mentale, quello del corpo che si deve ri-collocare e ri-adattare a un nuovo ambiente, questa decontestualizzazione del corpo rappresenta l'inaspettato, il movimento verso l'ignoto. Normalmente si parla del viaggio con un tono positivo, si descrive come 'una bella esperienza', un'esperienza di crescita, migliorativa... Per me invece è fondamentale anche il lato 'negativo', diciamo, cioè, m'interessano anche le esperienze negative che possono accadere durante il viaggio, sensazioni come la paura, lo smarrimento, la fragilità. [...] Il continuo ridisegnarmi attraverso il viaggio fa di me una persona sempre nuova. (Mencarelli 2019, 168)⁷

Drawing on these concepts and references, the artist's practice and outcomes can be more clearly understood according to a development that will be examined in detail in the following section.

3 **Echoes of the Void: From Sonora to Gobi**

This section presents a *disamina* of Maria Rebecca Ballestra's *Echoes of the Void*, following the chronological sequence of her residencies. It examines how the artworks produced in each context engage with the human-nature relationship, oscillating between absence and

⁶ Testino, A. (2016). "Ascoltare il deserto. Maria Rebecca Ballestra" in *Atribune*, 15 November 2016. <https://www.atribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2016/11/intervista-maria-rebecca-ballestra-deserto-ambiente-festival-venezia/>.

⁷ For Ballestra, travel went beyond the physical, encompassing spiritual, mental, and shamanic dimensions. The body's displacement into new environments exposed it to the unknown, fear, and vulnerability, revealing instincts and capacities beyond thought. Travel became a solitary, inner challenge that continually reshaped and renewed the self.

presence.⁸ Each stage of this journey also introduces a secondary theme, intrinsically linked to the overarching concept.

The first trip made by the artist was realized during the Signal Fire Artist Residency in the Sonora Desert in Arizona in 2015. The artwork is an homage to the American poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), an icon of the environmental movement. Jeffers' work focuses on the concepts of spirituality and the universe. According to Jeffers, human beings have placed too much importance on themselves and not enough on the "astonishing beauty of things" of nature (Jeffers 1965, 94). Many of his poems have celebrated the persistence of nature over the whims of humanity. In 2015, Rebecca Ballestra created an installation entitled *In-Humanism* [fig. 1], inspired by the term coined by the poet. It consists of the poem *Carmel Point* (Jeffers 1965, 102), printed on paper.⁹ On a white pedestal were exhibited ten dark stones polished by the sea, originating from the Ligurian coast, on which the artist engraved the title of the artwork. The experience conveyed nature as vast and overwhelming, completely indifferent to humanity, which, in turn, tends to place excessive importance on itself while neglecting nature's beauty.



Figure 1 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *In-Humanism*. 2015. Poem on paper, stones.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

⁸ *Echoes of the Void Project* (2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVvLcMcoFKc>.

⁹ In her Sonoran Desert journal, Ballestra transcribes specific passages from Jeffers's *Carmel Point*, engaging with his vision of nature. "It has all time. It knows the people are tide | That swells and in time will ebb, and all | Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty | Lives in the very grain of the granite, | Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff. - As for us: | We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; | We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident | As the rock and ocean that we were made from" (Ballestra 2017a).

As in other works by Ballestra, Leopardi's famous moral operetta *Dialogo della Natura con un islandese* seems to serve as a reference.¹⁰ This perspective also resonates in Augé's reflections, where nature, far from being a passive backdrop, actively responds to human aggression:

la natura, come dimostrano i fatti, è testarda: maltrattata, reagisce. Vi sono ghiacciai che si ritirano, mari che si prosciugano, deserti che avanzano, specie che scompaiono. [...] essa si incarica di moltiplicare e di diffondere gli effetti dell'imprudenza umana: l'uomo scopre di appartenere alla natura quando deve fuggire dai siti che aveva ideato per dominarla. (2017, 93)

By drawing on both Leopardi's philosophical intuition and Augé's contemporary critique, Ballestra's practice situates humanity within a broader cosmological framework, where the relationship with nature must be reconsidered in terms of humility, responsibility, and renewed attentiveness to the environment. This artwork could be read as an invitation to dehumanise one's gaze, to search for one's origin, understanding that human time is only a fraction of the earth's duration.

During the following stage of her journey in the Namibian desert, she developed and realised the installation *Earth* (2015). The work consisted of five jewellery boxes, with fossil wood inside, on each of which there is a letter plated in gold, to form the word EARTH [fig. 2]. Fossil wood is an organic material, which, buried, has changed conformation over time until it is petrified. The artist herself invites us to reflect on the work asking: "What's value mean? How and to what we attribute value?".¹¹

The notion of value, evoked in the artist's work, can take on multiple dimensions, symbolic, emotional, and material, as suggested using gold in the letters. This raises a critical question: do we privilege the economic aspect over the intrinsic value of nature to such an extent

10 This reference was previously suggested by Leo Lecci in Valenti 2015, 96. Leopardi's *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (1824) – part of the *Operette Morali* – reflects the image of Iceland as a harsh and inhospitable land, marked by glaciers, volcanoes, and extreme climates. In the *operetta*, a man recounts his futile attempt to escape suffering by retreating into solitude, only to encounter Nature herself, depicted as magnificent and terrible. This text signals Leopardi's shift from a vision of nature as benevolent to one of nature as cruel. Today, this perspective is reversed: human actions threaten nature, and Iceland – with its glaciers at risk – stands as a warning of global warming.

11 @Echoes of the Void, Instagram, 13 September 2018. https://www.instagram.com/p/BnrjPF0HvqP/?img_index=1. In the case of Maria Rebecca Ballestra, social media has played a key role in shaping both her artistic career and her public image, serving as a space to share works, reflections, and social engagement, while strengthening her visibility within the digital art world.

that we can no longer discern what truly matters? Once again, the artist invites us to reflect on the meaning of the desert and whether it is truly an empty space.

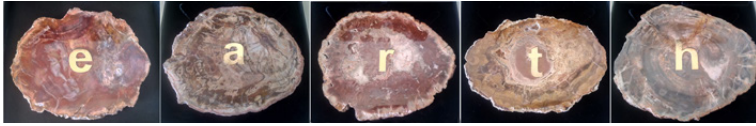


Figure 2 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *EARTH*. 2015. Jewellery boxes, fossil wood, gold.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

The artist took also multiple meaningful photographs [fig. 3] which, with their bright, contrasting colours, ideally combined with the installation, generate astonishment and wonder, bringing out the feeling of disorientation even more. In each of these images, man is absent, while the power of nature emerges with overwhelming force.



Figure 3 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Namibian Desert*. 2015. Digital photo.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

As her journey progressed, the next destination in 2016 was the Rub' al-Khali Desert, also known as the 'Empty Quarter,' or 'Fourth Void' in the United Arab Emirates, which is still largely unexplored and uninhabited. The installation created during the residency at the Maraya Art Centre, *Tabula Rasa* [fig. 4], comprised three video projections. The first depicted the night sky as seen from Earth; the second presented satellite images of a sprawling city at night; and

the third featured the poet Farrah Chamma (b.1994) performing her poem *Tabula Rasa*.¹² Complementing the videos were two plexiglass boxes filled with desert sand, each engraved with the words TIME and SPACE. Placed between them were the astronomical coordinates and the certificate for the star named Tabula Rasa, adopted by the artist.



Figure 4 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Tabula Rasa*. 2016-2017. 3D installation. Rub' Al- Khali. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

The multimedia installation explores the link between the mystical experience in the desert and technology. The starry sky guided nomads, uniting humanity to the universe in a boundless mystical connection. Today, cities are immense and lit by electricity, creating light pollution that obscures the vision of the stars. The night sky has reversed: it is the Earth that is illuminated by artificial lights. The way we travel and orient ourselves has changed: we no longer look towards the sky, but towards the Earth, observing it from satellites. The concept of the *tabula rasa* has been established in Western thought as a metaphor for both the primordial state of humanity and a 'blank page' from which renewal is possible, reflecting the enduring human preoccupation with erasure and re-creation throughout history. As already introduced in the previous paragraph, time has been a central theme in Ballestra's work.¹³ Her exploration often emphasizes humanity's marginal presence within the vast chronology of the planet: if the Earth's history were compressed into a single

¹² A video of Farrah Chamma reciting her poem *Tabula Rasa* is available at SAMAR Media - Farah Chamma - Table Rase (ENG) (2014). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQho8304NiE>; for a complete analysis of the poem cf. De Blasio 2021.

¹³ Time can be defined as one of the main topics of Maria Rebecca Ballestra's artwork, from early pieces such as *Suspended Time* (2008) to later projects like *Conversation on Time* (2019), including projects created during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as *L'uomo si ferma*, *Gaia respira* (2020) and *Respiro* (2020).

day, human existence would appear only at 23:59 (Cattaneo 2018),¹⁴ remembering to ourselves to change our perspective.¹⁵

Time and space are like the sand in an hourglass: a changing substance in constant transformation. This perspective aligns with the artist's reflection on the fragile and disproportionate role of humankind in relation to nature, calling for a renewed awareness of our interconnectedness and responsibility.

The only stop in Europe, at the Agriate desert in Corsica, was realised in collaboration with FRAC Corse-Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain, in 2017. The territory bears a long history of human occupation, starting from the Neolithic period and continuing to the present day. The very etymology of the word Agriate (arable land) reminds us how it has been inhabited for a long time. The improper definition of "desert", is probably due to the abandonment of agricultural land.¹⁶



Figure 5 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Ifana*. 2017. Print on rickbond, 30 × 40 cm. Agriate, Corsica. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

¹⁴ Cattaneo, M. (2018). "Cronistoria della Terra in 24 ore" in *National Geographic Italia*, March 2018.

¹⁵ In 2011, the artist proposed an exhibition entitled 'Changing Perspective' in Genoa, which can be used as a reference (Valenti 2011).

¹⁶ Through the digital archive, it was possible to identify the artist's primary sources of reference, Casta 1982; 1991; 2001.

In the Agriate desert, the artist presented *Ifana* [fig. 5] an art project inspired by a building constructed in the seventeenth century and ran by the Spinola family, part of Genoa's historic aristocracy.¹⁷ The artistic project is based on a confrontation between nature as a creative force in the landscape and an imaginary dimension linked to life in the building. It addresses various themes related to identity, the concept of limits, and memory. It took the form of a video, a series of photographs and a site-specific installation to narrate the territory, and the identity of those who live it.

The installation features a large panel representing a window, on which moss has been superimposed. On the walls some photomontages depict the interior of the building on which some endemic plants are superimposed: nature regains its space after man's intervention.

In the same year, during the art residency Barda del Desierto, at Contralmirante Cordero in Patagonia, Rebecca Ballestra researched into the influence of the European colonial mentality on rural areas, such as the desert, and how the identity of the local populations was influenced by the exploitation of these lands for agriculture, water, mining and energy resources.¹⁸ The village and its surrounding territory constitute an exemplary case for analysing both historical and contemporary processes, such as the Conquest of the Desert (1878-85), during which lands were taken from the Mapuche, Raquel, and Tehuelche peoples – who continue to claim them today – or the construction of the Ballester Dam on the Río Neuquén, an intervention that transformed the desert into an agricultural valley dominated by apple and pear monocultures intended for export. The substitution of the desert with an artificial agricultural landscape exemplifies the anthropocentric drive to dominate and reshape, which exposes the tensions between natural ecosystems and human-driven exploitation.

Furthermore, the artist decided to direct her observation towards the theme of double identity: in the landscape (*bard* and desert) and in the local culture. Through a relational project based on interviews with local habitants, she realised *Imaginary Atlas* [fig. 6], a site-specific work consisting of portraits of individuals and photographs of the surrounding landscape. These visual elements are interconnected by coloured wool threads, which link them to two symbolic objects: stones and apples. The stones refer to the primordial geological substance of the territory and, by extension, to its indigenous community. The apples, instead, evoke both the region's principal agricultural product and a broader symbolic framework rooted in

¹⁷ “*Ifana*”, le désert des Agriates en exposition au musée de Bastia (2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5acTlvNpwGY>.

¹⁸ Artist Residency Barda del Desierto (2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHOopWyqIDS>

Western culture and colonial discourse: the biblical fruit of Adam and Eve, whose consumption precipitated their expulsion from Eden and signified the loss of innocence and the rupture of harmony between humankind and nature.

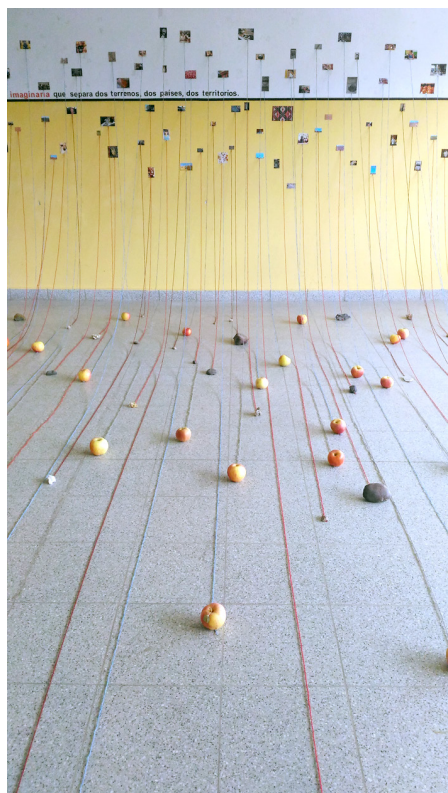


Figure 6
Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Imaginary Atlas*.
2017. Site specific installation, photos,
stones, apples, wool threads.
Colmirante Cordero, Patagonia.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

The fruit is a symbol of the country, but also of Western culture. For the artist, the apple represents the religious conquest that accompanied the colonisation of the New World, with the evangelisation and forced assimilation of the indigenous populations, and how colonisation imposed its presence and cultivation.

Chihuahuan Desert in New Mexico was the successive step, where she produced several works on the occupation, also focusing on the role of the desert as a borderland. *Cabinet Anthropologique* [fig. 7] consists of a box inside which there are objects related to the occupation of the Apache territories: photographs, stones, playing cards, and some gadgets, such as small resin drops with the words “route 66” or “trust”. It is therefore again a reflection on dual identity. The New Mexico desert is deeply embedded with history and

traditions, once again revealing how a landscape that appears empty at first glance in fact embodies a complex totality and a multiplicity of identities.



Figure 7 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Cabinet Anthropologique*. 2017. Photographs, stones, playing cards, souvenir. Chihuahuan Desert, New Mexico. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

During the trip to Greenland, she made *ART-LIFE* [fig. 8], in which she wanted to combine the creative power of nature and the shamanic power of art. The work is made of bone, wood, print on Tintoretto paper, nuummite. The last one is a very ancient type of stone, found only there, and dating back some three billion years. It is considered one of the oldest minerals on Earth and is believed to be a stone of ancestral magic and power, often associated with shamans. Nuummite completely surrounds the word *art*, while the word *life* is surrounded, as if in an embrace, by organic material such as bone and wood. Once again, a contrast emerges between nature and mankind, in which, notably, art aligns itself with nature rather than with human activity.

The photographs she took there depict the Arctic landscape [fig. 9], undoubtedly the most characteristic of deserts, the only one along with Antarctica to be covered by ice. The place where climatic changes are most visible, given the constant reduction in the consistency of the glaciers. The photographs present only cold colour tones, which give more of a feeling of melancholy. The artist's engagement with environmental issues in her works can be likened to Olafur Eliasson's practice, which similarly interrogates ecological concerns through artistic intervention. For instance, Eliasson's work *Your Waste of Time*

(2006) reflects on temporality and climate change.¹⁹ Some ice blocks from Vatnajökull, one of Iceland's largest glaciers, were removed and brought to the Berlin gallery Neugerriemschneider, where they were exhibited in a refrigerated space. He thus denounces the waste of man's time, who does not work hard enough to prevent the destruction of glaciers. Interestingly, in 2015, Rebecca Ballestra also travelled to the same glacier in Iceland, as part of *Journey into Fragility*.



Figure 8 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *ART-LIFE*. 2017. Bone, wood, print on Tintoretto paper, nuummite. 21 × 29.7 cm. Greenland. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi



Figure 9
Maria Rebecca Ballestra,
Greenland.
2017. Digital photo.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

19 *Your Waste of Time*. Artwork. Studio Olafur Eliasson. <https://olafureliasson.net/artwork/your-waste-of-time-2006/>.

The artist's last journey took place in the Gobi Desert (Mongolia) in 2017. On that occasion, she created two works on perception of time-space, entitled *Skin* [figs 10-11]. One of them, dedicated to the Yolyn Am Valley, was then presented at the exhibition *Le latitudini dell'arte* in Genoa in 2019. It depicts macro-details of algae in a stream. The artist called skin as her moral testament, a permanent tribute and an act of gratitude. The skin of the earth encounters that of humanity, framing a dialogue in which absence and void become critical lenses to reflect on the impact of human intervention on natural landscapes.

As the artist said in one of her inedited archival documents:

Un omaggio alla pelle della terra che mi ha accolta, alla vita che mi ha insegnato, accompagnata, piegata, gratificata, messo alla prova, risanata, che mi ha ricompensata, accolta, che si è rivelata e si è manifestata attraverso di me. Skin sarà un omaggio permanente, un gesto spirituale, un ringraziamento, una restituzione, un atto sciamanico di gratitudine, che farò alla Natura per il resto della mia vita. Un gesto ripetuto, ciclico, che accompagnerà il personale viaggio della mia anima su questa terra e in questo corpo, che segnerà il tempo del divenire personale, un tempo umano che incontra un tempo universale. Non realizzerò più altre opere per il mercato dell'arte a parte installazioni site specific con elementi naturali, e opere effimere (azioni performative, teatrali, video o suoni). Skin sarà un ciclo di opere che terminerà solo con la mia morte. L'osservatore o il collezionista potrà utilizzare le opere della serie Skin come un oggetto di consumo, come un prodotto estetico, come uno strumento di meditazione, una preghiera, un passaggio verso l'interiorità, come una finestra sull'immateriale, come un salto temporale verso l'eternità.²⁰

In this artwork, the attention to temporality becomes particularly evident, evoking Aristotle's conception of the void (Arist., *Ph.* 4.1.208b26). The philosopher denies the existence of a void, emphasizing that time is inseparable from motion and material processes: the absence of matter entails the absence of measurable time, highlighting the intrinsic connection between temporality and the physical world.

20 Ballestra, *Skin* 2017b.

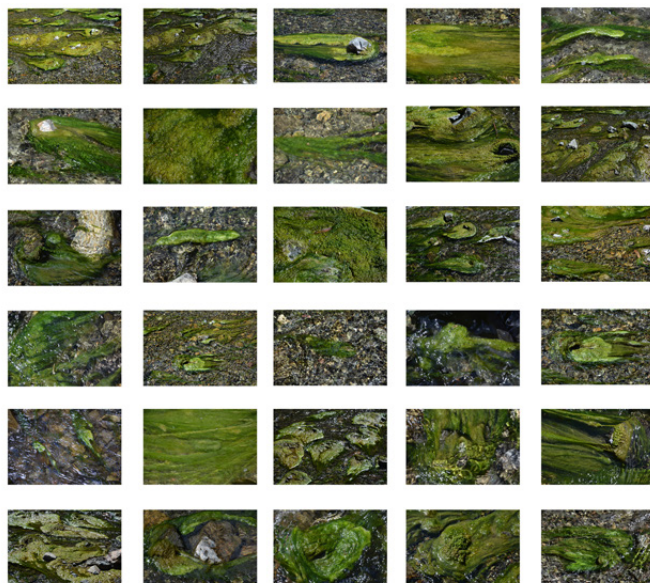


Figure 10 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Skin #1 Tribute to Yolyn Am Valley*. 2017-19.
 Digital photo. Mongolia. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi



Figure 11 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Skin #2*. 2017-19.
 Digital photo. Mongolia. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

Time flows inevitably, and, in many respects, it has been one of the central themes of the past century. Since Kubler's seminal reflections (1976), art has assumed a new form, with time understood as split into two essential components: a personal, subjective dimension and a more rational, structured one. In the footsteps of many before her, Maria Rebecca Ballestra now turns toward works of greater introspection – a gradual shift in her practice that began well before the conception of this project.

The second work in the *Skin* series follows the same structure as the previous piece, but the green of the seaweed is replaced by the warm tones of the desert. Bones emerge from the sand alongside sparse plants; all set within the emptiness and profound silence of the natural landscape. As Ballestra said in one of her archival documents:

Il viaggio è sempre stato parte fondamentale della mia vita di donna e di artista. Ho visitato luoghi e villaggi sperduti, dalla natura incontaminata e selvaggia; ho impiegato per raggiungere e conoscere le parti più remote del nostro pianeta. La mia arte è il risultato di quello che ho provato e vissuto fino a quando sono arrivata all'apice della mia ricerca. Ricordo il momento esatto, ero in Mongolia, nel deserto del Gobi, e dopo una salita impervia e faticosa, ho raggiunto la cima e ho provato l'esperienza assoluta, fino a sfiorare i limiti della conoscenza umana. Quell'attimo di benessere interiore, di estasi, mi ha resa capace di contemplare l'assoluta bellezza dell'universo e di comprendere che, sebbene l'uomo sia in grado di commettere le peggiori atrocità, non riuscirà mai a scalfire l'incanto dell'universo. In quel momento ho ripensato alla mia vita fino a quel momento e ho realizzato che, in fondo, non ho grandi meriti, se non quello di aver sempre accettato tutte le sfide che la vita mi ha posto davanti. Non mi sono mai tirata indietro, anche quando ho dovuto affrontare scelte radicali, sia nel campo dell'arte, sia nella vita privata, comprendendo che dovevo fidarmi di ciò che mi stava accadendo. La vita mi ha sempre ricompensata dinanzi a tutte le scelte, oltre quanto mi sarei mai aspettata e ho realizzato di non essere il frutto delle mie azioni, ma ciò che la Natura ha fatto su di me.²¹

21 Ballestra, *Il mio testamento morale* 2020.

4 Conclusion

Maria Rebecca Ballestra invites us to rethink the idea of emptiness, showing that it is not mere absence but a space full of life, present even in the tiniest grain of desert sand. The desert is not a barren void, but a living archive of microscopic life, fragile ecosystems, and ancient traces that resist erasure. As in Augé:

Un vuoto si inserisce fra le vie di circolazione e i luoghi di vita, o fra ricchezza e povertà, un vuoto che talvolta viene decorato, talvolta viene lasciato in abbandono, vuoto nel quale talvolta si rintanano i più poveri dei poveri. (Augé 2017, 90)

Ballestra creates ephemeral connections around environmental urgency while stressing the absence of humans and the persistence of nature, proposing a post-anthropocentric idea of belonging. This perspective represents a valuable avenue for further investigation, particularly by studying Ballestra's works through this interpretive lens, as they offer fertile ground for rethinking notions of community and belonging beyond anthropocentrism.

Echoes of the Void thus becomes both an act of revelation and of contemplation. By slowing the viewer's point of view, it invites a meditative awareness of space, where silence, distance, and light compose an invisible narrative. In doing so, Ballestra not only subverts the conventional notion of emptiness as absence but also transforms it into an active presence, that demands both attention and care.

In conclusion, this analysis of the most recent works should be further expanded through additional research, particularly by exploring the philosophical implications within the dimension of temporality, considering the influences that have undoubtedly impacted the artist. Just as the projects she initiated must continue to evolve, the concept itself transcends the artist and extends beyond time.

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