A drive towards the visible

Deep mapping and disciplinary agnosticism

Turbulent flows

Reading artist Rona Lee's article 'Truthing Gap: Imagining a Relational Geography of the Uninhabitable' in the last issue of **arq** (15.3, pp. 216–29), I was reminded of a comment the architect Christine Hawley once made when writing about her own practice. 'How does [the line]', she asked, 'deal with something that is reflected or immaterial, a shadow? How does it deal with that which hovers, threatens, glides or melts?'[1] Hawley saw in conventional orthography 'our constantly reiterated practices of definition' that support 'the tyranny of the wall'. Whereas edges in nature are defined by 'an incredibly rich and subtle intermingling: the time factors of mutation and growth and decay, the myriad physical forms, with winding, sheltering elements.'

Lee's article looked at deep-sea mapping and, although this is an environment few architects will ever work with, it allows us to see clearly the limitations of our own representational tools. According to Lee, for deep-sea mapping, these go beyond the technical difficulties of measuring in depth and darkness where access and visibility are impossible. Oceanography does not map the flowing liquid ocean itself but rather a rigid and idealised version of a landscape that contains the fluid. Lee's research suggests that there may be more to this than the failure of available representational techniques. There has, she writes, since the Enlightenment been a drive towards the visible. Modelling and representing the ocean bed as if fixed, immutable and knowable transforms and secures it as an object available for viewing, division and quantification.

Bathymetric modelling sends sonar signals through and beyond the water to its edges, passing through the water as if it was not there, and effectively 'draining the ocean'. There is a negation of the fluid which, for feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, is a figure which offers an alternative to the binary, either/or, logic of solid and void. For Irigaray we already perform a 'forgetting of air' when we think of the space between objects as void, rather than as itself a fluid medium of exchanges and continuity. This forgetting is all the more remarkable when it is the vast pressing depths of the ocean that is omitted.

Lee's study of the ocean invites architects to remember that despite our talk about ecology and the environment, the lines we make are outline-loving, they prefer solids and they too omit movement, exchange and the invisible but essential medium we inhabit on earth. Of course, there has been plenty of work in cartography, and some work in architecture that has looked at orthographic representation in terms of its broader political and economic associations (Yve-Alain Bois on the appropriating eye of the axonometric, or Catherine Ingraham on the relation of the 'proper' line of architecture to the demarcation of property), but Lee, like Hawley, makes no secret of the desire at work in wanting to render visible that which resists representation.

What I find most compelling about her practice-based research is that she attempts to find alternatives to the photorealistic visualisations of the sonar data made by the geophysicists she worked with during her residency at the National Oceanography
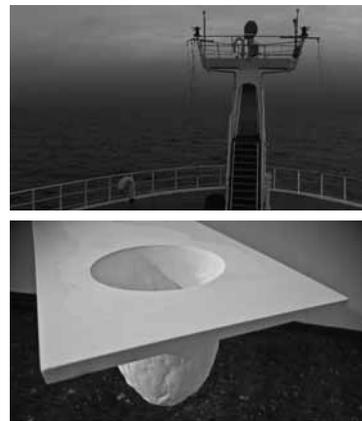
Top image Royal Research Ship, James Cook, May 2009. *Bottom image* Rona Lee, *to dive, to fall, to float, to fly* (porcelain, plaster), 2009

Centre in Southampton. Unlike Hawley, who seems content with a drawn line that simply deflects in response to the thought of something which 'threatens, glides or melts', Lee tries over and over to find some form of material expression that might get closer to its subject than the images the scientists produce (and she continues in her studio to explore these possibilities towards an exhibition at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton in 2012). Although beautiful in its own right, the first plaster relief she made seems almost to follow an architectural logic. A translation is made from one form of information – sonar data – to the quintessential solid/void language of 3D printing. In the second there is a direct indexical translation from the inkblot that arose from the swinging motion of the pen following the movement of the sea. But for architects, such representations will stand in and become the ground for the site. If Lee had presented the reliefs on

their own they might read only as known landscapes, fixed and available for appropriation, but appearing as they do in the article, carefully placed next to photographs of the ocean in its continuous motion and changing topography, it is more the gap between them that is foregrounded, the apparent impossibility of representation. One of the strengths of practice-based research can be that it presents questions, rather than resolutions.

More evocative is the porcelain extrusion both falling into the apparent void and held above it. Here the edges are determined by an unpredictable encounter of material forces rather than the rigid programming of the 3D printer. Lee's dockside performance walking a length of string long enough to reach the deepest surveyed trench on earth also transforms a fixed quantity into a slippery self-touching mass of material (as perhaps the ink of the pen hanging from the underside of the table in her cabin finally joined into a fluid pool) dissolving its original capacity to quantify.

What becomes clear is that Lee's art practice struggles to represent the fluid as do the science practices she interrogates. The struggle and the desire of both seem to have more to do with each other than it first appeared. Indeed, as Irigaray is herself aware, in some areas of science as in the study of turbulent flows (which requires in one of its key formulas that the medium in which flow occurs is taken into account), science might in fact offer figures for fluid thinking rather than simply inhibit it. Curiously it is through language that Lee, and the commentators she cites, seem to get closest to describing the deep ocean environment, and Lee suggests that her next step might be to work with the words of the scientists at the National Oceanography Centre.

If we are concerned with an architecture that takes into account the fluid, as Hawley is or as I recently heard her one-time student the architect C. J. Lim state (who also writes about his work in the same issue of **arq**), then research like Lee's which investigates scientific practice through fine art is extremely interesting and fertile, and I hope we will see more of it in architectural discourse and publications such as yours.

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Note
1. Christine Hawley, 'Invisible Lines', in *The Architect: Reconstructing her Practice*, Francesca Hughes (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 168–69.

Mapping deep space-time

arq is to be congratulated for publishing Rona Lee's 'Truthing Gap: Imagining a Relational Geography of the Uninhabitable' (15.3, pp. 216–29). At a time when, despite governmental and academic rhetoric, the *realpolitik* of research funding is reinforcing the ghetto mentalities (and power) of those who manage intellectual disciplines, it is heartening to see an architectural journal inviting its readers to engage with work of this kind and quality. I particularly welcome this as an artist/academic engaged in and supporting new hybrid practices such as deep mapping, who finds himself having as much in common with lecturers in architecture, cultural geography and landscape design as with those in the disciplines in which I was trained.

My appreciation of the project reported in Rona Lee's article is in part informed by having worked between 2007 and 2009 with colleagues from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds within the transdisciplinary Living in the Material World: The Performativity of Emptiness network, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The unexpected parallels between what emerges from her compelling account of a highly unusual project and my own experience working in that network made reading it particularly valuable. To give an example, she observes that: 'Liquids can be said by their nature to resist attempts to "map" them, evoking a desire to corral their fluidity and engineer them into recognition.' If this is read metaphorically it applies equally to the 'fluid' nature of space that Doreen Massey refers to as a 'simultaneity of stories so far'. An understanding that requires what Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks identify as 'different *ways of telling* and different types of recording and inscription, which can incorporate different orders of narrative'.

Thought through in this way I found her article suggests a rich common field of metaphorical resonance and reflection that I can now draw on in relation to my engagement in the practice of deep mapping.

For those unfamiliar with the emergent critical poetics of deep mapping, one that tries to engage in a critical solicitude with the ecology of place, it shares a number of the underlying concerns that emerged from Kenneth Frampton's working through of Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lafaivre's *Critical Regionalism*. That is with a critical place-conscious poetic that seeks to mediate between the impact of globalisation and the concrete particularities of a particular place, so as to reflect on the way that the human 'species-being conceives of its relationship to nature, including its own nature', a debate in which a critical ecology provides both a natural limit to the myth of progress and 'a new-found respect for the symbiotic limits of being and cosmos'.[1] Although Critical Regionalism has been seen in the West as largely ineffectual in articulating place and sustaining community, it has been noticeably effective in doing so elsewhere, a fact that may yet inform its potential dialogue with a creative praxis such as deep mapping.

This praxis, developed in its non-literary form in Britain by Mike Pearson, Michael Shanks and Cliff McLucas, is still less well-known than works such as William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* or Tim Robinson's two *Stones of Aran* books, but is becoming increasingly important for a variety of reasons. (Interestingly in the present context, McLucas trained as an architect but might best be identified as a site-specific, multi-media arts-led transdisciplinary practitioner.)

In theoretical terms deep mapping directly engages with what Rona Lee refers to as 'the trope of fluidity and flux' that, as she points out, has largely been addressed through the high theory of feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray. However, while Lee correctly observes that this thinking offers 'a means to disturb and dissolve the dualisms upon which Western culture is founded', that is only the academic half of the story. The task of practically translating that and other related thinking into praxis, while it has been greatly assisted by feminist work like Geraldine Finn's exposition of a 'politics of contingency', has to a large extent