Surfaces at Large

And the Meanness of Measure

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Author's note:

All images, illustrations, figures are the work of the author unless otherwise specified.

Please take the time to print and shuffle the pages of this paper before reading - they are not written in any particular order, and I see no need for them to be read in any particular order.

Acknowledgement:

Many thanks to those who have loudly encouraged and supported the creation of this paper, as well as to those who have quietly withheld their reservations. And perhaps most especially, thanks to those who unashamedly voiced their concerns - be they for the paper or for my own sake. Accidents, errors, and mistakes become compositional features that are embraced as those precious moments in which reality breaks through the rather strange façade of precision that is called for and generally expected. As Agamben highlights in his lecture on the resistance of art, the unfinished, or mistake in the perfect weave is that very thing which allows its author to escape imprisonment by their own design.¹ And so rightfully should we acknowledge and embrace the minor error: the slip of the hand, the smudge of ink... The mark of the author left behind, not by their own intention but as a result of their having been in the same place and time as the work - intricately involved in its production through material manipulations. It is only because of the author's intention, their aim for precision, that the error therein as a juxtaposed feature gains its importance and its beauty. As Francesca Hughes illustrates, the architect's relation to precision and material intolerance has run rampant to the point of redunancy, and near fetishization.² It is no longer a question of how things come together, but of a strange longing to remove ones self from the material at hand through machinic practice and digital tools that enable and encourage a practice of designing while ignoring material.



1 European Graduate School. (2015, March 8). Giorgio Agamben. Resistance in Art. 2014. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from www.youtube.com website: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=one7mE-8y9c.

² Hughes, F. (2014). The architecture of error : matter, measure, and the misadventures of precision. Cambridge, Massa chusetts: The Mit Press.

Time itself does not go tick tock to the rhythm of the clock. Nor does time stop when a timer reaches the zero mark. It simply continues, at exactly the same speed – fluid and undivided, in fact indivisible. Yet there exist sharp lines that dictate the precise moment a second has elapsed for the entire planet – offset by hours across timezones that further split time – of course, clinically measured with satellite clocks to ensure we all live 'in the right time'. Daylight savings provides a succinct example of how our understanding of shared time is simply an agreement on international scale, not necessarily a shared experience. Time itself does not care for its own passing, nor does it stop to make sure we are all in sync with it every second. The striation of time is but one of many arbitrary lines that cut through abstract space.1

David Claerbout speaks of a heterochrony, or the multiplicity of duration being in constant conflict with clock-time in his work.² When thinking of duration (multiple) as opposed to measured or 'clock' time (singular, static), duration implies that time begins to fracture into multiple parallel lines. Moving at the same speed but not in the same moment, the time in which this paper is written, edited, and read are somehow contained within the paper itself, and experienced only as individuals. When contending with these notions of multiple times, individual moments, the collapse thereof in an image and the projection of it into the future, one wonders, in which moment do we live? It seems difficult to grapple with the idea that all persons live in different moments, however also difficult to believe that I exist at the same moment as the person who is reading this sentence.



¹ Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2017). 1440: The smooth and the striated. In B. Massumi (Trans.), A thousand plateaus : capitalism and schizophrenia (pp. 474-501). London: Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1980)

Walsh, M. P. (2022). David Claerbout: Duration and Heterochrony. Springer EBooks, 191–202. https://doi. org/10.1007/978-3-030-76092-2_10

Much like the image, we generate models that mimic properties of reality. In turn the model is studied and analysed and understood in order to make projective analysis and speculation about the 'real' world which contains the model. Models often have a coherent internal logic, a consistent pattern, a recurring set of behaviours that make them predictable, and so our use of these models in analysing reality generates a world in which we anticipate certain things to happen based on a model of our own construction. However, the world is not as we made it of our own construction.

As such we can use a mathematical notation to understand that on the one hand, reality does not equal the model, while at the same time, reality as a set contains the model within it. While the model still technically adheres to the physical laws that govern the larger context, it is framed off, closed from the open systems of the actual, and 'scaled down' such that measure and impact have greater margin for error when scaled back to the reality of 1:1.

Reality \neq Model

Reality = {Model}



In the words of Walter Benjamin,¹ "The concept of technique represents the dialectical starting-point from which the sterile dichotomy of form and content can be surmounted." Sterile because form and content emerge together, are necessarily linked and dependent on each other, and ignoring their social, and temporal context reduces their relationship greatly.

It is as a result of technique that a work comes into being - it is the method and process by which *formation* transpires as opposed to stagnant form, and in doing so the work becomes encrusted with a surface that encloses the content within. And so the question for this paper and for any thing would be: what is its content, where are its limits, its framing, or surface that encloses it and provides form, and perhaps most importantly how have they been generated?

The difficulty within this paper is its attempt to define a trap that it itself is desperately trying to avoid falling into: the pinning down of an idea, a false sense of security by causing its stagnation and death. The paper is a critique on the measure, and the description and simulation of a behaviour of that encrusted surface which is in constant movement.

Much like the lighthouse which serves to warn of danger, the boat trying to circumnavigate a peninsula does not set course directly for that beacon to find out what the danger might be, but rather sails by at a distance, along its periphery. That periphery is necessarily dependent on the beacon, on the promise of danger towards it. At the same time however, the boat travelling along the periphery provides no independent confirmation of those rocks which it seeks to avoid (there is no collision). It is by virtue of the fact that the boat stays sailing, that it proves the rock-free nature of the waters it sails.

As a result, this paper as an experiment on the form of the essay itself seeks to circumnavigate its own content. Always regarding the dangers of the measure and precision from the sidelines outskirts, without risking collision by claiming to execute such precision itself. In its structure, pages of the essay may fall into place like leaves of a tree in autumn, to be read as it has been written: fragmentary, leaping from one page to the next, getting lost in its content, in order to find one's self again.

Benjamin, W. (1998). The Author as Producer. In A. Bostock (Trans.), Understanding Brecht (pp. 85–105). London: Verso. That is to say, the surface as a fluid – not necessarily the fluid surface, however this is where one might begin as a means to analyse and conjecture on the nature of surfaces at large, i.e. the nature of all surfaces, but also, the surface as something which has effectively escaped capture.

"The depth has to be hidden. Where? On the surface."¹ Indeed the surface contains more depth than what initially meets the eye - the material world is necessarily textured and rough. Much like the geological formation of mountains which so clearly express their internal stresses and external erosions in rock faces as John Ruskin² describes in his conception of the Deep Surface, all matter in its formation develops a surficial crust - evidence of external and internal forces. The world is rough, and space is textured, since it is no abstract concept, but exists within the material world.

¹ Hofmannsthal, H. (1989). Buch der Freunde (2nd ed.). Berlin: Suhrkamp.

² Spuybroek, L. (2016). The Sympathy of Things. London: Bloomsbury.

By modelling the planet based on formerly gathered (measured) data we can project within that model into the future and anticipate how the model, and therefore perhaps how reality will proceed (protention). However, between each cyclic recurrence and each anticipated future, there is a slight discrepency from the previously collected data (often due to a problem of measurement). In this difference, the unexpected, or as Deleuze¹ would conceptualise Nietzsche's 'eternal recurrence of the same'² lies a greater truth than in the expected, the stereotypical, the archetype, the preconceived and correctly executed story. It is in this way that the act of repetition can be said to engender difference.³ Because repetition is an action which operates in time, often engaging with material conditions, it can never produce an identical result. Just as Ursula Le Guinn⁴ decries the typical narrative: "that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)" I contend that there is a need to 'miss the mark,' or rather, acknowledge that we consistently miss the mark in our attempt to reach it. It is in the subsequent moment that what happens next is unknown, the stuff of panic, adrenaline, and urgency as the hero must give chase to the beast that still lives.

Indeed when generating planetary models we encounter great difficulties, many of which are the result of the material world not quite 'hitting the mark' according to our systems of measure. Primarily, the Earth is in fact not spherical, not only thanks to its mountain ranges and valleys, oceans and other topographic features, but even if simplified and considered smooth it posesses an ellipsoidal form that shifts to the gravitational pulls of the moon and sun. This ellipsoidal form of course complicates measurements across the globe, as the curve along the surface is not consistent (in its gradation, there is variation of the curve – it remains continuous however). Similarly, the moon's orbit around planet Earth is not neatly circular, but ellipsoidal with a "*mean*" eccentricity of 0.0549⁵ (note again the mean measure entering once again). Our orbit around the sun, is likewise rotating ellipsoidally, and in turn our solar system revolves around the Milky Way – each time returning to a different location – how does one return to a different location? To further complicate the matter, the general expansion of the universe implies that we travel in an ellipsoidal spiral - moving laterally whils revolving around a series of planetary masses. Never returning to where we once were, we continue along an uneven, <u>helter skelter</u> trajectory through the seemingly infinite expanse that is space. As a consequence, the tidal interval is never a neat and tidy quantity of time, like 12 hours, but rather, 12 hours and 27 minutes, followed by 12 hours and 16 minutes, and then 12 hours and 39 minutes.⁶

¹ Deleuze, G.(2014) Difference and Repetition. London: Bloomsbury.

[&]quot;The eternal return is a force of affirmation, but it affirms everything of the multiple, everything of the different, everything of chance except what subordinates them to the One, to the Same, to necessity, everything except the One, the Same and the Necessary." (p.115)

² Anderson, R. L. (2017). Friedrich Nietzsche (E. N. Zalta, Ed.). Retrieved January 22, 2024, from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy website: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/#EterRecuSame

³ Sauvagnargues, A. (2016). Artmachines: Deleuze, Guattari, Simondon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

⁴ Le Guin, U. K. (1986). Carrier Bag Theory Of Fiction. S.L.: Ignota Books.

⁵ Espenak, F., & Meeus, J. (n.d.). NASA - Eclipses and the Moon's Orbit. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from eclipse.gsfc.nasa. gov website: https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEhelp/moonorbit.html#:~:text=The%20Moon%20revolves%20around%20 Earth

⁶ Get Panama tide times. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2024, from www.tideschart.com website: https://www.tideschart. com/Panama/Panama

There is a slippage in the transcription of a mark on paper, or the trace left by water on a wall. The slippage is not only one of coincidence, but in its representation, - be it through spoken or written words, or some other means of signification (photography, painting, illustration) - it is a consequence inherent to the representation's inability to *be* the thing it is showing. There is a difference between the photograph and the world it depicts. As such it makes a mistake, an error – in attempting to describe or capture that which can only ever be experienced, or perhaps we are mistaken in our assumption that this image depicts some reality that in fact no longer/ never existed within our ability to experience it – a photograph is always a collection and compression of multiple moments in time, no matter how fast the shutter speed. It is therefore an illusion¹; we do not experience the compression of time, only its escape passage. This does not discount the work itself, as it generates its own experience: we experience the photograph as an object in time – however one cannot speak of a site analysis inherent through drawings or photographs, but rather, one maught in the world of analysing the drawings and photographs as they themselves are.



1

We conflate the reality of the image for that which the photographer experienced. Instead, in fact, due to the nature of how a photograph is produced, it is necessarily creating its own reality. The illusion here, is one which we gener ate in our eagerness to assume that the image and that which it represents are the same thing.

The tide does not level out perfectly flat to reach its measured baseline, or maximum line for the day on the 'correct' or appointed minute before receding or rising. Furthermore, the mean sea level of every ocean and sea is distinct from each other, despite being one total body of water, since the basis for their measurement is based on a geodetic system with 'datums' that supposedly stay fixed in relative position to other objects – of course, they do not¹. The Panama Canal makes use of its own datum, to bridge the gap between the Pacific and Caribbean oceans; which have a 20cm (higher on the pacific side) difference in average height². This is, also most peculiarly, an 'average difference'. In other words, it is the difference in height between two annual averages, both of which are fluctuating continuously. The actual or specific difference at any given moment can be is much greater, or less.

¹ Wikipedia Contributors. (2019, June 5). World Geodetic System. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from Wikipedia website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Geodetic_System

The system used today now relies on astro-geodetically oriented data; shifting the longitude and latitude lines on the earth's surface up to 100 meters since the European datum network of the 1950's.

Kirkpatrick, R. Z. (1926). Panama Tides. In H. A. Baldridge (Ed.), U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings (Vol. 52/4/278).
Menasha, Wisconsin: U.S. Naval Institute. Retrieved from https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1926/april/panama-tides.

Protention as conceived by Edmund Husserl and later Bernard Stiegler is the projection of memory- it is a future passed (be it as imagined, or through technical object, the core concept remains).¹ Paradoxical as it may seem, it is a necessary feature of the human experience – it enables us to anticipate, speculate, and exist between one moment and the next comfortably. As Derrida outlines in his book, *Memoirs of the Blind*, the hand seeks out, before the eye, in search of.² There is at once in this moment, an *anticipation* of a handrail, or for the next footstep, the *anticipation* of meeting the floor. Simultaneously however, there is an *apprehension*. The position of a handrail or floor cannot be known without action, a seeking-out, and a sense of expectancy. So there is an apprehensive manner to this progression; it is not without caution that the blind charge forth in the dark. There is always the chance that there is no floor, but a cliff. This occurs in the same way that one might write a sentence, be they blind or not. Words are sought out one by one, or in phrases as the sentence is stringed together; seldom entirely thought out and then to the beat enunciated or typed out written.³ Similarly, any illustrative act, photograph, or architectural drawing anticipates some as-of-yet unknown result. There is speak of a 'sightlessness' in the creative act – an inherent indeterminacy, a sense of not-yet knowing, a chance for falling, that the tracks might run out.



- 1 Stiegler, B. (1998). Technics And Time / Vol. 1, The Fault Of Epimetheus (G. Collins & R. Beardsworth, Trans.). Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press.
- 2 Derrida, J., & Musée Du Louvre. (1993). Memoirs of the blind : The self-portrait and other ruins (P.-A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 3 This may of course follow different patterns based on the language being spoken or written however no matter the language, in the written format there is always the ability to go back, to erase and restructure, and to seek new ways of communicating a specific intention.

The surface is that very boundary by which we are able to recognise a difference between two distinct things – but is in fact non existent as a 2D entity in a three-dimensional space. It can not be singled out, removed, or captured by its distinct form, but is the manifestation of a Deridian differance¹ - that is to say, in the same sense that a word gains its meaning from its distinction to other words, our ability to recognise a thing as such is owing to its distinction from its surroundings. This distinction occurs at the surface, where one material collides with another, at the periphery of form - this distinction exists in a state of continuous change, or continuous state of becoming; the surface 'happens' just as the frame on a painting, the Parergon² to the work, happens as a means to separate the painting from the wall, the work from its surroundings. Understanding reality in a state of constant entropic movement and flux, in which objects dissipate and tend towards a homogenous mixture, when, where, and how does their shared surface disappear and a homogenous mixture emerge? Perhaps, the differential surface was never there in the first place which would (alarmingly) seem to suggest, we are already living in some sort of homogenous mixture, save that our embodied experience in the material world gives matter its distinction. We should evaluate the process by which this dynamic entity (the surface) takes shape, modulates, speaks to that which is contained by it and that which is extensive beyond it.



¹ Derrida, J. (2020). Signature Event Context. In B. Stocker (Trans.), Margins of Philosophy. London: Routledge.

Derrida, J., & Owens, C. (1979). The Parergon. October, 9, 3–41. https://doi.org/10.2307/778319.

In keeping with the slippage that is inherent in this topic – trying to capture the uncapturable, this essay is also 'structured' as a fluid. Taking inspiration from William Burroughs' 'Naked Lunch' (the title of which emerges from a misspoken line of poetry – a detail which will emerge as relevant in due [or prior] course)¹ The following and preceding sequences of information are unchaptered, and can be /have been read in any order. The emphasis becomes no longer on the precise and pinned down sequence of paragraphs, words, or sentences, but rather that very slippery thing which happens between them in the reader's experience. As such, the paper also opens up to misreadings, committing itself fully to the multiple possibilities and experiences that any text might have on an audience. As a result, the paper aproaches its topic from the periphery - much like the behaviour of the surface and the impossible measure that escapes capture, the paper intends to explicate by doing, behaving like that very surface, rather than pretending to 'precisely' describe it. And so, images of draft versions - traces of the paper in various states of its formation are left visible. As a result the sentences which are struck out are somehow both there and not there, they exist in the final version only to indicate their removal, as well as to reveal that they once were.



1

The fluctuations that are inherent and continuous in the liquid surface across all axes of movement are the consequence of a miriad of factors: wind, oceanic currents, gravitational pull(s), continental topographies, depths... and at the very basic level, the form and material of the surface beneath the liquid, we can call this the 'sub-surface'. At the same time however, that sub-surface is rearranged by the continual movement of the water, taking on the shape of a ripple, by material being lifted and deposited in particular locations as opposed to others; the surface as we know it is broken up, shifted, and reconstituted. There is a quality of continuous, repetitive, and different movement that is apparent – and so there is no 'Site' as can be described by its relative position to other material (see for example, the description of the opening scene of Act 1, in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot:* ¹

"A country road. A tree.

Evening."

That is to say, there is no stagnant site, one without moving points, shifting, changing landscapes are the only given. As Samuel Becket opens his play, Waiting for Godot with the simple scenography he provides us with two objects, and a time. Their spatial relation to eachother is completely undefined, however they exist simply in one time, 'evening'. It is for the stage director to place them within the frame of the stage, open for rearrangement.

This relative 'sitelessness' is further enforced by an unsituated understanding of place: site gives way to non-site.²



- 1 Beckett, S. (2006). Waiting for Godot. London: Faber And Faber. (Original work published 1952)
- 2 Smithson, R., & Flam. (1996). A Provisional Theory of Nonsites. In J. D. Flam (Ed.), Robert Smithson, the collected writings. Berkeley: University Of California Press.

In the words of the otherwise speechless character, Lucky:

"[...] flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labors abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard (mêlée, final vociferations) . . . tennis . . . the stones . . . so calm . . . Cunard . . . unfinished . . . "¹

Because to claim finitude is to reject duration. The finished state is an illusion as much as five centimeters or three hours are. Since their is no stagnation, only movement, the work can never be finished - like sisyphus,² only, without effort to accomplish our supposed goal (of progressing), we are in a state of continuously rolling downhill, never to reach...



¹ Beckett, S. (2006). Waiting for Godot. London: Faber And Faber. (Original work published 1952)

² Camus, A. (1942). The Myth of Sisyphus. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

How exactly to know where any one thing is in a system of moving parts, other than to assume for the time-being that they are not moving, and give measure from one surface to another. It is the distance between these surfaces that make the difference - and recognise that the measure will never be true. It is a cruel trick that we play on ourselves by aiming for a precision that does not exist, not in the absolute - rather it is asymptotic, tending to perfection but never reaching it. Instead, an average, or mean will have to suffice. Since we cannot ever truly provide the height of the water's surface, a position at which it is never existing is instead selected: the mean level, at all times both above and below the water's surface. The meanness of the measure derives from its averaging abilities, and its seductive promise of a knowledge which we do not really have. Let us not be seduced by the siren-song that a definition seems to provide: the false security that one knows something with absolute certainty.