

TOUCHING VISIONS: SPECULATIVE IMAGINARIES

Caroline Areskog Jones

“To learn anything we must revitalise acts of noticing and include ethnography and natural history”
Tsing, Anna (2015)

Throughout the enforced stasis of lockdowns and without studio access, I began thinking about the process of “epistemological gathering”, a term outlined by artist Nanna Debois Buhl, asking myself how it may be possible to use the air to make a series of works with a lightness of touch entitled ‘Touching Visions: Speculative Imaginaries’. In parallel, and along a line of singularity expected of a rhizomatic practice, this body of work partially evolved as a written response to a question posed by the Venti journal “How to Feel the Air”, since published online. The progressive evolution of some of these ideas is presented in this reflective paper.

Amongst the recent chaos within moments of stillness, stepping outside into the air presented an opportunity to reflect upon an ecology of practice that overlaps elements of drawing, printing, and moving images through a process of exploring materials. Throughout this extraordinary time, whilst caring for family, I observed more closely the details of what I saw more expansively through joining a variety of online seminars across a range of subjects including a discussion on democracy and a reading group focussed on the politics of care.

The politics of care became highly challenged throughout the pandemic, yet its roots have a fundamental affiliation with the haptic, of attention to the interaction and exchange made between touching and touched. Historically, the senses were seen to exist within a broader hierarchical structure, where vision correlates to light and hearing to air. A sense of touch and an awareness of sensory ethnography are vital in many cultures, especially in the development of communication. Feeling our way across landmarks helps us come to know a place, find our way, or ask questions. I was thinking about work made in 2019 and its reference to The Muir Woods Sequence of Hitchcock’s ‘Vertigo’, where Madeleine reaches

out towards a slice of a cut sequoia through time. This act of transfer can be seen as durational and performative, as in the act of creating a print.

As the retina retains its physiological imprint of what it sees, our bodies retain the histories of what they have experienced. The idea of the body as an archive and the impact of touching: touched is particularly embedded in me having had previous backgrounds in both contemporary dance and physical therapy. Thinking of how touch can be considered to be material to ‘imprint’ a sense of the body within the space it traverses, the site of contact acts as the receiving register—as footsteps over time with repeated weight of pressure leave their impression on the worn stone beneath.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Dark matters, 2021.

Figure 2: Fallen Weather, 2021, 150 x 150 cm, Rainwater, Carbon on Zerkall sections

The process of drawing responds by creating a mark of some sort through the proximity of two surfaces. It is a means of leaving a trace. It is a means of mapping or recording an experience. Print can equally be viewed as a transformative process creating a mark facilitated by human touch or contact. Through a sequence of movements, including holding, folding, wiping, immersing, pressing, or rolling, it documents the sign of touching. It is a methodology that can escape beyond associations to the multiple or representational mimesis by considering more widely the spatial metamorphosis involved in its making. It can respond to the notion of truth with the first print pulled from a matrix surface being termed the 'proof'. It is forensic evidence of presence. It can make the invisible visible, no matter how temporal.

In 2020, I participated in a collaborative exhibition at Modern Art, Oxford with curator Lucy Sabin entitled 'Breathworks'. It involved considering air, its constituents, and particulates as an interconnecting substance, which, though unseen, occupies without borders and is continually recycled. I contributed a fragment of recorded expiration, which was imprinted over a digital manifestation of a drawing of inspiration, an imagined space of extensive pathways to a surface of exchange. It made me pay attention to the relationship between the materialities of natural phenomena, and start to question further how these could be relevant to my practice. I revisited a connection to plein air painting, Turner, Constable, Monet, and Manet, with works infused with atmosphere.

During this period of research, I discovered Debois Buhl, a Danish artist working with a conceptual and experimental approach to print, in both analogue and digital formats. In 2020, whilst studying for my PhD, Debois Buhl developed a body of work entitled 'Sky Almanac', which involved gathering hourly observations during a 12-hour walk while logging GPS location tracking data. These observations were overlaid in the final works and accompanied by field notes. The artist talks about drawing connections across histories of scientific, aesthetic, and speculative perspectives whilst documenting the skies, their transformations, and shifting light, and during the lockdowns, I found myself becoming increasingly visually, upwardly focussed in response to the restriction of movement. As ancient mariners negotiated their path using celestial navigation and knowledge of local topographies, I began searching the night skies for some constancy and returned to drawing as a means of making a tactile, immediate impression on a surface, thinking about the intangible made tangible, a physicality that is at once intense and large scale, returning to the hand.

Standing outside in the darkness, the eye gradually adapts to reduced levels of light source, even in an urban environment, and the universe expands as it reveals itself slowly through time. I made a series of exploratory drawings in situ, responding to what I could see, and plotting the stars, which shifted location as I altered my position. With increasing numbers and constellations, I became confused as to what I was recording. I started to think about the distance of time



Figure 3



Figure 4

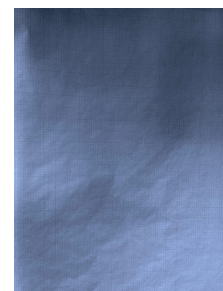


Figure 5

Figure 3: Solar Geometries, 2021, sunlight, copper, various

Figure 4: Visitor, 2021, copper, light, 28 x 35 cm

Figure 5: Cloud Study, 2022, digital print, 40 x 50 cm

across digital space, the suspended transfer of data from one surface to another, its relationship to the time of making and reception, and the possible estrangement that can occur in the liminal, unspecified space between. I was reminded of Deleuze's idea of 'becoming' where nothing is a singular, definable thing, where elements exist within an evolving matrix of potential and interconnection. I started to think more directly about the atmosphere, the air that we breathe, the humidity and temperature, trying to connect with senses beyond the purely visual. I became aware of the complexities involved in transferring information and concentrated on keeping the flow despite interruptions of thought. I recalled the importance of constellations for Greek mythologies, and the publication 'Uranometria', the first printed celestial atlas by Johann Bayer in 1603 formed from a series of copper engravings representing the skies as seen from the Earth looking up. I thought about the woodcuts of Christine Baumgartner shifting the residues of video interference onto a physical matrix and the 'Nordlicht' series with hovering light. The timeline stretching expansively and simultaneously back and forth in an overwhelming cascade of ideas, gradually developed into a large-scale etching entitled 'Dark Matters', 2021.

Back to earth, amongst increasing flash floods and rainstorms, I discovered that it takes each drop of rain an estimated two minutes to fall 2,500 metres at a speed of around 14 mph: its impact is often imperceptible, left without a trace. I wanted to continue to explore the residues left by natural phenomena and decided to see if it would be possible to record the mark of each drop using Suminagashi's methodology, where water and floating ink are registered on a receiving surface. Using a drop of Japanese carbon Sumi ink as a starting point, the receiving paper surface was secured and left outside throughout a rain shower to see what 'proof' could be captured. The falling water freely documented its trace in the form of a hybrid print without human touch and over time, with unexpected ephemerality impossible to replicate by hand, leaving a series of delicate marks as the water shifted state from liquid to evaporation. I experimented with different makes of ink of variable strengths and durations of showers and when the prints dried, noticed that some marks resembled planetary eruptions from distant stars, collapsing supernovas evoking a sense of movement and transition. Collectively, the works are called 'Fallen Weather', 2021.

Through the altered state of a fragile trace, a record, a documentation of a drop of water falling through the air remained as printed time. I was reminded of August Strindberg's series of celestographs made in the 1890s, perceived images of the night sky taken without a camera but where photographic plates were laid directly on the ground. It was a bid to capture astronomical and meteorological phenomena evolving as a series of curious images seemingly of distant galaxies. Later investigation revealed that these were 'chemigrams', dust particles and shadows on a disrupted layer of photographic emulsion: the micro of reality evoking the macro of imagination.

Evidence of traces left without human touch (archeipoeita) often requires a leap of faith, as with Veronica's Veil, a historical relic, or the Turin Shroud, linen cloth bearing the image of a man of ambiguous origins. A more concrete example could perhaps be the 'fire prints' created by John Cage at Crown Point Press in 1985, running burning newspaper and damp sheets of paper through a press in a bid to capture the ephemeral. Charred drawings/prints retained the trace of combustion and were later developed to include etchings in various colours of Thorreau's observational drawings of ice crystals, river meanderings, and morning dew. Tacita Dean (1995) made a short film entitled 'Bag of Air' during explorations of alchemy where the voiceover states:

"If you rise at dawn in a clear sky, and during March, they say you can catch a bag of air so intoxicated with the essence of spring that when it is distilled and prepared, it will produce an oil of gold, remedy enough to heal all ailments."

Gala Porras-Kim, most recently in her Gasworks exhibition, explored the intangible evidence of materiality relating to historical artefacts and archaeology, imagining supernatural forces and attempting to harness other unseen methods for making a series of physical works as an attempt to capture imprints of ambiguous existence.

I continued this line of speculative imaginings to consider the copper plate used in traditional printmaking methodologies as a material in itself to explore ideas. Copper is a conduit to facilitate interconnection, having a long association with aspects of healing and resilience. I noticed that the plate surface emanates a warm, pink glow when touched by light, becoming tarnished to a blackened tone when exposed to dew and air overnight. I started to consider the hypothetical transfer across a matrix (the air) without pressure as a means to create a hybrid print/drawing, and in 'Solar Geometries', the plate itself floated its delineations across a white wall akin to a contemporary sundial where, as the hours passed, the threshold times of sunset and sunrise were temporarily recorded. In 'Visitor', the plate acted as a mirror to echo the duplication involved in making a print, holding a fleeting image on its surface, conveying a sense of presence.

'Gassed' captures the carbon trace from 'smoking the plate' to convey a toxic, and claustrophobic presence, with no air to breathe as the soot marks cover the zinc. These were site-specific works created and situated in 2021 within a heritage Victorian house (Hospitalfield) where gas chandeliers had been commonly used. In their time, they had caused respiratory difficulties, choking the atmosphere and tarnishing antique tapestries whilst slowly blackening the intricate, wood-carved ceilings above. The painting close to the plate's location also contained bitumen, used to make a thick, dark, black hue, itself degrading with exposure to air over time. As a result, the figures today are slowly disappearing off the canvas into a murky shadow.

'Cloud study' returns to the skies, capturing incidental light falling across a topographical surface and printed in a shade of blue,

referencing indigo hues from early photograms, the time of the blue hour. 'Desert drift' echoes distorted geometries created by sand and rain from the Sahara, blown thousands of miles off course.

The term 'speculative' refers to a questioning approach and, increasingly, associations between unfolding connections across fields of knowledge seem relevant to a contemporary practice that asks questions across culture, capital, and climate. Print seems to be an ideal platform, with its unique history of disseminating information, challenging accepted dogmas, and presenting alternative possibilities. To exist, it also requires a dialogue inviting a transfer of information where surprises may materialise in the process. It offers the possibility of visual listening to a different perspective, another dimension, or point of view. I am interested in continuing to explore these lines of thought whilst developing work which increasingly responds to particular environments and experiences, using relevant materials in its unfolding.

Returning to the title, perhaps by recognising the value of broader senses of manifestations of touch it can encourage a greater sense of care in approach to and consideration of practice to print. It may be imperceptible, and fleeting, but as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) writes:

'My engagement with touch remains situated within an exploration of what caring signifies for thinking and knowing in more than human worlds. Here, a caring politics of speculative thinking could reclaim hapticity as a way to keep close to an engagement to respond to what a problem requires.'

REFERENCES:

Areskog Jones, C: 2021: "Up in the Air": <https://www.venti-journal.com/question-three>

Curran, F: 2019: Cloud Ecologies: Weather, pollution, time and data: Mutating Ecologies in Contemporary Art, Edited by Christian Alonso: University of Barcelona

Dean, T: 1995: Tate online
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dean-a-bag-of-air-t12920>

Debois Buhl, N: 2019: Time travelling with Photography: Louisiana Channel
<https://channel.louisiana.dk/artists/nanna-debois-buhl>

Deleuze, G: 1987: A thousand plateaus: University of Minnesota Press

Feuk, D: 2001: The celestographs of August Strindberg: Cabinet Magazine <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/3/feuk.php>

Hitchcock, A: 1958: Vertigo: Distributed by Paramount Pictures

Nancy, Jean Luc: 2013: The pleasure of drawing: Fordham University Press

Pallasmaa, J: 2005: The eyes of the skin: Wiley Press

Porras-Kim, G: 2022: Out of an instance of expiration comes a perennial showing: Gasworks Gallery, London <https://gasworks.org.uk/exhibitions/gala-porras-kim/>

Puig de la Bellacasa, M: 2017: Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in more than human worlds: University of Minnesota Press

Roberts, J: 2021: A W Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts: Art and the Pull of the Print: <https://www.nga.gov/research/casva/meetings/mellon-lectures-in-the-fine-arts/roberts-2021.html>

Tsing, A.:2015: The mushroom at the end of the world: Princeton University Press

IMAGE GALLERY

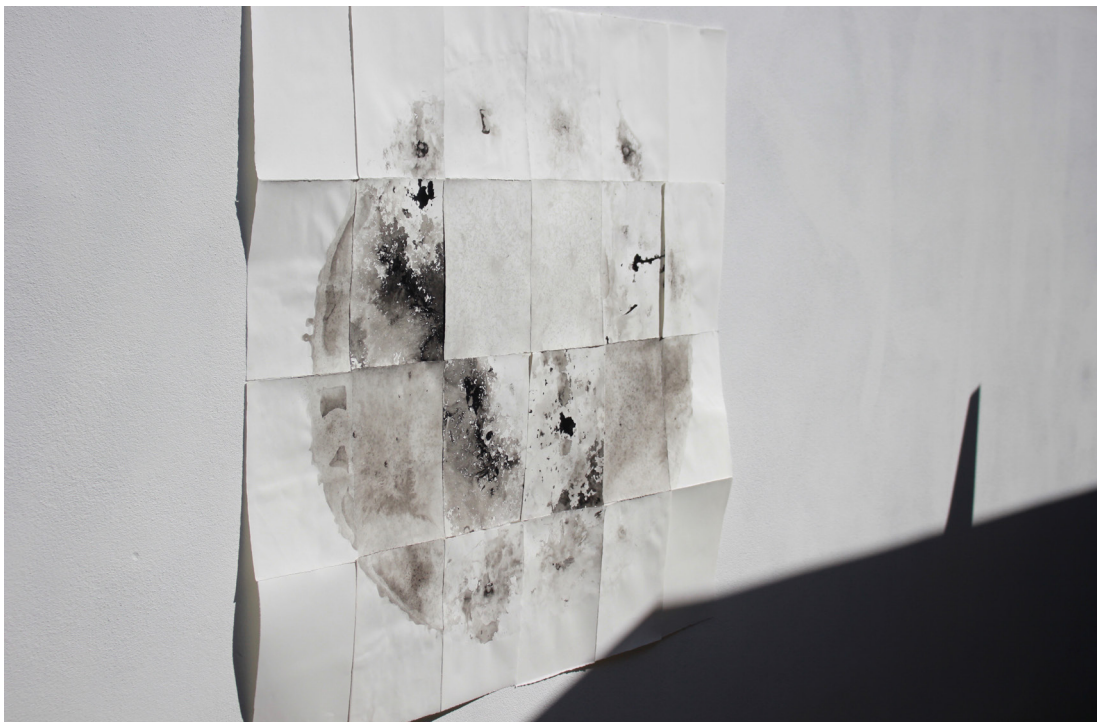


Figure 1: Dark matters, 2021.

Figure 2: Fallen Weather, 2021, 150 x 150 cm, Rainwater, Carbon on Zerkall sections

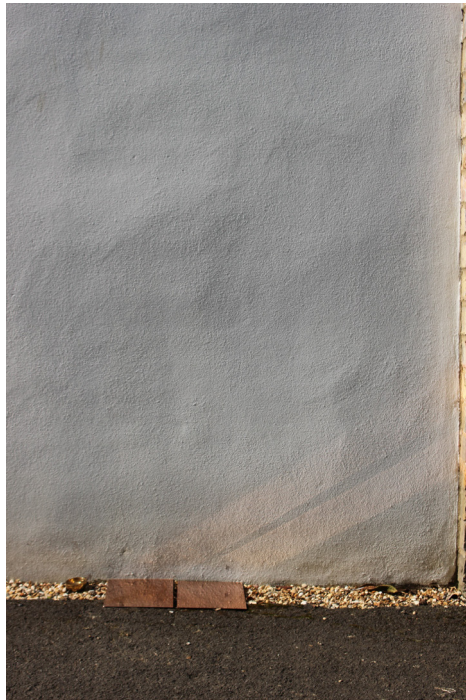


Figure 3: Solar Geometries, 2021, sunlight, copper, various
Figure 4: Visitor, 2021, copper, light, 28 x 35 cm

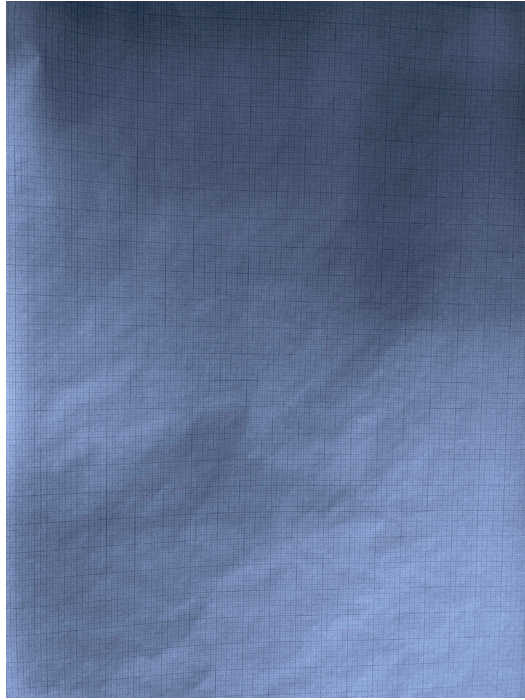


Figure 5: Cloud Study, 2022, digital print, 40 x 50 cm