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Article

Noisy Surfaces: Vulnerability and Art in Human–Ocean Relations

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Abstract

At the shoreline, human and ocean activities often act in unproductive tension with one another. This article draws from encounters between the modernist architecture in the port city of Toamasina in Madagascar and the activities of the Indian Ocean at that location to sense how human–ocean binary lines might become more porous. The first part of the article sketches a material-discursive theory of the weathered hole in modernist architectural surfaces. It explores the hole as a vital collective of queer otherings to the specific land-centred individualistic subject-hood of modernist Man, a specific figuration of a human who draws binary lines to separate itself out from the "natural world". The second part of the article argues that artistic inquiry is well positioned to sense into the activities of the hole. It looks to how the hole at the surface of modernist Man can co-shape the specific human–ocean relationship that forms at this shoreline. Such inquiry is explored through my solo exhibition titled *Static Drift*, held at the Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg in 2021. Sensing, the exhibition reveals, has the potential for listening to binary lines as they erect a surface that both pushes away yet also receives what has been pushed. In *Static Drift*, being vulnerable through human perceptions was highlighted as a critical mode for sensory attunement to the relationships that form at such surfaces. This article argues that the sonic is a useful sensory mode for opening perceptions toward what is not yet perceived in surface–hole relationships. The sonic opens sites for ontological thinking into human–ocean relations by sensing into the re-orienting potentials that noise offers for thinking about disrupting binaried surfaces.

Keywords: noise; sonic art; Indian Ocean; modernist architecture; weather; southern oceans; *Static Drift*

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Introduction: Scaling within Human–Ocean Relations

This article explores the vital realm of human–ocean relations by scaling attention with elemental behaviours involving salt and water on the material culture of the utopian, colonial project at the shoreline. To illustrate the failures of power in determining life at locations of high-weathering elemental activity, the utopian colonial project is sketched as inevitably eroded. The article locates the potentials of an interstitial zone for human–ocean relationing that, it is argued, should be sensed outside of land-centred ways of knowing. In this, the sonic is proposed as a sensory medium for becoming vulnerable and thus opening to ways of knowing that are more oceanic. This is done through noticing surfaces that generate an interfacing noise. When listened to, this article argues, such surfaces can be perceived through their multiple encountering locations and activities. To understand this zone of activity better, theories of the hole are drawn on to think through the failures of a surface asserted from within the colonial project. Here, a queer life of multiplicity, which is absent from colonial utopias at the shoreline, offers perspectives on the impossibilities of maintaining the Cartesian divide of materiality/intelligibility or culture/nature. Instead, elemental, chemical, and molecular behaviours continually mutate and liquify the modernist architecture and its associated figurations, rearranging their structures and surfaces through ongoing oceanic activity.

The first half of the article asks what an elemental analysis of the hole forming within modernist architecture can do for opening new sites to think human–ocean relations from. Here, the hole is taken up as a theme for reading discursive views of modernist Man, and the activities within the hole are proposed as a flux to recast terra-centric power within difference. The hole as theory carries into the second half of the article, where it is worked with to locate deviances from the imaginary of separability—that is, being able to exist outside of the forces of erosion so present within oceanic ecotones. Such locations are formed through thick relations where the human and ocean interface. The hole in the surface of this interface is taken up as a zone for sensing tensions within human–ocean relations. These tensions pull open the potential for sensory explorations that allow for a process of working with vulnerability to mutate within a multiplicity of difference. In this, the sensorium is outlined as being able to move away from the singularities associated with anthropocentric power.

This second half of the article congeals the concepts, theories, and motifs of the first half via a discussion of my creative practice, working deeper into sonic engagements conducted through my exhibition *Static Drift*. This shift in focus allows for the discursive subtleties that noise within the hole to propose how bodies relate and reconfigure in such zones of contact. The hole is thus understood through its activities of contact and not as a null, a no-space or no-place. Understood as a self-investigating zone of activity that inquires into the hole, *Static Drift* behaves as an ongoing process of vulnerable opening toward multiplicity. Such non-singularity disrupts the notion of a single “event” often associated with exhibitions that culminate in a showing of

completed work. Instead, being vulnerable to the agencies of vastness, the molecular activities of water in a basement, and the discursive meanderings of the artist-curator, *Static Drift* inquires into notions of temporal convergences, temporal multiplicity, and rhythms formed from human–ocean points of tension. It treats difference within these temporal rhythms as a zone for sensing into how to move *with* and *in* the thick relations they form.

This exhibition finds a staying point, which is the activities of rearrangement in human–ocean relations. However, it also moves into this point, treating it as a hole, a wormhole that funnels through space-time toward a zone where my own human–ocean rearrangements have taken place. This zone of rearrangement occurred for me somewhere on the outskirts of measurement when I was in the ocean for long enough to have forgotten to count the days, and my usual tools for measuring (such as the radio that caught signal from the shipping report, or my digital camera) had themselves become corrupted by salt. As I traversed deeper into the western Indian Ocean by boat in the high-weathering cyclonic activities typical of the month of February, I turned toward this weathering activity and released my grasp on land. The rise of atmospheric static on the radio while attempting to search for signal marked a moment of no return that I now return to again and again. By tracing the sensitive and unruly edges of signal that act as holes punctuated into a broadcast, this article asks what atmospherics and discursive attentions act within these holes, and how it might be possible to perceive these activities better. In my exhibition *Static Drift*, I returned to this liminal deep-sea phenomenon to notice how it has released terra-bound knowledge and comforts to make way for oceanic sensing. *Static Drift* worked within the hole through the sonic to find temporal divergences from terra-bound trajectories. It asked questions about how perceiving holes might reconfigure constructions of the human when in oceanic relations. The epistemic and ontological understandings that come from this are guided by embodied experiences (from being in the Indian Ocean) that propose “drifting” as a way to diverge from linearity and sense into “that which moves” so the ocean may be better oriented with.

From this, the article works through practice-led modes of inquiry, wherein noise (understood through perceptions of static) is noticed as a zone for connection that registers dis-rhythms of power and channels for drifting in. Overall, the article destabilises reliance on terra-formations of sight and sound, opening instead toward the noisy unknown as a modality of care for sensing what may yet become known in oceanic relations.

Modernism and Individualism at the Multiplicious Shoreline

The high-weather activity in the coastal ecotone of Madagascar’s largest port city, Toamasina, provides a critical location for thinking about human–ocean relations. It is here that this article sinks into the holes pitted into the pristine surface of modernist architecture on the shoreline to sense the potentials that such holes have for rearranging

over-determined surfaces. This is done by exploring notions of "weatherings" in a Global South context. Here, the focus is on zones of contact such as ecotones, wherein an over-determined subjecthood encounters oceanic activity through "the hole". The modernist architecture in the port city of Toamasina reads ocean activity as an invasive enemy. I propose a shift in perception in this relational set-up, wherein the weathering activity of oceanic weather cycles could be better understood through noticing the porosity of over-determined surfaces. Such relational set-ups are amphibious, as they draw together both ocean and land by looking at the encounters and resultant relations therein. To do this, Karen Barad's (2007) agential realist account of material-discursive ethics, which brings together theories of knowing with theories of being, is taken up because of how it holds the possibility of moving toward transmogrifiable worlding practices with such amphibious potentials. Alongside this, the notion of a surface being "pitted" or "weathered into" is entered into through feminist new-materialist theories of edges and the void, as this allows for a critical play with potentials for re-orienting into amphibious relations.

The port city of Toamasina exemplifies a problem of hegemonic individualism that is bound up in the modernist project that remains there. Situated on the eastern coastline of Madagascar, Toamasina sits in the high-weathering activities of the Indian Ocean, where trade winds and tropical cyclones are active. This activity is caught in continual relationing with the walls of the modernist buildings that scatter the coastline. Here, modernist architecture can be understood as the surface on which modernist imaginings perform "civilised Man". Historian Frederick Cooper (2009) outlines how in the 1930s the French colonists used their vision of this civilised man in the modernist architectural project in Toamasina as one that combines with Betsimisaraka[1] building techniques. This mixing of separate parts was proposed to set up novel colonial techniques more inclusive of vernacular ways of life; yet, importantly, the approach was designed to mitigate resistance in the colonies. Ultimately, according to Cooper (2009, 339), "the usefulness of this cultural strategy ... is pertained primarily to French interests, to 'civilized man', at home and abroad". Inherent in this is the individualised notion of a "civilised Man", placed in a hierarchical fashion spilling from Europe out "down" toward the colonies. This imaginary of the modernist project shapes the walls of the architecture that remain. The architecture is reinforced with concrete and steel to face off the weather—its "enemy"—thereby asserting the triumphant ideals of progress so bound up in modernism and colonisation. These walls represent the polished surface of this imaginary as it erases pasts in its rationality.[2]

1 "Betsimisaraka" translates loosely as "the many inseparables". They are the second largest ethnic group, after the Merina, in Madagascar.

2 The memory and cultural histories around such erasures in Malagasy architecture have been written about by Maurice Bloch ([1998] 2019). Bloch argues that language doesn't contain cultural experiences, and that knowledge exists cognitively, often in unworded ways, thus creating a disjuncture from earlier forms of anthropologist practices. This raises concerns about the modernist



Figure 1: *Modernist Walls*, by Meghan Judge (2012). Digital photograph taken in Toamasina. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

The walls also reveal a binary line that is seen to be encountering that which it others: oceanic weathering. Importantly, these walls mark a specific and traceable human–ocean encounter that is caught looping at its surface by the water's edge. This edge marks a contact zone and ecotone at the shoreline, where the movement of oceanic activities rush into terra. At this location, it is the surface of the modernist imagining that has become infiltrated by oceanic materials as they erode and corrode into the same concrete and reinforced steel that is designed to keep them out. These buildings at the shoreline are continually in presence *with* the ocean. What results could at first be understood as a hostile environment: on the one hand, the weather continually lashes at the buildings, slowly undoing them as it removes surfaces and liquefies interiors; on the

architects who sought to combine "local" architecture and culture from the colonies with the aesthetics of their modernist facades in order to make them appear more orientalist, as was the trend in modernism. What we are directed toward here are gaps in knowing, filled with colonial imagination. For a closer look into the meanings ascribed to homes destroyed by colonial wars in Madagascar, please see Bloch ([1998] 2019).

other, the buildings are caught up in a perpetual assertion of themselves as they are remade again and again by builders fixing their damaged surfaces. In this contact zone, two temporalities encounter each other: that of the deep-time cyclic nature of the ocean, and that of the linear progressions of "civilised Man". Looking more closely at an elemental activity at play here, it is possible to notice that this encounter need not be narrated as two forces at war, wherein the oceanic activity is viewed as an enemy to architectural structures. Instead, it is useful to think relationally in material-discursive ways (Barad 2007) that notice softer and more vulnerable realities beyond the binary lines of modernism and that which it others.

Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2016, 19) looks beyond such binaries by drawing our attention to what survives outside of capitalist ruin. Tsing outlines the "unruly edges" of capitalist human worlds and that which they "other" so that the subjects caught up in a capitalist world might begin to sense and absorb the lessons about being vulnerable to what this world others. Tsing provocatively asks, "What if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?"; in this, our time is sketched as precarity itself, what she calls "the condition of being vulnerable to others" (2016, 20). Inside the holes that are continually pitted into the modernist Toamasina walls by oceanic weather, a material encounter of oceanic forces, human progress, and water–Earth cycles exists. It is possible to seek out the resultant excess of this encounter (Dayan 1998), which I understand to be sitting in tension with the assertions of progress bound up in the modernist walls, haunting them with oceanic presences.

For Tsing (2016, 20), "unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others". What Tsing is proposing here is that there is a reconfiguring of self in encounters with what we other. It is possible to find ways of noticing these shifting parts by looking at how their configuring assemblages shift. Donna Haraway (2016) might add that this could be done through a project of re-storying—that is, the telling of stories that are not the same as the ones told over and over again in the Anthropos—and she would insist that this must happen again and again. Barad (2007) might add that such storying may occur in ways that re-turn, this time not through an assemblage of parts, but rather in ways that produce or diffract patterns of *more*.[3] For it is the encounters with these assemblages that hold transformative potential in what Tsing (2016, 23), after Barad, calls "indeterminate possibilities". The possibilities that re-pattern here are ones for rearrangement, ones that can world. This re-worlding diffracts alternative temporalities to progress and its associated march toward depletion.

3 In quantum field theory, Barad (2007) describes such acts of re-turning as "radical openings" which are at the heart of matter, or mattering. Re-turning produces patterns of more, or what they call diffracted patterns, setting re-turning as a mode for attempting to understand not only how such worlding occurs but what these changes are charged with—that is, what meaning they contain.

Crystalising in Oceanic Matter

Turning to the materialities of oceanic activities at this shoreline now, the "ongoingness" of material activities and the "indeterminacy" of discursive assertions can be seen acting agentially with one another. The ongoing activity of water infiltration into the walls at the shoreline is, as alluded to earlier, due to it being a part of a much larger activity caught up in oceanic cycles, namely the hydrological cycle. The infiltration of water into the modernist walls in Toamasina touches a particular part of this hydrological cycle: the part where water is moved from the ocean reservoir to the atmospheric one. Here, a purification process of the water occurs as molecules that have been dissolved in the water are freed and left behind to drift. These molecules are those of the varying salts, transmogrifying ionic compounds that move between states of dissolution and compounding crystallisation. Tracing elemental rearrangement through watery relations shows how bodies-in-cycle are vital and agentive as they continually scale through macro entanglements.

As the activities of the micro ions in salt move, they are agentially bound up in the macro temporality of water cycles. Here it can be seen that water is critical in the various formations of salt, which moves with water through various reservoirs. Water collects and dissolves carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, making the rain slightly acidic, which then enables rock erosion that draws out the mineral salts from within the rocks. These minerals separate into ions and wash into the ocean bed in entangled ways. When water comes into contact with salt, the water molecules attract and pull apart the sodium and chloride ions in salt crystals to dissolve them. Salt molecules are thus divided and surrounded by water molecules and they do not have enough energy to escape. They can remain in the ocean bed for long periods, caught in "residency time"; in the ocean, they coexist as different, separable admixtures, held together and apart by water.[4] However, when the hydrological process of evaporation takes place, water droplets that contain dissolved salt lift into the air, where they quickly separate from the sodium and chloride molecules, leaving those behind while the water transcends to its next reservoir—the atmosphere. Through tracing the movement of salt the separate parts of a mixture are highlighted, but so are the inseparabilities of this phenomenon: the salts that are left behind to drift are finally freed and can find each other again, crystallising and expanding with a strength that can crack through even the toughest of rocks. However, it is moisture that binds these crystals together again. On a molecular level, the ocean is a vast reservoir, a phenomenon consisting of co-existing differences that mix, merge, and mutate together. At the ecotones existing outside of the mass oceanic

4 For an interesting scientific read into residency time, please see Brigitte Falkenburg (2007). It is important to note that the concept of residency time is also taken up in racial analysis by theorist Christina Sharpe (2016), who critically links the deaths of slaves with molecules in the ocean bound up in residency time.

body of water but touching its activities, binaries that attempt to separate themselves from the ocean are soaked through as micro temporalities sag and curl into macro ones.



Figure 2: "Rust in reinforced steel." WikiCommons image. Creative Commons License. (Accessed November 28, 2022. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/43/Qew_bruecke_nf_beton_kaputt_33_von_46.jpg/2560px-Qew_bruecke_nf_beton_kaputt_33_von_46.jpg)

In the case of the modernist buildings in Toamasina, weather-blown salt crystals form inside holes that have been bored into the surface by erosion. Salt enables a slow pitting as it expands the holes between cracks. Crystals then infiltrate below the surface with the water and find their way to the reinforced steel below. Here, as a result, a new chemical behaviour occurs; between the metal surface and the salty water, a liquifying reaction takes place. A new in-between substance is born: rust. As it pits, rust creates an autocatalytic chemical network, wherein self-replicating molecules are set into action, thus setting the scene for mutation. These holes are a container of activity. They are mini-reservoirs of water that are caught up in the hydrological cycle system. It is the walls that intrude on their flow. Inside the hole-as-container, a "double encompassment" (Wagner 2012) or "double captivity" (Swancutt 2012) exists, wherein the host and what is hosted become a complex dance of activities. In this case, an activity of corrosion takes place which emerges materially from the excess between host and hosted, or metal and salt. Corrosion forms a hole that is a container. In this container-as-hole, mutation becomes an illuminated node that can be sensed. Here, the hole contains an active excess, the potentials of which mound the more you sense them.

Hole-as-Container-as-~~Void~~

The hole-as-container aligns with material feminist notions of the "void" (Barad 2015; Chen and Luciano 2015; Lorde 1995; Wynter 2003[5]), which I indicate as ~~void~~.[6] Perhaps the most directly linked literature that combines the non-human worlds with "human" otherness is found in Mel Y. Chen and Dana Luciano's (2015) theory of queer inhumanism, which usefully traces the void.[7] Chen and Luciano prefer the term "inhuman", which highlights the problem in the centring of the human by indexing all that is not considered to be part of a human as privileged by modernist, capitalist, anthropocentric worlds. In doing so, Chen and Luciano take queer theory as a starting point to think about relations. Here, they understand queer life to be precarious life. In doing this, they speak not only of the queer human, but of queer life outside of the anthropocentric human as well. For them, queer inhumanism frays at the edges of the figuration of a "human". Looking to what is voided by humanism means noticing what inhabits the void, what noises "human" binaries and builds a space for noticing what is pushed out of the centre and othered by human exceptionalism. This framing understands the void to be an active ~~void~~ rather than a depleted void. Following this, in much the same way that Filip de Boeck and Sammy Baloji (2016) view the hole as a site for meaning-making in material, mental, and ethical surfaces, I take the view that "the hole itself also offers an aperture, an opening, a possibility, at least for those who know how to read an alternative meaning into its blackness" (Boeck and Baloji 2016, 14). The resultant excess or the patterns of *more* which result from the encounters between the modernist project and oceanic elements at the shoreline in Toamasina are active in that they rearrange.[8]

Here, the holes are seen to be vitally active. These holes are not found wanting. Rather, they align with an agential realist account[9] of the void: "Let us align ourselves with the raging nothingness, the silent howling of the void, as it trans*figures fleshy possibilities. Wandering off the straight and narrow path, wonderings alight. Trans* desires surge forth electrifying the field of dreams and transmaterialities-to-come" (Barad 2015, 416).

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5 The notion of the human which is overdetermined in the world is carefully and usefully traced by Sylvia Wynter (2003) through her theorising of Man 1 and Man 2, which emerged out of the Renaissance and took centre stage in the Enlightenment project.

6 I intentionally strike through "void" in this article to indicate that there is activity within the void that counters the presumption of an emptiness or nothingness.

7 Chen and Luciano steer clear of the commonly used term "non-human", which indexes an entity displaying some human characteristics, but not enough to be considered human. This term still posits all that exists outside of the ideal "human", which is centred.

8 I speak to opening perception toward this, which is to say sensing it more, and how it reveals the potentials of "with" and "more" (as in thinking-with and more-than-human) that provide openings for deeper inquiry.

9 Karen Barad (2007, 234) proposes agential realism as an "epistemological and ontological framework that cuts across many of the well-worn oppositions that circulate in traditional realism versus constructivism, agency versus structure, idealism versus materialism, and poststructuralism versus Marxism debates".

By bringing words like "filled" and "raging" into conversation with "nothingness", the void being sensed here can be understood not as an empty *nullis*, but rather as a dense and vital collective that both yearns and releases, filled with all the queerness and "otherness" of the over-determined human figuration in question. By calling our attention to the "possibilities yet to come", we are drawn to an imagination which is utilised as a vehicle to travel between, above, and below while it still acts on the non-human/human binary, blurring at the surface set up within the Cartesian human/nature divide. With this understanding of the void, it becomes possible to sense the holing activity (via the pitting into resistant surfaces) as a behaviour of active tension within surfaces—a relationing which could be conceived of in more porous ways.

An agential realist account of the void understands it to be filled with tensions. Taking its lead from virtual particles, a phenomenon argued to be real in quantum field theory (QFT), agential realism recognises the haunting qualities of the real yet unobservable virtual particle that effectively appears to mediate activity between observable particles. According to QFT, while particles exist in a field as ongoing tones, virtual particles appear as disturbances to those tones, asking that you shift attention from the singularity of the particle to realise instead an overtone phenomenon of their relations, in such a way as one might think of the activity of waves that cause observable ripples on water's surface.[10] While the inobservability of these virtual particles haunts philosophers, physicists maintain that they are real (Falkenburg 2007) and that they move the fields that particles operate within, much like underlying waves affect ripples on the surface of the water. Barad's (2007) agential realism brings our attention to the potentials that particles have when orienting toward the virtual particle counterpart: "Virtual particles are not in the void but of the void. They are on the razor edge of non/being. The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be" (Barad 2015, 400). What is being oriented toward here is "a jubilation of emptiness", and in this jubilation, what is yet to be perceived and what is yet to come *can* be sensed. Barad (2015, 400) warns us: "Don't for a minute think that there are no material effects of yearning and imagining." An agential realist account of the void offers a location for orientation-within-desires that move from our edges of perception into *more*.

Thinking with the hole as a container, wherein the void of the hole acts as a necessary noise to attune toward, it is possible to understand the hole as an ongoing behaviour existing in-between and because of temporal tensions. It is desirable to sense the mutating potentials of these tensions, so that a coexistence within difference might not only be noticed, but be opened toward. As the hole is taken up metaphorically, materially, immaterially, and discursively, a better understanding of how to perceive the reconfiguration of an over-determined human in oceanic relations is grasped at.

10 I am borrowing from theoretical physicist Matt Strassler (2011), who has argued that virtual particles are best thought of as "disturbances in a field that is not a particle".

The Doing of Weathering

Taking up the hole now as a productive container and zone for thinking human–ocean relations, I turn to my exhibition *Static Drift* (produced as part of my PhD dissertation), wherein I occupied a hole in the ground for a month to sense into its agencies and how they opened channels for drifting into my own past-yet-ever-present oceanic encounters. I will now attempt to further open such channels so that they might guide an experience of being in the space.



Figure 3: *fieldnotes from the wormhole*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Soundwave on ocean salt. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Upon descending the staircase into the underground basement into *Static Drift*, sounds begin to rise.[11] Whispers spoken and sung are drenched in a fuzzing atmosphere. It takes a moment to arrive; it takes a moment to re-orient the senses toward sinking into the sounds that fill the air. The basement, itself a hole dug into the ground of the Witwatersrand ridge in Johannesburg, has been emptied of the water that continually wells up along this watershed. Although the water has been removed, the basement is far from dry. The presence of water is everywhere—in the cool damp air as well as in

11 I recommend you listen to this sound clip I generated from the exhibition while reading the text from this point on: https://soundcloud.com/megatrops/static-drift?si=49a1c903dab24928ba342c583a6a32dd.

the persistent leakings-in along the outer north-eastern edge of the floor, which gets drained monthly. At the entrance to the basement is a staircase that leads down to the activity of this leak, and it is here, alongside this ongoing activity, that a visitor to the exhibition first encounters the sonic waves that fill the space. In this basement-hole, sonic presences can be sensed. As you sink into the room, these presences rise, and it becomes necessary to re-orient alongside the excess, the "more" that they propose. That is, it becomes necessary to sense the potentials of what this rise of sonic waves does to sensing-as-usual (wherein the dominance of sight is most often favoured).

Static Drift was set up to search for relational locations at the edge of terra-based biases. The relational locations that are worked here span through space and time, disturbing their binaries. The entire exhibition re-turned to locations where my own terra-based biases became, and continue to become, rearranged by oceanic activities. It set up a zone for re-turning to the ocean at a point where the radio's weather broadcast signal that we picked up on a voyage I undertook through parts of the western Indian Ocean cracked into elemental noise, or static, signalling an activity of weathering itself.[12] The shift of perception associated with this change in signal and reception released my own overdetermined terra-centric perceptions. I became attuned to the oceanic activities that pit into receiving apparatuses. Although uncomfortable, the pitting activity and resultant holes house the potentials of an opening toward the virtual-particle-orienting activity that is Barad's void. This hole might be thought of as a signal itself, as it carries a sense of loss and desire for the social comforts associated with my relatively stable grasp on terra, and yet at the same time opens to the potentials for being in closer relations with oceanic and planetary weathering systems.[13] As the radio signal for the weather report disappeared into static on our receiver, a hissing that sounds like endless popping particles, it initially seemed to me, comparatively, that this static was an unwanted noise. However, this noise now entrains with it an embodied experience of becoming weathered into by the elemental spherics that static itself transmits. Through the noise of static it is possible for me to drift back into the hauntings of elemental activity that orient me within oceanic movement while I attempt to find a language for the ways that I have become moved by this.

These experiences are what I took up in *Static Drift*. By doing this I re-oriented my senses toward what exists in the static—that is, what the elemental noise that is static can do for opening my perceptions beyond terra-biases. Sound, here, is understood more

12 I undertook this voyage in 2010, working as crew-on-deck while seeking passage to Madagascar to conduct research into the social histories of martial arts in Antananarivo. The yacht was being delivered to the island of Mayotte, and a friend and I joined as the two crew members to the skipper sailing the vessel when it berthed in the Cape Town harbour. Neither myself nor my friend had any experience in sailing and we learned as we moved through the high-weathering conditions.

13 Although the lands of my yearnings are troubled, they still seemed more familiar than the ocean. One of the terra comforts enjoyed with the presence of the weather report was that of a social connectivity that slipped in through the cracks of the reporter's tracking and predictions. For an interesting read into radio as a social phenomenon, please see Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo (2012).

broadly than a reception in the ears. I attempt to think more oceanically about the sonic as a wave form sensed through vibration, as a material-discursive activity that touches tensions together. These wave forms find meaning and care through rearranging perceptions, or percept-ability, that imagine an oceanic sensing. There was a noise that permeated throughout the exhibition, as sonic waves bounced around the basement-hole. This noise can be perceived as accessible, something to move through, or it can be perceived of as a disturbance, something to move away from. It can be perceived as audible (as in sound clips), it can be perceived as visual (as in sonic booklets or disturbed water), and it can be perceived as felt (as in the affective sonic channels that occurred in the basement). The "volume" on each work's audio varied greatly, depending on the apparatus used to emit sound and the frequency range of the sound itself. Some sounds could not be heard, as they existed below the range of the human ability to hear, while some sound waves were diffracted over salt crystals, effectively dissipating at the closest surface to the speaker; yet others continued to thicken as they bounced around the room, ongoing and without end. Overall, the perceptibility of sounds and non-sounds of sonic waves were experimented with as a whole in *Static Drift*, wherein, on a macro scale, passages or channels of noise and silence that allow for movement through the space opened, allowing an embodied sensing of the sonic to occur.

I started *Static Drift* by setting up four sonic sculptures. The first, *fieldnotes from the wormhole* (Figure 3), consisted of mounds of sea salt that rose up to dangling tweeters with sonic recordings from practitioners who work at the ecotones as they sound out their oceanic rearrangements.[14] Secondly, *even my pores itch* (Figure 4) consisted of a large floating canvas ring that flapped in the moving air, with a radio in the centre playing spheric static. The third was *re-patterns: convergence, divergence* (Figure 8), which consisted of low-frequency sine waves that played through an amplifier into a bowl filled with Witwatersrand upwell water, the patterns and diffractions of which reflected on the walls and roof.[15] Finally, *before i sink* (figures 6 to 9) consisted of an ongoing mural that captured notes from spending time in-between the wall and a sonic recording of overtone singing performed into the Badamera ocean in Madagascar. Altogether, these sonic sculptures stood alone as broadcasts, but together they acted as an entrained activity with multiple zones of contact. Understood together or apart, they looped in time, thickening locations of multiplicity where both artist and visitor can sense channels for drift.

14 Contributors to this work are artists Môta Soa, Zayaan Khan, Nina Barnette, Lauren Manning, and Joanne Peers.

15 With collaborator musician Hugh Davies.



Figure 4: *even my pores itch*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Static, radio, fabric, chalk. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Noise, in *Static Drift*, is understood as a sounding out of locations that, like static, occur across space.[16] *Static Drift* asked that noise be perceived of in material-discursive ways, and it did this by setting up four sonic sculptures that each generated an excess from their respective re-turns to the ocean. Understood as contact zones, these sculptures both led into locations and located larger zones through their proximity to each other in the basement-hole; the zones patterned further contact zones as they came into contact with each other and the agencies of the basement-hole. It is through these thick locations that the material-discursive inquiry can occur. I spent the month that the exhibition was up sensing, through drift, where these zones were and noting down clues that helped me to understand my own oceanic relationing that emerged from being present with them.

Orientation is a key mode of thinking for this research. *Static Drift* offered a space where the creative work began to lead the process of how the research was contained. Re-orienting myself in the underground basement allowed me to step into "the hole" and re-orient my senses within the behaviours of the hole, so that I could think *from* and *through* it. Here, a necessary rearrangement with the matter present or immaterial hauntings that sit in relation to it could be noticed. Now, instead of my artwork existing

16 The thick and rapidly spotting noise of static is made up of a multitude of sounds called spherics, which are the dust of sound, as they include everything from lightning strikes to electrical devices to cosmic background noise.

as predetermined objects that express a particular theory—an arrangement wherein the theory would come first—the works come into being *through* the relationships that form inside the hole. It is only through a process of re-orienting *within* these relationships that the exhibition's potentials can be sensed. In this arrangement, the hole is entangled into the theorising and makings brought into the exhibition space. Such entanglements cannot be planned: they exist in an agential relationing that is always be-coming through their relationing within the hole, and it is precisely this that needs re-orienting with.

Re-orienting in this way into the agential activities of the space allows for a focus on a bodily sensing of sonic activities to be sharpened. In the experience of setting up the exhibition, I came to the realisation that I wanted to distil the movement of sonic waves from the sculptures present, because it had a way of acting and activating in-between, *taking up and touching the vastness of the basement.* I began to notice the basement through its reverberating, oscillating, spheric, diffractive, and affective wave activity. This activity moves in material ways that blur the borders of the works and demonstrate their entanglements into the larger space that they exist within, while at the same time acting discursively toward the thick locations that these works come from. In other words, sound brings the material and the discursive into thickening relations that allow for Sarat Maharaj's (2009) provocation of art as a glutenous mode, wherein one is enabled to think *through* the artworks.[17] Such a sentiment is echoed in cultural theorist and curator Chus Martinez's (2012) conviction that artists are well positioned to inquire, as they take up sense-making as an ability *and* inability to make sense. For Martinez, artists play an important role in imagining beyond hegemonic language in ways that function as clue-building toward a mystery. It is in this that I was brought to attention again with the ongoing activity of my reconfiguration with oceanic relationings, this time within the basement-hole.

As such, *Static Drift* could only begin to be understood *after* the works were installed inside the activities of the hole. That is, the clue-building could only be sensed after the sound was inside the basement where the sonic waves fell away from the speakers and bounced off of multiple surfaces, activating them and generating an affective sonic atmosphere. It was after the second day that the show was installed that I began to sense into how these waves moved, and the potentials for what that meant for the behaviour of difference in space as a whole. It became clear that, through sound, this exhibition could become more of an opening-toward-locations (more holes) than a full-stop (a blocked hole) on the works that were set up inside the basement-hole. This shifted the exhibition away from the notion of a "show" and placed it closer to that of an inquiry.

17 Maharaj's (2009) concept outlines how to *think through the visual* as opposed to the dominant *visual thinking.* I move this into the terrain of the sonic in much the same vein—that is, how to *think through the sonic*, as opposed to *sonic thinking*.

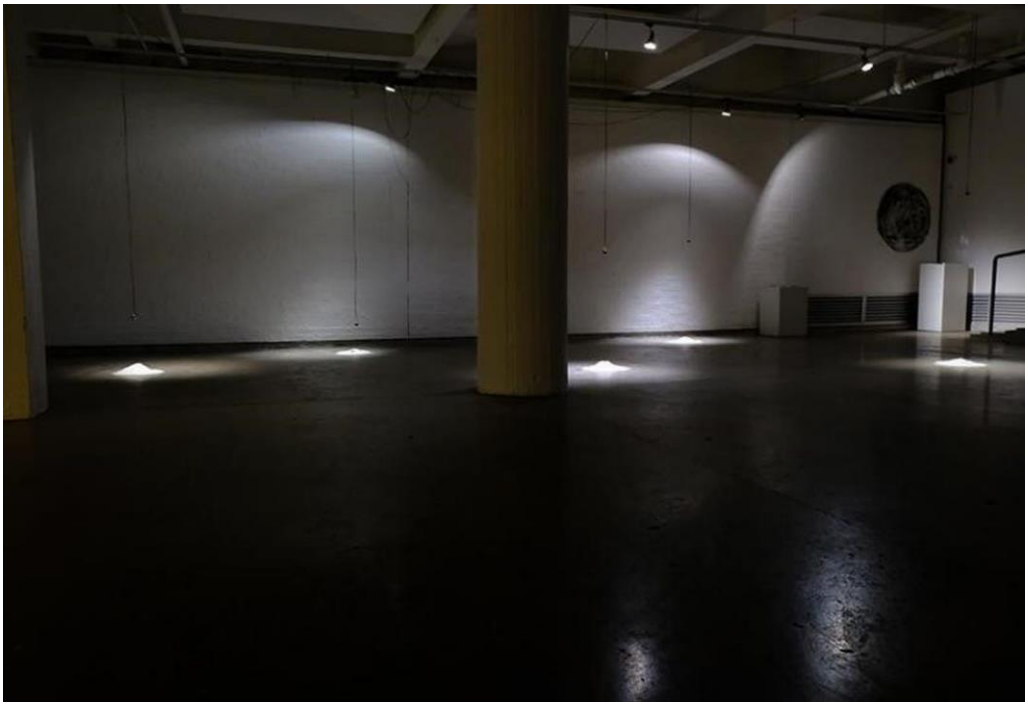

Figure 5: *Static Drift*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Soundwave channels in underground basement. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Underground and Damp in Zones of Contact

I experienced some discomfort in opening toward the underground location, as I initially perceived the emptiness of the hole. Re-orienting with this discomfort in *Static Drift* required being vulnerable toward my oceanic relations through zones of contact (Haraway 2008). These zones of contact form a threshold space of discomfort that I took and explored as an artist-curator in the exhibition space. I cultivated these zones in the underground location to sense into the opening of passages and movement that the works diffracted, wherein the agency of the space was attuned to and revealed. It is this that re-turned me to the ongoing phenomenon of my own oceanic relationing. The dampness of air in the vastness of space revealed the activities of water in the basement-hole that the exhibition was set up in. In them, I began to sense into the pools of oceanic activity that pitted into my surface and permeated my psyche from the experiences of being out at sea. In this state of re-turn, I was caught up in the highly active agencies of earth systems on oceanic waters that existed in the basement-hole, but also exist everywhere on earth. The more time I spent in the basement-hole sensing into this contact zone, the more I was able to inquire into it.

Moving around the exhibition space, varying contact zones were found overlapping in ecotones, like shorelines where terra and ocean move into and through each other, diffracting vital locations. The multiple dangling tweeters in *fieldnotes from the wormhole* released sonic waves that fell down onto the mounds of sea salt. The waves that fell onto the uneven crystals of salt broke up, which effectively lessened how far they spread across the room. However, the differing heights of the tweeters and mounds meant that some waves partially bounced off the floors and spread around. Where these waves diffracted through each other, noisy locations thickened. They further diffracted with the sound waves from the static in *even my pores itch*, and with the low-frequency sine waves from *re-patterns: convergence, divergence* and the waves from the singing in *before i sink*. How the waves bounced around the room, and where they diffracted, mattered channels of noisy locations. These overlapping zones provided their own locations while signalling routes for moving through the space.

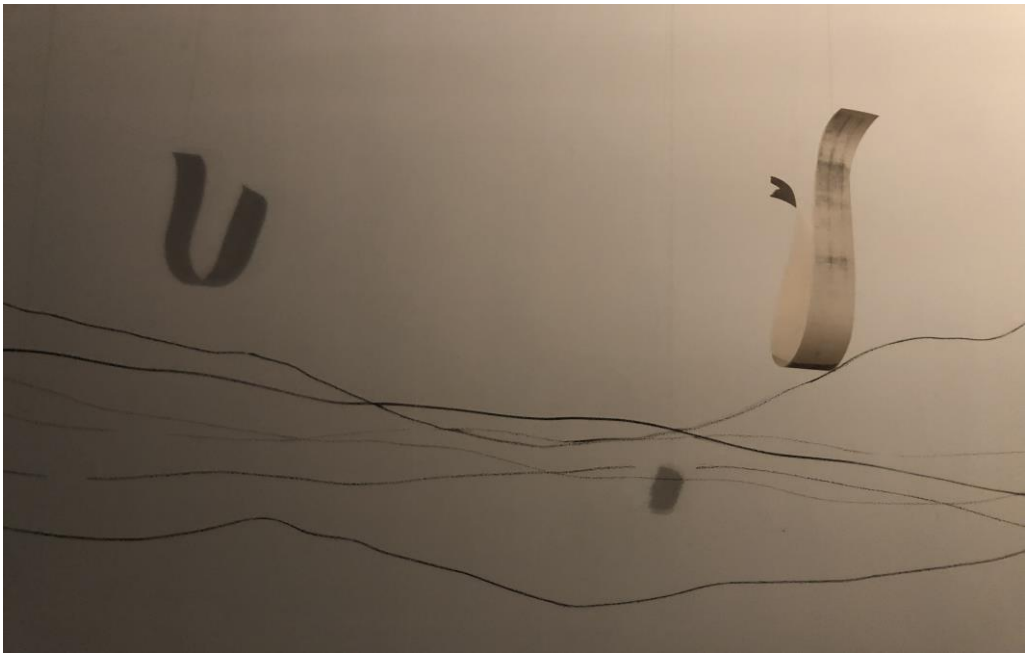

Figure 6: *before i sink*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Mixed-media mural. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Ecotones are a useful way to think about such contact-zone locations, as they suggest the rise of a third space in the meeting of otherwise categorised edges. Of interest is the presence of the sonic in the word “ecotone”, through “tone”, which indexes an overall quality of the narrator’s voice that can be picked up by a listener—as in tone of voice, or the strength and pitch of a vocal sound. Listening in to this emergent tone requires attuning to it, not only to hear the narrator, but to sense an emotive assemblage related to their embodiment of what is being expressed—that is, becoming receptive to tone’s

signal. This means that a necessary adjusting is required to the perceptions needed to sense into the noise of the overlapping parts as they repattern this third location. In this, noise is understood as an activity of perceptibility, wherein the discomfort of undesirable sounds (such as static on a radio receiver) are challenged to bring into question the receiver's limits for receiving tonal expression. The repatterned noisy location is thick with the callings from geographical locations (sites of the sound recordings) and the many ecological, spheric, and embodied relations housed therein. This ecotone thickens further still into a new zone that emerges as an excess, or *more*, that cannot be reduced to singular parts nor be the sum of any parts, as it is its own relations that repattern with and in the agentile hole.

Voice Notes as Inquiry into the Unknown

It is at these tonal zones of excess in the exhibition that I noted the clues that arose through my inquiry that helped me sense better. These clues described and reconfigured what I was sensing but did not yet know. While the emerging third zones of relationing are still being sensed, there is also a very real unknowability associated with human–ocean relationing. Humans cannot breathe under the water, even though we come from the ocean. As someone who can be traced as coming from a cultural trajectory that has dislodged from underwater spirit guides and the skills of forefathers who, as seapeople, may have learned some form of vibrational communication from fish,[18] I have to become comfortable with inquiring into something that I do not know. In a lecture by Wanda Nanibush (2021) in the Ocean/Uni programme at the TBA21 Academy, entitled "Entering the Space of Non-knowledge", the Western knowledge trajectory is outlined as being uncomfortable with not-knowing. Nanibush suggests that the quest of this knowledge-making is to know, and knowledge is considered a virtue. In this quest "individuality overpowers collaboration", and thus for Nanibush it is important that, instead of rushing to find knowledge, we might learn to be vulnerable while holding a space open (like a hole) as we wait for the knowledge to *come to us.* Such vulnerability is one that, like Tsing's others and Barad's void, holds the potentials of opening toward a vitality of the yet unknown. Barad's desiring orientation is moved toward here. Staying with this inability to know in *Static Drift* kept me at my surface as I sensed into and beyond it. The ongoing inquiry, coupled with note-taking in the exhibition, kept me seeking out the porous pores wherein *more* can enter into and be sensed. In this way what exists beyond the category of self is not so easily othered, as *self* and *more* become ontologically fluid together.

18 Emma McCormick Goodhart (2020) writes about the vibrational frequency picked up by human skin when attuned to fishing practices underwater.



Figure 7: *before i sink*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Mixed-media mural. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Being and Non-being, or Becoming Vulnerable to Wayward Sensing

In *Static Drift*, so much more was realised while the exhibition was up than before it was installed. Throughout the exhibition, all of the works were in varying states of ongoingness so as to allow for deeper inquiry. I find the notion of inquiry useful here, as I think through the artworks and how they help me understand my re-turns to oceanic relationing. Elizabeth Adams St Pierre (2011, 613) understands inquiry to be initiating "the cascading collapse of methodology's centre" by finding use in its "failure in the wake of the 'posts'".[19] St Pierre is interested in how the "posts" (post-modernism, post-philosophy, post-humanism, etc.) deconstruct a certain subjecthood bound up and centred in epistemology, shifting to a disrupture of distinctions between epistemology and ontology, with ontology being a branch of metaphysics concerned with what exists, a field which quantum physicists and theorists like Barad (2007) take up so well. By working with Jacques Derrida's "affirmative deconstruction", St Pierre (2011, 617) avails the potentials for the structure of "research" as taught in university settings, as it can rupture its own restrictions to meaning-making.

19 For St Pierre (2011, 615), the posts "announce a radical break with the humanist, imperialist, representationalist, objectivist, rationalist, epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions of Western Enlightenment thought and practice".

St Pierre (2011; 2021) deconstructs and rearranges the notion of research and its associated methodologies into that of inquiry. In arguing for this, St Pierre follows Derrida's understandings of deconstruction as a way of reading that moves away from the notion of a thing having its own essence; for Derrida (1997, 9), deconstruction can never be applied "from the outside", as it has no centre. St Pierre (2011) claims that, since Derrida sees deconstruction as both anti-structuralist and structuralist, in that it undoes while it is also concerned with the structure of texts, deconstruction is always already different from itself. Here "things" exist only *in relation*, as "meaning appears only fleetingly and then begins to decay as it misfires and re-forms within the play of language" (Derrida 1997, cited in St. Pierre 2011, 617). In the concern for texts raised through Derrida's deconstruction, St Pierre works through Derrida's (1997) theory of signs, which St Pierre (2011, 617) notes sees the sign as "not a structure of identity, of presence, but a radical structure of difference, absence". Following this, and as a set-up, *Static Drift* took up inquiry in its ability to hold the process of deconstruction of terra-biases, understanding that "signs" emerge from being able to work with and hold the restructuring process alongside and into difference. This process of deconstruction opens toward the unknown for reconstruction.

This concept of difference is derived through Derrida's (1982) concept of *différance*, which means both to "differ" and to "defer". Barad (2007; 2010) theorises this further in their agential realist account. This account works into the notion of *différance* by nudging us toward the sensory experiences of a dis/jointed movement which they describe as "a felt sense" (Barad 2007, 149) of this *différance*. Sensing, then, becomes a mode for noticing this *différance*, which moves us and which we move with. Sensing what moved in *Static Drift*, and how I was moved with what existed in it, opened me toward the agencies of the presences in the basement-hole. This opening should not be confused with "understanding", as it precedes any finalised knowings. It is a knowing that is not finalised, but one that is emerging or becoming, while churning with what emerges in unknowing. The differing agencies and apparatuses in the exhibition produced an excess that could be sensed into, and in doing so the *potentials* of perceiving more grew at my surface.

For Barad (2007, 379), "knowing is a specific engagement of the world where one part of the world becomes differentially intelligible to another part of the world in its differential accountability to and for that which it is apart". Here, through the notion of *différance* and sensing otherwise (or felt-sense), Barad (2007, 149) shifts the framing of intelligibility from being centred on humans to "an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation". That is, intelligibility is understood as a performance that attempts to separate out parts of the same phenomenon so that it can understand the relations of these parts better. In this move, the human is not placed on a higher level of hierarchy, nor is it divided from the material as in a Cartesian culture/material split.

Rather, a focus on ontologically becoming-with is achieved.[20] Here, the world does not rotate around the human as a pivotal point of departure, but instead leans toward the different articulations of the world, some of which can be sensed but many of which occur outside of the human ability to perceive.

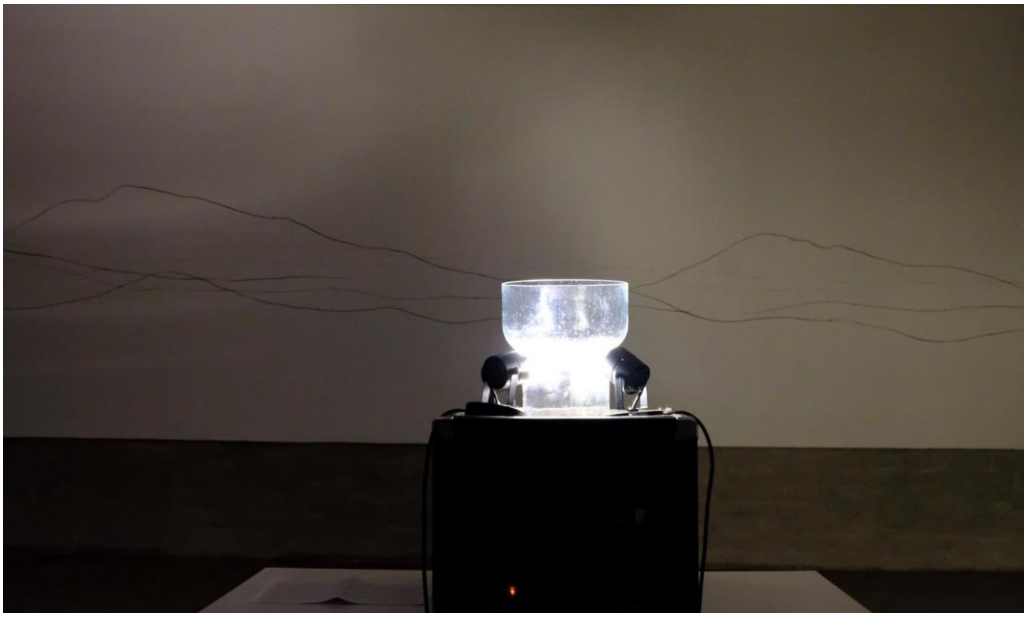

Figure 8: *re-patterns: convergence, divergence* and *before i sink*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Low-frequency sine waves, amplifier, Witwatersrand ridge upwell water, chalk. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

The word "drift" in *Static Drift* acts as a clue for sensing. Drifting means to be moved along by something; what that something is needs to be felt. In the exhibition, it is the excess of *différance* that created sonic and affective channels through which to drift. This excess is played with so that it can be sensed, allowing for a sense-ability that thickens the more it is inquired into. *Static Drift* took up St Pierre's (2011) *inquiry* to thicken perception through our senses. It also took up Barad's (2007) *diffraction*. For Barad (2007, 381), "diffraction is not merely about differences, and certainly not

20 There is also a concern around the notion of a flattened ontology. Both Barad (2007) and Rosi Braidotti (2014) point to the fact that the category "human" cannot be flattened, due to the uneven power at play in the world. As such it is important to not universalise the human into one large, blanketed flattening which ignores the power present in the figurations of human/inhuman. In the case mentioned here, however, becoming-with ontologically does not erase difference. Instead, it refers to a possible future, a justice-to-come (Barad 2010), wherein understanding *how* we become, i.e. how reality is functioning, is possible in less hierarchical ways. This understanding works against the power plays inherent in the very uneven surface of the term "human" by inherently seeing a *becoming* through the relational with the material-discursive world.

differences in any absolute sense, but about the agential nature of differences that matter ... diffraction is a material practice for making a difference, for topologically reconfiguring connections". For Barad, noticing diffraction means noticing differing entanglements. This onto-epistemic framing, which also acts as an inquiry, proposes important ethics for decentring notions of dominant subjecthood. In *Static Drift*, an array of connections scattered the basement-hole. I took up diffraction as a material-immaterial practice to trace the reconfiguration that this hole proposed by looking to the agential nature of *différance* as it became perceptible across the exhibition space.



Figure 9: *before i sink*, by Meghan Judge (2021). Mural of notes. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)

In *Static Drift*, the questions were always emerging and always shifting, and the language for understanding them was continuously being built. There was no pre-defined method that bound the works to strict research questions, as that was not an appropriate way to engage the ontological questioning of oceanic relationing that was *Static Drift*. My role as the artist became fluid as I began to curate alongside the agencies alive in the space, at times withdrawing my presence so that the sonic could noise across vastness as it agentially shaped and worked back into my perceptions. On many occasions it felt like inquiry in *Static Drift* leant into what cultural theorists Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) call "the undercommons". This terrain of commons, drawn from the theory of the black radical tradition, attempts to resist easy forms of categorisation along with forms of professionalisation. For Harney and Moten (2013, 19), failure to easily fit the structures of expected institutional norms might lead

you to steal the university from within the university, to "make common cause with those desires and (non)positions that seem crazy".

As one entered the basement in *Static Drift*, you sank into a noisy waterline filled with sonic waves that were initially difficult to trace as they mixed and merged into a thick location. *Static Drift* proposes that it is this very thickness that we drift with for a while. For Harney and Moten (2013), such a thick *now* calls for you as you call for it, dis-ordering a noise[21] that Moten (in Harney and Moten 2013, 7) describes as "extra-musical", inherent in a cacophony of sounds. Jack Halberstam (2018, 7) points out that Moten is reminding us "that our desire for harmony is arbitrary and in another world, harmony would sound incomprehensible". For Halberstam (2011, 88), "listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit that inhabit us", through what Halberstam (2011) terms "the queer art of failure". This form of listening is inquiry into ontologies. It re-orients with unlearning and non-knowledge, suggesting that we drift in their noisy diffractions with what we presume to know.

Vulnerability here is an important mode of access to this realm of sound-as-inquiry, which exists beyond heteronormative routes and inside what Barad (2003, 820) calls a reconfiguring of the material-discursive apparatuses. The apparatus here was both my human figuration and the exhibition set-up. But this in no way means that the exhibition could contain my oceanic relationings. On the contrary, this relationing welled up in the exhibition because space had been generated to try and understand its mutability; it disseminated across the currents that formed in the hole, leaking into and drawing from pasts and presents that sunk together, noticing encountering temporalities through space-time matterings. It is through these currents that I became vulnerable as I drifted in the highly active and agentive basement-hole of oceanic relationing.

Conclusion

This article argues that vulnerability through art-making and curating practices is an important mode for inquiring into opening perceptions. Here I focus on noise as having the ability to open perceptions toward *more*. The sonic is followed as a sensory guide toward repatterning noisy locations which are thick with the callings from geographical locations, earth systems, and the many discursive relations housed therein. The article traces material-elemental rearrangements through watery relations to demonstrate how bodies-in-cycle are vital and agentive as they continually move through micro and macro entanglements.

Through a discussion of my exhibition *Static Drift*, I argue that these locations are material-discursive, as they exist between human bodies and oceanic ones. *Static Drift* set up multiple locations to inquire into human–ocean relations. Together, these

21 Here noise is understood outside of the boundaries of sound, as it is extended into notions of perception and imperceptibility, wherein that which is imperceptible or undesired is read as noise.

locations diffracted a new zone, or an ecotone, that emerged through their collective and vital excess. This zone can be sensed as it works on terra-centric binaried surfaces. I liken such excess to notions of the ~~void~~ which is active in the "hole" as it pits at over-determined surfaces. I propose staying with and drifting in the activity of the hole (being moved by it) as a form of building language which critically plays with how to (un)know that which works at such surfaces. The article argues for this to be done by inquiring alongside what is unknown, what is voided, by sensing and taking notes while adrift. Note-taking is a sensitising activity. It opens pores as it stays with and is moved by the vitality of *more*. It seeks out the *more* inside the opening pores at surface level. I argue that such a practice leads to more porous, amphibious, and fluid oceanic relations that pivot around notions of *becoming-with*.

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