Christina McPhee: A Commonplace Book

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Two ecological moments in the history of video art. On the one hand, there is Bill Viola, discussing the animistic qualities of nonorganic materials. It is not hard to see why a great leap of the imagination is required to recognize that the material essence of the tools we engage in contemporary life, our telephones, color TVs, VCRs, and computers, are of the earth. All of these devices come from the ground, created from ‘nothing’, the conforming of an immaterial idea onto raw materials, animal, vegetable and mineral, gathered and distilled from the raw earth. Hidden presences all, from the metals in the chassis frame to the petroleum distillates that composed the tape and cassette boxes. A ‘leap of imagination’ is needed, since the black-boxing of media technologies make us imagine that their apparent animation, as well as their memory capacities, are essentially the effects of human input and human perceptual responses that are supported by, but in the end unrelated to, the materiality of machines as such. Such anthropocentrism was easier to uphold as long as film was the key reference, since the animation of the figures in the sequence of still images that make up a filmstrip is an illusion of the human eye/brain. With the increasing presence of electronic, signal-based technologies, such as video, temporalization and mobilization appear as an ontological condition that exists irrespective of human vision. In particular, with the emerging 1970s industry of time-based correctors and dynamic tracking technologies, the habitual focus on “visual works” or media products would temporarily get blurred by a new realm of opened-up machines, asserting a variety of microtemporalities and material processes. At the time, many had high hopes for videotape as a new archival tool for cultural memory; ultimately, the product of video was enhanced storage capacity. Viola, for his part, saw this memory in starkly “mineral” terms, as part of larger cycles of earthly transformations. The growing stacks of rapidly deteriorating videotapes signaled, to him, not just the historical archive as information overload, but, more pertinently, “a magnetic city dump.”

MINERAL BELIEF
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On the other hand, there is Frank Gillette, one of the founders of Radical Software magazine, using video as a way of posing emergent continuities between electronic and biological forms of life. “Nature” was, in other words, aligned with micro-temporalities and techniques of frequency modulation, at odds with human perception and (consequently) any traditional sense of ecopolitical “attention,” directed toward known natural entities. What was at stake in this strategy, was an acute emphasis on the possibility of producing new collective individualizations that cut across usually separated spheres of political influence, the division between a “voiceless” nature and “vocal” political activists. Technology, here, was metaphysical or meta-technical in Buckminster Fuller’s sense of the word—a globally integrative tool rather than the “destruction machinery” it had become. In the political context of the 1970’s, where strategic emphasis was on the critique, subversion and guerilla action, Gillette’s use of video stood out in being explicitly based on a dynamics of imitation: a mode of mental formatting or infrastructure organizes the intuitions through which the future acts on the present. Belief is essentially a navigational tool, which is why Gillette spoke of video’s connective affordances as a “self-organizing topology of beliefs” and associated it with the relational logic of cybernetic models. But, more significantly still, belief is by definition collective in the non-contained or distributive sense of the term: it attests to the contagious dynamics of imitation and invention that, according to Gabriel de Tarde, extends across all forms of being, from the smallest mineral composites to interhuman relations. The work of Christina McPhee is in many ways a sophisticated amalgamation of these two moments, put to work in the eco-political present. Technics of various kinds conjure up a genuinely political animation of the earth itself by engaging concrete instances of mineral or biological productivity in projective dynamics of imitation or belief across media (McPhee uses the term telemimesis). The general context is one of imminent crisis, evoked through reference to a number of concrete sites of energy production, destruction, or research and analysis: volcanic landscapes, oil fields in the Salinas valley, lime kilns in Big Sur, the Sonora Prairie grasslands, the Gulf of Mexico following the BP oil spills. However, the most pervasive technical mediator in this work is not electronic or digital systems, but drawing—a form of drawing characterized by expanding and contracting webs of thin lines, dotted with scattered explosions of color as if to demarcate particularly critical points of action or intersection. For this is a form of drawing that is essentially energetic: it does not provide forms and figures as much as mobilities, precarious leaps of connection from one point to another, tense thickets of activity and slower, lonelier, lines of release. If mathematics may at times use arrows to visualize the essentially abstract properties of vectorial functions or forces, McPhee’s restless lines often seem to evoke similar issues of visualization. One gets the sense that the image conjured up is all at once a particular, individual, material composite (colored ink, graphite, paper, the skills of a hand) and a precarious, temporary, expression of forces for which no
Adequate, human-readable language exists. The question of drawing’s mobilities is thus a question of expressive sympathy, imitation and belief in some kind of connection or association to other mobilities, however fraught or tentative. Yet it is at this level that drawing also enters into alliance with new media technologies, inasmuch as these are often seen as quasi-living forces, based on feedback circuits and vectorial operations that have the capacity of either simulating or visualizing life below the threshold of human attention. There is, however, no simplistic positing of life forms here. As the frontier of biological knowledge hovers uncertainly between genetic and computer codes, life itself is, as Eugene Thacker has shown, in any case a troubling and contradictory concept, whose metamorphic quality is witnessed in the essentialist concept of “life itself” as in formation, as well as in the proliferation of vitalisms and the pervasive politicization of all life. McPhee’s drawing, extended to and infiltrated with digital video, seems to outline a different and stranger project: that of creating as yet unknown material composites by aligning the rapid time-processing of our nervous systems with the emergent natures at actual sites of energy production or extraction. These are, as she explains in a note to the single channel installation video Tesserae of Venus: Ghostdance (2009), usually rejected or neglected natural areas, like marginal streambeds, riverbeds, swamps or sloughs in estuaries near the ocean, places that provide the large amounts of water needed for cooling. In such places, things are decomposed and recomposed: assemblages of disconnected elements are thrown together, their point of contact making up a kairotic moment that can be mimed and propagated by video montage. Thanks to video, the promise and desperation of these sites—their striving—can be “condensed,” “extracted,” and reanimated. This is a distinctly futurist form of eco-sensitivity, a state of affective engagement that is less attuned to the condition of existent beings (however important they may be) than to the sense of future crisis that colonizes the present moment. An acute feeling for an event that has already not yet happened produces some sudden and unfamiliar sedimentations—present in almost all of her work but perhaps most explicitly articulated in the project that takes as its inspiration the complex ridged folds or deformations that mark the planet Venus—a planet that does not have the Earth’s tectonic strike-slip faults, and whose generative land building may possibly be an effect of its heavy, ninety-six percent carbon dioxide atmosphere. Strange folding events, propagating across a number of media and sites in McPhee’s work, from inside electronic equipment to crumpled paper surfaces, may thus be a visitation from a carbon-intensive future. What we have here are, essentially, geological leaps of imagination, or belief, taking place within and through the mineral worlds that are at any time hard at work in video and sound technologies, as well as in pencil, paper and liquid airbrush paint.
Bill Viola, “Landscape as Metaphor” (response to questions from Martin Friedman, 1993), Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 254. Similar intuitions inform many technocentric texts of the period, among others Gene Youngblood’s Expanded Cinema (New York: P. Dutton & Co, 1970), 53: “What happens to our definitions of ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ when science has found no boundary between the two? Although it is still popularly assumed that the world is divided into animate and inanimate phenomena, virologists working at the supposed threshold between life and non-life at the virus level have in fact discovered no such boundary. ‘Both animate and inanimate have persisted right across yesterday’s supposed threshold in both directions...subsequently what was animate has become foggier and foggier...no life, per se, has been isolated.’ The quote at the end is taken from Buckminster Fuller’s “Planetary Planning,” the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture, New Delhi, India, November 13, 1968.

2 Viola, 125 (“History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime”).

3 Key examples are works such as Quidditas (1974-75) and Symptomatic Syntax (1981).


7 Eugene Thacker, After Life. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), ix-xvi.
Double Blind Study, 2012
Gelatin silver print on archival paper, 76.8 x 101.6 cm / 30 x 40 in
Alien Rivulet, 2017
Ink, oil and acrylic paint, paper collage from Wet Magazine, 1980, on canvas, 165.7 x 137.6 x 6.3 cm / 65.25 x 54 x 2.5 in
Before the Cut (After Annie Proulx), 2017
Graphite, crayon, ink, and found-magazine collage, 55.8 x 76.2 cm / 22 x 30 in
Double Blind Study 49, 2014
Gelatin silver print on archival paper, 76.8 x 101.6 cm / 30 x 40 in