

On the Surface

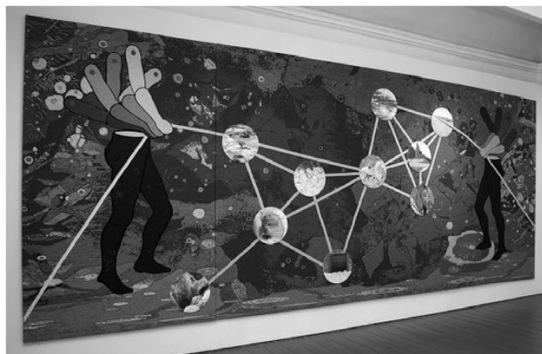
Michaële Cutaya argues that our preoccupation with depth has blinded us to the importance of the surface. The study of the superficial is not, as it is construed in the West, solely to do with appearances and with shallowness, but can offer new ways of engaging with our existence on the earth.

'Gently lowered into the declining ground, passing through a series of ancillary reservoirs, the channels would collect the gifts of the sky without doing damage to the earth: "Care is taken not wantonly to cut up and injure the ground." For Thom, dancing with the water as it flowed through the landscape appeared a form of art.'

In his 2016 book *Fossil Capital*, Andreas Malm writes on the hydraulic innovations conducted by Robert Thom on the Isle of Bute, at Rothesay. In the text, Malm makes the case for an intriguing proposition: at the dawn of the industrial age, the shift from the 'energies of the flow' to fossil fuels was not, as we have generally been told, driven by the quest for superior efficiency; 'to the contrary, steam gained supremacy in spite of water being abundant, at least as powerful, and decidedly cheaper'. Malm argues that the transition to coal was instead motivated by the control it gave industrialists over their workers and the elements, or as Naomi Klein puts it in her 2014 book *This Changes Everything*: 'Coal represented, in short, total domination, of both nature and other people.' Instead of going with the flow, capitalists dig in.

Writing in 1984 about what differentiated the postmodernist moment from modernity, Fredric Jameson identified a new kind of superficiality, a new depthlessness, which, via the contemporary theories of poststructuralists, repudiated what he called 'fundamental depth models'. These were the dialectic of appearance and essence; the hermeneutics of outside and inside, the Freudian model of manifest and latent, and the semiotics of signifier and signified. Depth models were then replaced by surfaces and intertextuality. In the most material and economic sense, however, postmodernity (neoliberalism or late capitalism) is just as dependent on depth and extractivism as modernity was. The postmodern appetite for fossil fuels goes on unabated – accelerates, even – and there is a whole new range of resources we plan on digging for in the future. Moreover, just as our production system is as extractivist as ever, so our language and expressions reflect how depth continues to be our mental paradigm for value, as we 'dig for truth', 'look beyond the surface', hunt for the 'root cause', 'feel deeply' and so on.

Superficiality has rarely been much appreciated in western philosophy – it is traditional to start with Plato – and is routinely associated with appearances, shallowness or artificiality. Yet it could be argued that superficiality, not depth, is the very condition of our earthly existence. As Bruno Latour reminds us in a recent article for the *Guardian*, when we talk about the earth, we don't really mean the planet, but this rather thin layer, this 'critical zone': 'the only layer of earth where terrestrial life can flourish. It's in this finite space where everything we care for and everything we have ever encountered exists.' Latour, who is, like Donna Haraway, a longstanding critic of anthropocentrism, could be said to be heir to the postmodern philosophers of the surface, whose ideas continue



Otobong Nkanga, *The Weight of Scars*, 2015

to inspire widely. The conceptual framework that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari proposed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, with their Smooth and Striated spaces, keeps on opening up new understandings about our terrestriality. Shifting the tension from the smooth to the superficial, I'm interested in looking at how superficiality plays out across practices, metaphors and analogies, and whether it offers a sustainable mode of inhabiting our world.

In his 1887 book *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche enjoins artists to 'stop bravely at the surface'. What if this injunction was one already followed long before, in fields as diverse as agriculture, architecture and archaeology, and could be said to find echoes in the ways we undertake academic research, engage with politics, or even in how we read and sleep and, ultimately, make art?

We often take for granted the need to dig, the need to lay down foundations, but, taken most literally, there are many forms of vernacular architecture which have shallow or no foundations. Best known, perhaps, is the use in Chinese traditional architecture of interlocking brackets, or dougong, fixed on top of foundation-less columns and held together by the weight of the roof, allowing the structure to move with – to slide over – the ground during earthquakes. These foundationless architectural structures have recently been studied more closely by engineers and architects because they offer long-lasting solutions to building on increasingly uncertain ground. Likewise in agriculture, we pay more attention to forms of permaculture that add layers or use symbiotic relationships between plants as an alternative to the *tabula rasa* of deep furrowing doused with herbicide and pesticide. The rewilding movement is another instance of a rethinking of our relationship with ecosystems where, instead of planning large-scale replantings, we step back and let plants grow with minimal intervention. None of this is new; many indigenous cultures have long practised such approaches. Archaeologists are starting to consider Amazonia's incredible biodiversity as the result of thousands of years of human inhabitation, challenging what we routinely understand merely as the remains of a civilisation.

In her 2014 book, Klein draws attention to the sacrifice zones of modernity: 'Unlike the energy it replaced, power from fossil fuel always required sacrifice zones – whether in the black lungs of the coal miners or the poisoned waterways surrounding the mines. But these prices were seen as worth paying in exchange for coal's intoxicating promise of freedom from the physical world – a freedom that unleashed



EL Putnam, *Indeterminate System*, 2021, video

industrial capitalism's full force to dominate both workers and other cultures.' If, as Klein and Malm point out, fossil fuels bring into sharp focus the consequences of a particular mode of extraction and production, with its attendant sacrificial zones, mining for minerals is no less problematic. The new technologies that are presented as a solution to our fossil fuel dependency are themselves hungry for natural resources. In *Gravesend*, 2007, Steve McQueen focused on the brutal extraction of Coltan in the Democratic Republic of Congo, an ore much needed for electronic devices. Human exploitation of natural resources and the concomitant ecological devastation does not pale in comparison with the coal mines of yore. Further, the short-sightedness of currently developing deep-sea mining projects leaves little hope for a change of approach.

Mining, and the gaping holes and exhausted soil it leaves behind, occupies an important part of Otobong Nkanga's art practice. Through performance, drawing and sculptures, Nkanga follows the links that bind singular objects, often minerals, to social practices, economies of circulation or sites of extraction. These links, including to colonialism, are sometimes obvious, sometimes not, but they are not invisible, we just generally choose not to pay attention to them. As Nkanga says, everybody, everywhere, has been, in a sense, colonised. Thus, looking at the copper roofs in Berlin, she followed the metal back to the Tsumeb mine in Namibia. Tsumeb is thought to be a Nama word which would translate as Green Hill, which is another name for the place. There is no green hill in Tsumeb now, because the vast quantity of oxidised copper ore that indicated the presence of this extraordinarily rich seam or 'pipe', almost a mile deep, has been hollowed out. The mine has been described as the greatest in the world, abundant in hundreds of different minerals, some found nowhere else on earth. Talking about the *Weight of Scars*, 2015, a tapestry that maps out these relationships around the Tsumeb mine, Nkanga recounts how the sight of these holes in the ground affected her, causing her to think of the people who had been digging the mine in the stifling heat of the shafts. The pipe had been known about and mined

since prehistoric times, and the artist talks about how the Ovambo people would carve out the minerals when needed. The pace of mining changed in the early 20th century, when a German company came, bringing dynamite and modern machinery to exploit the site. Within a hundred years, the site was bare. The artist speculates about how technology changes the way we extract and on the ways we relate to resources and minerals.

Shortly after listening to Nkanga, I watched the Safdie brothers' 2019 film *Uncut Gems*. The film opens with an overhead shot moving over an arid land to the crowded entrance of a mine-shaft. A worker has been wounded and the camera cuts to a close-up of their bleeding leg, the broken bone exposed. This is the Welo mine in Ethiopia and the date is 2010. The bleeding man brought vividly to mind the disappeared workers of Tsumeb. The film then follows the trajectory of an uncut black opal smuggled out of the mine and into the hands of a New York jeweller, Howard Ratner, who is played by Adam Sandler. When Ratner receives the package (the gem is hidden in the belly of a frozen fish), the basketball star Kevin Garnett – playing himself – is in the shop. Not finding anything to his satisfaction among the bling on offer, when Garnett is shown the opal he is mesmerised, seeing in its untreated beauty the memory of his people. He feels a sense of connection, an intimate tie to the past, and convinces Ratner to let him hang on to the stone for good luck, until it is auctioned off. The link formed between the basketball player and the uncut gem echoes the rituals through which Nkanga recreates attachments around objects in her work. In his 2018 text *Down To Earth*, Latour suggests that there is no new politics possible without generating alternative descriptions. 'How could we act politically', the philosopher asks, 'without having inventoried, surveyed, measured, centimetre by centimetre, being by being, person by person, the stuff that makes up the Earth for us?' For this task, Nkanga, along with other artists, shows us how we might go about it.

Taking depth into a more metaphorical territory, I would like to look at how the language we use valorises our daily mode of being. In *Memoirs of*

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a Spacemother: an Astropoetic Sci Fi Essay, 2019, artist and filmmaker Treasa O'Brien writes: 'On planet Ceres sleep happens in short bursts, and there are many moments of sleep and lucid dreaming where one is unsure if one is awake or asleep.' It is usually understood that good sleep – like good research – is deep and continuous. That is how it should be; this is what we aspire to. All the more so since sleep is under constant pressure by the 24/7 consumer/producer model we live by, as Jonathan Crary has convincingly argued. Sleeping can be a form of resistance against the neoliberal injunction to be productive. And there is something very attractive there, but there is also a risk of reifying the aspiration to enjoy a 'good' night's sleep, since it is unattainable for a great many. One could also wonder how much of a reality this reified sleep has ever been: no matter the period, new parents are unlikely to have ever enjoyed it. Following Roger Ekirch, a number of historical researches suggest that the one continuous night may not be such a universal given, and that splitting the night in two could have been quite common up to the 19th century – one possible reason being that to sleep too deeply could be dangerous. Our conception of a good night's sleep as a deep sleep could be just the result of our necessary adaptation to a more constrained schedule in industrial times: sleep was deeper, because it was compressed.

Feminist theorists have always investigated how socially constructed and gendered certain evidences

can turn out to be. Even before O'Brien started to speculate about a planet whose physical reality would be shaped by maternal affects, Lisa Baraitser, for instance, explored 'the notion of the maternal subject as a subject of interruption' in her 2008 work *Maternal Encounters; The Ethics of Interruption*. The artist and researcher (and mother of two) EL Putnam has been drawing parallels in her writing, performances and digital work between philosophies of the maternal and digital technologies, both calling forth an aesthetics of interruption, the glitch or the noise. She writes that she is 'not attempting to romanticise motherhood, but rather, shift understanding of what interruptions do to the subject', and, quoting Baraitser, that moments of interruption are when 'something happens to unbalance us and open up a new set of possibilities'. Over the past year, Putnam has extended her performative practice to produce generative design sketches using the creative coding project p5.js. The series, 'Emergent, Performing with Code', 2021, consists of daily sketches posted on social media. Through coding she explores repetitions, gaps, delays and interactivity. For *Indeterminate System*, 2021, she generated a never-ending looped animation from a random selection of still images taken from a video of herself with her daughter. In the video she sits behind the toddler and moves in response to her movement while holding her hands. The staccato rhythm of the superimposed images emphasises the awkwardness of their being



First Cow, 2019, directed by Kelly Reichardt

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together – no maternal harmony here. Their co-evolution is not determined by a social or genetic causality but by random associations: these two are not autonomous and their co-dependence is far from seamless, yet it opens up a new set of possibilities for them both.

The question as to whether to stop at the surface rather than explore the depths can also be addressed to the art critic, and how she chooses to look at and discuss artworks. These questions kept coming up when I was looking at the work of Richard Mosse in his 'Heat Map' series. For these works Mosse used a military-grade thermal camera to document the journeys of refugees across Europe, often from a long way off. This weapon-grade photographic technology can capture objects with pin-point precision up to 30km away and, because it uses thermal imaging that records contours in heat, it can photograph through fog and smoke. Some images in the series come across as photo-journalism with added techno gloss, yet I'm strangely enthralled by the reconstructed images of refugee camps composed of hundreds of shots made with a rotating camera and stitched together digitally into a panorama. Particularly engaging is *Moria*, 2016, a panorama of the camp on the island of Lesbos – burnt down in September 2020. Knowing nothing about it, I first encountered the image on the back cover of a photography magazine, square-cropped and in a space generally reserved for advertising. I kept coming back to it, my gaze unwittingly arrested again and again. I could not quite decide what it was I was looking at: a photograph, a drawing, even an etching, perhaps? The image is in black and white, but neither positive nor negative. The high viewpoint offers a depthless vista of constructions in an open woodland. Filling the picture plane to the top, offering no horizon beyond, the surface is teeming with a detailed profusion of tents, prefabs, utility poles, power lines, barbed-wire fences and trees, each sharply defined with a surreal clarity. The grid-like arrangement of the structures contrasts with the intricacies of the branches and the rich texture of the foliage. There are no shadows; the surfaces of the objects seem to emit their own immanent light. The scene appears empty of people at first, but then silhouettes and groups can be distinguished, pale and somehow insubstantial, lacking the precision

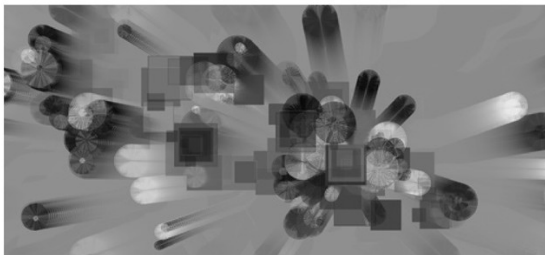
of their surroundings. They haunt more than they occupy the place. I'm reminded of the paintings of Hell by Hieronymus Bosch or Peter Bruegel the Elder, but with human bodies pushed further down the hierarchy, reduced to a residual existence among these man-made structures. It is a post-human world. This image tells me all I need to know about this shallow, surface world.

In typical fashion, Oscar Wilde's quip that 'only the shallow know themselves' is somewhat ambiguous, and, one suspects, probably not all that flattering to shallow people in this witty play on the old maxim 'know thyself'. But we could also read it as an invitation to embrace our shallowness as the necessary condition allowing us to know what we can do; that knowing oneself does not require going deep. It would be hard to argue against the superficiality of the postmodern era diagnosed by Jameson, as indeed the regime of the image and its glittering surfaces of billions of screens attests to. Yet if there are alternatives to be found, it is perhaps in this very superficiality extended to a mode of thinking, of relating, of inhabiting – of speaking, even. We could speculate about how much academic research, with its reliance on extractive reading and quote-mining practices, for instance, is shaped by depth.

Kelly Reichardt's film *First Cow*, 2019, is a Western, but one that does not reflect the classic arc of the conquest and domination of vast open spaces. Set in a densely forested Oregon in the 1820s, we follow the tentative alliances between a pair of newly arrived migrants from Poland and China, along with a European-bred cow, and their struggle to survive in brutal social conditions. We initially encounter Otis 'Cookie' Figowitz foraging for mushrooms in the forest to feed the group of fur traders he is accompanying. There is a close-up of his worn boots as he moves cautiously through the undergrowth, and another close-up of his hands, as he eases off the golden chanterelles from the mossy floor. He gathers them into a piece of cloth which he holds close to his chest, like so many precious nuggets. If there is talk of gold in the film, it is of the soft kind: the beaver's pelts the hunters came for. Cookie did come to trade, but the film suggests that, compared with the gold that needs to be either dug for or killed, he prefers that which can be found in the abundance of the forest; and the surface of the forest floor is gleaming with gold – with nutritious chanterelles, the exposed belly of a salamander, which he gently puts back on its legs, and in the rich autumn colours of the fallen leaves.

If it is our habit of going deep, literally and figuratively, that has led us into trouble, perhaps knowing and thinking about the surface, staying there and going with the flow can offer us an alternative paradigm for our mode of inhabiting our planet.

Michaële Cutaya is a writer based in County Galway.



El Putnam, *Emergent: Performing with Code*, 2021–, video