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Geographical Aesthetics: Imagining Space, Staging Encounters

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Geographical Aesthetics: imagining space, staging encounters (eds.) Harriet Hawkins and Elizabeth Straughan. xiv and 305pp; references, ill., index . Farnham, U.K., Ashgate: 2015. £70.00 (cloth). ISBN 9781409448013

Book review by Phil Smith

'Geographical Aesthetics' is ambitious. It seeks to marshal twelve papers on disparate subjects and with contrasting methodological and analytical approaches, advocate a new aesthetics by articulating key provisional theoretical principles, possible projects and trajectories, while re-describing geography as an always at least partially aesthetic discipline. Where its editors Harriet Hawkins and Elizabeth Straughan's task is trickiest is where they feel out continuities across longstanding controversies – "ethereal and precious" aesthetics as tending to the apolitical (it is hard to fit, say, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Hans-Thies Lehmann into this description), polarities of sublime and picturesque, aspirations for relational and synthesized practices of togetherness that tend towards "a sense of comfort" – and then seek to resolve or accommodate them with the collected papers and their general design.

Where Hawkins and Straughan have really succeeded is in envisioning different parts of the geographical-aesthetic project they imagine: a volumetric study of atmospheres, an almost-animist inhuman and vibrant 'geo', immersed and sensuous bodies in works of cognition, "aesthetic nervousness" (from artist Jon Adams), a viewpoint from "within the environment" that "open[s] us out onto the vibrant materialities of interminglings between humans, non-humans and the materialities of the world", all the while art and instrumentalism loop in mostly virtuous circles and dialectics.

In respect of the parts (at times clicking together, gear-like), whether the ruling project stands or falls, important spaces are opened up, promising technical tendencies are outlined and fruitful hybrids proposed. Virtuous looping appears in Mark Paterson's invocation of Barbara Gail Montero's "kinaesthetic empathy" operating through "mirror neurons" in the context of felt qualities of movement. A similarly sustaining sensuality emerges in Paul Kingsbury's paper on 'cosplay' where the "true aim of desire is not someone or a thing, but rather desire itself", integrating rather than excluding or replacing 'jouissance' in seven hour 'glomping' sessions.

Kingsbury evokes an excess that in some papers, often citing the relational aesthetics of Bourriaud, is smoothed out in “forms of collaboration”. Even with Naomi Millner’s concept of a “sensible surplus” that forces a “*break* with existing regimes of the seeable and the sayable” (original emphasis) it is possible to trace the resilience of those parameters in the hierarchies of mobility, language, media and power at work in the ‘No Borders’ project among refugees at Calais that Millner describes. The individual research subjects do not always serve the broader ‘geographical aesthetics’ project.

The scale of the editorial task, in short introductory chapters, necessitates the omission of key practices. So, in contradiction to Mark Paterson’s “kinaesthetic awareness in viewers as well as performers” and Alex Vasudevan’s “enterable, imaginary space” for viewers, an old prejudice about the passivity and “distanced” nature of spectatorship is restated, bypassing developments of witnessing in performance and live art or of the ‘holding’ partner in dance’s Authentic Movement, let alone older traditions of participative spectatorship. It feels churlish to criticise such a conscientious book for what is left out, but these ‘omissions’ are opportunities too, candidates for parts of Hawkins and Straughan’s geographical aesthetics. An example is the site of ‘site’, the conflicts around mobility and the torque of specificity in land art and other site-based practices; a little more interrogation might reveal that inside Miwon Kwon’s critique of site-specificity as consistent with the “prevailing relegation of authorship to... conditions” is an emergence of the vibrant non-human that is key to the argument of this book. Other inviting gaps include that between the micro-politics of experiencing subjects and more general political futures and, perhaps a related one, between an aesthetics that “retains its relation to values such as beauty, applied instead to cultural work previously thought of as decidedly non-aesthetic” and general arts-inflected radical urban interventions, a link already hinted at in a barely acknowledged ‘art of living’ and David Pinder’s “conditions of possibility... not in a realized utopianism... but in the avant-garde fusion of art and everyday life”.

There is a developing discourse around the unhuman – articulated by Dylan Trigg, Graham Harman in his book on Lovecraft and ‘weird realism’, Reza Negarestani, Nick Land, Eugene Thacker and David Peak, among others – that is waiting not only to be recruited to a geographical aesthetics, but is ready to assert (as in James

Riding's word) "the *mêlée* of things... as *aesthetics*" (original emphasis). This is rather more convincing than an ecological aesthetics, discussed and critiqued by Emily Bardy, that substitutes the critic for 'nature' in order to be "affronted" on its behalf. Brady's descriptions of the erosions and encrustations of Robert Smithson's artworks suggests that Gaia is quite capable of her own creative revenge, while the "attending to" and "tending to" suggested by Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik in their 'Site Dance' (University Press of Florida, 2009) and the "re-territorialization of the chaotic inhuman forces" advocated by Elizabeth Grosz as the ground of art, seem far better starting points for an ethical aesthetics (the likes of Harman and Trigg exemplifying how such an approach does not avoid issues of genre and style ["accomplishment"] but, rather, raises the stakes for them). Similarly, there are other initiatives, of variable sophistication, for geographically inflected aesthetics (similar to Jon Adams' 'autostratigraphy' described in Hannah Macpherson's paper with Adams) that might be recognised or, better, enlisted to the grand design: Nick Papadimitriou's 'deep topography', Tina Richardson's 'schizo-cartography', Dee Heddon's 'autotopography', Roger Bygott's 'integral drift', Kenneth White's 'geopoetics', and so on.

Methodologically, a discussion of practice-as-research would add much to 'Geographical Aesthetics', given the powerful argument made for "the creative practice of pushing, pulling, teasing and re-arranging words" exemplified by James Riding's earthy and unsettled piece on the homes, routes and grave of Edward Thomas; doubling-up Thomas and his memorials as Dee Heddon did by re-walking Mike Pearson's 'Bubbling Tom', both "becoming a part of the vitality of those places". When Riding describes the grass before Thomas's grave as "slightly worn" he evokes repetitions by which parts of a poet's work are selected, one poet and not another; such memorials (poems *and* stones) are "betrayal[s]", which, along with "shock" (as when 'character' emerges from the relational looking of livestock breeders in Lewis Holloway and Carol Morris's paper) are candidate categories in a geographical aesthetics.

For many of the scholars here, Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' are the most hopeful touchstone for progressive action; Ashley Dawkins and Alex Loftus call them "practice based utopianism". Existing objections (that these relations can quickly dissolve into market ones) are rehearsed, but mostly put aside. The examples cited

in papers championing the relational (gatherings for a mass opening of galleries in Hackney, Temporary Services at work in Chicago on a project which appears little different from pioneer community arts events of the 1970s, and 'No Borders'), struggle in different ways to sustain exemplariness. The pressure to return to the relations of the market is acute; refugees at the 'No Borders' project asking to watch 'Grease' rather than political documentaries: "[I]t was a joke.... [but] raised a serious point: about who was determining what should be watched". By directing a new aesthetics around Bourriaud, Rancière' education of laughter and a hoped-for equity, they become vulnerable to popular participants who operate not as artificers but as consumers and dealers.

Here a certain unevenness among the papers comes into play: while the popular participants involved in 'cosplay' are "predominantly middle class" no such classifications of the 'No Borders' activists or the Hackney gallery attenders is offered; while none of these three papers makes much of the particular spaces, rather than general locales and social contexts, studied, (even in Alex Vasudevan's otherwise excellent paper the representation of a Jewish Cemetery in Beate Gütschow's collages 'RS#1' and 'RS#2' goes for very little).

Without a more vigorous theoretical and geographical underpinning a post-ideological aesthetics, under conditions of deregulation and made up of tactics rather than overriding strategy, is always at risk of assuming a vagueness that mistily mirrors commercial/algorithmic/market exchanges (drawing it from the post-ideological towards the mono-ideological). To guard against such vagaries, something more strategically canny than a generous "liveliness" may be needed to spread the kinds of uncertainty, nervousness and porosity articulated by Jon Adams across the other practices and theories presented here. Danny McNally begins to sketch out what this might look like, drawing on Michel Maffesoli's idea of "*social puissance*" (dependent on intersubjectivity) and "*custom*" (original emphases) as everyday disciplines that power a visible togetherness enacted in apparent trivialities, constituting what Rob Shields calls an "art of living which emphasises... solidarity".

Across 'Geographical Aesthetics' there is a powerful critique of a Marxian approach that privileges depth and renders landscape as an ideological deception and

surfaces as “untrustworthy”. This is related, in Veronica della Rosa’s paper, to the longer-standing cartographical symbol of a “‘veil’ drawn across the ‘realities’”. Hawkins and Straughan are careful to qualify the surfaces they are reclaiming as “intermingled” and “complex zones of transmission, transition and transformation”, yet, against the immersions of site-specific performance and corporeality in dance, this advocacy for surfaces against depth seems to be drawing geographical aesthetics unnecessarily towards representation and reflection, leaving “art practices... [as] means to draw out considerations of surface textures”, and tying a new aesthetics, perhaps in other hands, to a nature without physical mass. Yet, there is nothing here on ‘spectacle’ (as social relations rather than ‘veil’), nor any detailed contestation of Debord or Baudrillard (less easy targets than more orthodox Marxian approaches to ideology; a concept used only once in its Marxist sense in ‘Geographical Aesthetics’). Given these absences, a certain instrumentalism creeps in at times and the arts become “a means to think through”, while at other points neo-vitalism inspires a floating free of “art as having the capacity to liberate affects, sensations and percepts from lived, embodied experiences” that sounds remarkably like a beginning of the long overdue review of nineteenth century Symbolism. Some attention to the entangled surfaces and porous boundaries proposed in J. Scott Turner’s ‘The Extended Organism’ (Harvard University Press, 2002) might help here.

It is questionable whether either David Harvey’s suggestion that there are as many aesthetics as there are aesthetic theorists, the concept of ‘lively aesthetics’ defined as “best understood through its differences and tensions”, or the seamless shifting between cognition and sensation imagined as travelling along a Möbius strip will provide the workable coherence for a new theoretical project. Harvey gives up to much existing work to individualism, while a single operative metaphor for diversity threatens to cut off the multiplicity of “complex zones” that emerge in the book, from a “geo... equipped with questions and concerns” to “aesthetic objects and events... proffering new ways of thinking through... spaces”, collapsing tensions like that of ambience (“atmospheres”) as “the ‘in-between’ of subject and object” or that between surface and depth. Rather than being forced to choose, in the rush to a new aesthetics, there is still some time left for realignments and recuperations in its emerging assemblage.