Porøsity

Tracy Hill

Porosity



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Porosity is a scientific term of measurement connecting water and rock, and it indicates how they almost become each other. Through drawing, print and installation, my project seeks to reveal further such connections, especially between invisible landscapes and the walking body: the invisible shaping the visible.

Walking, conversation, material and technological investigations are brought together to consider how human belief, customs and scientific understanding connect us to unseen landscapes. My focus is on the relationship between the physical nature of making, the materials chosen and fully conscious walking, a connection to a sense of place that explores how the world around us is held together in terms of energy, forces and form and filtered through human perception. The resulting artworks are visual traces of the relationship between materials, thought and movement; traces, which notice detail, slow down, witness, communicate and seek to be curious.

Installation and site-specific drawing invite a mode of sensing that is more attuned to the multiple ways in which the world is active around us. Many of my drawings exist in situ only briefly, and though some are very large, they are recorded here as details, shown without scale. They aim to build a series of fragmented moments inviting you to reflect on connections between inside and outside, boundaries between energies of the body, materials and the relationship between looking, thinking and feeling.

Tracy Hill











Intro/**duction** by Penny Florence

duction: (i) the act of leading, bringing or conducting.(ii) the rotation of an eye on the

vertical and horizontal axis.

There is a nature reserve near where I live, Marazion Marshes, Cornwall, the remains of what must have been salt marshes all along Mounts Bay from Newlyn to The Lizard. The marsh belongs to the land as much as the sea, since many streams flow down from the ridge a short walk above, on which there is a huge water tank that once formed part of the local freshwater systems, feeding the town below.

The underground tank, now disused, happens to be sited in what has recently become Tremenheere Sculpture Garden, and it is now the garden that functions as part of the water system, its ponds acting as a filter for agricultural pollutants. Far from being redundant, however, the tank is now a magnificent installation by James Turrell, *Aqua Oscura*.

I'm tempted to say that the space is transformed into itself, for fundamental to Turrell's sense of cosmic time is the unseen, that which is literally and metaphorically of the essence of any given object or place.

As Tracy and I walk our local marshes, she in the North and me in the South, I find I can't distinguish the experience of Acqua Oscura from our virtually shared walk, especially as her current work aims, as she says, to bring together 'different threads and layers of walking, feeling and understanding unseen landscapes.' It is therefore about 'non-human life systems connecting and interweaving with our own.'

An important part of this is technological; we both find ourselves pushing against any separation of technologies from our embodiment (something we share with Turrell, especially in his early work). I can't help mixing digital poetry and film with analogue media; all technologies of art are part of knowledge production, and it is by no means always science that reveals how, or indeed what, the technologies might engender. It is not that art is superior to science or vice versa; it is that they intersect in varying and shifting ways. They are porous.

Although Tracy's work has taken her to many other parts of the world, the revelatory journey she inspired in me began to focus in a surprisingly unglamorous way that now seems entirely appropriate. I discovered that the bureaucratically named Thurrock Thameside Nature Park is the third layer or iteration (at least of modern times) of what was once the delightfully named Mucking Marshes.

And its second embodiment? Mucking Marshes Landfill. What is now the Nature Reserve has been created out of a landfill site that had once been a marsh. An ecosystem clearly regarded quite recently as useless, literally as rubbish, is gradually returning to something closer to its natural state

It is as if the forces of the earth are reasserting themselves, rising up from deep time, their elemental dynamism spiralling through the embodied time and space that is geology. It links not only our actual locations of Cornwall and Lancashire as Tracy and I walk and talk in virtual time, but also, for example, the pre-histories of mining all over the world, from Britain to Australia, the Americas and beyond.

Such forces are also traceable in the magnetic patterns that guide eels on their migration, showing us how fluid the earth's movements will always be, however much humanity may try to fix them: what lies beneath our feet, geology, tells us that to "set in stone" is as much about porosity and fluidity as solidity.

The geological era covering our brief time as homo sapiens ('wise man'!) has been called the Anthropocene. I wonder whether the Quisquiliacene, the trash era, might be more appropriate. We shall see. Perhaps. ϕ











If you try to cross marshland, it will suck at your shoes, perhaps letting go with satisfying squelch as you lurch to the safety of a tussock. At first it will feel quite unlike the pull of quicksand, but then the surprising clarity of the water chilling your sinking ankles will feel and look just the same.

These sensations pass through me as I experience walking and talking to the artist across the 345 miles between Marazion Marsh and Little Woolden Moss. The release of bodily experiences from constraints of space unexpectedly reminds me of the shell beach at Pedn Vounder further down the peninsula, which, I now sense as marsh like, especially where a stream flows in, carving cliffs in miniature. They seem to prefigure futures when freshwater will become salt, and massive heights will level and slide, their steady erosive path chiming with the subtle changes of immediate and of geologic time.

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storm eye soupy primordial sky camera obscura

roiling definition stopping words silting

distinguishing one muddy water's drop living darkly vibrant

clear vision cloudy as the first second of the first day

the earthstar has always been godlike as the moon

17

explosive incandescent



Temporal Wand(er)ing

is a cloud the wind the wind, a cloud

is a tornado a cloud a wand of wild

the child of meeting of earth and sun

climb in here, my child, my self, look close

gaze past time and cities, ruins

through time and cities grow down to their foundation

stones are filled with storied time

The seasons are generally earlier in Cornwall than in Lancashire and most of the UK. Marazion Marsh is the most inland part of the The Lizard Peninsula, which is in turn, the UK's most southerly point. But this not primarily why it's warmer there. It's the effect of the Gulf Stream, which brings in warm air and water from the Gulf of Mexico, creating another spatial dimension to traverse that of latitude and longitude: flow. Like the marshes themselves - where water and land mingle north and south shift with our bodies.

The poet Paul Valéry observed early in the 20th Century that the physical component of art has to be reassessed in light of contemporary knowledge and power. His insight applies equally to our technologies exploring the digital, because the physicality of the artwork - media, process and the artist's body - is all too easily overlooked.

It is a realisation that brings back vividly the virtual walk Tracy and I shared; it re-minds me, which is to say, the experience of colliding physical and virtual space, familiar and unknown, shifts your sense of place into a radical and embodied becoming of surface and beyond.

As Valéry also famously said, to see is to forget the name of the seen. It is a wonder to glimpse through language to a world unmoored.

(h)edge

alineisaveinisabranch a channel

conduit and living entity

brachial fetcher and carrier linear lung

networking

invisible

being

ecology : etymology twins playing hide and seek

with proprioception to see with the wind



These wonderful blue patterns take us to the moon: they are details of the artist's cyanotypes of the 12 full moons of 2021, appearing as blue as the earth. The colour reflects our satellite's origin as part of our planet; it is a kind of truth re-placed in time, articulated in code that we grasp without knowing.

The blue moons are revealed from under the marsh by the artist placing the media and leaving it overnight, allowing natural process to show itself. Three visual thoughts cascade in my mind: my first sighting of brightly coloured fish quite deep under the sea when scuba diving; a fisheye lens; and the way that fish actually see, which is quite different from both. I sensed their strangeness and their kinship at the same time.

And again, I seem to feel the proximity of the earth's crust, the magma, the flow, the invisible below. Maybe submerged geologies are as powerful an element of our sense of place as those of which we are aware.



lib(r)ation

silver water tain to the sky, holding sublunary earth

blue as spring her planetary mate gravitates

'trepidation of the spheres'

these two are one by airy thinness

held to move the other's fixity











Porosity

by Anna Souter

... The pluck came sharp as a sting. The rod jerked with precise convulsions, Spring water suddenly broadcasting Through a green hazel its secret stations. Seamus Heaney, The Diviner, 1966¹

I - Divining

Seamus Heaney's short poem, *The Diviner*, describes the actions of a local water dowser, who walks across a landscape with a "forked hazel stick", searching for hidden springs and subterranean streams: "Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck / Of water." The dowser is part-professional, part-showman; he treats his work like any skilled trade, but he is also aware of the mystery surrounding in his actions and the scepticism of bystanders, who ask to have a go with the dowsing wand: "It lay dead in their grasp till nonchalantly / He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred."

Water divining or dowsing is the practice of using a forked stick or a pair of metal rods to sense the presence of water. The dowser holds the ends of the stick lightly in their hands and walks across an area of land. The presence of unseen water is indicated when the end of the stick dips towards the earth. The process, which has been practiced for hundreds of years, is particularly important in rural communities without easily accessible water sources (such as Heaney's 1950s rural Ireland). Like many of the most interesting things, it is unclear how water dowsing works. Various scientific experiments have concluded that it is simply luck and that water dowsers have naturally high odds of succeeding; certainly, if you dig deep enough almost anywhere in the world, you will find water. However, most water dowsers search not for the water table, but for moving water in the form of underground springs and waterways; and they achieve good results, outside of scientific tests. Consequently, dowsers and their esoteric practices are employed by some of the most committed capitalists, including Big Oil, mining, and water companies, and even the television presenter Jeremy Clarkson. Dowsing inhabits a strange liminal space between occultism and industrialism, practiced both by those seeking to understand the earth's energies and by those seeking to extract its resources.

For Heaney, the water dowser is analogous to the poet. The poem's concise title forges a link between the rural Irish practitioner and the poets of the ancient world, who were thought to "divine" messages from the gods, interpreting oracular signs and translating heavenly inspiration into human words. Heaney takes this analogy further in his prose, arguing that water dowsing or divining is "a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, a gift for mediating between the latent resource and the community that wants it current and released [...] The dowser resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised."² Heaney presents the "function" of the dowser/artist both as a trade or practice and as an enigmatic "gift" that helps communities to get in touch with latent energies and the gifts of the more-than-human world.

II - Depths

"Making contact with what lies hidden" and making "palpable what was sensed or raised" – these concepts are at the heart of Tracy Hill's project *Porosity*. Developed slowly over the course of around two years, *Porosity* uses a variety of fine art and mapping techniques to investigate how the walking body responds to unseen subterranean landscapes. Reacting to visual and sonic traces, Hill's work questions how the walking body acts as a receiver for unseen energy and how artistic practice can decode the multisensory signals received while walking.

This multipartite project is rooted in the landscape of North-West England, specifically in the parts of Cheshire home to a hidden network of salt mines and brine rivers. This history of extraction has left behind a legacy of solubility and subsidence throughout the region. Roughhewn rock salt pillars supporting the roofs of voids have been eroded by flowing fresh water, causing collapses and sunken surface patches like giant plough furrows. Many areas are essentially suspended on moving rivers of brine, formed when salt deposits dissolve in underground streams. This makes the landscape unstable and dynamic, the certainty of soil and rock literally and metaphorically undermined by the combined forces of human extractivism and the water cycle. This perspective on the local earth reconfigures it as a shifting mass holding within it myriad tensions between liquid and solid.

Conventional mapping systems struggle to capture such changeable terrain, and while there is extensive data available regarding these moving landscapes, Hill discovered that its forms are not easily accessible or legible. Her project *Porosity*, therefore, attempts to find alternative ways of interpreting and experiencing the unseen landscape.

As part of this process, Hill sought to form collaborative relationships with practitioners from other fields, including Dr Rosalind Todhunter BSC PhD, a walker, cyclist, coal mining geologist (retired), and lecturer in geology and geophysics (retired). Todhunter offered insights into the area's unique geological makeup and the ways in which it might be interpreted from a geophysical perspective. Hill also reached out to Deborah Bell, an artist, walker, and water dowser. Hill invited Bell to survey areas of interest and observed her process of water dowsing with a forked hazel stick, capturing the movements of the rod held in Bell's hands. *Porosity* developed through Hill's conversations and walks with Todhunter and Bell, weaving together different ways of experiencing local unseen landscapes and reading the negative spaces and voids present beneath the walkers' feet.

III - Drawing

"Porosity" is a term borrowed from geology, referring to the measure of holes in stone and used to consider how water penetrates rock. Much as the title of Heaney's poem links the water dowser to the ancient poets, Hill's use of the term "Porosity" implicitly connects the permeability of the landscapes with the porousness of the human body. This points to a give-and-take relationship between person and place, an inevitable interchange of molecules and energies, each leaving an impression on the other.

In Hill's series of lithographic drawings and prints *Letters to the Void*, she explores the body as a receptive threshold for sensing the unseen energies and forces exerted on the walker by the environment. To make these works, Hill drops water and tusche onto a ground lithographic stone (tusche, etymologically related to the word "touch", is a black grease-like liquid used in lithography for drawing designs). The tusche leaves behind traces of its motion through the water, both responding to and overriding the human gesture that applied it to the stone. As the liquid dries, it forms new patterns in response to the atmospheric conditions, seeping across the boundaries of the artist's hand, the environment, and the materiality of substances and surfaces.

For Hill, such drawings are a way to explore the energies created between materials, to slow down and notice the details of the interplay between places and creative processes. Folded Force consists of a series of drawings on large paper panels folded into sculptural wave-like forms. The folded paper waves respond to hodograms produced by the geophysics department at Keele University. These hodograms visualise sonic recordings used to monitor the network of salt mines under Cheshire, using digital sensing and mapping to capture subsidence and moving brine rivers in four dimensions. Hill's work also responds to the hidden elements of the landscape by obscuring parts of her drawings through the geological folding motions she applies to the paper. Folded Force brings together various ways of responding to and mapping the Cheshire landscape, layering different forms of interpretation into the strata of the artwork and challenging the relative legibility of geophysics, scientific data, and creative practice.

Turning to another key mode of interpretation, *Finding Centre* is a series of drawings made after a session of water dowsing with Deborah Bell. Made on paper whose dimensions correspond to Hill's own body, the drawings borrow imagery captured from GoPro footage of the dowsing rods' movements in Bell's hands. *Finding Centre* evokes the moment when the hazel stick dips towards the earth, drawn down by the action of crossing the hidden watercourse's centre. Visually describing Heaney's "pluck of water", the charcoal and graphite traces investigate the possible electromagnetic pull of water on the body and the hazel twig.

In Celtic and Gaelic traditions, hazel trees are associated with wisdom and poetic inspiration, further suggesting an analogy between water dowsing and creative practice. Hill's open-ended and collaborative interchange with the Cheshire landscape reaches towards a fluidity between interpretative modes, drawing together geophysics, dowsing, and art making as complementary ways of divining the signs presented by the earth. *Porosity* forges relationships between the corporeality of the landscape, bodies of water, and the female walking body. It evokes persons, watercourses, and geologies in states of constant motion, pointing to a reciprocal dynamism inherent in human and more-than-human worlds. Permeating the boundaries between disciplines, Hill's project is itself porous, making contact with latent energies and making palpable the sensations raised by experiencing them. As an artist, Hill brings these elements together, interpreting both the stirring of the hazel twig and the four-dimensional digital hodogram, and finding the hidden life in each. ϕ

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966)

² Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)










Images

p.2: Ephemeral Bodies, detail, salt drawing installation at The Birley Artist Studios, Preston, 2022 p.4: Measuring States, detail, hand-cut Kozo paper panel, 2021 p.5: Folded Force, detail, drawing on folded black Canson paper, 2021 p.6: Tatton Park, Mechett Mere, brine stream dowsing location, 2021 p.7: Pen and ink drawing, detail, 2021 p.8: Letters To The Void, detail, lithographic stone drawing, 2021 Tracing paper panel: Letters To The Void, detail, lithographic stone drawing, 2021 p.11: Fracture, details, lithographic stone drawing, 2021 p.12: Liquid tusche on lithographic stone, 2021 p.13: Deborah Bell, Water Dowser, Northumberland, 2021 p.14: Sphagnum Moss, Little Woolden Moss, Cadishead, Manchester, 2021 p.15: Surge, detail, charcoal drawing and projection on Somerset paper, 2021 Tracing paper panel: Little Woolden Moss, Cadishead, Manchester, 2021 p.18: Little Woolden Moss sky, Cadishead, Manchester, 2021 Tracing paper panel: Little Woolden Moss sky, Cadishead, Manchester, 2021 Tracing paper panel, Flow, detail, charcoal drawing, 2021 p.22: Continuum, detail, cyanotype, Little Woolden Moss, 2021 Tracing paper panel: Continuum, detail, cyanotype, 2021 p.24: Ephemeral Bodies, detail of salt drawing installation at The Birley Artist Studios, Preston, 2022 p.25: Folded Force, detail, drawing on folded black Canson paper, 2021 p.26: Deborah Bell, Water Dowser, Northumberland, 2021 p.27: Liquid tusche on lithographic stone, 2021 p.28: Veins of Transmission, detail, lithographic stone drawing, 2021 Tracing paper panel: Veins of Transmission, detail, lithographic stone drawing, 2021 p.33: Veins of Transmission, detail, lithographic stone drawing, 2021 p.34: Searching for Springs, Northumberland, 2021 p.35: Artist, studio drawing, 2021 p.36: Capillarity, detail, lithographic print, 2021 p.37: Measuring States, detail, hand-cut Kozo paper panel, 2021 p.39: Capillarity, detail, lithographic print, 2021 p.40: Folded Force, detail, drawing on folded black Canson paper, 2021 p.43: Measuring States, detail, hand-cut Kozo paper panel, 2022 p.44: Folded Force, detail, drawing on folded black Canson paper, 2022





Tracy Hill's practice considers the historical legacy of post-industrial landscapes, our understanding, relationship and connection to ideas around place. Perceptions of mapping, digital navigation and how we encounter our urban and rural spaces connect with a modern obsession for locating, ordering and fragmenting our experiences. Hill considers that in order to reconnect with ideas of place, we must first reconnect with the aesthetic; understand the experience, knowledge and memory of the physical encounter. Though combinations of print, installation and hand drawn imagery, Hill invites a new perspective to these landscapes. Disrupted and reimagined, Hill's images require a visual and cognitive attention intrinsic to walking, occupying the place where our digital and physical worlds overlap.

www.tracyhill.co.uk // www.porosity.co.uk

Published in 2022 by In Certain Places, Preston **incertainplaces.org** All works © Tracy Hill 2022 Text © Tracy Hill, Penny Florence, Anna Souter 2022

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library ISBN 978 0 9930498 6 6

Book design and layout: Bonnie Craig www.bonnie-craig.com



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Penny Florence is Professor Emerita, The Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. She is an inter/cross/un/disciplinary artist and writer, and a feminist materialist who struggles with "isms." She is based in West Cornwall, where she exhibits digital poetry, films and mixed installations, especially, but not exclusively, as a member of the Newlyn Society of Artists (NSA). She has performed readings in various galleries in the UK and internationally, the most visible of which include at Tate Modern and Tate Britain. She has worked in Universities, while resisting the label "academic", and her books, articles and papers are fundamentally concerned with the forms and processes of thinking and their intersection with what we call art and media. Appointments include: Head of Research

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