

atmospherics



Marguerite Carson

*The force behind the movement of time is a mourning.*¹

The voice fades in the ear even as meaning is articulated.

*A translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense.*²

Drops of water fall on the glass screen protector that raises the clear surface a fraction, a second skin (screen). You keep scrolling. A fragmented drop streaks up the glass—no matter—the artificial skin is there to protect it. Posing no resistance to the flow of information, the skin acts like an exact translation for every gesture inward and every liquid crystal visual outward. The now-brutalised raindrop refracts the inner glow in each piece of itself, imperfecting the colours of the screen media and getting in the way as you hit refresh on the BOM radar. The site is frozen; the rain is causing it to glitch, stuck in a past slice of movement, the 5 minute interval now well out of date, the same rain that is troubling the registration of finger on touchscreen, slippery and wet.

If we are to believe Harun Faroki, under computational navigation *there is no more outside*; the eye that determines the frame of the image is ours and we can move it in any direction, swiping and dragging our fingers to interact with the digital object.³ The ARI - an average recurrence interval known also as the Return Period—is a mapping device that reflects the likelihood of extreme rainfall (and therefore flooding) events in given areas based on rainfall data.⁴ Calculating probabilities through the collection and record of precipitation across a geography, this mapping stretches horizontally and vertically: the downpour converted into a measure of horizontal volume, and the lateral spread of distance that contextualises it within space and place. Lastly of course there is the function of time; both the atmospheric time that contextualises the data within the local season, which itself is plumbed into a network of global weather patterns that form a constantly affective assemblage, and the time that stretches forward in a looping motion, allowing the ARI's predictions to attach to it. The ARI relies on the repetition or return of something known. Like radar which swings itself round updating the image each time, the past is ever present in the prediction of the future.

The ARI produces a digital land object⁵ (familiar to those who interact with any kind of digital visual representation of land, —google earth and BOM weather radar being the most common examples), which projects through the surface of data and the screen the digital existence of space. The data is transformed into image-based representations with concentric colour-coded circles, an intersection of the visual representation of territory, of space, and the density of data.

We are used to looking at space and place represented in this way, we do so all the time, dropping in through the layers of old haunts to have a look—we navigate constantly through the digital-virtual space of representation. In doing so we interact with something that is real⁶; the image that is the map held within the screen.

In 2011 something strange happened in Prineville, Oregon. The heating system in a Facebook data centre produced air with 95% humidity as a result of an accidental feedback loop created within the cooling system. When this air was returned to the server racks it was so wet it condensed and produced rain.⁷ In this moment, the usually hidden materiality of the internet was felt: the server's own relationship with its supporting system was troubled and rippled more widely into the user's relationship, which then threaded back to this precipitation through brief obstructed usage, entangled by the realisation of enclosed atmospheres within the hardware of the digital. The internet and the digital are not only always in conversation with the material real but also with the atmospheric material. The globally networked internet has to contend with the local atmospheric changes at its point of delivery; when it's raining, the bandwidth is reduced.

In looking at a live weather visualisation tool, we watch the same atmosphere reflected back to us, closing the loop of atmospheric event—measurement—data—digital visualisation—transmission—atmospheric event—reception.

For surveillance and other forms of aerial photography or observation, days with low precipitation make for clearer images. The water in the air facilitates or obscures surveillance, becoming a medium through which to see, to perceive, to read. Conversely, the same idealistic observation conditions are the undoing of coral reefs which, unsheltered beneath clear skies, are bleached faster and harder. Each digital layer stitches together a patchwork of images, visualisations and data sets, but also contained within are the on-ground, 'on-life' conditions within which they were gathered, transmitted, re-transmitted and processed, thus forming an inward-looking and ever-shifting whole dispersed across distance on a scale that requires a break with the locale to realise. The aerial image, and particularly the hybridised digital rendering of the aerial image, is an image from the outside, territorialising different viewpoints to create an [almost] cohesive whole. The live digital map object is able to take this a step further. Not only is it able to realise the entirety of the earth from a perspective only possible through the dispersal and totality of observation (as seen in Google Earth), but it is also able to exit the shackles of time and to do so live. Through the speed of communication, interaction and transference, and the manipulation enacted on the frame by our fingers, the relationship between space and time has been transformed: the distance is shortened.⁸

The data point itself becomes a moment of rupture; situated or grounded to its position by almost pure context, tied to the multiple axis and stapling the different layers: time—place—rainfall—image—future. Data becomes the infrastructure and scaffold that holds these elements in tension. Technology departs from a primal magical moment: a materialisation of relations through the apparatus of perception—that is, the changes sensory perception undergoes as a result of exposure to new technologies.⁹ The ARI can be considered a form of water divining for the contemporary era. Just as once the technology for the knowledge of water was the wishbone-shaped dowsing rod, it is now the layered loop of two dimensional projection space—a transparent translation of the world that should not obscure the original. The medium through which knowledge travels is always atmospheric; something to move through; an agency, an intervening substance and middle ground all at once.¹⁰

How does the data point change in becoming-artwork and what ontological pressure does it sustain? Here perhaps is a different form of materialisation through a different medium and a different atmospheric. Metadata is data about data, describing not an occurrence or measurement but the *information* that constitutes such things—'a description of something else. But this description can extend infinitely and may end up as circular.' In becoming-artwork the relations that extend outward from the data and its representations are scrutinised: these same relations that constitute the material realisation of the digital are subsumed into the exchange that materialises the artwork. If the moments of connection or recognition constitute ruptures across the layers, puncturing them and pinning them in contact with one another, then the lines drawn between those punctures and the path travelled from one to another is what the artwork engages with. Jean Luc Nancy writes that the artwork commits a gesture that points outside of itself, to what it cannot name. He terms this gesture a signal, and also sometimes, a wink.¹¹

For *Average Recurrence Interval*, an exhibition of new work by Chantelle Mitchell and Jaxon Waterhouse at IN | artist run initiative, on Kabi Kabi (Gabi Gabi) and Jinibara Country. September 2023.

¹ Marilyne Robinson

² Walter Benjamin

³ This idea is explored by Doreen Mende in her article *The Code of Touch: Navigating Beyond Control, or, Towards Scalability and Sociability* published in e-flux journal #109 May 2020, in it she quotes the late filmmaker and theorist Harun Faroki's lecture Computer Animation Rules - <https://vimeo.com/100092938>

⁴ Australian Water Information Dictionary entry for average recurrence interval (ARI) - <http://www.bom.gov.au/water/awid/id-704.shtml> see also the entry how to read ARI maps - http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/extremes/how_to_read_arimaps.shtml

⁵ This terminology draws on Yuk Hui's concept of the digital object, outlined in *What is a digital object?* 2012

⁶ 'The Web is acting both as an interface between users and digital objects and as a world in which these digital objects conceal and reveal—in both physical and metaphysical terms.' Yuk Hui, *What is a Digital Object?*, 2012

⁷ *It Was Raining In The Data Centre*, Everest Pipkin, 13/06/2018 <https://medium.com/s/story/it-was-raining-in-the-data-centre-9e1525c37cc3>

⁸ *Digital Time: Latency, Real-time, and the Onlife Experience*

⁹ Yuk Hui, *Form and Relation*, pp. 111

¹⁰ *Walter Benjamin's Media Theory: The Medium and the Apparatus*, Antonio Somaini

¹¹ Jean Luc Nancy *Art Today*

