

The Copenhagen Invitation

Jamie Allen

What is a metaphor for? We might first assume that these unassuming little devices are fixers against incomprehension. They are often translative, mnemonics tricks, linguistically metamorphosing the unknown of a murky, muddy idea into to the crystalline clarity of the familiar. Language itself functions analogously — “that is a chair” solidifies reference, subtended by tradition, culture and practice, from a concrete object to a gaseous concept, and sublimating back again. “No ideas but in things,” wrote W.C. Williams. (Duffey, Litz, & MacGowan, 1987) Karan Barad inverts this relation with her own rejoinder: “Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.” (Micciche, 2014)

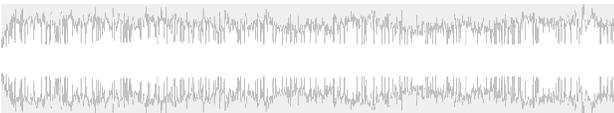
It would seem the potential or power of these relational comparisons would hardly need further authorisation, but these kinds of reminders seem to remain necessary... and we only have to look to the great edifices (literally, and metaphorically) of communications and media that have forever surrounded us. The electrical signalling that extends, contains and tracks a large proportion of people and things on earth, operates principally by metaphoric reference, by analogy. From the analog to the digital, we rely on the potential for things to stand in for one another. I am, here and always, writing reference, aligning indexes, programming pointers, coding for all kinds of stuff.

And yet, the clarity that metaphor and analogy give us, presupposes a limit. Paul DeMarinis describes these same metaphoric layerings as decoys, or entrapments: “what our mind does—when it tries to converge on the same mental state from seeing a picture of a duck, the written word duck, looking at ducks flying overhead, and playing with a rubber ducky—somewhat like what a duck does when it sees a decoy bobbing on the pond?” (Pritikin, n.d.) Things remain, no matter how many ideas we put inside them. If you told me that the earth’s circumference was 40,075 km, it would serve comprehension in no way better to tell me that 220 million pencils could wrap around it. Same goes for our understandings of the earth itself — whether a loosely spherical rock, a spaceship, an organism, or a mother in our minds, the formidable globe beneath our feet remains local and directly accessible to all.



Jens Lee Jørgensen slowly preparing a reenactment of the original Pitch Drop experiment, 15 November, 2013

It is at the limit of the metaphors between media and the geological that an invitation was extended to a group of people enjoin an encounter in Copenhagen, Denmark in the Autumn of 2013. In attendance: Martin Howse, Rosemary Lee, Will Schrimshaw, Anders Kølle, and the custodians of a loose collective basement project space Sankt Hans Gade 26 known as "Science Friction" (Jens Jørgensen, Jacob Remin, Jakob Bak, David Gauthier, Christian Villum, Carl Emil Carlsen and myself). Inaugurated by a salts-laden degustation for involved artists and scholars, the autumn at Science Friction was a call to think about temporalities: of media and their materiality, of rocks and their minerality.



"PITCH DROP" by heavyside on Soundcloud

A pre-programme discussion for the Pitch Drop exhibition between Anders Kolle and Jamie Allen, slowed down until unintelligible.

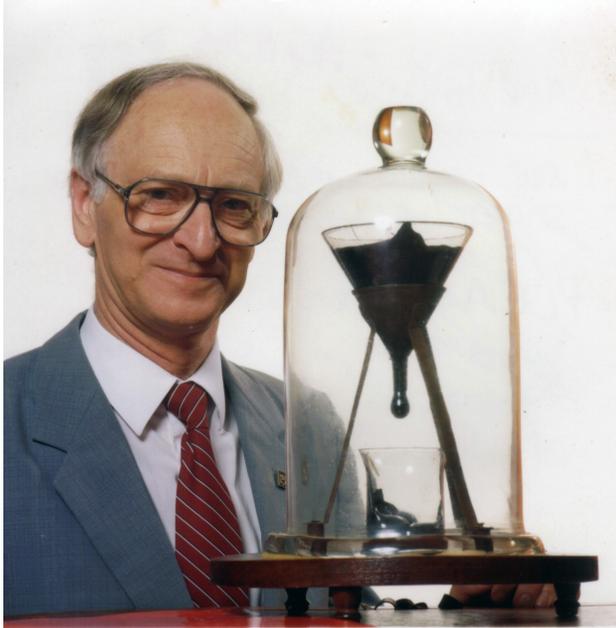
Inspired and presupposed by Professor Thomas Parnell's 1927 "Pitch Drop" experiment^[1] - showing off how certain substances which look quite solid are in fact not what they appear to be.

"The first Professor of Physics at the University of

Queensland, Professor Thomas Parnell, began an experiment in 1927 to illustrate that everyday materials can exhibit quite surprising properties. The experiment demonstrates the fluidity and high viscosity of pitch, a derivative of tar once used for waterproofing boats. At room temperature pitch feels solid - even brittle - and can easily be shattered with a blow from a hammer. It's quite amazing then, to see that pitch at room temperature is actually fluid."

(<http://smp.uq.edu.au/content/pitch-drop-experiment>)

Pitch rock is placed into a laboratory apparatus, has been continuously "dripping" out of a funnel for the past 80-odd years. What registers on one level as the Guinness World Records' longest continuously running laboratory experiment, calls up the geophysics of media, their material substrates and blinkered disposition toward us as human beings. Materials and the technologies that they compose show us new ways to know change, to know time. Digital technologies bring with them the assumption of speed, but is there a way to imagine slow electronics, slow material composites, a chopped-and-screwed version of progress that revisits the leisurely, plodding, derisive and contemplative modes of opposing the ever-new (ever-now?) of the technological? "Slow" here takes on many forms: the obtuse and incomprehensible, the insensitive and thick, the clunky, and the ignored. The reluctance of materials that underlie mediated existence, and their earthy roots, are unfolded and laid bare.

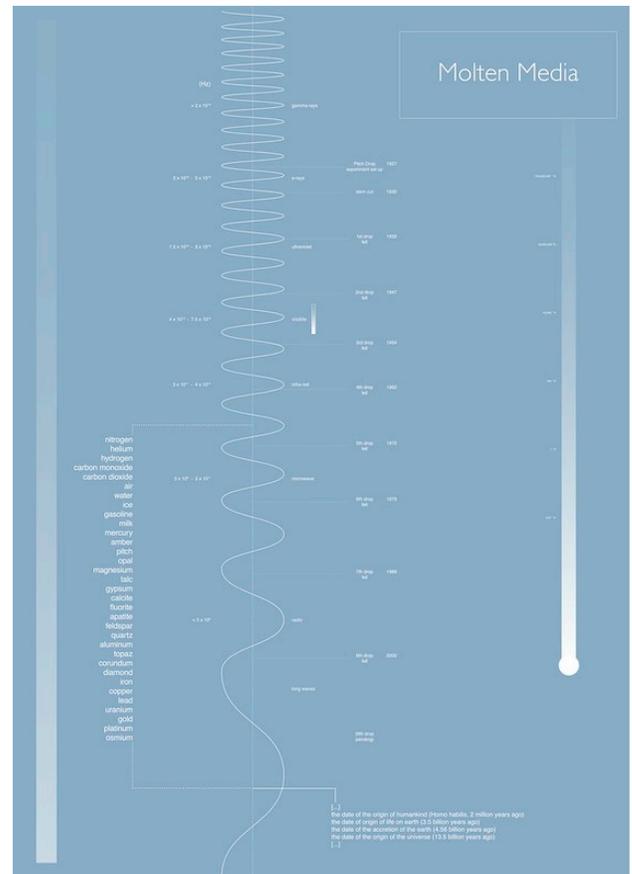


Professor John Mainstone taken with the Pitch Drop experiment in 1990 at The University of Queensland, Australia. (Image credit)

If this particular set of geological moments and movements served as inspiration and metaphor, they were also to be taken quite literally, and simply: If you slow down sound you notice immediately the mechanism of the speaker, if you reduce the speed of a film you see the plasticky petroleum of the images which compose it. Treated in a certain way, media reasserts its matter. Matter becomes media, in the phantasm sense, when it is sped up, oscillated or energized with particular frequencies. Considered a certain way, and as a failing of our perceptual bandwidth, seemingly static matter is likewise entirely mediatic, as in the Parnell experiment (Images of Professor John Maidstone, Professor Parnell’s successor, watching the pitch drop are journalistically contrived and yet revealing — his is not the so-called objective gaze of science, but the fixed stare of someone watching television.). And what could a petroleum asphalt medium with a viscosity approximately 230 billion times that of water possibly communicate to us? Is it a signal from the earth?

The meaning of any signal is to be found in its response, and responses to a Copenhagen invitation celebrated as well the strangely perhaps-coincident etymology of analysis and analogy (metaphysics and metaphor). Actions and

expressions in the underground exhibition in the Autumn of 2014 seemed to align with Joseph Kosuth’s idea of “art [as] an analytic proposition.” (Kosuth, 1966). Rosemary Lee’s meditations on the continuum of dureté/durée invokes Deleuze’s proposition that “a body has a degree of hardness as well as a degree of fluidity.” She charts the analytical and analogous spectra available to material media precisely like this:



Rosemary Lee’s “Molten Media” poster, drawing comparison between frequency, density, and deep-time events.

Martin Howse’s workshop connected to an earth computer, looking at Ballard’s megaliths through the earth-smeared lens of Robert Smithson, and his “tombic communication”, and of “the medium is the mummy.” Anders Kalle helped out with the bachelardian notion of matter as the unconscious of form and as a kind of rough sketch for unbounded dreams. Will Schrimshaw’s Ur-writings sound works produced a three hour tracing of a fossil surface, a cultural technique of media as a force of nature.

To metaphorise the geological is to both empower us to think it anew, but also an opportunity to rekindle an old romance with the dirty soils, muddy waters, and conjoined medias of earthly substrates. From these we compose, from these are given the advantageous reading materials of art and thinking that clings tightly to its things.

"The pitch drop experiment." *European Journal of Physics* 5.4 (1984): 198.



A photograph of an intervention from Martin Howse's workshop, Tombic Communication (1010.co.uk/tombic.pdf), 21 November, 2013.

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[1] Edgeworth, R., B. J. Dalton, and U. T. Parnell.