Speculations on a more-than-human sensorium: spatial practice and becoming-with others

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the notion of a human sensorium through critically reviewing the 2016 Honours project, Hydrophilous and the Observatorium, of Interior Architecture graduate Emilie Evans. Evans’ speculative design project highlights the boundless relations and encounters with which human bodies are inescapably intertwined. Her graduating design project manifests the consideration of other bodies—both living and non-living—in spatial practice and questions the authoritative role of designer as sole author of any project. Instead Evans acknowledges beings, forces and processes beyond human that we are inextricably engaged with. In reflecting on this project, we discuss perceived binaries of human and more-than-human sensoriums, and demonstrate how these conventions obscure the ways humans attempt to control nature via interiorised landscapes. Evans’ work illustrates the commingling of bodies, materialities and sensorial effects that stretch beyond the realm of a speculative student project, and which speak to tangible and immediate futures. Emerging debates about the Anthropocene have prompted key aspects of this project, as well as a desire to design for a fluctuating environment: the hyper-saline water body of Don Juan Pond in Eastern Antarctica. This review explores entangled bodies, landscapes, and sensorial experimentation, and ultimately demands a reconfigured understanding of designers working in spatial practice. As such, we posit their strength as ‘curators’, and nature as any project’s true creator, while acknowledging humans’ limited power in a world of forces primarily beyond their hitherto-assumed control. Rethinking the future(s) of spatial practice involves ‘becoming-with’ others in space and time, and privileging a more-than-human sensorium allows us to design-with a vast assemblage of beings, forces, and planetary processes.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of a (purely) human sensorium is challenged by myriad interconnected relations increasingly apparent in the Anthropocene. Although a highly contested notion across multiple disciplines, the Anthropocene is generally identified as the alarming shift from the benign conditions of the Holocene period that began 10,000 years ago. Among the conceptual confusion though, a steady focus on the interdependencies between ourselves, non-humans, and nature has emerged; as well as the key suggestion that humans have never really been entirely in control of this world. Here, ‘nature’ is an interpretative rather than simply descriptive term, and is “discursively constructed to particular discourses and representations that are ideologically charged.” Consequently of this multifaceted experience form anomalies between ourselves (human containers of many selves) and the wider landscape, and we argue, by way of feminist science and technology scholar Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘becoming with’, that engaging with these inconsistencies allow us to better understand this interconnected world. Essentially, this paper considers the problem of how humans occupy larger landscapes: that is, the interiors of this planet. When we disregard a more-than-human sensorium, we simply avoid a critical understanding of the ways humans attempt to control nature via such interiorised environments.

Above Figure 1: A compilation of final artefacts documenting the Hydrophilous and the Observatorium project, featuring exhibition banner, exegesis, and ice superstructure prototype, 2016. The banner, pictured, displays diagrams, animation stills, digital photo-collage perspectives, diagrammatic drawings, and maps and scientific footage of its site, Don Juan Pond, a hypersaline lake in the McMurdo Dry Valleys of East Antarctica. Image by Emilie Evans.
In avoiding this disregard, we will interrogate a recent design project by Interior Architecture Honours graduate Emile Evans, which approached inhabitation as a more-than-human sensorium. Evans’ speculative project, Hydrophilus and the Observatorium, as seen in Figure 1, responds to the paradox of human-controlled interiors and interiorised landscapes by exploring a remote water body, Don Juan Pond, as site, user, and body. Hydrophilus and the Observatorium emphasises the non-human and non-living bodies with which human bodies are interlaced, and brings to light new shared spatial experiences. This paper will also draw on the project’s conceptual framing to examine larger concerns of the designer (as both curator and object) and nature (as simultaneously creator and subject), in an attempt to dissolve the subject-object divide. We will conclude by reflecting on what this discussion provides through recontextualising the sensorium as more-than-human, thus offering a future for spatial practice beyond anthropocentric constraints.

RECONCEIVING THE HUMAN SENSORIUM

In order to reconceive the human sensorium, this paper makes use of theoretical framings emerging from critiques of the Anthropocene, and scaffolds these with Haraway’s provocation of ‘becoming-with’. We consider the possibility of planetary-scaled interiors that are not only shared among all on the Earth, but interconnected through intertwined sensory experiences of the world. Recent hybrid modes of design research that coalesce under the broad category of ‘speculative design’ also help situate Evans’ project, and offer an alternative critical lens for analysing the potential for imagined futures in spatial practice. Through Hydrophilus and the Observatorium, Evans constructs imaginaries of the possible by synthesising scientific data via text, photo-montaged perspectives, iterative diagramming, and 3D printing. These design interventions operate as re-presentations of the world, non-humans, the non-living, and spaces in seemingly uncontrolled change. The Anthropocene is thus a slippery notion for spatial practitioners, and collapsing orders in this era designated as the Anthropocene. Recent critiques by sociologist Ulrich Beck and urban political ecologist Erik Swyngedouw also posit that planetary processes extend our conception of assemblages to include those that are dynamic assemblages performing across and through the planet. A familiar term across disciplines as diverse as critical geography, urban studies, and feminist ecological theory, ‘assemblages’ are best understood as “interactions between human and non-human components that as ‘co-functioning’ can be ‘stabilised’ or ‘destabilised’ through ‘mutual overlapping’”, as shown in Figure 2. This term thus also engages with feminist economic geographer(1) J.K. Gibson-Graham’s notion of a new way—the complexity of living with others in emergent publics that are themselves constituted by escalating environmental degradation. Indeed, this paper is deliberate in its usage of ‘we’ and ‘us’ throughout, and assumes that these assemblages take in more than the human, in order to understand interdependencies that constitute such (conscious or not) groupings. We are, more accurately, more-than-human, always operating in the context of other beings. We should also extend our conception of assemblages to include those that sit beyond living/non-living binaries. Humans, non-humans, and the non-living are entangled with socio-spatial ideologies that constitute such (conscious or not) groupings. This emerging field, held together by ficto-critical methodologies, highlights the importance of projects that ask questions we cannot already resolve.

MORE-THAN-HUMAN BODILY ENCOUNTERS

Inherently engaged in multispecies relations, spatial practitioners must reconsider their focus, and work to understand humans and non-humans as dynamic assemblages performing across and through the planet. A familiar term across disciplines as diverse as critical geography, urban studies, and feminist ecological theory, ‘assemblages’ are best understood as “interactions between human and non-human components that as ‘co-functioning’ can be ‘stabilised’ or ‘destabilised’ through ‘mutual overlapping’”, as shown in Figure 2. This term thus also engages with feminist economic geographer(1) J.K. Gibson-Graham’s notion of a new way—the complexity of living with others in emergent publics that are themselves constituted by escalating environmental degradation. Indeed, this paper is deliberate in its usage of ‘we’ and ‘us’ throughout, and assumes that these assemblages take in more than the human, in order to understand interdependencies that constitute such (conscious or not) groupings. We are, more accurately, more-than-human, always operating in the context of other beings. We should also extend our conception of assemblages to include those that sit beyond living/non-living binaries. Humans, non-humans, and the non-living are entangled with socio-spatial ideologies that extend well beyond our individual selves or any one place on this planet. Rather than seeing the sensorium as a specifically human condition, this critique therefore re-imagines interiority as

surprising new and old connections.” 10 For this project review, the Anthropocene is imagined as both performance and ongoing narrative, staged across the planet. As such, Hydrophilus and the Observatorium invite us to examine a very different sensorium, here, ‘the environment’ is not just a backdrop to the project, but instead a critical space of experimentation. 11 Thus, the ‘interior’ this project concerns itself with constitutes the intimate experience of space where we negotiate all interaction. This extends beyond conventionally constructed architectural forms, and understands that interiority does not just denote an inside location. 12 As political theorist Lars Tander notes, the disregard of embodied experience inhibits how we respond to questions of power and perception. 13 We therefore situate this review within a particular framing of the sensorium, in the Anthropocene age, where spatial practitioners move beyond narrow concerns privileging embodiment as a solely human perception of space. When reflecting on Hydrophilus and the Observatorium we foreground Tander’s politically-charged definition of the sensorium:

... a multilayered phenomenon that spans all aspects of sentient existence, including the way in which touch and other sensory inputs elicit affects, emotions, and perceptions...[that is] not reducible to physiological law but rather hinges on the interplay between a body’s biological makeup and the surrounding institutions, practices, and traditions... [and] a multiplicity of forces that work with and against each other...[as] a rejection of the culture-nature divide. 14

Evans’ speculations on Don Juan Pond seek to make explicit the intertwining interiority of human-controlled space, seemingly-wild landscapes, and more-than-human bodies in this sensorium, as they articulate a permeability between these realms. By privileging the multispecies relations engaged within her interventions and their connectedness to Don Juan Pond, she treats Don Juan Pond as an active user in its own right, and acknowledges the limits of human control and entanglement of landscape, non-human and human. 15 This project also sits within

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a ‘planetary space of encounter’ between bodies, objects, and events. As such, Hydrophilous and the Observatorium examines compositions of life due to collective spatial consideration. Significantly, the recognition of our own affects, emotions, practices and materialities entangled in more-than-human relations has yet to be fully explored in critical discourses of the interior.

THE PROJECT: ‘HYDROPHILOUS AND THE OBSERVATORIUM’

The conceptual framework of the Hydrophilous and the Observatorium project involves abandoning ideas of interiority as (only) constructed space, and instead considering experiences that speak to interiors at the scale of the planet. The subject of this review was designed by Evans, and aimed to expand current ideas of spatial practice beyond their narrow focus on the human self. The project responds to the provocation of ‘planetary interiors’ (that is, nothing is ‘outside’ or unconnected in the Anthropocene) and explores extreme environments that provide homes for residents beyond the human, forming a more-than-human sensorium. The project was also informed by analysing theoretical texts from anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour, environmental historian Libby Robin, artist Olafur Eliasson, science communicator Lone Frank, and, of course, Donna Haraway. Situated in East Antarctica, and scarcely inhabited by humans, Don Juan Pond was chosen as an isolated ‘planetary interior’ for the project, where Evans designed primarily for the site’s non-human residents. Importantly, the selection of the Don Juan Pond also stemmed from its (seemingly) stable environment of extreme saline levels—a key motivation in disproving this positivist assumption of certainty in the landscape. Developed through a series of iterative sketch models, material investigations, physical making, and stop-motion animations, Hydrophilous and the Observatorium also documented experiments on ideas surrounding agency and the ephemeral, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 2: Assemblages By Way of Bruno Latour’s Monsters: an early developmental photocollage, 2016 by Emilie Evans. The photocollage explores human entanglements as hybrids or ‘Franken’ bodies, acknowledging assemblages impossible to disentangle.

Figure 3: A collection of Hydrophilous and the Observatorium iterative sketch models, 3D-printed and performative ice artefacts, hand-sketched and stop-motion animation stills, and material experiments during the design process, as documented in Evans’ exegesis presented at the final exhibition. The artefacts, shown along the bottom constructed from nylon and coated in layers of ice, served as a performative small-scale physical manifestation of the Observatorium tower which executed its deconstruction (melting) process during the length of Evans’ presentation. All images by Emilie Evans.
THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN SENSORIUM

Evans’ project explores the tension between Earth’s biosphere and humans’ understanding of landscape by proposing certain curatorial tactics as spatial practice. Where conventionally constructed interiors satisfy the needs and comforts of humans only, Hydrophilous and the Observatorium dissolve this subject-object relationship to situate landscape beyond its ubiquitous perception as a “palatable scene for human consumption.” Reframing these primary relations (as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5) allows a deeper understanding of human as object and nature as subject. Newly apparent relations between humans, non-humans, and the non-living are thus explored in this project as both spatial and conceptual provocations. The investigation manifests in two distinct interventions: Hydrophilous, a suspended water-gathering structure; and The Observatorium, a research tower.

The first intervention, Hydrophilous, explores dynamics between designing for humans and designing for non-humans and ultimately caters for more-than-humans. Hydrophilous (a term describing processes of pollination by the agency of water) is a large-scale freshwater catchment structure that harnesses nearby water for Don Juan Pond (as seen in Figure 6) and feeds a series of bacterial incubators. Freshwater from snowmelt deposits are redirected into an elaborate spherical ice structure where incubators hang below, housing organic lifeforms (as shown in Figure 7). These lifeforms previously existed in and around the pond (but no longer do due to climate change), operating as micro-interiors restoring historically evidenced lifeforms back to Don Juan Pond. In designing these incubators for other bodies, Evans diffuses anthropocentric sensory hierarchies, and privileges a species-specific sensorium. The intervention is a perpetual curation: lifeforms will grow, eventually burst out of their incubators, and fall again into Don Juan Pond’s waters along an indeterminate timeline. The designer concedes full control of project and timespans, acknowledging our design efforts are only “guestimates” as to what will eventuate with so many variables at play.

The second intervention, The Observatorium, is a constructed ice tower of scientific observatories, as shown in Figure 8. As a counterpoint to Hydrophilous, it deliberately caters for humans already inhabiting the site (glaciologists, Antarctic biologists, and geologists who all make use of the McMurdo Dry Valley). The tower presents key views of the pond and its surrounds on the topmost observatory, with a large laboratory on the lowest level. The Observatorium understands the heavy impacts scientists have already had on the site and creates a “reduced harm” alternative so now they can carry out research at a respectful distance, with minimal direct contact with (and thus limited human contamination of) the pond. Over time however, and if climate change models follow current trajectories, the ice tower will melt, and The Observatorium will eventually disappear, leaving only scarce remnants of the human labours it once contained. Scientific endeavours claiming to assist us in understanding our environment also contribute to the degradation of that environment. The Observatorium indicates the passing of time, presenting Evans’ project as a process sensitive to changing conditions rather than a fixed outcome. Evans acknowledges, as curator, that nature has the greater agency in this location and accepts her limited control of the design process.

Figure 4: Designer/Curator vs Nature/Creator relations. These diagrams organise the various stages (construction and post-construction) and locations (within both the Hydrophilous and Observatorium interventions) of the project, and challenge the dynamics of all users engaged. Diagrams by Emilie Evans.

Above left

Above right

Figure 5: Designer/Curator vs Nature/Creator relations. These wind-mapping experiment results explore Evans’ personal human-nature relations in a study of agency: activating a physical manifestation of humans’ spatial and natural power as creator. In curating this experiment, Evans tied a piece of chalk onto the branch of a tree on a windy day and let natural forces execute their own fluid mapping process. Image by Emilie Evans.

Above left

Above right

Figure 6: Hydrophilous, situated alongside The Observatorium in the McMurdo Dry Valley, is an ongoing curation for the restoration of lifeforms in Don Juan Pond. This montage shows the proximity between the two interventions within the valley, in which they are positioned in accordance to react and interact with one another. Image by Emilie Evans.

Above left

Above right

Figure 7: Hydrophilous (detail). Incubators as micro-interiors for the restoration of lifeforms in Don Juan Pond. Each is designed to house specific non-human (such as lichen) and non-living (such as salt) entities in an environment that nurtures growth processes. The top two rows display all incubator types; each column displays stills of an incubator growth animation, (from left to right): algae, cellulose, lichen and moss, alkali-tolerant sponges. Image by Emilie Evans.
DISJUNCTIONS BETWEEN INTERNAL WORLDS AND EXTERNAL EXPERIENCE

Evans’ interventions act as anomalies between human bodies, more-than-human bodies, and the wider landscape. These anomalies form new nonhierarchical relations between beings and dictate the interlacing of “creative agents.” Her project reveals that disruptions to the environment shape the more-than-human sensorium, and recognises that myriad life forms transform our human understanding of interiority. In particular, The Observatorium (as a literal extension of its surrounding sea ice landscape) prompts human users to experience the tower as a combination of sensations pertaining to the icy Antarctic environment, as shown in Figure 9. These extreme sensorial impressions emphasise our position as ‘other’ within an environment that already challenges comfortable human inhabitation. By foregrounding non-human sensorial experience, the project acknowledges non-human users as the native residents, and humans as disruptive newcomers.

Additionally, sub-interiors are created within both Hydrophilous and the Observatorium, and embedded into the surrounding rocky site. The project is thus curated to allow for the inherent integrity of microbial-sized bodies. These micro-bodies see and feel the intervention in entirely unfamiliar ways. For instance, as shown in Figure 10, Evans has designed in detail for the body of lichens, forming an incubator to provide dark, moist nooks with perforations that allow sunlight for photosynthesis. She strives to make the lichens’ sensorial journey as habituating as that of a human user; and understands that the ever-expanding growth of lichen bodies demands a flexible container. These incubators diffuse perceptions of more-than-human embodied experience in an exploration of dynamic other sensoriums, opposing ideals that restrict the sensorium to “recognise some but not other modes of sentient existence as legitimate.” Moreover, these interventions remind us that the Antarctic landscape itself can be understood as a macro-body, which experiences its own set of internal and external experiences that affect its (and others’) behaviours. It is these vast bodies that are integral to understanding planetary interiors, and to foregrounding them when designing for spaces of the future.

Figure 9: The Observatorium (detail). Sensorial affects preference the Antarctic environment rather than assumptions of human comfort. Here, the Observatorium is emphasised as literal icy extension of surrounding Antarctic terrain and catalyst for a more-than-human sensorium. Image by Emilie Evans.

Opposite

Figure 8: The Observatorium, the ice tower for scientific observation of lifeforms in Don Juan Pond, on the deconstructed Observatorium, displaying configuration of parts, from delicate, intricate ice modules to heavier solid segments. It is shown in fragments to emphasise its modular, human-curated nature and its eventual nature-driven deterioration. Image by Emilie Evans.
RELATIONS BETWEEN BODIES AND LANDSCAPE

In acknowledging the prominance of landscape itself as a body, Hydrophilus and the Observatorium is a platform for sensorial experience, where landscape is neither object nor background to our human lives, but an opportunity for abundant growth of organic and inorganic bodies. Landscape experiences sensorial disruptions foreign to other bodies that define its own parameters, including cyclical events and weather-related occurrences associated with temporal processes at both molecular and planetary scales. By establishing Don Juan Pond as both site and user, Evans reconfigures the water body as an actual body; Don Juan Pond is a user with shifting control, impacted by extreme fluctuation of water levels, variations in air temperatures and relative humidity, and various aquatic erosions.

The two interventions of Hydrophilus and the Observatorium situate the lake and the McMurdo Dry Valley in which it sits as a platform for human and non-human intersubjectivity, but their primary objective is to activate the lake and its surroundings. The needs of all other bodies are considered consequential to this water body. Don Juan Pond experiences both extraction and replenishment of its original water source, which promotes changes in its body and therefore changes in more-than-human bodies that reside within the lake. This understanding of Don Juan Pond ensures it is given due consideration, as we would both human and non-human users, and suggests future methods of critical spatial practice.

CRITIQUE, MEDIATED BY THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

By taking Hydrophilus and the Observatorium as the subject of interrogation, this paper also engages in practicing the key intentions of Evans’ planetary interior speculation: co-creation is ongoing and always enacted through assemblages. Indeed, Tønder’s notion of the sensorium as the interweaving of perceptions, practices, and a rejection of the nature/culture divide supports our very own multiplying endeavours. Reviewing this project beyond the pedagogical space of design studio, we, as co-authors of this new text, continue to make sense of this project in different domains (such as critical reflection and public debate), well past the originally-intended outcomes of this project. We now synthesise understandings of a more-than-human sensorium in order to recognise the emergent properties of surrounding forces, institutions, affects, emotions, and more, in other spatial practices. We therefore clearly wish to use this paper to review from the project, rather than simply about it. As such, this critique is always mediated by the presence of others, and Evans’ central contention that power oscillates over time is therefore changes in more-than-human bodies that reside within the lake. This understanding of Don Juan Pond ensures it is given due consideration, as we would both human and non-human users, and suggests future methods of critical spatial practice.

THE PROJECT AS MEDIATION BETWEEN THE PRACTICE OF INTERIOR AND THE ROLE OF CRITIQUE

Evans’ project Hydrophilus and the Observatorium mitigates absolute anthropocentric control and elevates more-than-human presence, she, as human, is unable to define completely the empathic insight exclusive to the more-than-human entities entangled within the project. We may only ever make educated guesses regarding the likely consequences of the project over time. We must also understand climatic forces and flux of the site as Evans argues through her project, sites are unpredictable forces and ‘bodies’ in their own right. This brings forth critical questions regarding the process of Evans’ project; claiming to surrender to the omnipresence of natural flux, the project sets up a theoretical process in which The Observatorium should melt within a certain timeframe. Here, we could argue, with the benefit of critical distance, that the embedded unpredictability of her project gives rise to boundless ‘what-if’. One of these must imagine ‘what if’ The Observatorium ice tower does not melt as speculated, but instead, continues to accumulate ice for hundreds of years and creates a new impediment to the landscape. Perhaps this project is less engaged with privileging others in a multispecies sensorium than it is with deliberately surrendering human authority in such a relationship. Indeed, Evans’ project does relinquish some control within a more-than-human planet, but it stops short of foreseeing the multiple possible futures (and their unintended negative consequences) that such a conceptual undertaking seems to imply.

Moreover, while Hydrophilus and the Observatorium speaks to the understanding of ‘the planet as interior’, what does it offer in concrete terms in response to this? Do ‘planetary interiors’ simply supplant one type of bounded interior—the conventional constructed interior we associate with shop fitouts or domestic spaces—with another (admittedly much larger) one? Indeed, Evans project fundamentally calls into question the role of the spatial practitioner in relation to much vaster interplanetary and extra-planetary ecosystems extending beyond comprehensible control, and even this universe. In engaging with Tønder’s notion of ‘human nature as an interspecies relationship’, Hydrophilus and the Observatorium reconfigures our understanding of the sensorium by manifesting relations between beings, ideas of power, and our multiple entanglements with so many others on this planet.

SPATIAL PRACTICE AS A MODE OF SHARING

The articulation of shared space through time allows temporal aspects of Evans’ project to move beyond their role within a
learning environment and make a tangible impact in our immediate future. Hydrophilous and the Observatorium places itself in a realm of current global concerns and works to analyse its own hypotheses (and assumptions driving those hypotheses). The project critiques itself through its proposed state of continual change, and the implications of this self-critique leads us to shift our own perception of the appointed designer. Moreover, the project reconfigures how we imagine spatial practice may operate in today’s world, particularly as we advance into the rapidly changing future(s) of the Anthropocene. Thus, Hydrophilous and the Observatorium considers not only the sharing and co-mingling of bodies and beings, but the sharing of time. In accepting its continual change and its own inevitable deconstruction, Hydrophilous and the Observatorium is placed in a realm beyond the existence of the human designer. The project is conceived in an indeterminate time span, and prepares for a future without human encounters, imagining a reality in which that which is human-conceived does not require the presence of humans to prevail. Evans’ positioning herself as curator, and not creator, therefore acknowledges that she is only a fleeting facet of her own project.

SPATIAL PRACTICE AS A ‘BECOMING-WITH’

In foregrounding the concerns of making educated guesses within an unpredictable and uncontrollable process, Evans’ project reminds us of the importance of recognising our position on the planet as one of becoming-with an assemblage of others. Writing on this theme for more than two decades now, Haraway argues that scientific research has revealed “the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached,”[40] and nothing can be clearly defined linguistically, mentally, socially or technically as a unique characteristic that might separate humans from those we consider non-human. This concedes that categories and concepts are always provisional. These interconnections bring into question the already imprecise boundary between the physical and non-physical, and alert us to Haraway’s possibility of transgressive hybridisations and fusions: “social relationships include nonhumans as well as humans as socially, active partners.”[41] To this collection we might also add vast landscapes such as the Antarctic in their full (planetary) interior. Haraway’s biology training underscores her use of the term “symbiogenesis” (the importance of cooperation and countering dominant Darwinian models of competition) when describing such relations, and we should recognise this has broader implications than just that of metaphor.[42] Symbiogenesis as a ‘becoming-with’ conceptually frames social relations concurrently emerging across fields such as literary theory, gender politics, and mathematics. ‘Becoming-with’ disrupts widely entrenched thinking that relies on conventional binary models for explaining change. Haraway instead adopts ideas of infection, mutually recursive influences, and transformation, to examine interdependent and co-evolved modes of existence. For example, sustainable design projects and environmental solutions usually talk about returning a thing to its original state (that is, before human threats to its existence), but Haraway’s notion of symbiogenesis suggests we cannot unwind such complex webs of cross-infection.

In fact, Haraway’s argument reinforces that we cannot consider ourselves even as individual selves. We are always intertwined with other selves (human, non-human, bacterial, and others) and thus other worlds. This provides us with possibilities for engaging with the planet we live in: “a useful reminder that we are always remaking ourselves with others, human and otherwise.”[43] Spatial practice is also an exercise in figuring-the-world whilst figuring-ourselves, as its operations challenge and embrace sensory perceptions of built environments, in particular within the project Hydrophilous and the Observatorium, where multispecies existence and multitudinous ‘sensory apparatuses’ stimulate “partially overlapping ontologies.”[44]

CONCLUSION

Evans’ project clearly demonstrates for us that the notion of a human sensorium is directly challenged by the myriad interconnected relations we are becoming-with in this age of the Anthropocene. This paper reviews her recent design research proposition (a graduating project in the Bachelor of Interior Architecture Honours degree at Monash University in 2016) entitled Hydrophilous and the Observatorium, which deliberately approached inhabitation as a more-than-human sensorium. Evans responds to the paradox between human-controlled interiors and interiorised landscapes through curating the project’s interventions, situating nature as the project’s primary creator. Evans framed the water body, Don Juan Pond, as site, user, and body for her project so as to diffuse the socially constructed perception of human governance in spatial practice. Hydrophilous and the Observatorium emphasises non-human and non-living bodies with which our human bodies are interconnected, and illuminates new shared spatial experiences that result from these possibilities. Although Evans’ project fails to resolve multiple possible futures inherent in any such undertaking, we argue it still offers a strongly reconfigured future for spatial practice beyond conventional anthropocentric constraints.

This paper has critiqued from her project, rather than simply about it, and illustrates how experienced embodiment is not just a human sensation of spatial perception, but rather, a continuous operation involving a multiplicity of affects, emotions, practices and materialities performed by nonhuman entities intertwined with our own bodies. Indeed, foregrounding this can reveal how landscape is both inherently connected to our existence and transcends the conventional boundaries drawn between humans, non-humans, interior, and planet. Additionally, by way of Haraway’s notion of ‘becoming with’, our critique has made explicit how our internalised worlds and any exterior are mediated by the presence of other organisms, objects and systems with which we are entangled. The implications of these interrogations—the importance of modes of speculative critique, and sharing for the future of spatial practice—allow us to better reconfigure our interconnected world in this age of the Anthropocene.

Thus, rethinking the future(s) of spatial practice involves ‘becoming-with’ others in space and time. Significantly, these reconfigured practices also reaffirm the conceptual lead established by
critical feminist approaches, postcolonial studies, and queer theory—that there are no binaries. Evans’ project reiterates we cannot simply assert that there is any definite inside of ‘outside’ in the Anthropocene; a more-than-human sensibility approaches the interior as a porous threshold at best. Interiority is more accurately realised as the mediation between the planet and our inmost selves, and a method by which we can project our own uncertainties and possible futures onto the ground in utopian speculation. As Evans’ project Hypodermics and the Observatory demonstrates, designers exist within a more-than-human sensibility (commonly referred to as ‘nature’), which ultimately is the creator of all designed works. Designers themselves only ever occupy a temporary position as curators of landscape, bodies, and space at any given point in time. They may only ever have some ownership over their own works, understanding that the presence of time, and any conceived project, exists beyond the healing footprint of human intervention. Interior is therefore an ongoing critical operation (physical and metaphorical) by which we seek to understand our shared place on this planet by becoming-with the vast interconnected assemblage of others. Evans’ project leverage a new trajectory of co-creation and radically decentering human control one that provides us with an inherently pragmatic approach to designing, with a vast assemblage of beings, forces, and planetary processes.

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

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BIographies

Emilie Evans is an independent scholar, interior architect and illustration artist, graduating from a Bachelor of Interior Architecture with Honours in 2016. As a spatial practitioner, Emilie has worked on extensive projects in commercial interiors, religious hermitage design, art installations, graphic design, and illustrative science-fiction zines. Her interests lie in speculative design journeys and imaginative futures on hybrids between ecology biology, ontological studies and spatial practice. Emilie is currently working on a variety of self-initiated interdisciplinary projects based in Melbourne.

Charity Edwards is an architect, urban researcher, and lecturer at Monash University’s Faculty of Architecture. With over 15 years of practice experience, Charity continues to collaborate with other spatial practitioners to create interiors, buildings and landscapes in Melbourne, regional Victoria, and internationally. She teaches Interior Architecture and Architecture, and is currently undertaking a PhD on Antarctic geo-imaginaries and the increasing urbanisation of the Southern Ocean. Her research focuses on the relationship between the ocean, planetary urbanisation, and representations of climate change. Charity has also been an active ‘re-writer’ of notable Australian women architects into history with the international Women.Wikipedia.Design initiative.