

## CHAPTER 5



# Infra-materiality and Opaque Drifting

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My most recent project DRIFT started when I stumbled across an obsolete letter: the runic and anglo-saxon sign, the thorn sign: þ, now only active in Irish and Icelandic, and unreadable to most others. Or readable only as an indexical marker, the mark of an ancient or dead language, unreadable otherwise. The initiatory qualities of tripping, of falling over became the leitmotif of the project's first piece 'Noping': 'You trip over some Ping nearly makes you fall over' and also a pretext for a seemingly innocent autobiographic turn: 'I went looking for my Nordic roots in the English language and found this sign. A þ attached to a long stick, or a type of hoop'. This 'thorn' letter became a sign of absence and of disappearance. I tripped some more over its protruding root and fell deeper into historic soils, deep nightmarish matter, dream-like consciousness. Signing off on absence was bringing up all sorts of ghosts. Charting a course through ancient historical, anglo-saxon and irish sea poetry, medieval travel documents, and viking sagas inevitably took place more or less in parallel with the news of an ill-fated crossing of migrants across the mediterranean sea's political waters, a disaster that came to be known as the 'Left-to-Die' Boat Case (April 2011).<sup>1</sup>

The work developed slowly into a text, into a performance with a musician, into a moving textmass with a digital artist, into drawings and prints. Back and forth between writing, vocal strategies and performance and historic research, this project would keep on asking questions about the handling and processing of the artistic and poetic material in relation to the human dimensions being presented. Developing the various poetic languages of the piece, it was dauntingly clear how these ancient literary journeys were being echoed in the harrowing and unsung, unwillingly documented, disasters of contemporary crossings such as the 'Left-to-Die' boat case. Distinctions between present, future and past times were challenged. History functions as a complex time loop. It can dredge up events seemingly wide apart by running them through a very fine sieve. An implicit notion of 'poetic time' was activated: open vibratory chains of linguistic connection between historic and

contemporary languages were set up; verbal declensions were activated. It sought to cover vast ground from ancient tales to current mediatized lives through a complex network of mixed temporalities and mixed art practices.

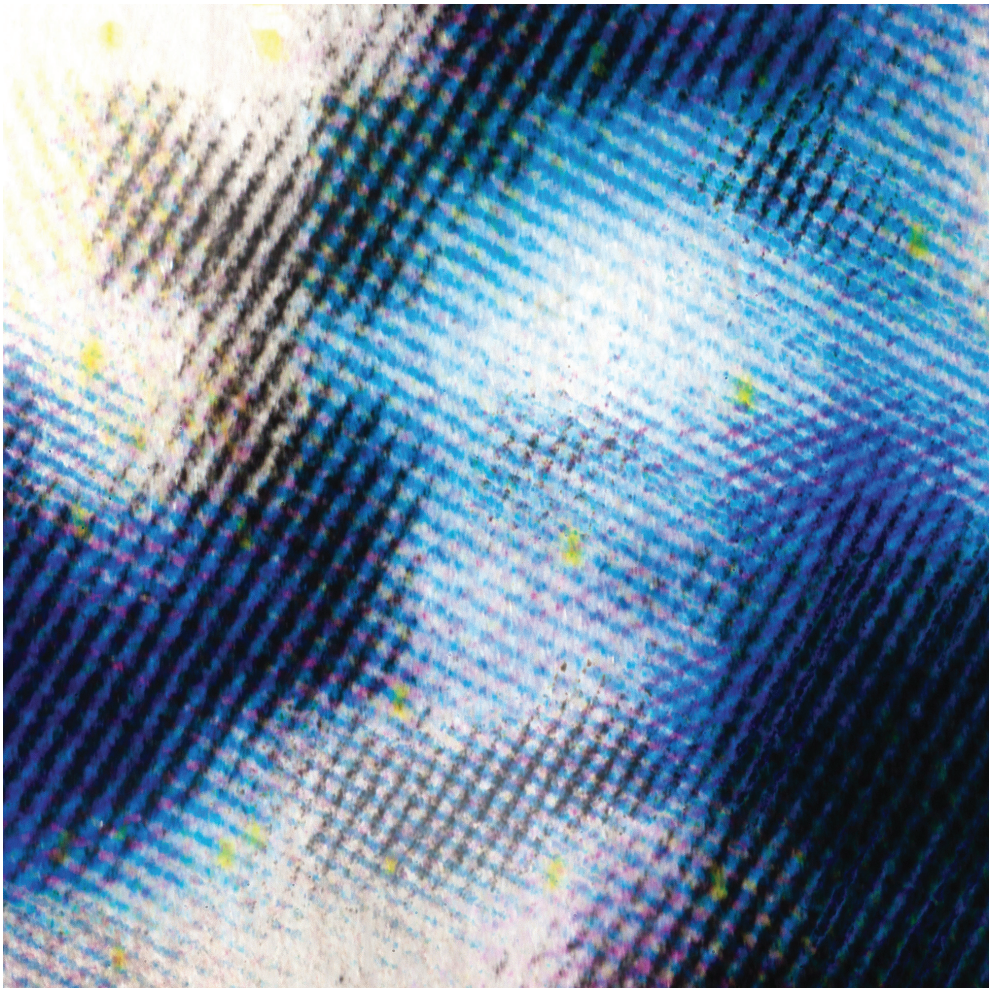
Cold gesprung weary worn were my feet frost  
bound in the ice-blinding clamour of kulla  
city sank further seafaring is seafodder heart  
humbling Could scarcely move or draw my  
breath cursed with nightmares gewacked by  
seachops gave up all parts of me on gebattered  
ship Yet a hungor innan mind stole me to more  
weird comas let me let me let me let me freeze  
Blow wind blow, anon am I

Song 2

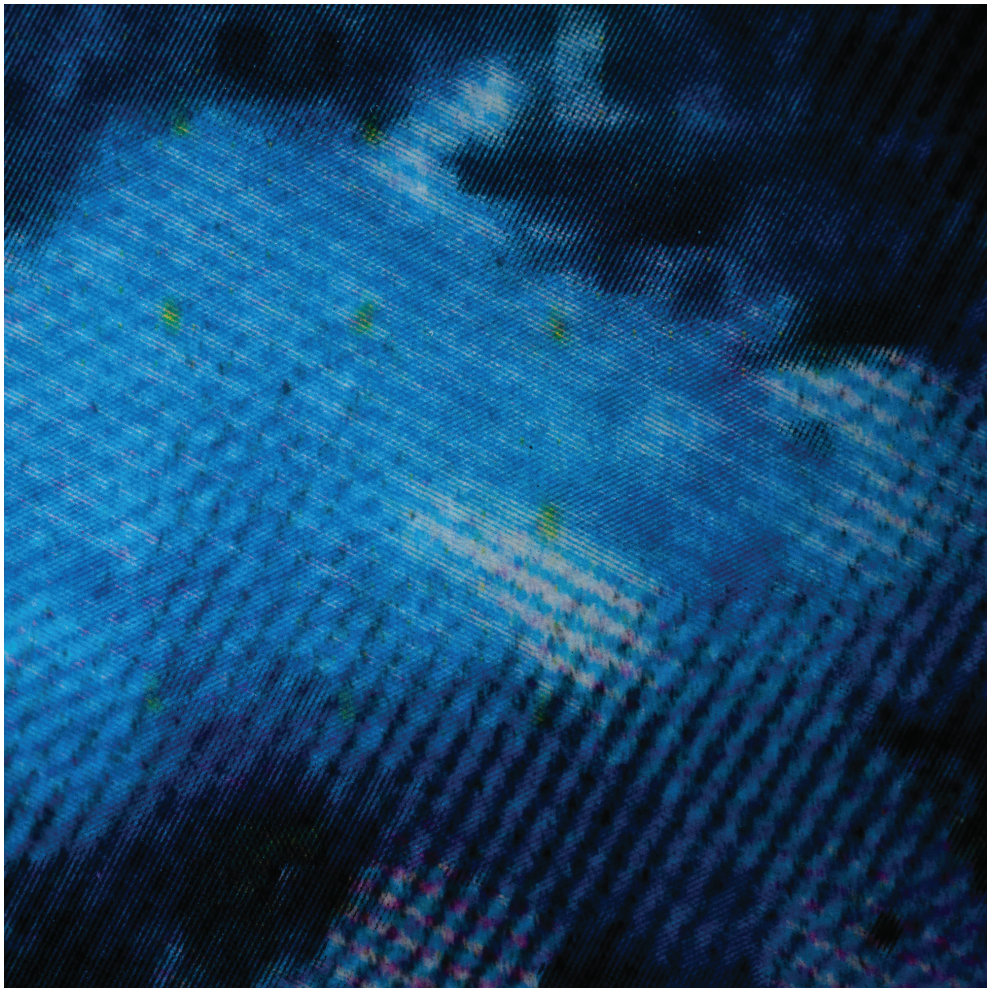
Writing in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary fashion is reflective of my interest in multiple languages, in the power relations between languages, and in thinking about language across various modes of literacy and experientiality. A lot of my recent work is engaged in thinking about how languages cohabit, survive, are prohibited, become dominant, infiltrate or irremediably dominate one another, not only on a syntagmatic axis, in geopolitical proximities, but also paradigmatically, by virtue of deep vertical drops into etymologies, syntactical development or other transformative surges of change within a language's history. This crossing into a range of language soils and environments by way of artistic processes is a way of pushing at questions of power and translatability, of voicing and ghosting, of being and remembering, of empathizing and stripping bare. On this occasion, it asked for more than I had bargained for. The more inter- or transdisciplinary my methods became the more they pressed against borders of knowledge, of practice, of suffering.

*Drift* had started quite casually from a tiny incident, a stumbling, not even a falling over. Yet it jolted me to the core. It threw me into the mysteries of anglo-saxon writing, a language and an epoch I knew very little about. An experience of intense disorientation became the edge, the limit against which my knowledges and my life started to push. It put everything into question, it threw everything out to sea. It boiled down to questions of methodology and ideology: translatability and opacity, access and cultural unavailability, love and loss. Direction, navigation, journeying out, getting lost, finding a new direction, seeking a steady course, an 'orientation' for oneself and with others, these became *Drift's* central narrative motifs.

In the 'Log' of the project I wrote: 'Desire's opacity is the longing that gives the courage to depart, to set out. It lends the harshest sweetness to the most total risk. It is as opaque as it is luminous and precious. The intensity of its luminosity always much depends on the political times one lives in and how much darkness is imposed as light. To measure the light at what is needed in order to make out other objects in the night. How much freedom can be retained and explored from dwelling in the dark, how much work can be released when making it out into the light. How much release when making out the nature of darkness and light, and walking into it' (*Drift*, 149–50).



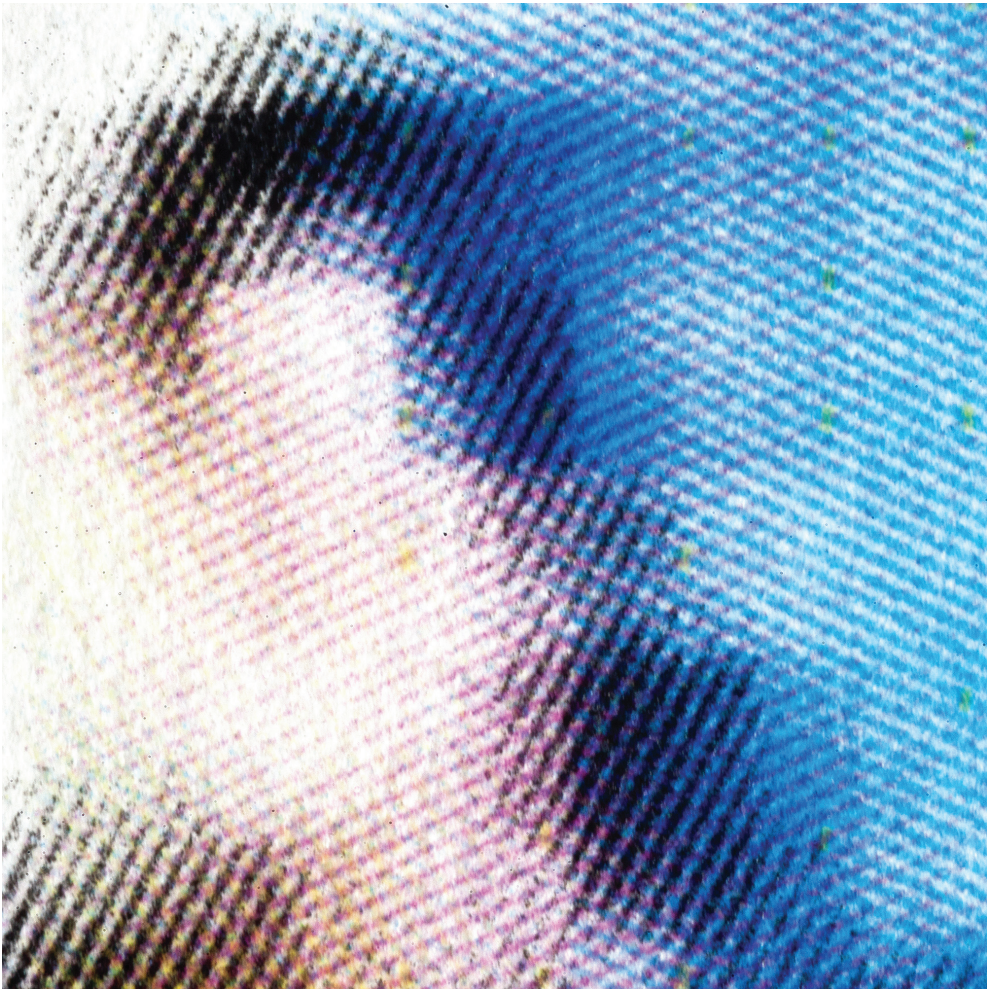
I started to use the original tenth-century poem ‘The Seafarer’ not only as support for my linguistic excavations and translative elegiac meditations on solitary sailing/flailing/failing, but also increasingly as a way to delve into the unmoored dimensions of contemporary identity, of which the doomed horrors of current sea-bound migrants. This brought home yet again that creating methodological relays of activities when attempting to peer into other epochs through their material signs was far more than a powerful and humbling reminder of one’s place in the layers and times of the world. A transhistoric practice provides its own form of contemporary engagement. It generates an actual friction between historic investigation and contemporary witnessing. A palpable connection is made between archaeological work and forensic investigation, between investigating ancient drama at their sometimes horrific residues and piecing together current crimes from unyielding signs at the scene.



The methodologies of the Left-to-Die report, which brought the case to widespread political attention, were developed by the research group ‘Forensic Architecture’ at Goldsmiths University. This varied group of researchers has tried for a while to answer these questions by dealing with a whole range of violent acts, harmful and unlawful, engineered and hidden by states. Both their fieldwork and their findings’ analysis are inherently interdisciplinary. They use human testimonies, on-the-ground interviews, as well as the most contemporary digital modelling and spatial technologies from tools often used by maritime and military forces to reconstruct the events they’re examining: ‘What happens to the “era of the witness” when a crime is no longer visible to unmediated human perception? What happens when the evidence has been made untraceable? Will the era of scientific model come to replace human testimony in adjudicating humanitarian claims?’ writes Anselm Franke in the seminal group work *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (2014; p. 507).



For the book I invited the photographer Tom Martin to reflect on the image that has been widely circulated online: the image of the zodiac of migrants at the start of their journey, photographed by a French military helicopter. Tom has worked as a photographer for international charities, in war-zones and countries ravaged by conflict. He is also keenly interested in old printing processes. The question I ask of him here is how one might unpack the cruel scandal that this image reveals and that is ‘about to’ take place. How one might imagine and hold visually the memory and the reality of these passengers beyond morbid voyeurism. How one might activate both inquisitiveness and empathetic connection not only in a forensic but also in an experiential way. So that seeing can be radically slowed down and the viewing of the news item can be experienced as a material, opaque, inescapable trace of observed and shared life. He developed a series of macro images, which each seek to respond to this call. They are unreadable, yet potentially decipherable. They remove representation from the viewing. Yet the intense colours bring up a



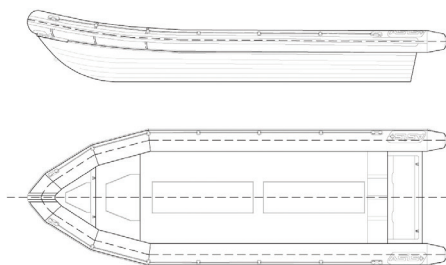
peculiar sense of rawness and fragility. Not being entirely sure of what I'm looking at, they make me feel a bit nervous of what is perhaps hiding here. They open up the viewing process to analysis while also detecting other media traces at the heart of the image: the yellow dots of location sensors embedded in the image processing itself.

These images remind me of the way the 'forensic research' scholars define the technologies they deploy. They do not simply create a new representation of the sea but rather they constitute a new sea altogether, one which is simultaneously composed 'by matter and media' (*Forensis*, p. 667). The remarkable documentary *Nostalgia for the Light* by the Chilean Patricio Guzmán is a powerful example of how mixing media and working transhistorically can release forbidding though fugitive testimonial matter. It meditates on the confluence between the desert of Atacama, the driest desert in the world, the research in astronomy into the oldest galaxies being done there, the Pre-Columbian rock drawings found there, and early

twentieth-century open graves of miners and workers. Rather than diminish their significance, as though paling in this layering of time's many events, this complex and resonant accumulation from the past highlights the plight of a few women seen still stubbornly hunching down in the dust, picking up small bones like gold-diggers, still looking for the scattered remains of their loved ones, some of the many thousands summarily executed and hidden about the desert by Pinochet's troops in the 1970s. This becomes a profound act of resistance, which imbues its powerful and deeply moving human testimony across all the layers of the film.

Seeking to create a temporally complex matter of past and present texts to compose and reconstitute 'hafville' (an ancient icelandic term meaning 'sea-loss') in my own project meant that acts of witnessing would stretch across times and epochs. Looking for the 'voices' (signs) of current disappeared passengers gave 'voice' simultaneously to lost apparitions from the ancient past of voyagers and quest literature. A quote I used as the epigraph to one of my chaucerian works, *Alyson Singes*, also impressed itself on these thoughts. It stems from Christa Wolf's profound, transhistoric meandering and anti-nuclear novel *Medea*: 'Do we let ourselves go back to the ancients, or do they catch up with us? No matter. An outstretched hand suffices. Lightly they cross over to us, our strange guests who are like ourselves. We hold the key that unlocks all epochs, sometimes we use it shamelessly, darting a hasty glimpse through the crack of the door, keen on quick, ready-made judgments; yet it should also be possible to get closer, a step at a time, awed by the taboo, unwilling without great need to wrest away a secret from the dead. Confessing our need — we should begin with that. (p. 1)

The work of the French historian Michel de Certeau is particularly relevant here. Indeed, his approach is often that of a tracker of verbal remainders, material smudges, fugitive collective tracks, or 'lapses' as he calls them, which interrupt the smooth functioning of the authoritative text within inscriptive culture. There is in his writing a struggle to make voices and bodily presences seep through the official and eradicating stamp of the omniscient history machine. He describes it in this way in his classic collection *The Practice of Everyday Life*: 'The voice insinuates itself



Dimensions	
Overall length	11900 mm
Overall Beam	3770 mm
Internal Length	9600 mm
Internal Beam	2600 mm
Weight Empty	2500 Kg
Buoyancy Collar diameter	550mm

Capacity	
Max No. of Persons	25 Persons
Max Payload incl. fuel*	3720 Kg
Floor Board Usable Area	22.2 m2
Buoyancy Volume	3758 L

into the text as a mark, a trace [...] an indiscreet ghost [...] a metonymy of the body'. In a previous essay I had come to understand this idea of 'indiscreet ghosts' as a type of infra-materiality (p. 155). A notion I keep very close to Duchamp's fugitive and potent idea of the 'infrathin', this performative friction of bounds between objects in motion, or the inner-outer spaces of some of Rachel Whiteread's negative objects. Small seemingly unimportant or simply illegible elements in a text turn out to be disturbing and revelatory because they do not seem to belong. Or because they belong exceedingly to it. They point to an interiority that is not fully traceable yet is entirely contained in the text's or the object's intrinsic matter. They rub against the reading process. They actualize what is gone in embedded and performative ways. Like indistinct spoors, or lingering afterimages, they call up unexplored, disallowed parts of ourselves and our un/shared histories. In the context of *Drift*, pursuing material traces of both evidence and of invention encourages both a performance of recitation (and mouthing) and of excavatory imagination. It can offer itself up as an impossible salvaging or restitutive operation: 'I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted — inarticulate' wrote famously the American poet Susan Howe who has always been committed to following histories' indiscreet and accidental revelatory traces (*The Europe of Trusts*, p. 14). Reclaiming the experience of singular lives alongside larger collective investigations provokes a pendular effect between far and close, which can favour various kinds of empathetic identification at both a personal and a collective level. During my performance, my verbatim recitation of sections of the 'Left-to-Die' report based on the archaeological and forensic work became a form of witnessing. It entered into the audience's public consciousness by way of an archaic, experiential



performance. In the book the text is written in white on black page, both a funerary gesture and a hint at the luminous constellations showing the way on the darkest nights.

### Note

- 1 Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani and Situ Studio, *Report on the 'Left-To-Die Boat'* (Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012). This chapter includes the following images in order of appearance: *Wake*, Macro Exploration, 2014, Tom Martin; *Passenger*, Macro Exploration, 2014, Tom Martin; *Passengers*, Macro Exploration, 2014, Tom Martin; *Passenger 2*, Macro Exploration, 2014, Tom Martin; Zodiac boat model in *Report on the 'Left-To-Die Boat'*, p. 50; Zodiac constellation, Caroline Bergvall and Pablo Lavalley in *Drift* (2014).