Dissolving Personal and Planetary Coordinates

By Fran Painter-Fleming

An essay in response to
Before It Was Water, by Miroslava Večeřová.

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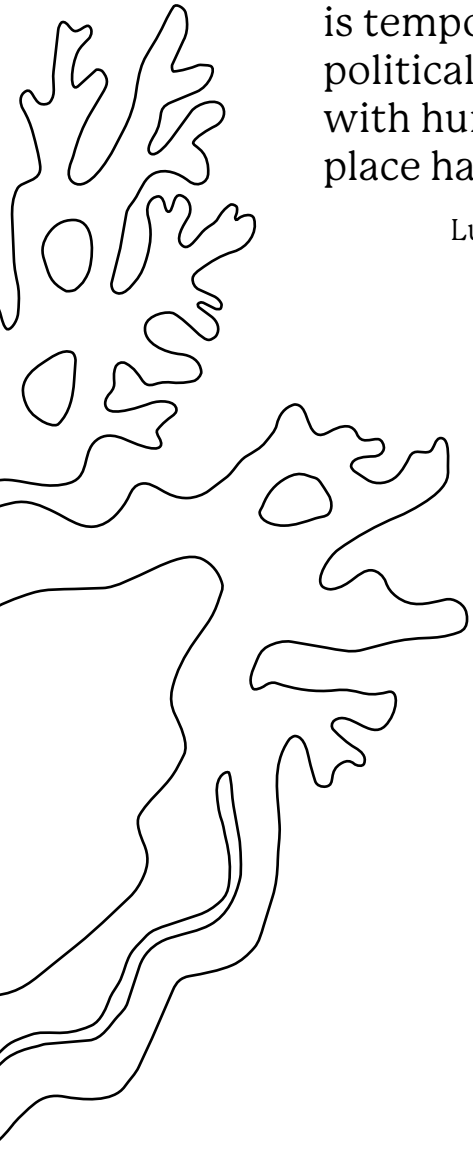
‘Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth’.

Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 1997.



Before It Was Water is composed of a central chalk sculpture, pastel drawings encased in copper frames and an immersive soundscape developed in collaboration with Isobel Anderson. Within its cast, a host of aquatic and geological figures spawned from the East Sussex coastline are brought to life. This body of work reverberates between hyper-present, personal interactions with site and eternal currents of cosmos, temporality and geology. The present is sliced and stitched with immense stretches of time, with the artist negotiating her own position within the strata of wild places. Personal coordinates dissolve in a mesh of interspecies encounters and deep-time explorations. Testing the material capacities of sculpture, drawing and sound, Miroslava Večeřová encourages audiences to similarly destabilise human-centric patterns of thought.

A suspended chalk sculpture greets visitors in Amici Studio. Its head is carved from fallen chalk retrieved from the shoreline of the Seven Sisters. Draped from a beam, the bodice is secured with a chain found on Rock-A-Nore Beach. As if unearthed from the depths of the sea, forged seaweed components tangle up its links. Its metallic eye meets the gaze of those who stand before it. The natural indentations of this boulder have also been extended by Večeřová, adding score marks to construct an amphibian-like skin. Part sea creature, part relic, part reptilian, this atemporal being has a commanding aura.

Imagination is a central component of geology. Writing about geological time in 1802, Scottish scientist and mathematician John Playfair explained that 'how much farther reason may sometimes go, imagination may venture to follow'.[1] Victorian geologist Charles Lyell similarly echoes that his craft 'restores in imagination the appearance of the ancient continents which have passed away'.[2] The sheer scale of deep time is incomprehensible in line with our common temporal markers. Večeřová's sculptures 'restore imagination' as Lyell puts it.

1 J. Playfair, *The Works of John Playfair*, Esq. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1822), p. 81.

2 C. Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 7th ed. (London: John Murray, 1847), p. 190.

Crafted from chalk, this porous stone is formed from the skeletal remains of marine algae and plankton. Over millions of years, these calcium-rich shells settled on the ocean floor and were compressed into thick rock layers. CO_2 is permanently locked through this process, making chalk one of Earth's most long-standing carbon sinks. This is partly what draws the artist to this material, as it aids our own capacity to breathe.
As an ode to this material's shapeshifting, life-giving properties, chalk is re-animated by Večeřová, shedding light on the life-force it provides.

The chalk sculpture is accompanied by a series of wall-based works. Sitting somewhere between drawing and sculpture, each pastel drawing is housed in a Rococo-inspired, flamed copper or stainless steel frame. When chiselling chalk, Večeřová collects the dust from this process, adding it as pigment into these amorphous drawings. Each individual work becomes swept up in this interlocking system of copper, stainless steel, pastel and pigment, germinating a collective presence. Drafted on either jet-black or white paper, the composite silhouettes are drafted from observations of local wildlife. Luminous jellyfish orbs emit seaweed tentacles; clusters of celestial bodies unfurl and in the softer hues, a nebulous form comes into view, with crab pincers and a cloaked crown. Like window frames of an underwater dwelling, the copper casing draws audiences into unexplored habitats and rarely seen beings.

The use of copper holds particular resonance for the artist. In classical mythology and alchemy, copper is linked with Venus. Cyprus, renowned as the birthplace of Venus, was an ancient hub for copper mining. Alchemists paired copper's high conductivity, its rosy hue and malleability with Venusian qualities of connection and receptivity. The frames for Večeřová's drawings bear witness to a series of chemical reactions—rusty, earthy hues, shimmering pink speckles and luminous green patinas are brought out by exchanges of heat. Relinquishing a sense of control, Večeřová has not waxed the copper, meaning that the palette will continue to organically shift as the frames oxidise over time. These material

experiments imbue the drawings with an amorous, cosmic quality, connecting both the characters within the frames and warmly inviting the affections of those who encounter them.

The final component of this presentation is the soundscape, titled *Every Second Breath*. Developed collaboratively with the sound artist Isobel Anderson, this sonic portrait conveys a series of somatic interactions with neighbouring landscapes. The composition layers fragments from three recording sessions: one along the Seven Sisters coastline, one at Rock-A-Nore Beach and a final session at the artist's studio. Večeřová brought a copper sound bowl to kickstart their first session, using this instrument's enveloping frequencies to help tune into the environment. Quickly, however, this instrument was relinquished as Anderson and Večeřová turned to natural cavities, grates and pipes embedded in rock faces, lapping waves and rock pools to germinate a new sonic library. The resulting collage is populated with a divergent matrix of sounds—resonant chimes, nails scratching into rock, underwater vocal experiments, breathwork into cavities, whittling in the artist's studio and hands dragging through sand.

In conversations with both Anderson and Večeřová, what felt important to note was the relational flow between themselves and the respective environments. Večeřová didn't arrive at these locations with a predetermined performance to be documented; rather, an organic choreography unfolded with Anderson actively coaching and encouraging experimentation. Blurring the traditional roles of artist and recordist, Anderson handed her headphones to Večeřová, and you can hear kernels of their orated exchanges within the mix, 'move your hands again', 'do it louder' etc. These snippets of conversation add a personal dynamic to this abstract score, breaking down the fourth wall of field recording and lacing these meditative experiments with a sense of kinship. Večeřová also remarked how this supportive rapport enabled her to further relinquish her sense of self in these habitats, with Anderson supporting the required vulnerability to propel these somatic exchanges.

Večeřová gave Anderson the loose brief to create an underwater world for her figures. This sense of world-building or immersion is heightened by the custom-built sound system designed by Tony D. Birch. The speakers are suspended at height in the space, sculpting the sound in an upward current towards the ceiling. Experienced from below, it gives the impression of being underwater, being submerged in the world of Večeřová's beings. At moments, the four-channel installation collapses into stereo sound, diluting the temporal breadth of the mix and offering chances to come up for air.

In her study on deep time, Helen Gordon explains that 'in deep time everything is provisional. Bones become rock. Sands become mountains. Oceans become cities'.[3] Within *Before It Was Water*, Večeřová echoes this metamorphic quality of geology. Chalk gathered from specific sites is sculpted sonically and physically. Copper frames are radically transformed through thermal oxidation and bodily interactions with landscape become sonic material. Through warping the parameters of different media, Večeřová produces a distinct vocabulary of her own. In her epic poem *SEA*, Etel Adnan draws on the communicative capacity of waves, commenting that 'Water's iridescence is language'.[4] With this body of work, Večeřová has cultivated her own language of reciprocity, connecting herself with both human and more-than-human collaborators. Tidal zones become fertile testing grounds to unpick conceptions of home, migration, cosmology, deep time and interspecies relations. Collaging her internal experiences with external environments, Večeřová prompts audiences to corrode their own divisions between self and site—to enact entwined relationships with their immediate environments and the wider planet.

3 Helen Gordon, *Notes on Deep Time: A Journey Through Our Past and Future Worlds* (London: Profile Books, 2021). p. 10.

4 Etel Adnan, 'Sea' from *To Look at the sea is to become what one is*, An Etel Adnan Reader Volume II, (California: Nightboat Books, 2014). p. 256.

On the occasion of Miroslava Večeřová's solo exhibition *Before It Was Water*, Fran Painter-Fleming was invited to respond to the exhibition and the ideas that flow through it. Drawing on conversations with Večeřová and sound artist Isobel Anderson, the resulting essay considers the relationships between place, material transformation, collaboration and deep time that unfold across the works.

Fran Painter-Fleming is a curator, writer and researcher. Her curatorial research hinges on cultural memory, geopolitics, translation and myth. Her projects often gravitate towards particular environments, unpicking the various temporal, political and social strands embedded in these places.

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