

OUT THERE, THATAWAY

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Image: Kevin Gaffney, still from *Our Stranded Friends in Distant Lands*. Duration: 5mins 37sec, Korean with English subtitles, 2015.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CCA, FRANCIS HALSALL, AND DECLAN LONG

CCA: *OUT THERE, THATAWAY* TAKES ITS TITLE FROM AN EPISODE OF THE POPULAR SCIENCE FICTION SERIES *STAR TREK*. COULD YOU EXPLAIN HOW YOU CAME TO THIS TITLE, AND HOW IT FRAMED YOUR IDEAS FOR THE EXHIBITION?

Francis Halsall: This was not where we started, but rather where we ended up. Our initial conversations were about ideas of North and how these are understood culturally, historically and aesthetically. One key reference for us was Peter Davidson's brilliant book *The Idea of North*. For him North is not merely a place, but: "a goal rather than a destination, a place of revelation that is always somewhere ultimate and austere." What Davidson suggests is that journeys, either northerly or elsewhere, are important in offering the opportunity to think beyond immediate predicaments and situations. The passage to different realms often comes with risks. After all, we might get lost. The journey might begin from compulsion rather than choice; and offer no fulfillment, only solitude or struggle. We might be forced not seduced toward the wild and the unknown. As the writer and explorer Robert Macfarlane puts it in *The Wild Places*: "I could not say when I first grew to love the wild, only that I did, and that a need for it will always remain strong in me. As a child, whenever I read the word, it conjured up images of wide spaces, remote and figureless... To reach a wild place was, for me, to step outside human history." It seems that the drive to transcend - and to contemplate extreme ideas of elsewhere - is irresistible.

Declan Long: A lot of Davidson's and MacFarlane's references are to the past - to various historical representations of an extreme "elsewhere". These sorts of references are, we think, relevant to how some of the artists think about their work. In general terms, for instance, the pared-back, reticent forms of Fergus Feehily's art or the enclosures and boundaries that sometimes define regions of space in

Merlin James's paintings often seem informed by the austere visions and unsettled sensibilities of Northern European art. But if the past is important in various ways, our title also indicates an orientation towards the future, given that it's taken from science fiction (even if it's science fiction of the relatively recent past). The specific Star Trek reference we're using is from the first movie, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, from 1979. It's quite an odd film: rather ponderous for a big-budget blockbuster. But, in following on from the original 1960s series, it tells a surprising and quite unsettling story. The Star Trek TV series is often associated with some optimistic aspects of 1960s culture - racial equality, for instance - and at the same time with an expanded vision of pioneering American discovery (the show was conceived as a "wagon train to the stars"). With the later motion picture, however, we get a strangely disconcerting representation of human advancement. The story centres on the re-discovery of a 20th century NASA probe that has travelled so far out into space, gaining vast knowledge of the universe along the way, that it has achieved consciousness. Having journeyed home towards earth it becomes a powerful, threatening presence. So, a human technological creation, designed to reach, and so learn about, distant space, returns as a dangerous force. At the end of the movie, an optimistic note is re-established and Kirk initiates a new phase of interstellar discovery by telling the helm to set a course for "Out there, thataway." There is renewed determination and positivity in these concluding words. But given all that has just occurred, they seem jarringly casual, even arrogant. What does the human exploration of space mean now, as the Enterprise becomes a new Voyager? What will accumulated knowledge of the world out there do to this machine, and to these explorers? Star Trek tended to ask such questions quite a lot, particularly in the subsequent *Next Generation* TV series, in which there were many leaps into the far, frightening beyond. Such imagined adventures beyond all conceivable co-ordinates were ways of asking, within the framework of popular science fiction, if it is possible or reasonable for us to envisage what lies beyond all possible human experience and comprehension. So some of this absurdly over-reaching thinking is in the background to the choice of title for the exhibition. But we could, perhaps, have drawn from any number of sci-fi references in this regard. There's lots of stories where characters are thrown across impossibly distant stretches of time and space. J.G. Ballard's story *The Waiting Grounds* comes to mind here: it tells of an astronaut who is given the ability to witness the end of the universe, at the end of time. But in passing, a pretty trashy reference seems relevant too. In the 1997 movie *Event Horizon* - kind of a schlocky, horror version of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* - the crew of a spaceship uses an experimental device to travel to a very distant point in the universe: what they discover is a terrifying convergence of every possible human fear. In other words, the place they reach out there is what, historically, has been known as Hell...

CCA: FOR AN EXHIBITION THAT APPROACHES IDEAS OF GEOGRAPHY AND ITS METAPHORS, THERE ARE MANY WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION SEEM TO REFUSE ANY GEOGRAPHICAL OR LOCATIONAL IDENTIFICATION. THIS WAS OBVIOUSLY A DELIBERATE STRATEGY?

DL: Yes - deliberate insofar as an important issue is that of how geographical or locational identification might be articulated or understood in the first place. What determines our sense of position and location? What language, symbols, metaphors, images (and so on) are employed to give meaning to such positionality; with what implications? And how might alternatives be found? In this regard, Homi Bhabha's notes on the idea of the "beyond" offer some relevant terms. In the introduction to *The Location of Culture* Bhabha values a "sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction" that is an effect of contemplating the "beyond". He writes of how beyond "signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future, but our intimations of exceeding the

barrier or boundary - the very act of going beyond - are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced." Comments such as these relate to questions of how we establish and delimit a sense of place, and how we might escape familiar categories of emplacement.

FH - The metaphors we give to place are important ways of thinking about our place in the world. Such metaphors are not mere poetic re-descriptions of our place in the world, they are means by which that world can be known in direct relation to our body's place within it. Such metaphors arise from a really basic and primal form of experience - that which relates to our body. The philosophers Lakoff and Johnson call these Metaphors We Live By. Their simple point is that metaphors of space and time do not merely enrich thinking; they are foundational for thought itself: we fall asleep, get up, drop dead. Such foundational metaphors have significance for not only what we know but how we know it. In these terms unknown territories - like the Terra Incognita of myths and legend - occupy the same metaphorical space as those matters that are up-in-the-air. Such space is not settled. But despite this uncertainty these places are also something to aspire to; somewhere that can be travelled up toward even if they can never be reached. In thinking about these things recently I keep coming back to *The Truman Show*, Peter Weir's film about a man who doesn't know he's the subject of a reality TV show based around his entire life. He spends the movie striving to escape his constructed reality. Truman's tragedy is that he achieves this. The film ends with him escaping from the TV set back to "reality." But then the film ends; and it's not really the happy ending it's presented as. What we don't see is what happens next. We don't see his faltering attempts to join his new world; or whatever crappy job he inevitably ends up with. His tragedy is that he has no further place to escape to.

CCA: IN PETER OSBORNE'S RECENT BOOK *ANYWHERE OR NOT AT ALL*, HE REFERS TO THE CONDITIONALITY OF CONTEMPORARY ART WITHIN A "TRANSNATIONAL" ART SYSTEM THAT SUPPORTS IT. CONTEMPORARY ART IS RARELY PRODUCED TO BE ACTIVATED EXCLUSIVELY WITHIN A SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHY OR LOCAL CONTEXT; MORE OFTEN PREDICATED ON A PHANTOM GEOGRAPHY OF PLACELESS CIRCULATIONS AND ATTRIBUTIONS OF VALUE. DOES THIS RELATE TO YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOW GEOGRAPHICAL METAPHORS AFFECT OUR BEHAVIOUR AND THINKING?

FH: Osborne's point is related to one of the starting points of Lane Relyea's tremendous book about the legacy of D.I.Y. culture in contemporary art, *Your Everyday Art World*. His argument is that as art becomes increasingly globalized it follows the logical of multi-national business; that is, it becomes more organized and coherent. For him the art world, to use that geographical metaphor, becomes more tightly organized and its borders more clearly delineated, by virtual of its dispersal across the globe. He says: "today the art world no longer resembles a pyramid with one city at its apex. It is a horizontal matrix. Prestige now accrues not to any single city, exhibition, or art event, but to the lines between, the routes of connection, distribution, and circulation that interlace the various centers and gatherings. The ability to shuttle along these pathways, to partake in the network's scaffolding of spokes and nodes, is what keeps competition heated. Put simply, to go where the action is means to be always on the go." Relyea also refers to Erwin Strauss' book *How to Start Your Own Country* as an earlier inspiration for a defense of D.I.Y. culture as if making fanzines, putting bands together and creating little unions of like-minded people was almost like making a new, tiny, country brimming with social and political potential. Two examples come to my mind here that highlight what might be at stake in such thinking. First Daniel Birnbaum's name for his curated show at the 2009 Venice Biennale,

Making Worlds. Here he loosely invoked the American philosopher Nelson Goodman's argument in *Ways of Worldmaking* that forms of cultural production make worlds. This is brimming with the vague (perhaps unrealistic) optimism that art might make the world a slightly better place. Second you have the Slovenian group Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) declaring themselves an autonomous state with their own currency and flag. In doing so they explicitly activated the strategies and style of the totalitarian regime they were formed under. Relyea's position is that the idea that any attempts to set up alternatives to an institutional art world were "cloying, candybox romanticism." His point is that strategies of opposition or withdrawal are actually underwritten by the contemporary logic of neo-liberalism that celebrates self-expression and demands that we all become entrepreneurs marketing ourselves. Despite his skepticism my own commitments and taste draw me to practices that appear to either disrupt the organization and coherence of this global system of cultural and economic capital or exist in little islands somewhat adrift from where the action is. I'm drawn aesthetically to things that seem to come from a different world, or suggest that our own one could be different. Sometimes this is possible; although my feeling is that with art this potential is rarely realized.

DL: Writing recently about what he calls the "secular homelessness" of much contemporary fiction, the critic James Wood refers to an editorial in a US literary magazine which argued for seeking out versions of "thorny internationalism" that might be preferred to the "smoothly global" voices that dominate today's market-driven field of "world literature". This is also the argument of Emily Apter's book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, which aims, among much else, to highlight the types of literature emerging at "geopolitical pressure points." In these instances, there is an interest in attending to precisely the kinds of culture that, as Francis says, might offer moments of disruption within - or examples of drift from - contemporary reality. The works by Stephen Brandes, Kevin Gaffney and Rana Hamadeh in *Out There, Thataway* might be seen to emerge, in very different ways, out of a related impulse. Each in its own way proposes a disorientating, dis- placing account of place and position. They are, to again borrow Francis's terms, definitively from our world, and yet they seem at the same time to propose the possibility of another.

FH: Both Stephen Brandes and Kevin Gaffney work from landscapes that are recognizable, but only barely so. Brandes presents a travelogue that he describes as a "retro-futuristic portrait of Europe, as portrayed by a fictional character who has spent his lifetime journeying." Gaffney on the other hand uses the migration of birds between North and South Korea to offer an allegory that refers not only to a specific global- political situation but also some fundamental aspects of the human condition.

DL: With Rana's work, recognizable present day places and predicaments - such as the conditions of conflict in Syria or the hazards faced by migrants from North Africa traveling across the Mediterranean - are also critical. But entirely unexpected co-ordinates are found for interpreting these contemporary stories, one key reference being the 1974 Sun Ra film *Space is the Place* - an Afro-futurist science-fiction fantasy in which escape from racial oppression becomes centred on escape from planet earth. Extraordinary narratives such as this sit alongside much more oblique allusions to places real and imagined in *Out There, Thataway*. And one of the excitements in assembling a show of this kind is in the ways that altogether dissimilar styles and attitudes become connected and complemented in each other's company. Nathan Coley's call to the power of the imagination to allow us to re-make the world - using a quote borrowed from George Bernard Shaw - and his assertion, in both textual and sculptural terms, of effort, endeavour and required will, is in a sense a placeless work. But it

is also fixed in place; grounded in the here and now: a lit up allusion to somewhere other and beyond, and at the same time a locked-down manifestation of material reality. Similarly Aleana Egan's work - in a way that also resembles Fergus Feehily's singled-out, carefully contained and absolutely literal sample of *The Sea* - names no precise place. In the company of the other works in this exhibition, however, it seems to gesture, with uncertainty and ambiguity, to somewhere both here in the world - to a simple, recognizable everyday realm - and to somewhere undefined, somewhere out there...

References

- Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, (Verso, 2013)
- Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (Routledge, 1994)
- Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, (Reaktion Books, 2005)
- George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago University Press, 2003)
- Robert MacFarlane, *The Wild Places*, (Granta Books, 2008)
- Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, (Verso, 2013)
- Lane Relyea, *Your Every Day Artworld*, (MIT Press, 2013)
- James Wood, *The Nearest Thing to Life*, (Jonathan Cape, 2015)

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