

Graphite geography

Aya Nassar

To encounter Emma McNally's work is to encounter the question of how we might know our world at the same moment that the earth underneath us, around us, or as we know it collapses from under our feet. 'What happens when earth gives way?'¹ When land slides? When we do not trust where we place our feet, or having planted one foot, find the ground has shifted? What do we attach ourselves to when we are ungrounded? Perhaps it is also an invitation to look for ways of making meaning when the landmarks and parameters of knowledge crumble. That is, when what we typically understand as the railings that support *how to know* disappear. Perhaps this encounter might be received as an invitation to chart a geography that folds into itself. So that what is neighbouring is swallowed, and what is distant sits in awkward intimacy to where it was not near before. Where what we typically orientate ourselves towards ceases to exist, or becomes something other than an anchor, or gives up its role as the thing that shows us the way... as compass, as guide.

This is an unknown geography.

Geography. Geo-graphy. Writing the Earth.

It appears to me that one of the core, and unsettling, threads throughout Emma's work is her fundamental undoing of everything that geography rests on. The artwork gathers all the ways in which the earth could be written – in other words, all the promises that geography makes in terms of knowing the world. Geography has always relied on drawing, mapping, charting, measuring and calculating, which are taken as tools of the trade for surveying, seeing and, therefore, for knowing and mastering space. In *The Earth is Knot Flat* we face up to these tools and their allure of mastery. Yet, as we encounter them, they twist under our gaze, within the interplay of light, shadow and opacity. Writing the earth has typically been a process of matter turned into marks, land into a map, earth into its representation. But here we are, where this process is suspended. Where maps that have been painstakingly drawn to write the earth are folded, crumbled, glued, mulched and fossilised. Maps are becoming matter.

¹ Marijn Nieuwenhuis and Aya Nassar, 'Losing ground: a collection of HOles', *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol.36 (2020), doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100677.

‘Maps are becoming matter’.²

Emma says these words as she shows me a solid rock. I catch a glimpse of what she once etched on the surface: the calculable measurements, the circles, the crosses, the ripples that could be charts of sonic waves, bomb detonations or planetary spheres. Whether in the smallest rock or the entangled knot, we enter into a fullness rather than nothingness. A fullness of charts, cadastral markings and cosmic plottings. The installation is full of measures, calculations, a glossary and even an earlier map of itself. It is full of paper, writing, matter and light. Yet in encountering this fullness, in encountering all of these tools, all of these modern promises, we recognise that these anchors of certitude are not what will hold us together.

One of the sheets is a map previously exhibited in *Afterness* (2021): a nine-meter graphite drawing on paper, which inhabited a building that was once used to house elements of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE). For *Afterness* McNally attempted to chart the cosmic and the atomic, the toxic aftermath that settles and the suspended effects of harm that linger, all through the medium of graphite on paper.³ This vast map, which McNally had named *The River that Flows Nowhere, Like a Sea*, is now to be folded and crumbled within unflattened earth. The knot holds within it the aftermath. Nothing remains, but nothing goes away. It is up to us to see in that a threat or a promise.

Geography is a term that is left unuttered. It is a word that will not appear in the glossary that accompanies the installation. While we might use the glossary as a guide for our encounter with the artwork, the installation perhaps demands that we grapple with our own geographies as a question rather than an answer.

Geo-graphy. *Geo* ‘earth’ and *graphein* ‘to write’.

Earth writing.

In this lexicon, the earth appears and reappears: *terra*, the *geo* in geologies and the *topo* in topologies. It is what is charted in *cartographies*, exploited through *property* and *value*, *extracted* and colonised through the imaginations of *terra nullius* and *tabula rasa*. It is the *soil*, the *ground* and the *sphere* that are entangled in dust storms where the air lifts the earth and suspends it in atmospheres. The earth fractures and fragments

² Emma McNally in conversation with the author, 8 July 2024.

³ Emma McNally, ‘The river that flows nowhere, like a sea’ (2021), available at www.artangel.org.uk/project/afterness, accessed 15 July 2024.

through the terms and it is on the run. The earth is ‘on the move’ and ‘you can’t join from the outside’.⁴ It is, in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s poetics, greeny, salty, watery and dusty.

It *shakes* and *caves* and *falls*.

It *knots* and *folds*.

The glossary we hold – and that we hope might hold us – is an earthy lexicon, but it is also one in which the earth disappears.

What does a glossary do?

On Tuesday 4 August 2020 over 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate exploded while being stored at the Port of Beirut in Lebanon. It was about six in the evening. Earth shook. Glass shattered. It was the largest non-nuclear explosion ever recorded. It registered as seismic event (3.3 magnitude) and created a wave that disturbed the Earth’s upper atmosphere.⁵ The blast occurred during a global pandemic, an economic collapse and a wave of protests that had begun in around 2019. In 2023 a group of Lebanese writers and creatives published a document, which they titled ‘A Collapsing Lexicon’. The text, and the performance that followed it in 2024, were an attempt to grasp the changing meaning of words across the four years of collapse interspersed by that blast. In writing, drawing and collating the lexicon, they hoped to gather some conditions of possibility for certain meanings to emerge, while not taking words or their meanings for granted. For the writers, language gestures towards ‘all that is humanly possible [...] our relations to other’. Therefore, its failure is intimately entangled with material, discursive and political ruination.⁶

In the brokenness of words, perhaps something else will emerge; so, a record of brokenness must be written.

⁴ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, ‘Base faith’, *E-Flux Journal*, issue 86 (November 2017), available at www.e-flux.com/journal/86/162888/base-faith, accessed 5 August 2024.

⁵ Bhaskar Kundu, Batakrushna Senapati, Ai Matsushita and Kosuke Heki, ‘Atmospheric wave energy of the 2020 August 4 explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, from ionospheric disturbances’, *Scientific Reports* Vol.11 (2021), doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-82355-5.

⁶ Cynthia Kreichati, ‘Introduction’, in *A Collapsing Lexicon* (2023), available at drive.google.com/drive/folders/1y4BTXgWpeZURvr7CA_pEQgi7jTqMgbM, accessed 9 July 2024.

‘This is what I am trying to do, the pile of debris’, in matter and in words.⁷ Yet what we are invited to is more than a ‘convulsed archive’ or a collation of wreckage.⁸ There is nothing in the installation that gives in to the fatalism of collapse, or that revels in the catastrophe or the futility of the fall. *The Earth is Knot Flat* is a provocation to carry *the geo* in entanglement, in relation and in reaching out to carry and hold something or someone (the knot/the knit) than in negation (the *not* that we hear but that slips).

Thus, we are held and suspended.

We are held through an elemental geography, mulched and rewoven, and airborne. The elemental asks of us to attend to the relations of entanglement among the basic elements of earth, air, water and even fire, as well as wood, metal, the pollutants, toxins, residues and chemicals and the particles that swirl around them. We might receive the elements as something basic or fundamental to the composition of space, or, instead, as an excess that resists reduction and allows for speculation and creation. Indeed the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, famously called the elements ‘the hormones of imagination’.⁹ For geographers, the elements are part of an attempt to understand how materiality of the ‘geo’ is ‘implicated in the distribution and delineation of forms of living and dying’.¹⁰ Here, we encounter the earth as a combination of elements: paper acting on graphite, graphite acting on water, suspensions creating clouds, folds creating opacities catching graphite, and graphite catching and escaping light. The ground slides, cracks and detonates, yes. But it also exchanges, extends and suspends. It shifts states and hold pockets, and pockets hold us in return.

Graphite here is a fugitive matter in every form.¹¹

Graphite is a crystalline form of the element carbon. Unlike its kin – diamond, which is also formed when carbon is subjected to heat and pressure – graphite is soft and twists under pressure. Therefore, graphite is used to write. Graphite is a conductor. It can conduct electricity, yet is resistant to heat. Graphite is slippery. It is also typically regarded as stable. Graphite is both banal and alluring. It appears in

⁷ Emma McNally, *op. cit.* (note 3).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), p.11.

¹⁰ Sasha Engelmann and Derek McCormack, ‘Elemental worlds: Specificities, exposures, alchemies’, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol.45, issue 6 (2021), doi.org/10.1177/0309132520987301.

¹¹ Emma McNally, *op. cit.* (note 3).

the installation as rock, dust and air. It is the marks of the paper, the pockets in the landscapes. Matter and meaning. It is opaque. That is, it enables opacities. To graph is to mark, to write, to chart and to narrate. Perhaps with a slip, it is to know. But graphite, as Emma tells me, is fugitive. It is playful, and it will escape its role as matter of utility. As we mark with graphite, graphite marks us, scattering dust suspended in the room. I breathe your mark. You breathe mine. Graphite might be an elementary companion as we seek to chart different terrains of knowing the world, while attending to its right and our right to its opacities.¹² The drawing is folded and crumbles so that the mark is both legible and not legible. As Emma marks the surface of the paper, perhaps she writes all the violence that the mark does, as well as all the vulnerability it invites. We cannot undo the trace of the mark on the surface, we have to sit with it.

*'we broke the earth and now we fell through time. deep gashes in the ground. we scale the edges of our knowing. the smoother the worse, the more jagged the more better. what we stand on is not masonry. it is the torn place unhealed. the footholds come from how unclean the break.'*¹³

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

M Archive: After the End of the World is a speculative text written after a cataclysmic world event, organised around the four elements and chemical entanglements of the periodic table. It is written with Black feminist theory that already inhabits this world of *afterness*, which McNally crumples into being in this installation. Here we are already in 'afterness'. From genocidal violence to ecological catastrophe, we graph known and unknown geographies with something else than mastery, with broken ground, with paper whose markings are on the move. We inhabit the 'afterness' and step into the folds.

¹² See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

¹³ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).