



Matterlurgy

Hearing from Artists

Matterlurgy is a collaborative artistic-research practice by Helena Hunter and Mark Peter Wright. Their work explores the intersections of art, science and technology in relation to environmental change. Their approach is interdisciplinary and often involves collaboration with communities. Both grew up in the Tees Valley and are now based in London. In 2017, 2018 and 2019 they showed work at, and developed public workshops with, MIMA. Here they are in conversation with Elinor Morgan, Head of Programme, in May 2020.

EM: Matterlurgy. What does that word mean and how does it describe your collective practice?

M: The word is relevant for us through its play on the practice of metallurgy, an itinerant science less concerned with categorising what things are, and more embroiled in what they do. Metallurgy derives from alchemy, an ancient philosophy and practice connected to magic and astrology, involving the transmutation of matter. In the contemporary context of geology or chemistry, metallurgists test materials and design new processes; they follow movements and flows and do not necessarily observe at a distance or present neat factoids. Instead they focus on relations and collaborations based on intimate, sensitive and practical co-working with materials and processes of exchange. It's a sort of para-praxis that is made by hands-on experimentation and process rather than a traditional scientific point of view.



Air Morphologies 2019. Courtesy of the artist

Our work encompasses many of these aspects so it seemed like a useful term to house our collaboration. Switching it to “Matter” rather than “Metal” expands the scope for us and means making with the visible and invisible, audible and inaudible spectrums of everyday life. As Matterlurgy, we may work with materials such as waste, technology, air, water or geology, but those materials are always webbed to a political cartography, or map, with chains of causality and power. We are interested in blurring expert and non-expert practices; many of our works are co-constructed with people, across perspectives and disciplines. The subjects we tackle, such as environmental change, demand a kaleidoscopic approach so that we don't replicate existing hierarchies of knowledge. So, “matter” is also a very pragmatic word



Geofictions 2017. Shown in Liquid Crystal Display at MIMA, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist

for us in the sense of holding onto what matters; the ethics and relations involved in sharing and collaborating with humans and nonhumans.

EM: Let's turn to South Gare, an incredible place that you have explored through your work. The south bank of the River Tees, South Gare is a meeting point for river, sea, land, industry, wildlife and human lives that encompasses many of the things you're interested in. What does it encapsulate for you?

M: South Gare is a unique place. We are familiar with it having grown up in the area, and as artists having made projects with its materials and narratives. It's a breakwater for the North Sea, a manufactured spit of land built out of the byproduct of steelmaking. As a landscape its surface appears "natural" with wildlife, flora and fauna. But the fact that it is man-made, that steel byproduct leaks high lime content, which acts as fertiliser, which attracts an ecology of nonhuman relations is so paradoxical and interesting. It's almost like walking through a fictional world when you're there; you can never be sure what's real.

There's a history of the steelworks, the rich fishing tradition, walkers and recreational users, military ruins, you have the green energy of a large offshore wind farm as well - and not to forget the golf course! It's a place made by participation: the coming together of materials, environments and people of dizzying scales. So, it encapsulates many things: the materiality of the site itself is a true fiction; the multiple practices and points of view entangled in the landscape; the way time seems to cancel itself as you walk amongst past materials of manufacture whilst stumbling upon the future fossils of discarded tech and plastics.

EM: The piece *Geofictions*, 2017, was made there. A series of films, collages and sculptures, the work was commissioned by MIMA, shown in 2017 and 2019 at MIMA, and is now part of the Middlesbrough Collection. What ideas does the work hold and how was it made?

M: We began working on *Geofictions* in 2016 and an integral part of the process involved recurring field visits to the site, South Gare. Whilst there we worked with an array of found matter that seemed to trouble categorisations



Flom Sang 2019. Courtesy of the artist

of the natural and manmade, organic and inorganic. There were rocks imbued with melted plastic: some appeared to be organic but on closer inspection were completely manufactured, some were repurposed by living creatures. They conjured different figurations and narratives and we began to create speculative characters for the materials such as “The Grafter”, a fusion of plastic and sandstone, and “The Trickster” a synthetic material camouflaged as a natural element. We produced creative writing tasks with the materials, considering them as future fossils embedded in the landscape and what they might tell us about the particular time we find ourselves in.

These visits and methods became formalised into a practical field kit with a series of Geofictional cards for navigating and working with materials on site. As we shifted between site and studio both spaces seemed to collapse into each other and gradually we invited people to co-construct with us, to share and generate new narratives and perspectives of place. Through workshops and interventions we produced posters, sculptural assemblages and poetic-texts as well as film and digital collages. We were interested in

how site based materials and processes fold back into the gallery in an active way, not just a flat documentation of events but as a mode of artistic production itself.

EM: In 2019 you made *Flom Sang (Flood Song)*, an installation in a former Hydropower Station in Norway that was developed with school children. How do you approach an urgent and nuanced topic like flooding in your work?

M: Flooding, air pollution, industrial activities; these types of subjects can be broad and lead to apocalyptic, end of the world tropes very quickly. It’s something we always want to steer away from. We try to deal with the context we are working in and the urgency of a given environment or community. In the process of making *Flom Sang* many experts told us how they were going to solve the problem. This is one of the common responses to flooding or other types of environmental damage, to employ a techno-fix solution. Although we appreciate engineering and design have a part to play we were curious about how people live with water, how they continue to hope, persist and take action in the extremities of climate change.



Geofictions (detail) 2017. Courtesy of the artist

EM: Your work deals with ecology, technology, material innovations and human networks, so it seems probable that you're thinking about the current global changes through it. What are some of the things you're reading, looking at and talking about?

M: We have been talking about how Covid-19 reaffirms that planetary health is undoubtedly linked to human health, and you can't really isolate one from the other. Nothing is a separate issue and this moment seems to have heightened that point. We are currently working on another site-specific project about flooding and have been researching and having meetings with scientists to discuss various watery questions. It's been interesting to think about where "the field" is once you cannot access it anymore. How does the circumnavigation of a site become a site itself? What role does the digital online space play within site-specific art projects? These questions always fascinate us but they have been more present in our thinking lately. We have also prepared work on air pollution for a group exhibition in Fiskars (Finland) and are currently online artists in residence at GAZELL.IO, Gazelli Art House's digital platform, London.

Aside from the production and making side of things we've been diving into various media and literature. We've been enjoying a book of poems by the late astronomer Rebecca Elson called "A Responsibility to Awe". The night lockdown was announced, we watched a live stream of Elaine Mitchener, vocalist, artist and composer, performing from Cafe Oto. The work was incredible and it was made all the more profound by the events unfolding outside and knowing this kind of live event wasn't going to happen for a while. We have enjoyed watching a documentary called "The Other Side of Mars" directed by Minna Långström, it reveals how images of Mars are constructed as a technological process. We've also listened to a lot of podcasts and have been enjoying an audiobook of Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*. It's an incredibly rich listen and combines a wonderful grasp on science, poetry and prose.

We were lucky enough to be in touch with a wonderful school during the process of research and development and it became clear to us that the students were the experts we wanted to hear from. We were interested in questions such as how do you live with flooding and how can we engage in such content together, from our different points of view. We ran field writing workshops and listening activities to initiate our questions and to imagine with water. The project required a huge amount of effort in a relatively short space of time. We made workshops with two groups of students, set up rehearsal and recording sessions with the local brass band, negotiated the use of an ex-hydropower station in a fjord as the exhibition site, made field recordings of the river and produced poetic texts. Then there's all the research, relations and care. Not to mention making the artwork which ended up being a 4-channel sound installation, three films, text scores and a live performance and listening session.

So, we made this work by combining our own practice with the imagination and creativity of people invested in the community. We listened to voices that often fall outside the conventional idea of the expert, and we worked very hard on setting up the right space and conditions in which the work would be shared and received. At all times we wanted to steer clear of grand narratives around flooding and focus on the lived and imagined experience of being with water, in all its confluences and complexity.