

DRAWING SUBTERRANEAN

JAMES GEURTS





gemak 

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JAMES GEURTS

3rd September - 2nd October 2011

Director: Marie Jeanne de Rooij

Paviljoensgracht 20-24

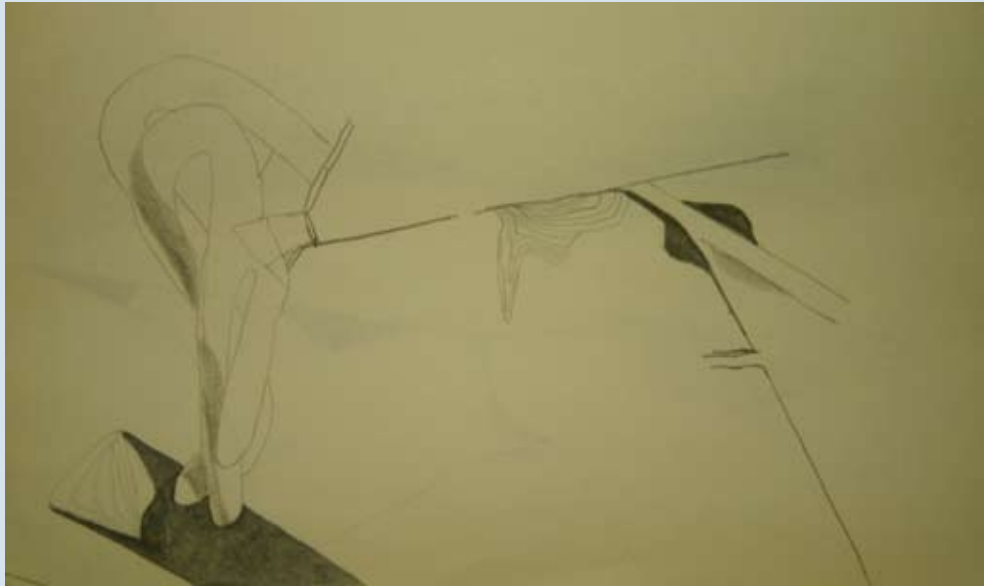
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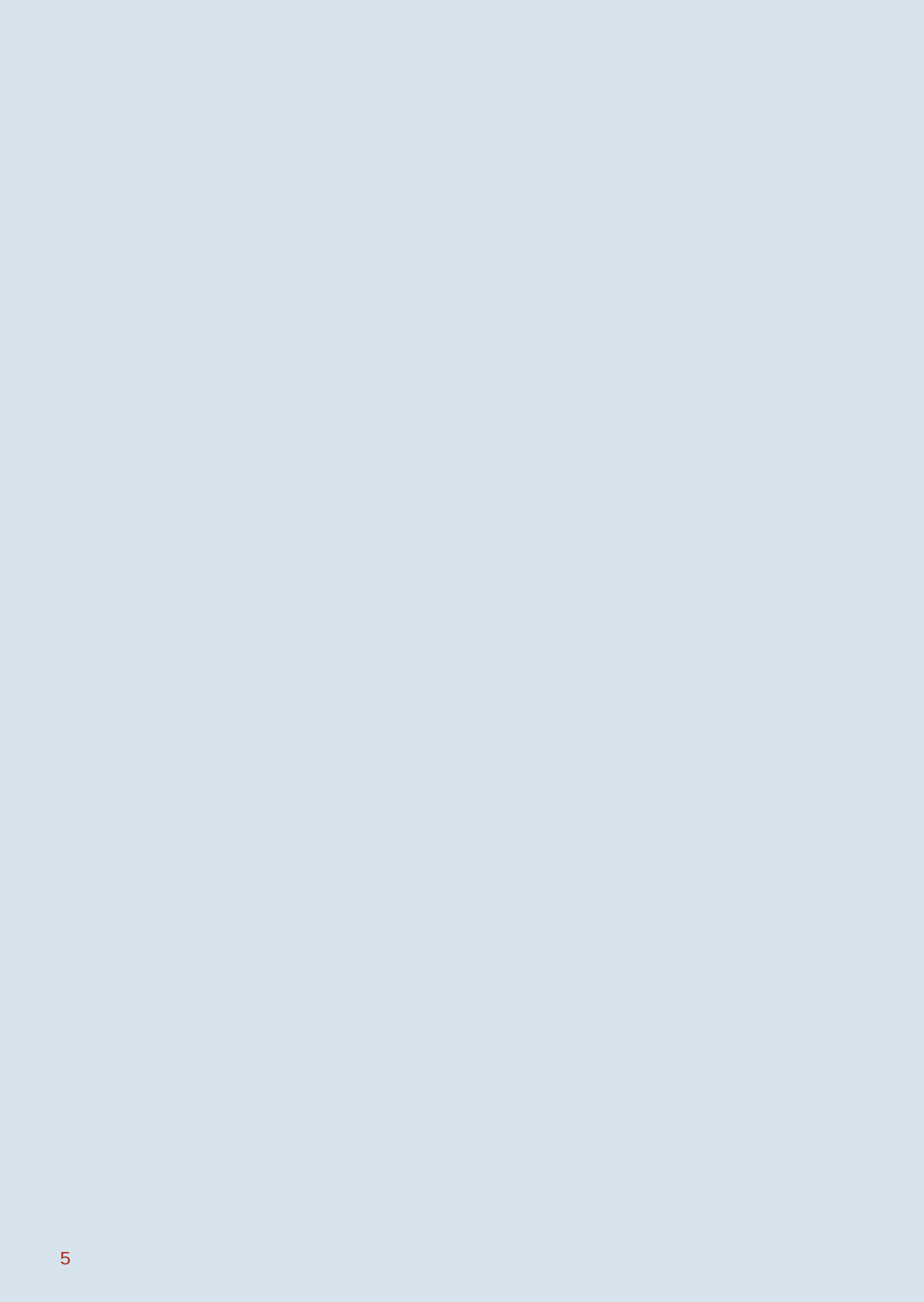
james@jamesgeurts.com



Drawing Subterranean: North Sea, work on paper #1 of 60



Spot light (with green gel) on stand: pipeline running through GEMAK building



Tidal Continuum #8, Video projection: screen suspended from roof



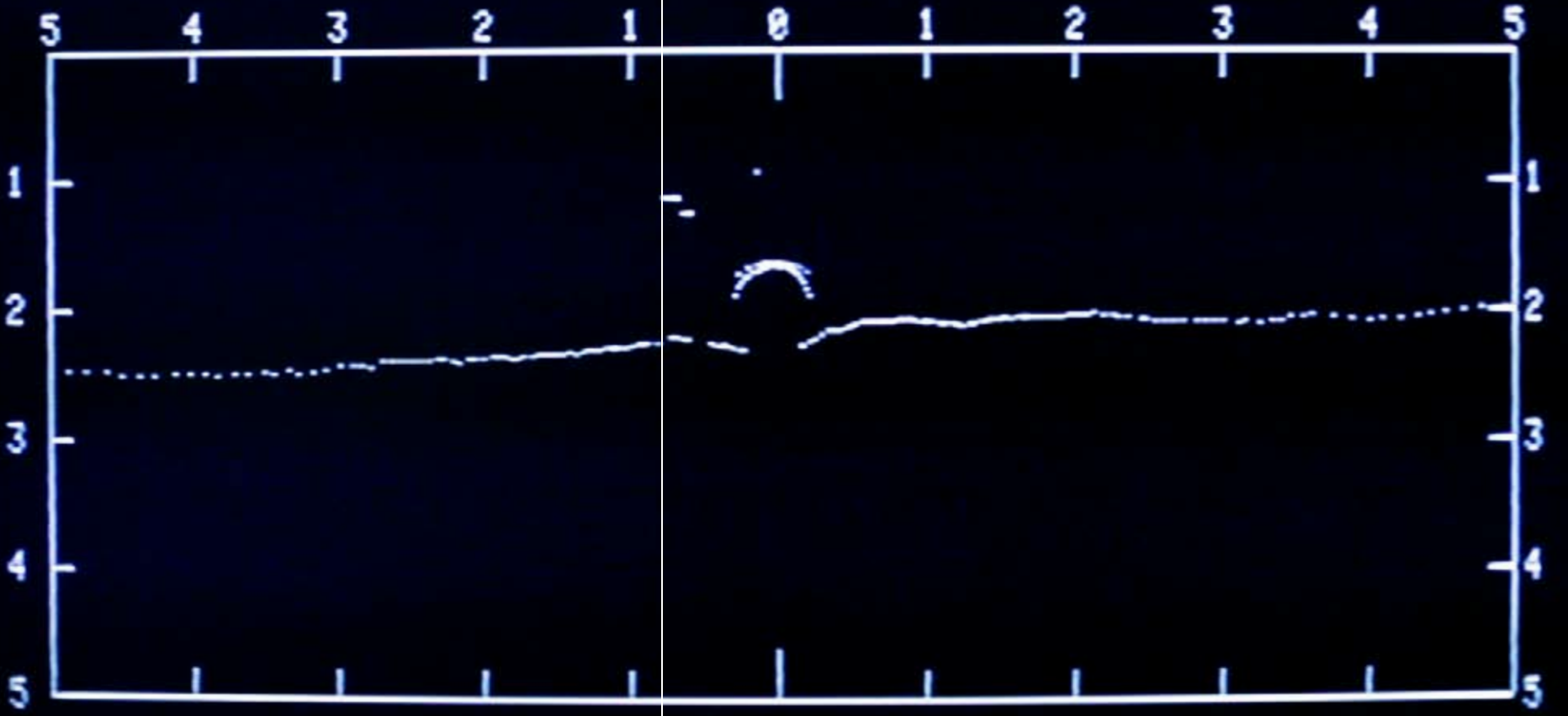
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D- 6.3927 D- 24.6 0 1.0 OFF: 0.0



14 May 1989 22:25:30

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DATE	14/05/89	G: 308.6	D: 24.6	A: 1.0	STOP ANGLE	120	deg
TIME	13:26:53			OFF: 30.8	STEP SIZE	0.9	deg
SOUND	VEL. 1487.88	m/s			AUTOMATIC	00	sec
HORIZ.	SEP. 1.42	m			PORT HEAD		ON
VERT.	SEP. 0.00	m			STED. HEAD		ON
PORT	HEAD HIGHER				LOGGING		OFF

SCANNING



2005/05/06/06
MOTION REC

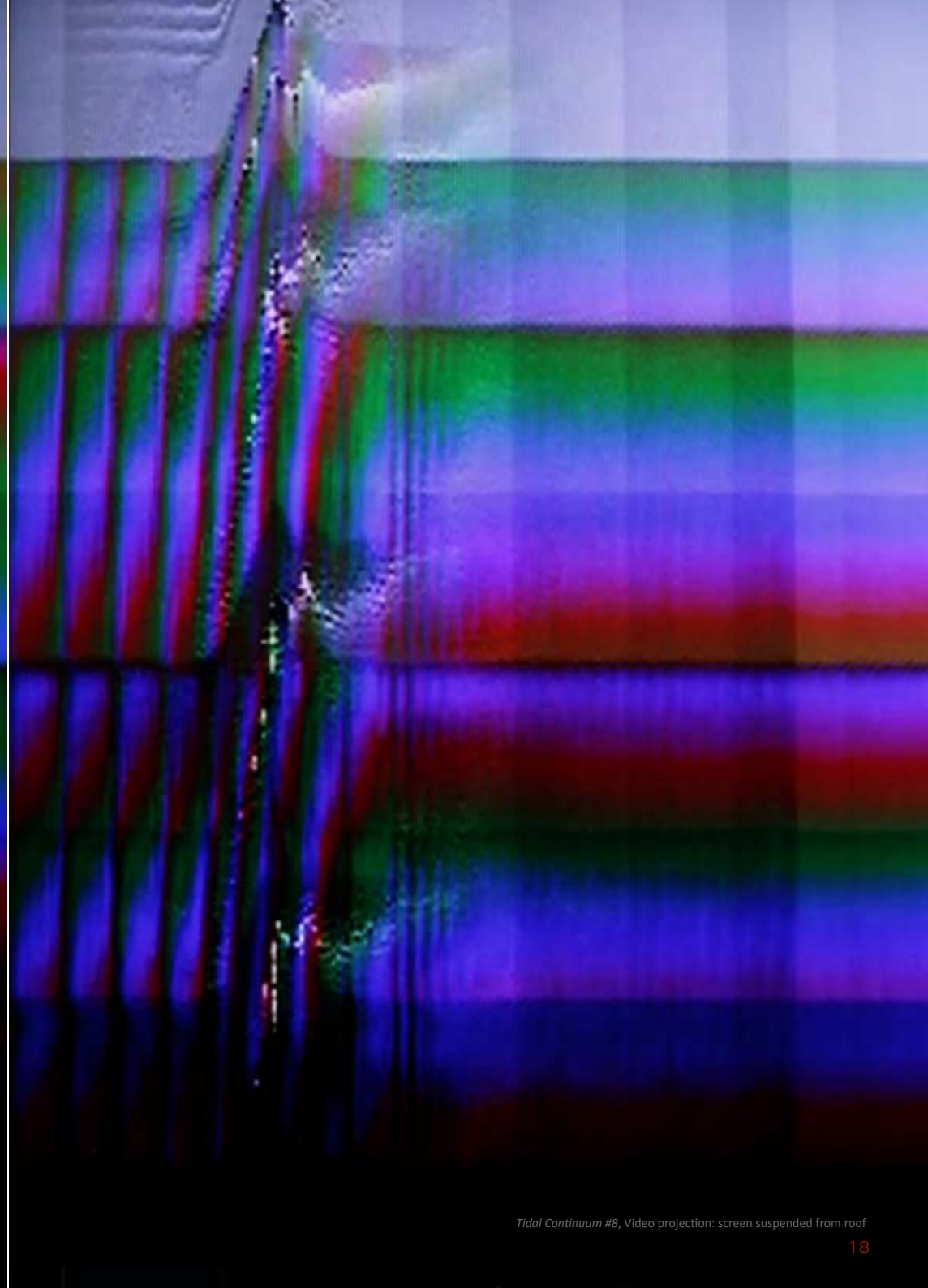
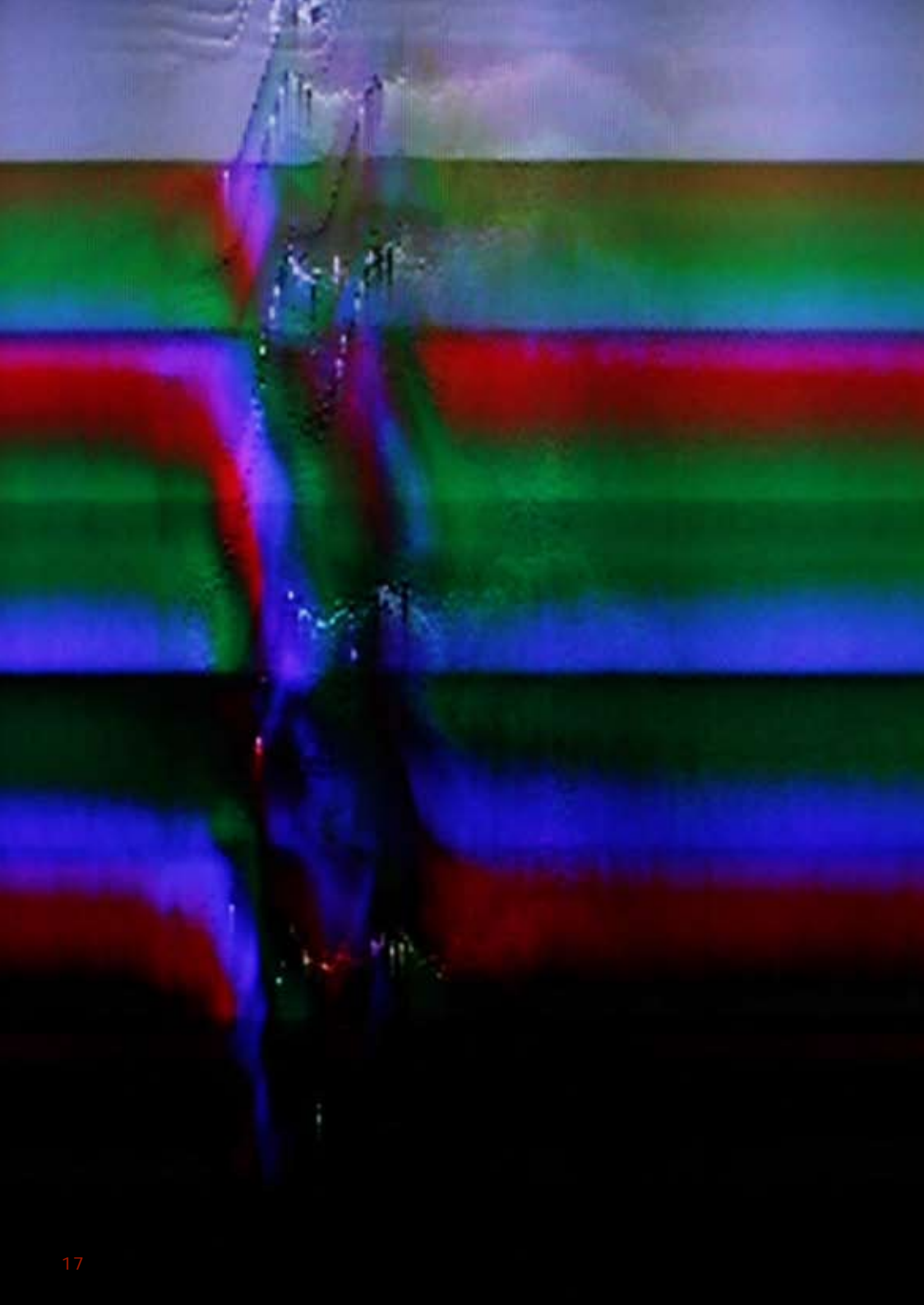
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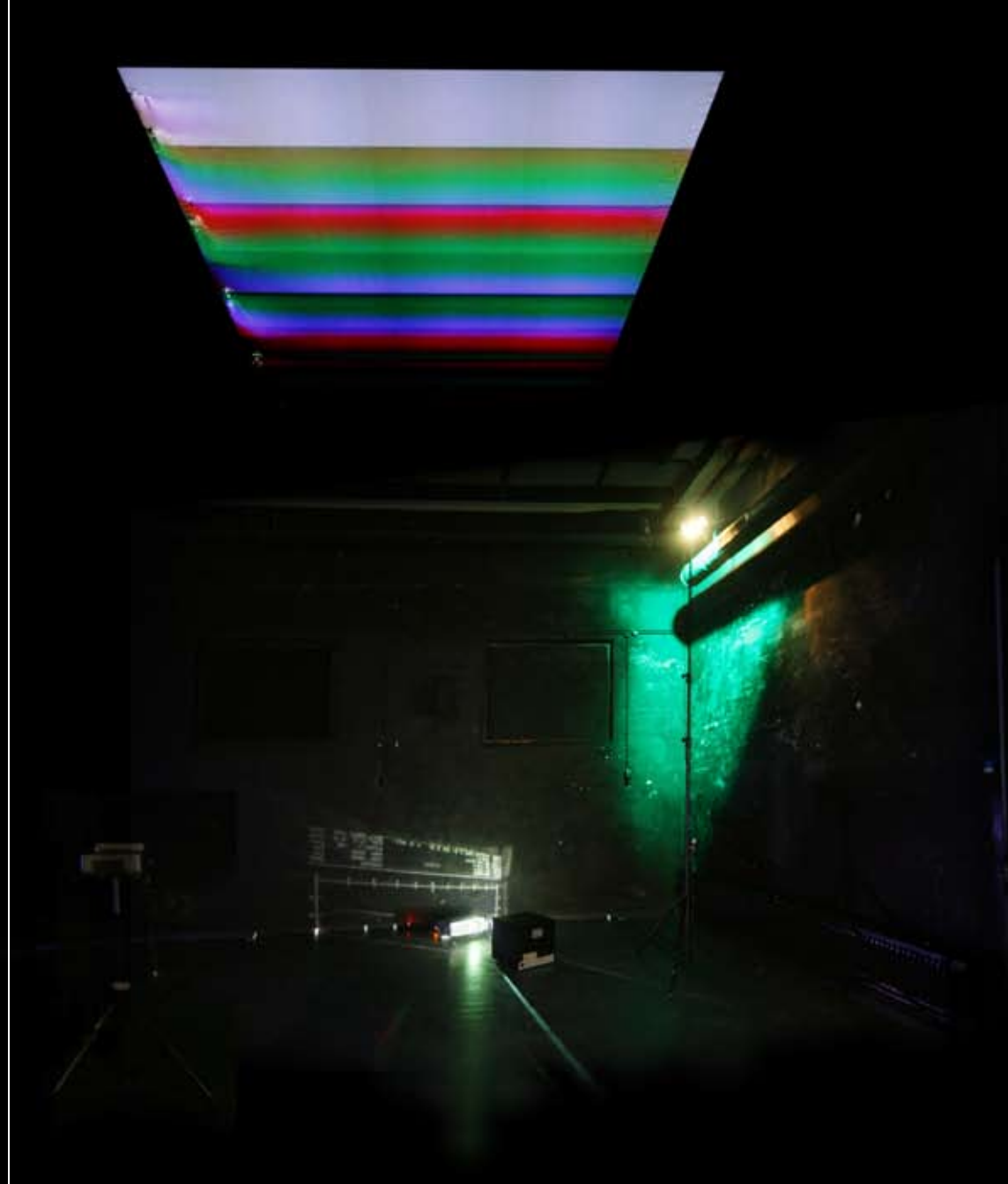
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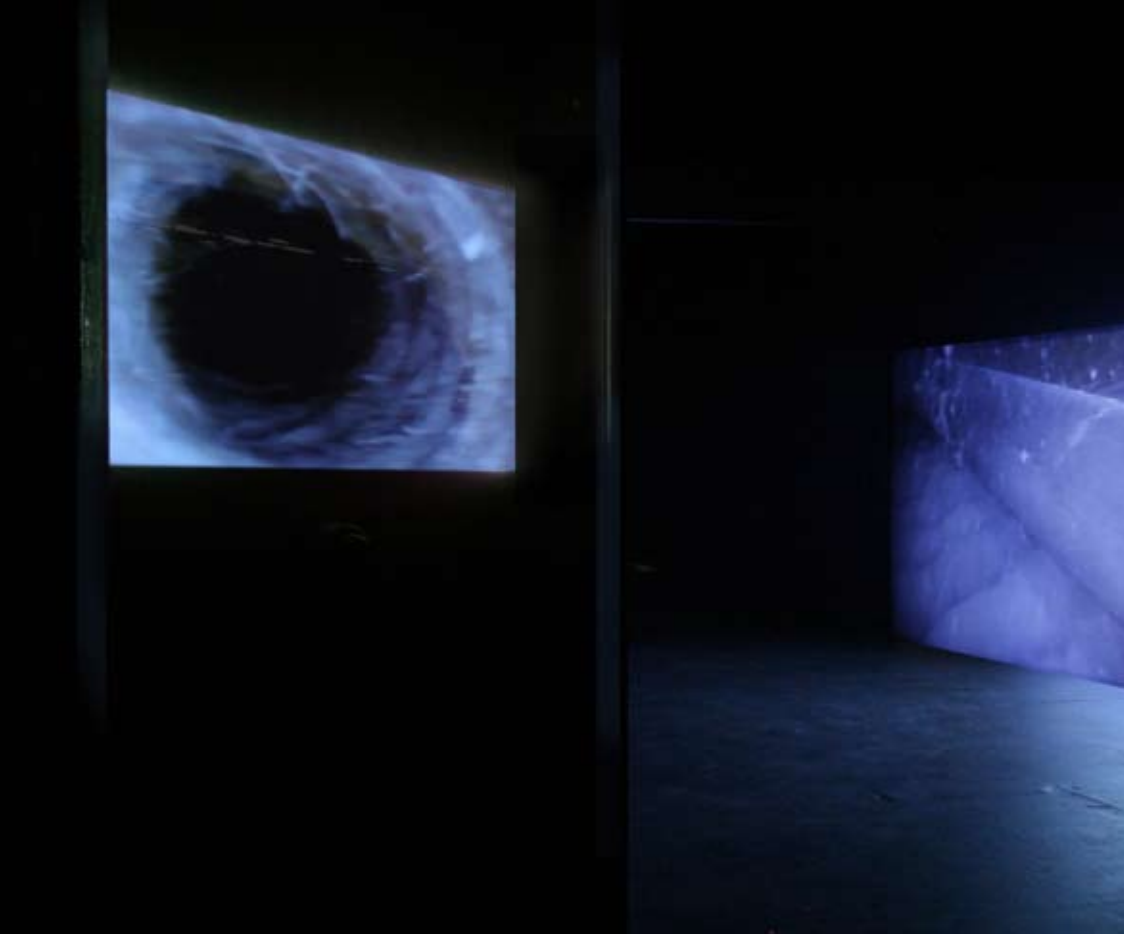


Scanning Subsea Pipeline, Video projection onto unpowered signal TV monitor









On diving : Drawing Subterranean

Julie Louise Bacon

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization in the depth of the seam into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things suffer ‘a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl-diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living as something rich and strange...

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt’s words, drawn from the introduction of Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, set the scene for the atmosphere of the Australian artist James Geurts’ current project at Gemak in The Hague, conjuring up, as they do, the feeling of a thinking-sensing body, moving through surface and then depth, encountering changing light, guided towards the goal of something lucid, embedded within matter, and shaped by the forces of time.

Rather than a diver seeking pearls in the ocean (or the thinker seeking enlightenment that she infers) the surface and depths explored at Gemak in the multi-screen video installation *Drawing Subterranean* are multiple. They arise from the artist’s exploration of the archive and technology, specifically those of image recording and display, and within this the relationship between the sea and screen, the body and perception.

As the starting point of his research, the artist set out to explore a collection of old U-matic video tapes, featuring surveyance footage of an underwater pipeline. Over the years, label upon label indicated that the tapes’ original imagery had been recorded over numerous times, and for a variety of purposes associated with their new home at the art college and gallery. The artist assembled a range of video decks and monitors with which to view the now archaic U-matic video format, purposefully adjusting tape feed speeds, alternating between NTSC, PAL and other settings, and switching deck-monitor connections, to bring into play the specific properties of each design, and the element of chance.

In this act of resurveying, there is a move through the documentary surface into deeper encodings layered in the video tape. There is a seeking of both form and the erosion of form embedded in the magnetic surface, in the interference and flux between recording intervals that are both relayed by the deck and monitor, and produced by the internal workings and display modes of these machines.

Once the artist had identified sequences of form and flux – conjunctions of past trace and present feed – he re-filmed them from monitor screens, creating a composite of footage, a new archive from the archive, a source from the already mixed source. A parallel process, exploring the possibilities of projection in the voluminous black box installation space across the way guided the re-filming choices. Chance discoveries in the interaction of light, arising from the changing number and configuration of screens, added to the chance encounters of light and form surfacing in the tape viewing. The result : a configuration of illuminating screens and monitors, organised in the black deep of the exhibition space, relaying bodily presence ; the sense of being and the video realm as both a composite of inscriptions and a fluid medium.

Surfacing from the installation for a moment, to look at art making more generally, *Drawing Subterranean* reminded me that there are two, essentially different, ways of approaching the materials and ideas, the space and time, of which art is made. One sees all this as stuff to be shaped according to an idea, hopefully a good one, that the artist has had that originates at a time and place prior to process. Sensations that have taken form internally, in the formulation of a concept or viewpoint, become external once more as the artist creates a work that illustrates a prior awareness or experience. What results is led by the perspective of language and thought, more open modes of sensing intertwined with fluid thinking may, or may not, follow in its wake.

The other way of making art, aligned I suggest with James Geurts' practice, opens up our experience of the threshold between sensing and thinking as method and content in the art itself ; it takes as its premise the space of experience before the thought that is already known and the sensation that is already named. In so doing, it creates a dialogue between the known – established signs – and the unknown : that which is out of sight, beyond existing forms of meaning, but whose signal, in certain conditions, takes shape and comes through.

In the space and the configuration of *Drawing Subterranean's* screens – in their pulse, flow and spillage – we encounter the wake of images of an underwater camera surveying a pipeline, tracked with an illuminating spotlight. Elsewhere, we are exposed to the fluxing of colour bars becoming waves, or are struck by breaches of light caused by the wear of the tape feeding between receivers. Alignments synchronize, syncopate, become offset. What emerges from this ensemble of appearances into disappearances, figurations into abstractions, is the orchestration of an experience that is analogous with the evolving relationship between man, technology and nature, expressing : slippage and control, loss and gain, fixity and flow, analysis and wonder. The artist allows deep layers of this story – which could be alternatively titled 'consciousness unfolding, intimately and socially, through civilisation' – to surface for themselves, not passively, but through his act of seeking and engagement. I am speaking of surfacing in the way that things come to light, or find expression in the world, through the act of attention as well as invention. Thus, art that voices an idea to which we are invited to listen differs from art that both speaks of, and embodies, this act of listening.

The images of a sea-bed pipeline are, as I mentioned, recognisable at times and footage of depth graphs relating to the survey further signal documentary procedures. Yet, in the way that they are framed and edited, their rhythm and exposure, along with the dialogue between this screen and other video and sound elements (depending on our positioning in space come in and out of the field of awareness) there is a feeling of a constant slippage, of swimming in the threshold between abstraction and figuration, this known into unknown. Accordingly, what happens as I repeatedly move and position my body and so my view – what the

work does to me and draws from me – is an experience of alternation. There is an alternation between : the tendency of the mind to fix and interpret fascinating surfaces and curious material, the chance to see what engineers see, that chance to decipher strangeness ; but also an unfamiliar experience of light and form, and the wonder that it arouses, the freeing up of representation, and the re-immersal in flow that this invites, the horizons of sensing and thinking that it quietly signals. Ultimately, the installation draws us into the stimulus of perpetual movement that we know internally to be a strong underlying current of life. *Drawing Subterranean* draws psychological, documentary and conceptual space out into the bodily relationships from which they came ; specific forms surface only to dissolve back into depths of light and space.

To go to the heart of the matter : what is drawn out, and allowed to emerge, in *Drawing Subterranean* is a correlation between : the properties of water and light in the deep-sea survey, the pipeline, searchlight, video encoding and transmission ; and the properties of consciousness that are channeled through the organic body, and the systems that it encounters.

The artist's process of illumination goes beyond the spotlight, and the image per second range of any recording technology, or even the eye, in engaging a body of experience with landscape and water. This has seen Geurts nurture his art through a hidden river in Brussels, across a salt lake in Australia, and along the course of an ancient waterway in Israel, to name but a few. It is quite beautiful that metaphors of light and water – sounding, divining – are both a metaphorical echo and are embodied in the space : in the soundtrack of the video composed of ambient sounds from the tape spools and monitor audio, the movement of form and light as wave and frequency, and the tangibility of the relationship between depth and surface created by screens that both amplify the volume of the space encased in black walls and remove these walls as they take us into the inner reaches of ourselves. This is an intimate encounter that simultaneously connects us with an expansive motion.

I mention the process of divining, and here we come across a fundamental characteristic of *Drawing Subterranean*, and the artist's method of making as a whole. Arendt uses the metaphor of pearl diving for the seeker who is sensitive to the world around him, as well as strong in his motion through it and towards a goal. It was whilst observing the artist's research process first hand in the video and installation workspaces that it dawned on me that, as I said, no preconceived idea was simply being shaped, but rather there was listening and a drawing out of phenomena. As I delved, through the surface of all the things I can say, and know 'about art', trying to grasp what was going on, it occurred to me that it was precisely equivalent to a process of divining.

To explain more of what I mean by this, I would like to return to *Illuminations*, and the moment at which Benjamin draws attention to the 'impact of thought'. What is interesting about the sense in which he means this, is that it is far more than a metaphor. Literally the spirit in which thoughts are conceived carries through into what they become, bring into effect in the world, and of course how they shape us, being as we are 'of the world'. Thus ways of seeing the world, and forming ideas from it in the mind, that have the force of extracting, mining, drilling, excavating and the like, result in precisely such impacts in the physical realm. In contrast to an idea that breaks or ruptures the surface, destroying the integrity of the body or landscape, divining reaches through and beyond the surface, looking not for domain but for alignment.

In saying that Benjamin's 'impact of thought' is more than a metaphor, it is perhaps closer to the truth to say that in using these words, he is pointing to what metaphor actually is, at its deepest level, which is one and the same with the source to which it refers. I am speaking of the point deep within where the body and the world flow together, beneath all surfaces, where language is a light carried in a depth. This, at its most poetic, is the story of the streaming of varied energies in the world : energy that is not created or destroyed, but which simply changes form and nature throughout time. This is expressed most essentially, in our world, through light and water: through the sun of our planet's life and the expanse of our planet's surface; through the intimacy of our eye and water-bound synapses. The artist's work with video footage of deep sea pipelines, with eras of technology manifesting and eroding – draws out this journey that is so particular in each of its manifestations and instances, and universal throughout time.

When metaphor and phenomenon converge – in other words, when the form of language and the life of matter meet, when we know what thought's impact is – so there is an opening through which to sense the connection between the poetic and technical, poesis meaning simply 'the act of making' and techne 'the systematic, or industrial, treatment of an art, craft, or technique.' Arendt points out that Benjamin is that most special of things a 'poetic thinker', which I take to mean that he is not caught in dichotomy's net of sensing versus thinking, intuition versus reason, analysis versus fluidity. Rather the one flows in and draws out the other. Through Geurts' resurveying he draws the technical reality of the process of surveying, displaying and charting back into poetic alignment. The poetic and technical ultimately meet in *Drawing Subterranean* in that this mode of art making requires both freedom of the spirit and the discipline of method to produce results.

When the poetic and technical align, so the relationship of aesthetics and ethics may be raised. I have mentioned the aesthetics of listening, which has a clear ethical charge. But further to this, *Drawing Subterranean* engages the aesthetics of flux and flow, understood in the artist's work as a force and current in their own right. This too has ethical implications. So too does the sensitivity towards what is regarded as precious, here not the conventional valuable gem – the focus of Arendt's pearl diver – but the unassuming crate of obsolete technology, assorted U-matic video tapes. But this is merely the entry point, deeper still, what Geurts is valuing, what he is signaling as precious is the capacity and range of our perception, anchored in the body's own experience. This only adds to the ways in which Geurts's mode of artistic research is aligned with divining, in that it goes beyond conventional means of seeking, and conventional forms of value.

In conclusion, it seems pertinent to recall that all perspectives arise through practices, through the way that we live, and see and seek, all this and more cultivates and nurtures what is, and so what can be. Distant and out-of-view spaces are playing a decisive role in the shape and spirit of the times, as outer space satellite fields expand communication resulting in a metamorphosis of intimacy itself, as drilling into sea-beds extracts resources that change society's habits and shape. The impact of our thought is very clearly visible here : waste in outer space, and damage done to the sea-bed. But for this reality to be truly understood, to be more than an idea of which we are aware, an at once more subtle and more potent understanding of the relationship between the visible and invisible is required. What is needed is something subtler than the idea that because Google Earth provides information that makes the surface of the planet entirely visible – figured – we somehow have more knowledge. The reach and mass of information is not one and the same with the power of communication possessed by the story that knowledge that once brought things to bear in us has now disappeared from view, perhaps, and perhaps not, leaving traces. This knowledge includes ways of connecting with deep layers of our being.

The parameters of invisibility in relation to visibility – the limits and range of what we see in the world in relation to what we know – are as ebb and flow. The motion is one of surfacing and then re-submergence, of technology's traces, of the palimpsest of consciousness ; as a tidal motion that exposes then envelops the forms of a sea bed and its ecosystem. There is strength, coloured by humility, in understanding that knowledge and perception is not cumulative, in realising that for one thing to be visible another recedes, most literally in making space for the in-between signals of the layered experience that composes life.

There is a risk, I think, in some kind of message emerging from my words. The art work exists precisely to go beyond this, to activate deep relationships between sensing and thinking. That is why the challenge of the act of writing on art – as a final salute to Benjamin whose illuminations are resounded in the poetic thinking space of *Drawing Subterranean* – is not that of gathering the chemistry of its dust, but seeking the alchemy of its light. Through James Geurts' acts of listening and responding to the phenomena that he chose as his research material – working with layers and flux, shifting form into flow and back again – he both refracted the body's relationship with the archive and technology, and ultimately divined the simplicity of its belonging with the elements, with the realms of water and light.

1] This divining is hinted at in the term that the artist uses to describe his creative process: 'expanded drawing practice'.

Here drawing, like divining, involves sensitivity to the layers of resonance that exist in and between phenomena.



INTERSITE SURVEYS

SUBSEA OFFSHORE

CLIENT: EUROPEAN MARINE CONTRACTORS

PROJECT: SOLE PIT AS-LAID SURVEY

VESSEL: SKANDI SURVEYOR

ROV: PIONEER 14

PIPELINE: 24" TRUNKLINE: BACTON TO CLIPPER

START KP: 20.194

END KP: 20.560

DIVE: 61

DATE: 24TH MAY 1989

TAPE NO: SS/24/AL/0182/P

~~QUANTITY~~ / COPY

PORT / ~~STATION~~