

Jellyfish Crisps

A conversation between Ross Little and Timothea Armour

'Current-borne, wave-flung, tugged hugely by the whole might of ocean, the jellyfish drifts in the tidal abyss. The light shines through it, and the dark enters it. Borne, flung, tugged from anywhere to anywhere, for in the deep sea there is no compass but nearer and farther, higher and lower, the jellyfish hangs and sways; pulses move slight and quick within it, as the vast diurnal pulses beat in the moon-driven sea. Hanging, swaying, pulsing, the most vulnerable and insubstantial creature, it has for its defense the violence and power of the whole ocean, to which it has entrusted its being, its going, and its will'.¹

This quote from Ursula Le Guin's 1971 novel *The Lathe of Heaven* features in artist Ross Little's film *The Heavy of Your Body Parts and the Cool Air of the Air Condition* (2017). Ross' practice draws together research, current thought and his own lived experiences whilst gathering footage. To make this film, he took part in a 'Digital Nomad' cruise and posed as a

nautical science student to gain access to ship breaker's yards in Alang, India. His methods are closely interwoven with - and often guided by - his films' subject matter, switching between a disjointed, dreamlike style (roaming through the cruise ship disco) and raw, cinematic scenes (a cargo ship, hull sawn off). The film investigates different forms of immaterial and material labour; drawing links between colonial histories, current touristic cultures and contemporary forms of work.

What follows is a conversation between myself and Ross about the film and his research; a discussion framed by the five living Moon Jellies in another work, *I hear a new world calling me*, that accompanied Ross' film when it was installed at Collective for his exhibition in 2017. Illuminated by coloured light, the jellyfish tank sat in a lobby with blue tinted windows, passed through by audiences en route to viewing the film. I was working with Collective as an Associate Producer and tasked with caring for the jellies.

T.A: In your film and the installation that accompanied it, this quote spoke to your filmmaking process as well as the presence of jellyfish. In turn the quote and the jellyfish speak more lyrically about some of the things that are represented literally in the film. How

¹ Ursula Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*, (New York: Avon Books, 1971), p.1

did you arrive at the decision to use real jellyfish alongside the film?

R.L: Whilst developing *The Heavy of...*, I was reading *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* by Rob Nixon. One area the book examines is the exploitation of the Global South by transnational corporations. Nixon describes it as a 'violence that occurs gradually and out of sight; a delayed destruction often dispersed across time and space.'² I found this to be a useful frame to think about the connections I had been making between the increase of immaterial labour in the global north and the ways in which the cruise and shipping industry rely upon the cheap labour and lax laws of the Global South. This led me to question how we measure violence - be it against communities or the climate - and how we understand it temporally and spatially.

Around the same time I kept coming across articles on the proliferation of jellyfish in the oceans and this being a rather curious effect of climate change. The more I read into them the more their behaviours seemed analogous to the entanglements of globalisation, as well as being a bellwether for climate change. It's like the

² Rob Nixon. *Slow violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) p.2

Turritopsis dohrnii jellyfish, with its ability to revert back to an earlier stage in its life cycle in response to adverse conditions, waiting until its environment is no longer toxic to it and then continuing to grow and mature. This resilience and adaptability to extreme conditions resonated with my wider research. I recently heard a Danish scientist developed a way to make crisps out of jellyfish, which seems like a fitting example of the versatility of the free-market in the face of climate change.

T.A: Jellyfish have all this destructive potential yet most species of jellyfish have no brain or central nervous system, no ability to control the direction of their own movement, other than to go up or down. Their brainlessness and otherworldliness makes them difficult to comprehend. Irrepressible, emotionlessly damaging and with a logic that seeks only to colonise, the spread of jellyfish blooms at the expense of other marine life seems at once a product of, and analogous to, global capitalism.

The difficulty we have comprehending the experience of a jellyfish, even when we can see one in front of us and the kind of blankness they have because of that felt somehow relevant to the way they were being used analogically in your work.

R.L: That difficulty felt similar to the feeling when one tries to visualise or comprehend the vast messy networks of global trade and movement. This brings me back to the Ursula Le Guin quote. I liked the way it gave this feeling of being unanchored and at the mercy of a force beyond your control, yet at the same time this very force somehow guided you or enabled you to go on. I read *The Lathe of Heaven* around half-way through the process of making the film and it seemed to guide the work in several ways, some more explicit than others. Conversations onboard the cruise ship were often very aspirational and reality often felt disjointed, I think being in the middle of the Atlantic might do this to you. The first half of the film is supposed to feel somewhat dreamlike and then there is a kind of slip or rupture of this dream into the parallel world of the second half.

The phenomenon of jellyfish being caught up in the ballasts of ships plying the global trade routes and transported to non-native waters also appealed to me. This deterritorialisation echoed in contradistinction to the digital nomad's privileged "citizen of the world" perspective. Jellyfishes' ancient history and their recent global spread and success also reminded me of Donna Haraway's ideas on human exceptionalism. The fact is that we are merely a blip on the universal timeline and

probably will be outlived by many of the other species on this planet.

It was partly these associations that made me decide to include live jellyfish in the exhibition. I was also aesthetically drawn to the jellyfish and their custom made aquarium. The tank design resides in that strange space between new age and corporate life/work-styles, something that I had experienced onboard the cruise ship, where meditation, mindfulness, yoga etc. become a means to being more productive and efficient.

T.A: A fishing net heaving with jellies makes visible the messy material reality in a similar way to the Alang breakers' yards that feature in that second part of the film, the rupture from dream to waking nightmare. Here, huge vessels, cargo ships and cruise liners alike, arrive at the end of their lives, are broken down in a decomposition-like process, dispersed and then recirculated. Terrific masses of stuff constantly being created, piling up. What are we going to do with this gelatinous mass, these miles and miles of rusting propellers, lifeboats, mattresses? It is what is beneath the surface of the gleaming, somewhat abstract world of the 'digital nomad'. I find that comment about what 'being in the middle of the Atlantic' does to you quite thought provoking. At the same time as speaking about your personal experience of what was a very involved filmmaking process, it

made me think of the presence the open ocean has in your film.

The digital nomads on the cruise (and you) are crossing a territory that is also traversed by so much of the 'stuff' that we eventually encounter in our daily, land-bound lives; the conditions you mention in reference to Rob Nixon's book mean the majority of consumer goods we can purchase here will have crossed an ocean. When we visited Rotterdam with Collective, we went on a boat tour of the container port there, which is the biggest in Europe but quite small compared to some of the ports in China, for instance. Even so, the scale of the place and the size of the container ships was immense. One took a full five minutes for our tour boat to cruise past, and its scale made me think of how this most physical aspect of the global economy is invisible to most of us in the North, hidden in the vastness of the open ocean with no land in sight. We only hear about this system when it goes wrong; when cargo falls overboard in storms and washes up on beaches or when a ship becomes stateless and is stranded at sea. It's maybe worth mentioning alongside the yoga and meditation practices adopted by the digital nomads that the ocean is often used as byword for calm and tranquility. Pictures of ocean sunsets make good backdrops for inspirational quotes. There's privilege in

being able to think of the ocean in this abstract way.

R.L: The experience of being on the open ocean for nine days was both one of being unbound yet at the same time highly restricted. The cruise ship is a site of extreme control in every aspect, both for the crew and passengers. Every morning we would receive a daily program under the door of our cabins. If you wanted you could have your whole day planned out for you, going from a pilates class to a presentation called Cellulite FACT vs. SOLUTION or A PERFECT SMILE IS POSSIBLE! and then on to a cupcake decorating workshop. Even without these activities your autonomy is somewhat diminished, you quickly develop a routine and tend to frequent certain places, routes and even conversations.

The crew on the other hand had those tired eyes and aching smiles and always had to be 'on form'. I've heard that crew members are contractually obliged not to speak beyond their work capacities, hiding any aspects of their land-based lives and performing as the cruise company wishes. Everything had an exteriority to it that was unstable and waiting to be broken. There were many moments when these smooth shimmering surfaces started to deteriorate - the lights in the grand, central atrium flickered and the tacky carpets

underfoot, the sun-faded aspirational stock images that lined the hallways, the poolside sunbathers overwhelmed by sea sickness. For me this feeling of something lurking beneath translates to our relationship to global trade; the ease in which we can ignore where a commodity comes from and ends up; the neocolonial nature of some forms of tourism. Alang is just one point for those commodities on a continuing cycle - they are a physical manifestation of trickle-down economics. This masking of unsavoury truths is done on a micro and macro level - be it through the affective interior design of a cruise ship or office, or be it through making the inner machinations of the global trade (from the perspective of the global north) appear so seamless and without obvious human cost.

T.A: There might be huge drifting masses of jellyfish present but hidden beneath the surface of the waves in any ocean sunset scene. That feeling of something lurking beneath describes well the various underlying - present but often unspoken - truths that the film draws on, including the likelihood that the human species will be outlived by things like jellyfish. No matter how many jellyfish crisps we eat... I can imagine jellyfish crisps looking a bit like communion wafers, the ghostly embodiment of the future of the ocean, reminiscent of Le Guin's jellyfish drying out in the sun. I want to

end on this quote, which also features in the film, because it seems to encapsulate the fragility and precarity of our relationship with the environment that is tangible in *The Heavy of...* as well its feeling of dreaming and being woken:

*What will the creature made all of
seadrift do on the dry sand of daylight;
what will the mind do, each morning,
waking?³*

Originally published in Jackalope, Issue no 1, 2018.
thisisjackalope.org

³ Le Guin, *ibid.*