

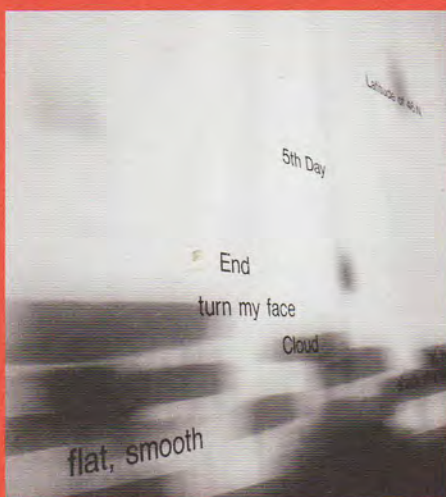
# Laputa: A Construction

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In Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels*, the flying island of Laputa patrols its little empire, making sure that order prevails in the subservient territories below. Powered by an adjustable lodestone – the book is, after all, a work of eighteenth century science fiction as much as political satire – the island is seen first by its looming shadow, and then by its vast undercroft hovering overhead. If the shadowed lands beneath have aroused Laputa's ire, the floating island will stay motionless, crushing the people's spirits and depriving their crops of rain and sunshine. If this aerial siege fails to extract a suitable response from the citizens below, Laputa will descend and crush them.

The trajectory of Mark Dorrian and Adrian Hawker's construction *Laputa* is more modest than that of Swift's floating island, but its implications are no less severe. Created by the pair (collectively known as 'metis') in their lair at the University of Edinburgh's Department of Architecture, *Laputa* was subsequently deployed in the Lighthouse's Review Gallery in Glasgow, and is currently installed in GallerA1 in Leith.

Whereas Swift's *Laputa* is a monolith of mythically hard black adamant, Dorrian and Hawker's is an altogether more fragile contraption. An irregular timber raft sits on props, forming an armature above which are attached baked clay shards, fragments of a shattered crust. A cloud or sea of calico is suspended below this, balanced by carefully weighted threads that pass over a measuring grid at ceiling level. Within this floating assembly of interlocking strata, various elements point directly at, align with, gesture towards, or cast shadows onto, fragments of Swift's text painted on the wall.



This assembly, barely contained by the drawing room in which it currently stands, could be seen as an imaginative reconstruction – a model, complete with a scaled grid – of Swift's island. But metis' *Laputa* (like Daniel Libeskind's *Micromegas* drawings) is no illustration of a text. It is a thing-in-itself, powerfully and materially present, but also conscious of itself, calibrating its various parts against the text from which it derives, and suggesting rich material stratifications and spatial strategies beyond itself. It is a kind of architectural instrument. Think of a violin – a similarly fragile and improbable configuration of a few materials (wood, cat gut, resin and horse hair) – which has the capacity to speak many messages.

Two factors in this work of particular interest, and cast a salutary shadow over the practise of architecture. The first is *Laputa*'s exactly constructed physicality. It is an extremely hard-won piece of work, not crafted for the sake of craftsmanship, but because the making of it matters. We have recently come into technologies that make us incurious and forgetful. By pressing a few buttons, we can generate images of complex surfaces, rendered in moist pornographic perfection, and call them architecture. *Laputa* casts a menacing shadow over such delusions. The second is *Laputa*'s sensitivity to cultural stimuli and the question of representation. This sensibility is found in metis' earlier projects, documented in their monograph *Urban Cartographies*. In these works, the promptings of a site or of a question yield multiple traces which are sedimented and mined in the creation of a new project. Such traces can be historical, cultural, explicit, or latent. Metis, even in a 'small' project such as *Laputa*, operates in a big world, with large critical horizons. *Laputa* casts its shadow over those who see the production of architecture as a simple task.