***‘The Queer materiality of the Archive: ‘back to where we have not quite been’* :**

**a talk by Dr Ben Cranfield given at ‘Matter and Meaning: Materiality and the Visual Arts Archive’, *University of Brighton, September 2016***

There are few relationships more fickle than the one between contemporary art and the archive. Contemporary art, its practice, discourse and institutions seem to be at once in love with the archive’s often mentioned ‘richness’ whilst antagonistic towards its categorical imperatives. Although it may have become commonplace to talk of the archive within contemporary art, the discourse seems to be rather one-sided – many art practices use the archive, critique it and deconstruct it, but what do such practices give back to the archive?

I want to suggest that it is the possibility of another type of matter and, with it, another way of mattering that is brought into focus by the double lens of art and archive. To explore this I will think through the work of artist ‘collective’, Fourthland, whose work, I will argue, brings a particular materialisation to the concept of the archive. Despite the explicit material presence of Fourthland’s work, I wish to argue that such practice helps think through the archive as a site of ephemeral and emergent potential.

Last year I put a call out to artists to work on a project with me titled ‘The Fugitive Fragment’. The title made reference to Hal Foster’s now canonical article ‘An Archival Impulse’ in which he describes contemporary art practices exhibiting such an impulse as being ‘fragmentary rather than fungible’. This tendency to understand the archive as prison house and, at the same time, the archival item or fragment as possessing an almost criminally subversive quality, once released from its binding fonds, is what characterises, for Foster, the works he bracketed in 2004 as ‘archival’. The archival impulse, as it attempts to avoid capture both by tradition and the market, is unbounded and yet specific, not determined by pre-existing institutional agendas/structures, but, also, not released onto the open market, to be endlessly re-collaged into new post-modern consumables.

Of the responses I received to my call, one interested me in particular – it was from the artist ‘collective’ Fourthland. What intrigued me was that unlike other artists who had responded, their work seemed not be engaged with archival research, the use of documents, found material from the internet or the formal analogue signifiers of archives (files, papers, black and white photographs), nor was the work about collecting per se. From what I could understand from their website, their work seemed to be largely performance-based, perhaps what might be termed socially-engaged, in that they worked with groups and communities in and out of the gallery in workshops and through co-created performances. What was the archival impulse within their practice and where was the archival fragment – fugitive or otherwise?

When I met with Fourthland for the first time, they placed in front of me a bundle of rough hessian cloth tied with course twine. As we talked, they invited me to open the bundle. The bundle contained two objects – a wooden stick, with long strip of crinkled waxed paper loosely rolled around it and a conical ring, like a braclet, covered in wax and displaying signs of having been well-handled. As they explained more about their practices of story-sharing, collective production and their interest in the re-appropriation of words, we instinctively handled the objects. However, these hadn’t been made for our encounter. Indeed, as they explained, the bracelet had been made from old free newspapers collected on the tube, then pulped and reformed – this had become a ‘mouth’ used by workshop participants like a conch to facilitate discussion, whilst the blank waxed scroll had been used to facilitate thinking and sharing, to mark time as it was unrolled and re-rolled during conversation.

Our next exchange took the form of my participation within a listening workshop, as a part of their project at PEER Gallery ‘Everything Happens in the Street.’ Here, again, I encountered objects that seemed to have been fashioned for other purposes at other times. The display appeared to me like a museum of lost process. This time I gathered with a small group and collectively carried bundles that lay on the gallery floor into a side room and proceeded to untie them, releasing more items that suggested practices, methods and making, but did not give up fully their histories or uses.

Having handled the objects we now experienced their materiality in a different way – lying with our eyes closed, we were asked to listen, as all around us materials rustled, distorted voices came to us through horns and footsteps merged with sounds familiar and yet not quite placeable. We were asked to remain with our eyes closed until we heard the ring of a bell, at which point we could open our eyes and in our own time gather in a circle. Once we were in a circle we were invited to share about our thoughts about what had just happened. Slowly at first, but then with a steady flow, conversation emerged – reflections, from intimate memories of childhood, to thoughts about the political possibilities for spaces of collective experiencing. Throughout the conversation, members of the group reached for the objects that now lay strewn around us, sometimes explicitly addressing them (a nest, for example, came to symbolize the thoughts of home one woman had had during the listening exercise), whilst others seemed to use the objects to measure their thoughts and speech. After two hours we parted ways taking with us this strange slice of time.

Following the workshop, I wrote some loose reflections on my experience and sent them to Fourthland. When I next met with Fourthland they handed me an envelope tied with twine. It contained a CD and playing it I was surrounded by the sound of many voices, in chorus. As I tuned in to the words being sung, I realized that they were my words, they were the words that I had sent to Fourthland. But these were not quite the words that I had written, some were repeated, others were missing. As they came back to me they felt different – now imbued with another sense of meaning and another material quality - a sonorous layering that was not my own.

The choral piece had been created by Fourthland giving my text to a group of singers who then used my words within a wider performance. Now, phrases that I had thought of in a particular context, as passing words recording a passing experience, came back to me with a renewed substance and significance. One of these phrases, taking on a life of its own, resonated through the song ‘back to where we have not quite been’. Yes, these were my words, but now they belonged to a collective space, with another resonance. It was not quite that these words had been appropriated, rather they had been reinvested with meaning through different moments of materialisation. What was revealed to me, as I heard these words given back to me, was that they had never really been mine anyway. After-all, they had only been my materalisation of a shared and co-created experience in the first place. But neither did they quite belong to Fourthland, after all, the objects that sounded in that space to which I responded, had been created through so many exchanges and interchanges, and the sounds themselves had required listeners to hear and respond – to re-materialise individual experiences of the sounds into a collective speech-act.

One could understand these fragments – whether objects used in performances, or words passed-on – as fugitive. They certainly seem to trouble any attempt to fix a relationship between event and trace – history and archive. But I think this is where the similarity between Fourthland’s work and the practices that Foster identifies ends. Whereas the works of the ‘archival impulse’ seem to parody and festishise in equal measure the quasi-historical process of recovering lost narratives, memorializing the passing of time, or resurrecting utopian projects, the fragments that Fourthland bring to fruition require an entirely different understanding of temporality. This reordering of time I believe can be understood through a consideration of the archival within their practice.

Like many artists and organisations, Fourthland’s website has an archive section – this section represents the long-tail of the website as a series of current projects, now-consigned to the artists’ history. These, necessarily, take the form of accepted notions of practice – projects, events and exhibitions. This is the post-bureaucratic archive – no longer holding the organizational material necessary to bring a project to fruition (which will more than likely be contained within an artists’ email archive) but a more self-consciously promotional archive of evidence that documents and fixes the ephemeral project as historical object.

However, this is not the only ‘archive’ on Fourthland’s website. Titled ‘documents/physical archive’, this other archive contains images of a diversity of objects and materials. The description of the section says: “Our physical archive; a collection of sculptural props, objects, paintings, video, text, sound and photographs.” The breadth of this description is not in and of itself at odds with more traditional archives but, the preponderance of objects that are not text or image-based does seem to suggest a non-traditional understanding of archive. Indeed, the very diversity of materials may lead us to ask - what from their practice is not in the archive? Here the outcomes of an art process and the incidental markers of that process seem to blur and become indistinguishable. Reflecting on my own experience of seeing Fourthland’s ‘archive’ of items in action, these objects seem to be predominantly facilitators of a process, catalysts to performance and discussion. In this sense, it may be easiest to understand the use of the designation archive here as ‘things that have been used as part of our practice’ – a kind of storeroom of props. But whilst this may account for the material and tool like nature of many of the items and certainly seems to describe the agency of the items within Fourthland’s workshops, it fails to comprehend these objects as documents and the productive ambiguity opened up by the slash between document/physical archive.

This ambiguity can be grasped by apprehending the difference between the project archive and the document/physical archive. Whilst the former renders the process of documentation invisible, as documentation and, therefore, promises to be a transparent record of what has been, in the document/physical archive, the idea of document takes on a very different meaning. It is not that these are material objects *and* documents of a past process, but that they are objects *because* they are documents; because material can only embody its process of coming to fruition. *And* they are objects because they are documents; because anything that records a process is also a materialisation in the present. Yet, as material ‘actants’ iteratively deployed within networks of meaning-making, such as is the performance or workshop, their status as document – as material witness and site of meaning formation – is never complete. What Fourthland’s archive of props and prompts makes clear- is that a document, like language itself, not only exists as record of what has happened, but also as potential material for what is to come – it bears witness to the possibilities of the future. Just as the objects that Fourthland brought to me in a bundle came to document our conversation, whilst bringing with them material traces of past uses, and processes of making that constructed our conversation, so too, my words, given as a document of an experience, were re-sounded and re-materialized to document new events and thus realize a potential within their materiality that was only latent in their original function and meaning.

I would argue that the project archive (like all past project sections of websites or CVs) belongs squarely to what Raymond Williams would call the dominant culture – the culture of professionalization and publicity. Here the archive (the photograph of a performance, or a degree certificate proving a qualification), evidences what is value – what has capital. The document only matters as witness and, thus, is denied a matter and mattering of its own.

If this is so, then to what culture-time does the document/physical archive belong? As I have suggested, this archive works in reverse – rendering the ephemerality of the event in terms of so many material fragments – the proliferation of what matters and times of mattering. The specific materiality of Fourthland’s ‘props’ appear to be not quite of this time, certainly not the dominant culture of the contemporary, enthralled to technological neologism. Perhaps we might describe these as belonging to what Williams called the residual. Indeed, Fourthland frequently employ processes that belong to a different material, social context to the contemporary-urban one that they inhabit – processes of weaving, skinning, tanning, all recall the residual. Crucially, for Williams the residual is not that which has passed, but forms and processes that are with us but were developed from earlier material relations. However, the objects produced by Fourthland are not *just* the residue of outmoded processes, but are as much attempts to materialize yet-to-come relations that are grown within, from and in opposition to the dominant culture.

Fourthland’s objects may look like they belong to past-times, but their creation is necessitated by present circumstances and commissions that represent dominant agendas. For example, much of their work has occurred from commissions to work with residents of housing estates displaced by processes of ‘regeneration’. However, rather than attempting to smooth, realise or even critique the agendas that bring them to a particular site, Fourthland use the agendas itself as a site of collective gathering and materialization – bringing specifically designed objects and actions together with participants to allow something to emerge which exceeds the limits of the dominant culture. Indeed, the word emerge is important here, as the name for a formation that belongs neither quite to the present or the past, but is also not yet the stuff of the future. This could be said to occupy that notional territory that Williams describes as the emergent (the third part of his triadic cultural structure). The emergent is the coming together of what Williams termed a new ‘structure of feeling’ – an awareness that arrives with a cultural form – be it the industrial novel or the union meeting.

In fact, I think that these objects and actions that are held as ‘documents’ within Fourthland’s ‘archive’ inhabit a time-space that William’s triadic model doesn’t seem to explicitly allow for, but is offered by an equivocation within Williams’ theoretical apparatus. That is, the possibility for formations that are at once a part of the dominant culture, in is as much as a work exists as part of the imperatives of cultural policy, but at the same time operates as a gesture towards an emergent consciousness through a new collectivity of people and things, but one that relies on a repurposing of the residual, practices and materials that specifically perform against a received discourse of modernity.

In this way I think Fourthland’s archive takes Williams suggestion of the coexistence of temporal-material formations towards an even more radical reconceiving of time: what Bruno Latour, calls a ‘poly-temporality’. Latour writes:

“Such a temporality does not oblige us to use the labels ‘archaic’ or ‘advanced’, since every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times.”

Latour’s temporalities are not consecutive, but co-present as a complex network of temporalities as they exist within specific materialisations (such as genes that are 3 million years old, within a body that is fifty years old, with habits that are three days old). Much like Latour’s view of the social – as something which does not pre-exist or exist apart from the world of things, but emerges from the particular activation of networks - Latour’s con-temporality has no centre or margins, only constellations and extensions.

Whilst Latour’s conceptualization seems more complex and closer to lived reality than Williams’, and, crucially, means we do not have divide the world irrevocably into that which is of time and that which is out of time, that which is central and that which is marginal, I do not wish to completely ditch Williams’ political, cultural project. In as much as our present is only made out of the matter of past-presents and the future is only a potentiality contained within those materialities, the archive can be reconceived as a space for sorting out what matters – what temporalities and materialities are to be put together, mobilized, activated; which are more or less complicit within the power structures that we understand to be currently dominant. By bringing together the Latourian network with Williams’ structural unevenness we may be able to account for what on their own they cannot – that, on the one hand, nothing appears as wholly dominant, residual or emergent, but on the other, not all parts of the network seem to have an equal relationship with the present.

Thus, whilst all elements of our material reality may be rendered ephemeral, as shifting and mutable networks of materials and temporalities, the ephemeral, as a specific type of materiality, captured outside the main-frame of objective evaluation of what ‘matters’ impels different types of meaning-making that do promise a beyond to the limited horizon of an all-encompassing present. I believe this position is well-represented by queer theorist Jose Esteban Munoz when he writes “The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters. It matters to get lost in dance or to use dance to get lost: lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality.”

Munoz is here talking about the dance gestures of queer club performer Kevin Aviance, but I would argue that what Munoz is identifying is the potentiality that comes with getting lost in the materiality of the ephemeral such is found in all archives, formal or otherwise. Munoz’s project was to weave promiscuously the traces of practices that belong to a imagined archive of queer becoming in order to recognize that a utopia of non-normative anti-categorical being is not only anticipatory or critical, but is also concrete and ‘then and there’ (rendered as gestures in the archive), as found in the ephemerality of the trace and residue. An anecdote from a night of clubbing, the silvered reflection of one Andy Warhol’s balloons, the twist of a heel on a podium, the virtuosity of a drag artists messiness, the final leap of a dancer through an open window all come together for Munoz as documents of other forms of identification, that refuse dominant cultural understandings or meanings – whose value exists, to quote Munoz quoting Ernst Bloch, as ‘cultural surplus’. At the same time, these ephemeral gestures are absolutely networked and contingent – they are props and prompts to be acted with. Tellingly, Munoz, referring to the archive of gestures that one might call ‘camp’ quotes Raymond Williams by describing this as a ‘shared-aesthetic, a communal structure of feeling.’

Whilst Fourthland’s archive is not explicitly ‘queer’, in way that Munoz’s collection of traces might be, I do think that it performs a similar queer futurity, by eliding the straight-time of an explicitly (re)productive logic of historical narrative, through the production of an archive that whilst ‘then and there’, is also always in the process of becoming. It is this potential that I think such work offers back to the archive in its more conventional form. Before the archive, as item, structure, or process, is reduced to the evidentiary base for an historical narrative that obliterates the archive as a material presence, it can be worked with as so many gestures, so many documents of incompleteness, used to teach us about the false limits we have imposed on the horizon of our present.