PLYMOUTH COLLEGE of ART

Making Futures

‘Yet more re:words, reverberations and resistances’

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Butterflies and Books, Books and Butterflies
Paper, polyethylene
Reworked Paper Cups

My current art practice and research project seeks to uncover, connect with and hence deepen our connections with the material world; connections that are currently stretched and ruptured by the strictures of capitalism and neoliberal economics. This work takes the form of re-examining, reassessing and hence elevating certain forms of matter, which, when viewed within the current hierarchical value systems of materials would be seen to be pretty near the bottom. The materials I use in my practice have already passed through peoples' hands; they have been used fleetingly, are felt but not noticed, consigned to their 'post-use' phase before they are ready. They are not worn out or broken, but our relationship with them is. In trying to resolve uncertainties around the status of these materials I am also considering why these valuable resources (taking the view that all resources are valuable in some way) inherent in their making are deemed irrelevant enough to be considered 'waste'. I will draw on the diverse and somewhat confusing traditions of the theories of materialism and the developing ideas that are contributing to a contemporary concept of a 'new materialism'; a concept that is already being employed by certain authors and artists as a radical new way of challenging the status quo, of our being in the world, and to inform, to quote William Morris, 'how we live and how we might live.'[1] This writing by Morris is still relevant today as he had grave misgivings about how capitalism and the nascent industrialisation he saw around him were beginning to impact on the values he held dear, questioning where creativity, art, craft, beauty, fitted into this evolving early capitalist system:

That beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity . . .unless we are content to be less than men.(MacCarthy 2014: 12)

As the proliferation of goods and consumables has increased relentlessly since the mid-twentieth century, particularly in the wealthy and developed countries of the world, resulting in a scenario of hyper-consumption and intractable productivity, the writer Paul Voice, in describing the work of Hannah Arendt says, 'If no artefact is made to be permanent but rather made to be obsolete, to be used and consumed, then the very structure of the world, as Arendt understands it, is threatened.' (Voice 2014: 41)

The objects that I work with are indeed 'made to be obsolete', but, as they are made to be used only once, they have a rather shorter lifespan than Arendt had in mind, thus making this threat more immediate and more harmful.

The recuperative process of finding these materials, their subsequent altering and re-imagining is transformational for myself, as the artist/maker, and is instrumental in enabling the viewer, my audience, to be able to reconsider these materials when reinstated as art/craft objects, with a heightened sense of curiosity and engagement. What are they? Where have they come from? What do they do now? How has their function and meaning changed?

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in describing the perplexing question of what actually constitutes a waste material, states 'However hard one tries, the frontier separating the "useful product" from "waste" is a grey zone; a kingdom of undefinition, uncertainty, and danger.' (Bauman 2004: 28) That this is a perplexing place, an anxious and unsatisfying place, with no longevity or completion, is not in doubt. Greg Kennedy also sees the need for further investigation into the phenomenon of waste when he states 'Something extraordinary; despite its everydayness, is at work that demands interpretation and elucidation. (Kennedy 2007: xvi)

Thus in this questioning and examination of what constitutes waste, slipping and shifting between the lives of humans and the 'life' of matter, Bauman shows a recognition that there is a disputed, contested connection between the two. He sees a relationship between how we treat the material world and how we treat each other. This study of Bauman's is a prescient description of how 'human waste'- superfluous populations of migrants and refugees, is one of the inevitable outcomes of modernism. Bauman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Leeds University and despite retiring in 1990 he is still lecturing and writing. According to the writings of journalist Madeleine Bunting he is considered one of the most influential sociologists working in Europe, although he is not so well known in Britain, despite being Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Leeds University, where there is also a Bauman Institute.[2]

He has diverse, challenging yet accessible ideas around how we can make the world a better place and discusses in his work what counts as personal responsibility and what might be the future for liberal capitalism.

This inclusion of ideas around societal problems and the process of linking them to the search for and definitions of a new kind of materialism is also suggested by Samantha Frost's and Diana Coole's statement where they hope that 'new materialist scholarship testifies to a critical and non-dogmatic reengagement with political economy, where the nature of, and relationship between, the material details of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures is being explored afresh.' (Frost and Coole 2010: 7)
So what is this danger that Bauman has referred to? Might it be the uncomfortable truth that everything, as soon as it is made, finished, or seemingly complete, is on its way to obsolescence? How can we arrest this process, or do we want to? How does this affect our humanness, our compassion? Kennedy has also noticed a possible link between how we relate to material waste and how we relate to others when he says:

We must ask what it is about the being of commodities as such that they so readily turn to trash. At the same time, we must also ask what it is about ourselves that we so easily trash the increasing majority of beings that we encounter in the world. (Kennedy 2007: xvi)

How can these ideas affect our current attitudes and responsibilities? After all our society is convinced that perpetual economic growth and increased productivity is the only measure of economic success. That there are alternatives to this viewpoint becomes evident in the work of economist Tim Jackson. He describes ways to re-view prosperity not just in monetary terms but with different meanings and relationships, and how value can be placed on the future.[3]

So how does the way in which we treat certain materials impact on our lives as dutiful citizens in a postmodern world? How does our relationship to matter impact on our own mortality? The twentieth century philosopher Hannah Arendt described the consequences of throw-away consumables as being threatening to and a kind of 'eating away' at the world, when she said: 'The endlessness of the labouring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption.'(Arendt 1959: 125)

It is easier to view the concept of waste as a topical environmental problem, a problem that just needs the seemingly appropriate technological solution, such as recycling or incineration. If we can somehow 'get rid' of these materials surely the problem is solved. However in a world of diminishing and finite resources and faced with a situation where first world waste technologies still impact on third world ecologies, alternative approaches are needed, a more thorough questioning of why we are still convinced that perpetual economic growth is the only measure of economic success.[5]

John Scanlan suggests that there are more important issues than first realised when he asks whether we should 'see this habit of separating the valuable from the worthless within a whole tradition of Western ways of thinking about the world.' (Scanlan 2005: 8) Hence this problem can be situated in a wider metaphysical framework that encompasses the 'new vitalism' of Jane Bennett, as well as forms of materialism emerging across the social sciences and humanities.

Bauman employs geographical terminology to describe what waste is and what it is not, calling this division 'a borderline,' and insisting it is one which must be properly policed, needing 'immigration officers and quality controllers.' He is also well aware, as I have been made aware through my practice, of the difficulty of defining what waste actually is, who decides, where is the line drawn?

He declares that rubbish collectors are the 'unsung heroes of modernity', as they 'refresh and make salient again the borderline between normality and pathology', between 'the desirable and the repulsive', (Bauman 2004: 28)

He asserts that the main danger to this borderline, which must be upheld at all costs, is ambivalence, an ambivalence that cannot be tolerated. 'All boundaries beget ambivalence, but this one is exceptionally fertile', (ibid) and it is this fertility, this uncertainty, this intolerance, that I am exploiting in my practice. I am investigating this border, pushing at it, straining it, wanting to break it down. I am exemplifying this boundary by, having broken through it, re-imagining what might be on the other side; altering perceptions of what the matter of waste actually consists of and in a contradictory act revitalising, reanimating this matter to stretch it to its limits of what it might become, giving it a new life; in the process altering perceptions of its place in the world.

Hence these materials that I find, single use products; 'paper' coffee cups, crisp packets made from unrecyclable aluminium and plastic, are found, picked up and rescued. They are 'res derelicta,' things in a strange state of non-ownership. Their trajectory has changed by being in use for a few minutes, now they are seemingly despoiled, unclean, no longer hygienic. Having traces of other human's bacteria renders them undesirable and relegates them to the status of 'waste'. I recognise these as a valuable source of material that I can use in my artwork; they pose no threat when recognised as such. I do not describe them as 'rubbish' or 'litter' or 'garbage' or 'trash'. These words, when described as a verb, as an action, imply a violent relationality, implying a lack of compassion and thoughtfulness. To Kennedy this signifies 'a mode of comportment, treating things without care, negatively, and destructively.' (Kennedy 2007: xvi)

Jane Bennett is an American political theorist and professor at the department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. Her body of work includes writings on Thoreau and nature; she laments the need for a clearer definition of the ontology of matter when she asks, in the introduction to her 2010 book Vibrant Matter A Political Ecology of Things, 'Why is there not a more robust debate between contending philosophies of materiality or between contending accounts of how materiality matters to politics?' (Bennett 2010: xvi)

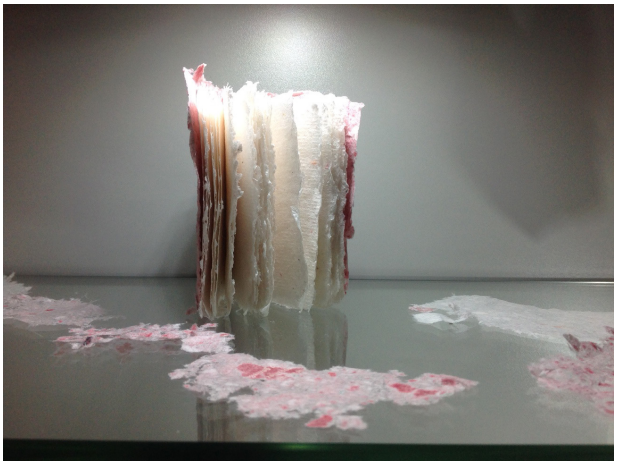
Politics in this sense is not the politics of power but the politics of ideas; more powerful, some might say. The phrase 'political ecology' is an interesting way to describe this field, meaning the study of the relationships between political, economic and social factors and how these relationships impact on ecology.

She uses the term 'thing- power' to describe a desired elevation in our relationship with and viewing of inert matter, of things. In her book she is examining 'the extent to which human being and thing-hood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other'. (Bennett 2010: 4) One of the outcomes of this is a revealing of a 'complicated web of dissonant connections.'(ibid) Bennett intimates that we need to pay more attention to the material world and in seeking to explore an updating of 'vitalism' she seeks a re-enchantment with the modern world, a form of 'enchanted materialism'. She describes an early morning experience of catching sight of some things caught in a storm drain; not very attractive things; a dead rat, an old work glove, a mat of oak pollen, a white plastic bottle cap and a smooth wooden stick. She was suddenly struck by the 'energetic vitality inside each of these things.' (Bennett 2010: 5) This feeling was so strong that she felt a sense of them 'having the ability to make things happen, to produce effects.'(ibid) They 'shimmied back and forth between debris and thing,' (Bennett 2010: 4) - one moment seen as trash to be ignored, and the next being accepted as things in their own right - 'as existents in excess of their association with human meaning.' (ibid) Thus her description of the boundary between what constitutes waste and what does not, what deserves a second look and what does not, wavers and shifts but she welcomes this revelation as it seemingly gives her a new and simpler way to look at the world, a Thoreauvian aspiration, 'to be surprised by what we see'. (Bennett 2010: 5)

I also notice the abandoned and the overlooked; in these materials I see the stuff of my practice. This is not searched for, but presents itself to me full of potential and possibilities – shiny colourful crisp packets left in the grass, used 'disposable' paper coffee cups - receptacles of paper waiting to be exhumed. My curiosity is piqued by these seemingly unimpressive objects; how did they come to be here?

I am impressed by their potentiality and amazed at their availability, at the same time wondering at the capriciousness of human nature to discard these materials in this way. I feel compelled to take this stuff home with me whereas Jane Bennett left hers where it was. She is struck by the intensity of her initial relationship with these things, struck by the fact that they are not passive and have an ability, in that situation and in that setting, to seem animate, to speak to her, possessing a 'vitalism' unnoticed before. Another effect of Bennett interacting with these articles gives rise to her thinking that the sheer volume of stuff produced to satisfy American consumerism leads to a kind of 'antimateriality'. There is so much stuff you do not notice it any more, this gets in the way of forming relationships with it or noticing its intrinsic qualities. Similarly the ubiquity and sheer volume of common 'waste' materials can prevent us from wanting to engage with it in any form for longer than is absolutely necessary.

The image of my work at the beginning of the paper is entitled: Butterflies and Books, Books and Butterflies. It is an installation in a glass case in a corridor at the Royal United Hospital in Bath. It is part of Wildscreen's photography conservation exhibition called FRAGILE; this exhibition of photographs depicts the detrimental impact that man is having on the natural world, particularly on certain animals. My piece of work consists of three pairs of paper cups; each of the three shelves has a pair of cups displayed; each pair is identical and one of each pair has been deconstructed and remade, in the first instance to demonstrate just how much material is inherent in each cup.



I remake the paper from the cups into various forms. In order to make I first have to unmake - one red cup of a pair has been made into a small book with a red cover and is called, not surprisingly, Little Red Book. The other cup has been left intact. The book has twenty five double pages, making fifty pages in total and is displayed alongside the inner polyethylene liner which all these so-called paper cups have inside them to ensure their water-tightness. Other similar books in this series have been called Books of Lost Knowledge - this title refers to our current inability to live in a sustainable way and references pre-industrial times. These cups cannot be recycled nor are they compostable due to their composite construction (as stated they have a plastic liner) and so have to go through a 'mixed waste' waste stream. I have left the pages blank - they are vacant, void, empty, free of text but not of meaning. Does this signify a loss of knowledge or is it a potent unspoiled place, as the earth once was, unblemished, waiting for someone else to make a mark, to leave their trace, just as the person who used the cup left their fingerprints, their DNA somewhere within it. If books are repositories of knowledge, what is the nature of the knowledge we will need to sustain us through the coming difficulties? Will we need more of the practical material knowledges that art and making can give us and the problem solving aspects that are an inherent part of creativity? At the same time what can we learn from redrawing the boundaries of the materials used and redefining the limitations, if that is what they are, of waste? For at the present time we are treating the world as if it is disposable.

In order to make I first have to unmake, a preliminary process of acquainting myself with these materials, exploring, getting to know them in a physical, almost personal, way. It is important to me that this practice is as low impact as possible, using little energy, and adding no other chemicals, colouring materials or other matter. These creative constraints are embedded into the practice and throw up challenges which create an aesthetic of purity or minimalism. In making this work I soften the cups with water and then tease away at the paper, gently pulling it away from the plasticised liner.

I add more water in order to make a pulp from the layers of paper. This is a slow process that cannot be hurried; it depends on the amount of water absorbed and the amount peeled away; a balance between the two actions, wetting and waiting for the paper to be 'ready' to be pared away. A gradual reduction in the materiality of the cup results in a paper infused liquid which I then liquidise. This continues until I have the right consistency for making 'new' paper. I test the 'density' of the liquid and the suspension of the fibres with my hands, ensuring it is the correct viscosity for my needs.

The forms that I make in this way are not fixed, they do not have to be permanent as the paper can be rematerialized into a pulp again by adding water and agitating the fibres. Can this process of the possible remaking and re-imagining of the paper fibres make me more aware of the impermanence of the material world? Does this work enable me to see these materials as a process, albeit on a macro level, constantly changing instead of being fixed and inert? As stated this process is one that can be repeated after more paper has been made and dried; adding more water will cause the paper fibres to disassociate themselves from each other and become free and are then able to be made into a different form, a continuing process of forming and reforming.

Bauman is well known for using the term 'liquid modernity' to describe recent changes in society and has written a book with the same name. He uses this term to describe a fluid and unfixed society, where identity is uncertain and where accepted traditions and beliefs are constantly being altered and superceded, resulting in unprecedented anxiety and insecurity.

He describes the physical properties of liquid using an unusual awareness of the materiality of these words, they are words of becoming, of changing, of having the capacity to alter and affect. This coincides to an extent with the thinking of Frost and Coole that 'matter becomes' - it is not static but is in a constant process of 'forming and reforming in unexpected ways.'(Frost and Coole 2010: 8) rather than being static and inert. Bauman emphasises the intrinsic material agentic qualities of this 'liquidness'; it has the ability to move and to alter, affect other forms and objects in its mobility, in its 'lightness' and hence ease of movement.

So in using these words to describe the material properties of liquid to chart the changes in society, this is a very different approach from the more prosaic methods used by traditional politicians and economists.

One aspect of this societal 'liquidity', is that, as he puts it 'whatever happens in one place has a bearing on how people in all other places live, hope or expect to live'. (Bauman 2007: 6) This concept is echoed by Frost and Coole when they say,

The enormous macroscopic impact of myriad mundane individual actions provokes critical, political, and legal reflection not only upon the nature of causation but also upon the nature of the responsibilities that individuals and governments have for the health of the planet. (Frost and Coole 2010: 16)

Meanwhile, Jane Bennett, describing herself as a 'word worker', laments the fact that in attempting to describe and define her ideas 'linguistic means prove inadequate to the task.' (Bennett 2010: 4) She states that she wishes there were more poetic and artistic ways to discuss these ideas. So how can creativity, making, craft, art, be of use in defining new fields of political ecology? How can I bring the artefacts I work with back into the realm of 'human meanings', with a meaning of being more than a recycled or upcycled artefact or object or thing? Implicit in this interrogation of matter in my work is an awareness of where these materials have come from before they found themselves in my hands. What was their impact before they came into my 'possession'? As with our food we seem to be becoming aware that it is a responsibility to know what we are eating and how it has affected the biosphere. What is stopping us from doing the same with other objects and materials? Is it because food is ingested and seems in a way closer to us?

To return to the installation of work in the glass case - I find that from a small paper cup I can make forty two butterflies (as above) and from a medium sized cup from a certain American coffee chain there is enough fibre to produce ninety nine butterflies. I initially made the butterflies in an attempt to link this work back to the natural world, I was aware that people were so distanced or in a way 'alienated' from the material in these objects that they were missing the intention of the work. After all this kind of paper has been sourced from trees; it was once an organic, growing material, but is not recognised as such. In Eastern cultures the butterfly symbolises metamorphosis and transformation hence it seemed a fitting form to transform the paper into. People seem to identify with them, perhaps feeling closer to a butterfly than a tree. The 'butterfly effect' is a phenomenon of weather patterns, where it is thought possible that the disturbance created by the flutter of a butterfly's wings can cause a hurricane on the other side of the planet. 6 Is this another example of small actions having wider ramifications in ways that are hard to imagine?

This investigation into the definition and meanings of materialism and materiality is not straightforward. The philosophical traditions and definitions of materialism have a long, diverse and contested history. Timothy Morton describes an antagonism between "high" philosophy and "vulgar" materialism. (Morton 2010)

If we consider the legacy of what Andrew Simms and Ruth Potts calls the 'old materialism', in their pamphlet entitled The New Materialism, they describe it thus -'Like an abusive relationship with the real world, materialism has become synonymous with consumerism – wasteful, debt fuelled and ultimately unsatisfying.' (Simms and Potts 2014: 1) They propose a new relationship with our material goods; one of keeping, valuing, sharing, making, mending, repairing. They talk of 'reclaiming' the material world, recognising the similarity between different forms of matter and quoting Spinoza in order to further define this relationship;

'It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing; it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us' Baruch Spinoza, Short Treatise II (Sims and Potts 2014: 11)
Is 'reclaiming' too strong a word to use in this sense? This implies humans have the upper hand, so to speak, the power, to alter the world at their discretion. Should we not be seeking more of a re-alignment or a renegotiation with the nature of matter, of not only seemingly inert matter but other manifestations of the world different to ourselves, and only understood or mis-understood through self-referential human constructs?

Spinoza also had views on the nature of matter, as did Roman and Greek philosophers before him describing 'matter in motion' which is an interesting parallel with more recent developments in quantum physics, where scientists are viewing and describing matter as 'vibrating strands of energy.'(Frost and Coole: 12). A recent newspaper article described the latest discoveries in the field of quantum mechanics, which is the branch of physics that examines what goes on inside atoms, describing how this examination teaches you that everything you think you know about the material world is not correct. The journalist John Naughton states 'Quantum mechanics…is not for the fainthearted, not least because it teaches you that everything you know about the physical, tactile world is wrong.'[7]

So if, as already mentioned, we accept that matter is more like a process, this idea is taken up and elucidated further by Frost and Coole. In the introduction to their book they discuss how, in reassessing or reconceiving matter as 'possessing its own modes of…self-organisation,' (Frost and Coole: 10) and this can result in a disconcerting feeling for humans of not being in control, of not being the main agents. If matter becomes rather than is, this concept also questions the ethics of human behaviour – whether they, or we, 'have the right or ability to master nature.'(ibid) Thus there is an implicit 'relocation' of the human within these ideas, a de-centring of the human, if you like.

The American political theorist William E Connolly in his 2013 work The Fragility of Things describes the predominance of neoliberal politics and the stresses that market driven economics places on the natural systems we depend on to survive. In his view human activities are a series of interacting systems of self-organisation that makes life more fragile than it needs to be. He states 'We inhabit a time when things have become more fragile and urgently in need of delicate tending. At the same time, a large section of the populace is belligerently opposed to recognition of this condition.'[8]

So what form can resistance take? How can we resist in a capitalist culture in which we are so deeply embedded – is it even possible to withdraw completely?
Or can resistance be found in challenging the knowledge of the 'old materialism' and embracing forms of 'new materialism'? The work I produce has no price on it, it is not seen as an economic transaction, it is not 'for sale', being seen as an exploration of not only the physical materials used but also of the theories of materiality that have become apparent during this exploration.
To quote Glenn Adamson, in discussing the ambivalent status of craft he optimistically says:

'Conceived as a "problem", the idea of craft has fuelled all manner of artistic and social changes in the past, and it will continue to do in the future.' (Adamson 2007: 5)

I will leave the last words to Timothy Morton,

'Studying art is important, because art sometimes gives voice to what is unspeakable elsewhere, either temporarily – one day we will find the words- or intrinsically – words are impossible.' (Morton 2010: 12)

Grace's Foot – Entanglement
Plastic, aluminium, thread
Reworked Crisp Packets

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