Aleatory encounters: a rumination on trash and new materialist ontologies

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**Aleatory Encounters: A Rumination on Trash and New Materialist Ontologies**

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*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle. Jane Bennett¹

I share with TRES a long history of interest and cultural connections with urban detritus, with the discarded stuff of everyday life that has been cast aside: dumped, forgotten, forlorn objects. Some of my own projects have aimed to highlight the political economies of waste produced and sustained by global capitalism but I am also open to the magical and talismanic qualities and disruptive properties of things. For me, Jane Bennett’s comments on the vibrancy of stuff and ‘thing power’ have a peculiar resonance with the recent and current projects of TRES. Inanimate objects have affective properties, they can disrupt our everyday sensibilities, perhaps their ‘thing-power’ can undermine rationality and overwhelm scientific understanding. Briefly, besides acknowledging social and cultural histories of trash, this rumination tentatively seeks to explore aleatory and disruptive encounters with urban trash and their entangled narratives.

To track back a little into my own biography, I should point out that, for a spell in the 1930s, my grandfather was a ‘rag and bone’ man in the industrial steel-city of Sheffield in the North of England. Of course, for Walter Benjamin, as for Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth century rag-picker – the *chiffonier* – was a peripheral but symbolic figure of modernity², living on the margins of the city, scavenging debris for valuable fragments. The *chiffonier* was part of the urban palimpsest, the collaged city. In nineteenth-century London, the ‘dust-heaps’ such as the great Marylebone

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Dust-heap, provided a lucrative living for a whole range of scavengers and dustmen. ³ Today, the chiffonier is ubiquitous: the twenty-first century global megalopolis, and its satellite landfill sites, is inhabited by foragers, tip-dwellers, dumpster-divers and rag-pickers. Global capitalism thrives on excess production and waste – the wealthy’s detritus keeps capitalism in business and trash still provides a paltry living for the poor.

When I was young, my father used to tell me stories about going around the city streets with the ‘rag and bone’ horse and cart, calling out ‘any old iron’ – the familiar call which would bring children running from the backyards with stuff they no longer wanted. Then, at home, all the family would sort the heaps of clothes and objects they had collected – wooden toys, ornate picture frames, broken crockery, old household tools - sifting and sorting stuff into piles, weighing the metals, bagging up the wollen jerseys, stacking bits of cardboard – looking for tiny bits of treasure to make something with. The makeshift notion of bricolage, making do with whatever is to hand, about which Michel de Certeau wrote so eloquently in *The Practice of Everyday Life* ⁴ - and resourceful practices of improvisation with found stuff - are deeply embedded in my research, in my artistic interventions and in my curatorial practices.⁵ Indeed, I have spent many years working on the cultural histories of rubbish and engaging both with past and contemporary artists working with trash.⁶

But, here, I want to respond aesthetically and philosophically to a couple of recent specific TRES projects. For me, their projects with extensive collections of discarded cigarette butts and regurgitated chewing gum operate on many

different levels and they speak directly, and in various registers, to many of my own preoccupations. In each project, TRES created wondrous taxonomies of trash. Coldly, clinically, forensically, the objects were examined and exhibited. In *Desechos Reservados* (2011), thousands of cigarette butts were presented like a scientific inventory. The specimens had been through the laborious process of being diligently collected, organised, logged, classified and numbered. Here, in their *Chicle y Pega* project (2012), they have, again, carried out a systematic forensic investigation – this time scraping chewing gum from urban pavements – employing a range of methodologies from beyond art (archaeology, sociology etc) and utilizing high-level technical skills such as the meticulous restoration work of the fine art conservateur. But, aside from the scientific analysis and techniques, there is also, in both projects, a sensual evocation of the individual human encounter – lips have tasted the filters, fingers have held the tabs, lungs have inhaled the cancerous substances, saliva clings to the expunged chewing gum. Although the butts and the globules of gum are life-less, there is a residue of vitality. Once, an individual human being walked down a particular street, paused for a moment and tossed the debris aside. Who was that person, what were they thinking, what did they feel in that moment? The objects and their images invite our empathetic scrutiny, they demand a multisensory gaze – they require us to look longingly and affectively at the discarded debris that these projects have painstakingly amassed. These regimented dregs of everyday life picked up from the streets are ingrained with human remains – like tiny relics of some mysterious sensual public ritual. Their metamorphosis is complete: these mundane objects have become wondrous miniature fetishes.

So, the TRES urban trash projects in Mexico City lead me, again, to bring together some thoughts on the poetics and politics of detritus. To ruminate on my own aleatory encounters with trash through the lens of critical and philosophical thinking and, in particular, a recent body of writing which has been called ‘new materialisms’. For, despite the toxicity of garbage and its blatant disregard for the environment in which it becomes entangled, I am enchanted by shimmering fragments of trash – by the manufactured plastic detritus which, everywhere, glints on grey concrete walkways and amidst the green filigree of leaves and grass.
But, first, to return to some thoughts on ‘new materialisms’, the vibrancy of stuff and ‘thing power’. In her book, *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett urges us to consider not only the sensuous enchantment of nature but to re-invoke the agency and affectivity of organic and inorganic things.\(^7\) Partly inspired by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, there has been a ‘biological’ turn in cultural thinking and critical theory. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost note in their recent book on new materialisms, there is something unprecedented about our contemporary situation in which the prefix ‘bio-’ proliferates: bio-mimicry, bio-technology, bio-politics.

In the life sciences and in physics, material phenomena are increasingly being conceptualized not as discrete entities or closed systems, but rather as open, complex systems with porous boundaries.\(^8\)

In the 1980s, Arjun Appadurai’s book on the ‘social life of things’\(^9\), formulated an anthropological approach to material phenomena and emphasized the politics of consumption in relation to the human desire for things. Since then, there has been a protracted debate about the sociology of objects and the processes of commodification under neo-liberalism. Of course, it is imperative to avoid universalist assumptions about human behavior in relation to the things that people keep, cherish or discard. But in a recent reappraisal of Appadurai’s legacy, Wim van Binsbergen sought to complexify any simplistic urge to classify ‘the West’ versus ‘the rest’, arguing that it remains vital ‘to relate the life of things, in one way or another, to the ways in which people give meaning to them.’\(^10\)

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\(^9\) Arjun Appadurai’s seminal collection of essays on *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective* was originally published in 1986.

New materialist ontologies are about a reorientation to things and matter that conceives it as lively or exhibiting agency. Indeed, there has been a revival in the Bergsonian notion of vitalism and in the idea that objects and stuff can have affective potential. In her book, Bennett refers back to Spinoza’s exploration of the concept of conatus – she talks about ‘thing power’. Starting from the position that the world is full of animate rather than passive things, she argues that objects and materials are – to use Bruno Latour’s term – actants, and that they have vitality and volatility.  

Living in a world of global, mediatized, commodified experiences, how can this be? What is this ‘thing-power’?

There is a place near where I live that has a small wood. It is not in the inner city but on the margins of a major sprawling, once industrial, conurbation. Thirty years ago, this area was dotted with scrapyards, railway marshalling yards, coalmines, colliery headgear and pit-tips. Since then, the coalmines have closed and the land has been reclaimed, the contours smoothed over and new ‘forests’ planted, obliterating disruptive and resistant labour histories along with the polluting industries. Occasionally, the palimpsestual nature of this porous landscape breaks through and amongst the bracken, there is piece of coal, a bit of old machinery or a fragment of ancient crockery. I walk there everyday, foraging for wood, conscious of the hidden history of the landscape but, also, gleaning for treasure. For me, there is always something magical about picking up something which someone else has thrown away.

As I walk through the woods, my boots blackened with coaldust residue, a glint of blue and a ghostly veil of plastic catches my eye. It is merely a fragment of non-degradable litter. I should pick it up and remove it to a safely sanitized place. Yet there is something evocative and affective about this exquisitely translucent matter. In the moment – and there will never be any moment quite like this one - it is marvellous, I am enchanted. As Jane Bennett

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notes, to be enchanted is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter, it is to be transfixed. 12 Philip Fisher describes this as a ‘moment of pure presence’. He writes

[T]he moment of pure presence within wonder lies in the object’s difference and uniqueness being so striking to the mind that it does not remind us of anything and we find ourselves delaying in its presence for a time in which the mind does not move on by association to something else. 13

And in this ‘moment of pure presence’, I refuse to turn away. Instead, I open myself to the enchantment of everyday objects. And it is precisely that which TRES invites us to do - to look again at the overlooked everyday stuff - only they urge us to look more closely this time, as maybe we can start to see it – not as inert stuff to be contained and concealed – but as vibrant, volatile matter.

Gillian Whiteley, August 2012

Gillian Whiteley is an artist-curator-writer, based at Loughborough University. Her interests focus on transdisciplinary practices and cultural production within socio-political contexts, from cultural activism, artists' collectives and sites of transitory utopia, from the 1960s through to contemporary practice. She operates as bricolagekitchen, a multifaceted project space for creative-critical practice, emerging from preoccupations with the art and politics of bricolage, assemblage and trash. Previous exhibitions include Radical Mayhem: Welfare State

International and its Followers (Burnley, UK, 2008), Pan-demonium at the AC Institute, Chelsea, (New York, 2009). Recent publications include Greasepaint Guerrillas: Clowning as a Subversive Strategy (www.stimulusrespond.com) and Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash (I B Tauris, 2011). She is co-organiser of RadicalAesthetics-RadicalArt (RaRa), an initiative based at Loughborough University School of the Arts, with events, network and book series. She is Associate Editor of Art & the Public Sphere (Intellect) and is part of the Sheffield-based improvisational collective, The Gated Community. See www.bricolagekitchen.com