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Fugitive Objects

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Fugitive Objects:

As Petra Lange-Berndt describes in her introduction to Materiality “To understand the languages that emanate from materials or the atmospheres connected to them one especially needs to consider what happens after the work of the artist is done, once materials are submitted to the forces of time gravity or the elements.”

It is this active phase of objects and materials which interests me and has driven me to make over the past thirteen years. The objects themselves have been for the most part fugitive; brief, fleeting, escapologists; performers that are indifferent to the presence of an audience, they continue unseen in complete darkness as they do in light and public view. I can describe them, as can others who have seen them. I can show you photographs or films, but besides occasional fragments, they no longer exist. Clay is a medium and a method for learning, understanding, provoking and imagining; objects come and go in the process.

Though rooted in craft and traditional medium-specific skills, the outcome of my practice may be considered temporary sculpture, where the materiality of clay is an active agent. The work may dry, shrink, crack and dissolve during the time it is shown, before being reclaimed as raw material, and re-made elsewhere. As such, it poses challenges to the traditional structures of collecting. From the perspective of personal practice, this paper considers, the intersection between decorative arts, craft and sculpture and the opportunities and challenges provided by making ephemeral work, particularly in the context of museums and art history of the future.

How may ceramics operate as a site of live production, learning, and performance? What are the implications of documentation and the collection of ephemeral works through visual and non-visual media; such as photography, film, re-performance and writing? How might archival material of ephemeral practice extend beyond the walls of the museum.

Fired clay objects have endured as far back as Palaeolithic cultures. We often associate ceramics with the potential for permanence, and comparatively, ceramics are less susceptible to deteriorate with light, humidity and pests than other materials such as paper and textile. Ceramics and sculpture are frequently separated in museum collections, though sculpture departments contain ceramic objects and ceramics collections sculptural works, as can be evidenced in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Clay, in its unfired state, is far from static, it displays a variety of properties depending on it's water content and the processes in which the raw material is formed in the ground arrive from transition and erosion. To me clay will always be bound to a sense of flux, complexity and variation.

In 2016 I was invited to write a Statement of Practice for the Journal of Modern Craft. It was an opportunity to reflect on my own approach to making which has happened in drastically different environments, from the Arctic to Hawaii, factory to museum. As I wrote in that statement, "Places inform and direct the work and often provide vastly different environments to work in, but there is continuity in the approach to moving and thinking with the material. No one body of work is entirely separate from another, things dart back and forth between locations and times. I am not very interested in holding onto what is made, but things may resurface in different locations, in different ways, and there is an ongoing curiosity which is constant. Plasticity is a significant property of clay and I try to extend it into the way in which I work"

In beginning to describe this itinerant, peripatetic way of working I became clearer about what I carry with me, which is essentially a way of thinking

through clay which provides a personal space and freedom regardless of physical location.

In 2010 I undertook a six-month residency at the V&A. It was the second residency in the then newly created studio space within the public ceramic galleries, and for me a space in the museum which allows practice to be collected temporarily in the present. Beside the studio, is a reconstruction of Lucie Rie's studio, perhaps a stereotypical scene of how you may imagine a ceramic practice to operate and a reflection of the studio pottery movement that dominated ceramics in the 20th-century.

Next door I was provided with a modern equivalent, yet my own practice continues to operate without a fixed studio. In my process of making work I feel connected to both Robert Smithson's ideas of the 'de-architecturing' of practice and also the domestic workspace of what Janet Leach termed 'women kitchen potters', an area explored more recently in Jenny Sorkin's book *Live Form: Women Ceramics and Community*. The residency studio provided me instead with the chance to work as if inside a museum case, and the entire space became the work during my time there. My research was focused on how nature and landscape had been represented historically through ceramic objects in the collection, looking particularly at transfer printed table ware. With this interest in mind, Senior curator and Head of Ceramics & Glass, Reino Liefkes, took me to see a group of objects then in storage at Blythe House. They were a mixed group of porcelain

fragments that once belonged to table fountains produced by German porcelain manufacturer Meissen.

As a group of objects, they were astonishingly beautiful in their details, and through handling were the first time I considered the modelling of flowers through hand processes and sprig moulded details. This group of objects also began a trail of thinking about fountains and an ongoing interest creating objects which are not static but instead are set up in a way to enact their own performance.

In the time since the residency the fragments were part of an in-depth research and conservation project initiated by Liefkes, tracing and reconstructing the original table fountain commissioned by Count Heinrich Von Bruhl for a celebration of the wedding between the Crown Prince of France and the Princess of Saxony in 1747. The original object was the centre piece of the desert course during the celebration, flowing with scented water, as an active spectacle. This object, *The Triumph of Amphitrite*, is now on display in the European galleries at the V&A.

In 2017, the Woman's Hour Craft Prize provided the opportunity to make and present a piece of work again in the V&A and I proposed to make a clay fountain that would gradually erode itself over the course of the exhibition.

Made partly at my kitchen table over a period of one month, and built together in the museum over 4 days, the piece, Triumph of the Immaterial, was on public display for 6 months, with water timed to run briefly each day. Fountains are of continued interest to me as objects which historically have succeeded at standing confidently as sculpture, craft and design. There is no either or; they are all at once, and to my mind all the better for it.

Like much of my work this piece paired an intense labour and craftsmanship with the brief existence of the object. The investment of making was focused towards public experience rather than generating a product that could be physically possessed. A requirement of the competition was that the exhibition would tour which was a push to resolve how I might represent the work after the object. Fragments of the fountain were fired and are currently touring a range of venues in the UK together with a photograph and film footage of the active fountain. This material represents one method for representing work of an ephemeral nature within museums, through an archive of various physical and image-based material.

At present, the only work I have had formally acquired by museums was made in 2016 through the Contemporary Art Society's Craft Acquisition Scheme. This project brought together a cluster of museums - Southampton City Art Gallery, York Art Gallery and The Shipley in Gateshead, to jointly acquire a piece of work. Discussion over a period of 2 years led to re-working a piece I originally made at Siobhan Davies Dance studios in 2011. The piece 'Production Line', was built directly onto a rope and hoisted with a pulley as it was made within the stairwell over a period of 4 days. I was interested in the choreography of making, particularly when guided by a single process, which I had been particularly aware of during an Arts/Industry residency at a large sanitary ware manufacturer, Kohler, in Wisconsin in 2008. To produce large cast sinks, associates worked in pairs, working in time and co-operation with their partner to meet the demands of producing the objects. Within the stairwell of the studios, I

set myself the task of covering the rope with a texture extruded through a tea strainer, a texture I became interested in during my time at the V&A, often seen on the bottom of figurines to represent grass or to suggest animal fur. For the permanent acquisition I re-created a version of 'Production Line' within the gallery at Southampton. The making process, sculpture and final dissolving of the work into water was documented through photographs and film which is now in the permanent collections of each museum. It was the first time I had re-made a version of a work and in the case of this piece it felt appropriate that might happen. Consciously going through the act of re-making and documenting was a means to understand it more fully. Re-production or re-performance is often a method by which performance may be acquired by museums and has potential for the work to be re-created beyond the life of the original artist. In this case, the piece I made was process led, and could potentially be repeated by another maker in the future. However, many other works are intensely connected to my own hand, and their ephemerality is part of their material which raises questions around how appropriate it may be to re-create such a work and if this defies the work's own values. I believe even within an artist's practice there is variation in the way individual works should be represented, and artists must take responsibility in defining this and working with institutions to clarify through contracts the future of the work.

Whilst most projects I have produced alone, by hand, there have been several that have explored making as a collective experience. In 2012 I was invited to create a work at the University of Hawaii Art Gallery working together with groups of students.

Over a three-week period we created a large suspended sculpture that stretched 9 metres from almost two tonnes of clay. The piece was covered with the same extruded texture used in 'Production Line' and during the installation time the gallery was transformed into an open workspace where students could drop in and out to create texture to be added to the piece. Though all employing the same technique, the hand of individuals was

evident in the texture produced and readable in the surface of the final piece, with distinct territories in its topography. After the exhibition the clay was then recycled and used within the ceramics department for student projects. In its temporary suspended form, the work allowed the viewer to experience the mass of raw material above their head attempting to shift the relationship between viewer and object where so frequently clay and ceramics are grounded; and the viewer looks down or face to face with object.

More recently I was invited to make work as a temporary commission in the University of Liverpool's Victoria gallery and Museum. The museum housed in the original University building was designed by John Waterhouse, and much like the Natural history Museum, is covered in decorative architectural ceramics inside and out. The work I created was situated in the former Women's common Room, which in 1892 was the first dedicated space for women in higher education in the UK. Within the room stands a fireplace, designed and carved by the first group of female students attending the university; a quietly radical object. Through the work I created I wished to return the space to a common room and consider how a work might be made 'in common'. A tea set was made by the public on the opening night to sit beside the fireplace recalling the kettle kept beside the fire in the original common room. Two reading areas were created, highlighting relevant texts around craft and collective making, and in the centre of the room is a decorative column, which has been added to by the public through a series of workshops over the past 6 months. The common room contains a workshop space in which the public have made clay tiles that have been added to the column, pressed by hand by children and adults from moulds I made based on ginkgo leave, similar to the fan designs on other columns in the building.

This commission was one of a series at Victoria gallery and Museum by independent curator Rose Lejeune as part of her wider interest in 'Collecting the Ephemeral' which seeks to situate ephemeral practices within museum

collections. The work questions what activities and functions (practical, intellectual and decorative) a common space might have today.

Throughout my practice there has been a connection between objects of historic design and craft that manifests through temporary sculpture. A commission for the British Ceramics Biennial in 2013 again used an object I first encountered in the V&A as a start point for creating a large immersive installation. The design 'The Death of the Bear' was produced by Spode and other Staffordshire manufacturers in the 19th century, there felt connections between the collapse of the bear and that of the factory; both fallen giants. Within the space of the former Spode factory I recreated the scene on a scale for the viewer to enter in to. Almost like a theatrical set which the viewer then activated, the clay was palpable in the damp, polythene enclosed air. Outside of this environment the original plate was also displayed, returned to its site of production.

Through the projects I have worked on there is an ongoing interest in using clay as a distinct language within sculpture, one that has the possibility to speak about nature, design, craft. One where objects are active, practice is ongoing and open ended, and the gallery or site is a place of production and learning, sometimes personal, sometimes through participation. I often feel caught between the fascination and delight of exploring collections of historic objects and the overwhelming sense that in the face of so much, the world does not need me to leave anything behind, yet there is also a responsibility to perhaps leave a record of activities even if the ephemerality of the work should be insisted on. The ephemeral poses opportunities as well as challenges to museums. As in the case of residencies or temporary commissions, it may activate the permanent collections and engage visitors in new ways through situating such practices, temporarily and in the moment. It is a means of post-medium collecting and with that comes a freedom from storage and care that burdens permanent objects. If we consider museums of the future it seems

unsustainable that they may continue to amass and care for objects endlessly. With freedom from the preservation of fixed objects and implied restrictions and limitations moving and displaying them imposes, there is also increased opportunity for moving beyond the walls of the museum. Archival material, particularly digital, has the potential for being shared more easily and extending into society in ways that the display of historic objects would be problematic and in cases where re-production of work is appropriate it is a way of presenting ephemeral work in the future, again without the physical requirements and duty of care attached to the permanent acquisition of objects.

Throughout these three key areas identified as means of collecting ephemeral practice, museums are enabled to reflect the expanded modes of working that have and continue to exist, beyond the traditional segregation of disciplines. Whilst the collection of performance and ephemeral sculpture in a fine art context has a longer history and theoretical research attached to it, performative and ephemeral work overlapping into craft and decorative arts remains largely absent in museum collections.