

**Art, the Architectonic and Functionality**

Thomas Charles Beesley

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies

October 2017

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

© The University of Leeds and Thomas Charles Beesley

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank both of my supervisors; Simon Lewandowski and Dr. Gail Day for their support and advice during my PhD research, and for their contribution to making the past three years such an exciting and rewarding time. I would also like to acknowledge the valued contribution made by all of the following;

Dr. Chris Taylor.

Dr. Stephen Walker.

The staff, students and fellow researchers at the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds.

Dr. Renata Tszczuk, Dr. Julia Udall and all the students on the M.Arch programme at the Sheffield School of Architecture, University of Sheffield.

The White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities and the AHRC.

My partner Linda, for her unstinting support and our children Joe, Rosa and Max for their encouragement.

## **Abstract**

What is the status and position of the 'functional' art object? My research has sought to consider the role of the object in recent examples of socially-engaged art practice, by examining the notion of the 'useful' in contemporary art as conceptualized by theorist Stephen Wright and his advocates. By interrogating the praxis of the Turner Prize winning architectural collective Assemble and the deeper social-engagement of American artist Theaster Gates, I have sought to decode the institutional structures supporting their work, permitting a more nuanced assessment of the status of the useful object as art. During my research I undertook a six-month collaborative project with the staff and students of an M.Arch module at the Sheffield School of Architecture. The module addressed issues of local energy generation and use within a geo-sociological context and gave me the opportunity to create a body of work in response to these themes of utility. Through the development of my own praxis, the concomitant practice-led research and the critical distance this has permitted, I have been able to consider art's relationship to objects of utility within the epistemologies of both my art and design background. For, as I conclude, it may be better to view these objects as the result of socially-engaged creativity – as critically-engaged architectonic design – rather than objects of art, thereby encouraging contemporary art practice to continue to stand in autonomous opposition to the instrumentalizing forces of capitalism.

## Contents

|                                                                 |            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Acknowledgements                                                | p. 3.      |
| Abstract                                                        | 4.         |
| <b>Introduction</b>                                             | <b>7.</b>  |
| <b>Chapter One: Art, the Architectonic and the Turner Prize</b> | <b>11.</b> |
| Utility                                                         | 12.        |
| Criticality                                                     | 20.        |
| Autonomy                                                        | 25.        |
| <b>Chapter Two: Art, the Architectonic and Future Works</b>     | <b>29.</b> |
| Introduction                                                    | 30.        |
| Part One: <i>Future Primitive</i> (2016)                        | 32.        |
| Energy                                                          | 32.        |
| The Hand                                                        | 35.        |
| Making                                                          | 38.        |
| Part Two: <i>Escape</i> (2016)                                  | 41.        |
| Architecture                                                    | 41.        |
| Anticipation                                                    | 46.        |
| Material                                                        | 47.        |
| Part Three: <i>Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil</i> (2016)  | 51.        |
| Use                                                             | 51.        |
| Object                                                          | 54.        |
| Repurpose                                                       | 57.        |
| Conclusion                                                      | 60.        |
| Images of the exhibition <i>de-,dis-,ex-</i> . Sheffield.       | 62.        |

|                                                                 |            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Chapter Three: Art, the Architectonic and Theaster Gates</b> | <b>64.</b> |
| Part One: Social Engagement                                     |            |
| The Collector                                                   | 65.        |
| The Developer                                                   | 68.        |
| The Trickster                                                   | 71.        |
| The Communitarian                                               | 74.        |
| The Assembler                                                   | 77.        |
| <br>                                                            |            |
| Part Two: Where is the Art?                                     |            |
| Object as Leverage                                              | 80.        |
| Social Practice                                                 | 82.        |
| The Business Artist                                             | 85.        |
| Critical Distance                                               | 89.        |
| A Double Ontology                                               | 92.        |
| <br>                                                            |            |
| <b>Afterword</b>                                                | <b>96.</b> |
| <br>                                                            |            |
| Bibliography                                                    | 99.        |

## Introduction

*Contemporary sculpture is renegotiating its position with regard to functionality and use value. Relational and post-relational art practices have expanded the field of socially-engaged praxis, raising vital questions regarding the role of the artist as activist and interventionist. This expansion has revitalised the debate concerning the art object/ place, the designed object/ space, their functionality as practical tools and as sites for self reflection and critical thinking. My doctoral research will explore the blurred boundaries, contested spaces and disputed definitions that map out the territories of the functional and non-functional art object in the wider context of a society enamoured with 'total design'.<sup>1</sup>*

*Incorporating utility may involve a direct response to a social need and an art work may propose use value as a fundamental aspect of its radicality, yet the functional art object deflects attention from content to context and exposes what we may think of as intrinsic value as being conferred value. For it is the relationship of the functional art object to the institution and its place inside and/or outside the gallery that exposes the complexities of the art object's social position.*

These are the opening paragraphs from my original PhD research proposal drafted in February 2014 that, in rather dramatic prose, draw together the key terms that have underpinned the development of my art practice and practice-led research in the period since. Within this thesis I have sought to examine and illustrate current debates concerning the value of 'usefulness' and the social function of art that have continued to reverberate within a contemporary art world pre-occupied with questions of its own social relevance.

I have been engaged with the theoretical positions concerning the place of material 'use value' within art over many years, for there is a long and complex

---

<sup>1</sup>Hal Foster believes that the *Gesamkunstwerk* has been subverted and realised through the inflation of design to the point where we can speak of 'the political economy of design'. *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 22.

history to this field. Theories emerging from the historical Avant-Gardes – notably Russian Constructivism and Soviet Productivism – were further developed in the work of Frederick Kiesler, Constant Nieuwenhuys, The Independent Group and Archigram.<sup>2</sup> Post-Duchampian concepts were extended and contested by Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Helio Oiticica and Dan Graham in the 1960s before re-emerging in the 1990s in the work of Liam Gillick, Simon Starling, Jorge Pardo, and Andrea Zittel. More recently the interventionist work of N55, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Rikrit Tiravanija and Tania Bruguera has enriched the debate as has the architecturally framed practice of Theaster Gates, Marjetica Potrc, and Thomas Hirschhorn. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster and Fredric Jameson, among others, have written extensively on art's use value, both materially and as a vehicle for social critique.

An ideal opportunity to explore a number of the arguments concerning both the 'artistic' and the 'use' value of socially-engaged praxis emerged toward the end of 2014 when Assemble – an architectural collective from London – were nominated for the 2015 Turner Prize. Chapter One seeks to explain the circumstances that lead to their nomination and, more importantly, looks to assess the implications of their being awarded the prize in November of that year. The collective designed household objects for use in the scheme for which they were nominated, these were then sold during the Turner Prize exhibition raising important questions regarding art objects, designed products and their respective modes of circulation.

This aspect of their work resonated with my own background in design and manufacturing. I started my own design studio and production workshop during the post-modernist reappraisal of visual culture in the early 1980s, undertaking product, exhibition and commercial interior design. In the years that followed, the business undertook a comprehensive range of projects; manufacturing

---

<sup>2</sup> Both the Bauhaus in Germany and Vkhutemas in Moscow developed an education programme aiming to bring together fine art, crafts and the applied arts. These programmes were influenced by emerging artistic ideas regarding the integration of art into everyday life and in turn influenced the development of Soviet Productivism and the International Style in design and architecture. In a foretaste of the arguments to come, both art schools were encouraged to integrate art into general manufacturing by governments seeking an economic advantage.



ranges of furniture for retail, designing contract furniture for production by UK manufacturing companies and managing a roll-out programme of vehicle retail showrooms across Europe. I witnessed at first hand the explosion in the commercial exploitation of design as both a fundamental management component and as a mere marketing device. Over the following thirty years the business of 'design' (in the expanded sense) has come to occupy a dominant cultural position, at the expense – as some critics believe – of the visual fine arts.<sup>3</sup> A period during which much contemporary art has either succumbed to, or been exploited by increasingly sophisticated and dominant market structures.

My object-based art practice, whilst exploring technologies of production, seeks to engage with issues of precarity and provisionality through the exploitation of found or everyday materials. Employing objects and materials that have, have had or may yet have utility allows me to reflect on the language of objects whilst also questioning our attitudes to material culture and resource use. During my research I have sought to bring together the epistemologies of both my design practice and my fine art practice to interrogate the notion and the standing of the 'useful' art object.

The nuances regarding the position of the art object within the context of socially-engaged practice are explored further in Chapter Three with a close look at the artistic oeuvre of the American artist Theaster Gates. Gates is lauded for a multi-faceted practice that re-engages marginalised social groups through refurbished and rearticulated architectural spaces. Reviewing his practice permits an exploration of the architectural public sphere itself as a space of utility and use, expanding the scope of the discussion to include the object at the scale of the architectural interior. Exploiting the financial crisis Gates has created a significant business, running multi-million dollar projects and employing several dozen people within the local community. Yet his practice continues to raise questions about the extent to which artists can, or indeed should, resist the instrumentalizing forces of capitalism.

---

<sup>3</sup> This view will be discussed in detail in Part Two of Chapter Three and will include references to the work of Brian Holmes, Claire Bishop and Gregory Shollette.

Both Chapter One and Three consider the tension that exists between an art that engages with the issues facing society – seeking to make a real difference in people’s lives – and that which extols the value and importance of artistic autonomy. These texts book-end Chapter Two, which details the development of a project from my own practice, in collaboration with the Sheffield School of Architecture. Working as an artist in residence within a Masters module at the architectural school, I took part in a full range of their activities, allowing me to absorb the implications of the discussions, presentations and proposals through the filters of my own artistic concerns and the theoretical arguments emerging from my research. Over a period of six months I developed a body of work that culminated with an exhibition at the Bloc Projects art space in Sheffield in October 2016. This chapter presented an opportunity to reflect on the processes at work during the evolution of the project, allowing me to consider in detail the relationship of the architectonic – of design and architecture – to contemporary art.

## **Chapter One: Art, the Architectonic and the Turner Prize**

## Utility

At 7.30pm on the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2015 radio and television broadcaster Lauren Laverne introduced Channel Four's live broadcast of the Turner Prize award ceremony from the Tramway in Glasgow. With an excitable and noisy venue audience as a backdrop, Laverne quizzed invited commentators; broadcaster and writer Muriel Gray and art critic and writer Morgan Quaintance, on their thoughts of the short-listed artists and likely winners. Both guests favoured one or other of the more clearly recognisable artists but feared that Assemble, the bookmakers' favourite, may well win the award. Once this had been confirmed both appeared deeply unsettled, with Gray exclaiming that 'it's a very peculiar year' and going on to state that 'I think it's changed the nature of the Turner Prize because I don't think it is modern art'. In some ways this could be seen as another example of the 'but is it art?' perennial argument, except that this year one of the most prestigious awards for contemporary art in the world had been won by a group of self-acknowledged non-artists. What were the forces at work here? And what did the award mean within the context of contemporary critically-engaged art praxis? For, as Morgan Quaintance went on to argue, 'It was a decision that could have seriously detrimental ramifications for British contemporary art'.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to their nomination and short-listing for the Turner Prize, Assemble – variously described as a collective of 14, 16 or even 18 architects and designers who had met each other at the University of Cambridge – had been busy creating some notable left-field architectural projects in tandem with the communities who used and inhabited them. These included *Cineroleum*; a provisional cinema housed within the canopy of a disused petrol station, and *Folly for a Flyover*; which transformed a disused motorway undercroft in Hackney Wick into an arts venue and new public space. These projects had brought them some significant attention within the architectural press, however it was their more limited involvement with Granby 4 Streets – a community-based regeneration project in Toxteth, Liverpool – for which they were

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

nominated. The Granby triangle sits within an area of housing that has suffered from poor planning policy for decades. Following the Toxteth riots in 1981 various demolition and rebuilding programmes were proposed, dropped, redrafted and dropped again. A number of local owner-occupier residents were determined to stay on, and despite an increasingly bleak outlook the Granby Residents Association – that had formed in 1993 – managed to save what would become the Granby 4 Streets from the threat of demolition.

By 2010 the remaining residents had started planting up tubs on the streets and ivy against the empty properties and, importantly, had started a monthly community street market ‘We wanted to make it a better place to live but we also wanted to remind people that we were still here’.<sup>5</sup> Following the creation of a Community Land Trust (CLT) the residents and their advisors achieved a great deal in a relatively short space of time, winning the support of the City Council, bringing housing associations on-board, developing their own programme of refurbishment and submitting funding applications. Ronnie Hughes who had been acting as a housing-policy advisor to the community for many years acknowledged that the intervention of Steinbeck Studio in January 2013 was a particularly significant moment. Steinbeck had been formed as a vehicle to make investments on behalf of a wealthy Jersey-based social investor and was prepared to make a £500,000 interest-free loan to the Granby 4 Streets CLT. It was Steinbeck Studio who introduced Assemble as architectural advisors.

Assemble claim to champion a working practice that is interdependent and collaborative, seeking to actively involve the public as both participant and collaborator in the on-going realisation of their work. After acknowledging the achievements of the community over the preceding twenty years, they suggested that their approach was ‘characterised by celebrating the value of the area’s architectural and cultural heritage, supporting public involvement and partnership working’.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the nomination their involvement with the CLT consisted of helping the residents ‘to translate their resourceful and DIY attitude

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.granby4streetsclt.co.uk/history-of-the-four-streets> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>6</sup> [http://assemblestudio.co.uk/?page\\_id=862](http://assemblestudio.co.uk/?page_id=862) [Accessed April 2016]

into the refurbishment of housing'<sup>7</sup> and helping in drawing up proposals for the refurbishment of a group of ten empty properties on Cairns Street. Speaking in May 2015, Erika Rushton chair of the CLT acknowledged that 'Assemble are the only ones who have ever sat and listened to the residents, and then translated their vision into drawings and models, and now into reality, regeneration is always this blunt, abstract, over-professionalised thing', she added. 'But Assemble have shown how it can be done differently, by making things that people can see, touch, understand and put together for themselves'.<sup>8</sup> In the same article, Oliver Wainwright, the *Guardian's* architecture correspondent noted that:

Assemble's work is founded in an interest in issues, and sites that go way beyond constructing pretty scenography in gritty industrial locations. It is about engaging with people on their own terms, driven, as they put it, by 'a belief in the importance of addressing the typical disconnection between the public and the process by which spaces are made'.<sup>9</sup>

The group exemplify a certain kind of emergent work structure where individuals from the larger, mutually-delineated collective, often working part-time in more than one position, opt in to a more formal group that will collaborate on particular projects as and when they occur. Individuals are connected to a wide number of different types of networks drawing in expertise whenever it is needed. A structure more akin to an artist's collective than an architectural business is particularly useful when undertaking projects that entail working closely with local residents. It was this level of social engagement, relatively non-hierarchical work structure and the transformative nature of the 'useful' creative outcomes that lead Alistair Hudson, Director of the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima) and member of the Turner Prize jury, to nominate the architectural collective.

---

<sup>7</sup> [http://assemblestudio.co.uk/?page\\_id=1030](http://assemblestudio.co.uk/?page_id=1030) [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2015/may/12/assemble-turner-prize-2015-wildcard-how-the-young-architecture-crew-assemble-rocked-the-art-world> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>9</sup> Ditto

Hudson first came to prominence as the deputy Director of Grizedale Arts based at Coniston in the Lake District. Together with Adam Sutherland, Hudson oversaw the development of the arts trail into an active curatorial community-based arts organisation. Central to their ethos was the 'aim of implementing a more valuable function for art... a philosophy that emphasises a use value for art; promoting the potential for art and artists to affect (sic) change in practical and effective roles'.<sup>10</sup> The organisation is now based at Lawson Park Farm where the 'farm is an art work in progress: socially engaged, confrontational, productive and creative'.<sup>11</sup> Soon after taking up his post as Director of mima in October 2014, Hudson sought to explain a number of his ideas in a series of short videos entitled *What Is Art For?* 'Art' he suggested, 'is a way of doing things rather than a thing in itself'. He believes that the artist should be seen as an 'initiator' who can 'direct practical effects in the world, that they get a job done, that they make contributions' and that these contributions 'are not a representation of something'. 'What is it' he asks, 'that art can do in the world that would make a difference, that would actually change things?' He reiterates this point again 'art needs to be involved and embedded in the way we work, so therefore it needs to be kind of useful – it needs to have more functionality'.<sup>12</sup> Whilst still at Grizedale Arts Hudson had initiated a number of well-received artist's residencies. Taking place far away from the London art scene he believed, allowed the artists to be less self-conscious and to be more willing to experiment. Instead of giving the artist's the freedom to do whatever they wanted, they were pressed into creating useful things within the community. As Hudson explained, 'Liam Gillick recently designed a library for the village, An Endless Supply created the *Honest Shop* and (Kinks star) Ray Davies wrote a school play'.<sup>13</sup>

For Hudson, the iniquities and absurdities of the contemporary art world and its associated art market can be traced back to the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries and the development of Romanticism. In his video

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.grizedale.org/about/> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.grizedale.org/accommodation/lawson.park.information> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.axisweb.org/thinking-and-ideas/2015/07/what-is-art-for/> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2014/oct/21/alistair-hudson-mima-modern-art> [Accessed April 2016]

presentation, Hudson supports Boris Groys' notion 'that before the French Revolution there was no art, only design'.<sup>14</sup> He believes that Immanuel Kant is largely responsible for introducing ideas that gradually promoted a separation between art and its use in the everyday. 'Art doesn't have a role in people's lives in the way that it used to', Hudson states, 'art was embedded in people's lives, it had a function... there was a symbiosis between craft and design and architecture and social activity'.<sup>15</sup> Hudson proposes a line of connection drawing together the ideas of John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Arts and Crafts movement and the Bauhaus in a nexus of socially-engaged praxis whose contemporary iteration can be seen in the examples of Arte Útil.

Established by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera (b.1968), who explains that 'Arte Útil roughly translates into English as 'useful art', 'but it goes further' she adds 'suggesting art as a tool or device'.<sup>16</sup> Bruguera is primarily a performance artist whose work pivots around issues of power and control. In 2011 she began working on a project entitled *Immigrant Movement International* whilst living with five families of illegal immigrants in Queens, New York, there she offered free English classes, legal advice and practical support. Out of this experience Bruguera began researching wider notions of useful art and formulated her own set of criteria for drawing together historic and contemporary case studies. As Bruguera explains:

Useful Art is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art's function is no longer to be a space for 'signalling' problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions. We should go back to the times when art was not something to look at in awe, but something to generate from. If it is political art, it deals with the consequences, if it deals with the consequences, I think it has to be useful art.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> <https://vimeo.com/134189412> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>15</sup> <https://vimeo.com/134189412> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>16</sup> <http://museumartutil.net/about/> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/528-0-Introduction+on+Useful+Art.htm> [Accessed January 2016]



- 1- Propose new uses for art within society
- 2- Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc)
- 3- Be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies
- 4- Be implemented and function in real situations
- 5- Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users
- 6- Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users
- 7- Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions
- 8- Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation<sup>18</sup>

Bruguera's research culminated in the launch of the Museum of Arte Útil within a newly refurbished building at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in December 2013. Working with a team of curators (including Alistair Hudson), Bruguera presented a series of endorsed case studies and a set of criteria by which future applications would be assessed. The *Honest Shop* and two other projects undertaken at Grizedale feature in the Museum of Arte Útil, a version of which resides at mima and a further iteration of which has recently been installed at Arts Catalyst in London. The case studies within the museum, currently numbering approximately one thousand, are not confined to what their authors (initiators) would describe as art projects. Indeed, a significant number of the projects are examples of political or social activism. Other case studies are extremely broad, for example; nominating the entire 'Bauhaus 1919–1933' or the 'entire compendium of lectures and essays by John Ruskin'.<sup>19</sup>

In a nod to the work and the language of Ruskin, Hudson suggests that 'the responsibility artists have should be brought back into the equation' and that 'they should work collectively within society to be more useful'.<sup>20</sup> In the award citation, Turner Prize judges praised what they called 'a ground-up approach to regeneration, city planning and development in opposition to corporate gentrification', adding that Assemble 'draw on long traditions of artistic and

---

<sup>18</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/about/> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>19</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/archive/> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/turner-prize-2015-housing-estate-collective-nominated> [Accessed April 2016]

collective initiatives that experiment in art, design and architecture. In doing so, they offer alternative models to how societies can work'.<sup>21</sup>

Since his role as a co-curator of the Museum of Arte Útil, Alistair Hudson has been intent on creating Museum 3.0 at mima, a 'civic' building where 'everything is reprogrammed' to meet the needs of the 'usership' and where the institutional imperative is 'to demonstrate what the real use of art is in society' by 'applying art in ordinary life'.<sup>22</sup> The open access museum allows users to run fitness classes, cookery lessons, maker fairs and crèche facilities; 'it is the usership', contends Hudson, 'that creates value and meaning'.<sup>23</sup> He envisages the offline 3.0 museum, as a kind of walk-in toolbox for usership, a place where user engagement – user wear and tear – is explicitly acknowledged as generating value, and as such is entitled to share that value. Hudson has courted controversy in his role as a Turner Prize judge in order to promote a post-relational, post-participatory, post-spectacle vision for contemporary art – one based on use. In establishing the Useful Museum, Hudson is looking to step outside of the recognised art-world framework and to 'demonstrate what the real use of art is, how people actually employ it, what they do with it'.<sup>24</sup> When seeking to explain the ideas behind this conviction Hudson often refers to recent concepts of Usership Theory and in particular the ideas and theories of Stephen Wright.

Stephen Wright is a Canadian theorist, art writer and curator who teaches the practice of theory at the European School of Visual Arts, Angoulême/Poitiers. His writing has focused primarily on the politics of usership, particularly in contexts of collaborative, extradisciplinary practices. His biography confirms that 'his current research examines the ongoing usological turn in art and society in terms of contemporary escapological theory and practice'.<sup>25</sup> Published to coincide with the launch of the Museum of Arte Útil in 2013 *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, took a fresh look at the conceptual vocabulary inherited from

---

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/07/urban-assemble-win-turner-prize-toxteth> [Accessed December 2015]

<sup>22</sup> <https://vimeo.com/134189412> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>23</sup> <https://vimeo.com/134189412> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>24</sup> <https://vimeo.com/134189412> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>25</sup> <http://bakonline.org/en/Who/StephenWright> [Accessed April 2016]

modernity and repurposed a number of terms within the contemporary art wordscape. In the introduction to the publication (available for use as a printable pdf) Wright suggests that ‘with the rise of networked culture, users have come to play a key role as producers of information, meaning and value, breaking down the long-standing opposition between consumption and production’.<sup>26</sup> Wright acknowledges the considerable challenge in confronting the ingrained conceptual cornerstones of the contemporary order; expert culture, spectatorship and ownership:

*expert culture*, for which users are invariably misusers; *spectatorship*, for which usership is inherently opportunistic and fraught with self-interest; and most trenchantly of all, the expanding regime of *ownership*, which has sought to curtail long-standing rights of use.<sup>27</sup>

Wright contends that usership is all about repurposing available ways and means without seeking to possess them, he believes that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s user-based theory of meaning in his *Philosophical Investigations* provides an informative model for Usership. Referencing Wittgenstein, Wright points out that in language, all the meaning that there is, and all the stability, is determined by the users of that language, and by nothing else. Wright notes that ‘language usership provides a relative stability of meaning’, adding that ‘the language is used by all, owned by none. It changes, but no one user can effect change; we are, at best, co-authors in the language game of usership’.<sup>28</sup>

There is, within the *Lexicon*, a phrase that has particular resonance for Alistair Hudson and one that he has often used when discussing the place of art in a wider social context. Based on a quote from Marcel Duchamp,<sup>29</sup> Wright introduces the notion of a ‘Co-efficient of Art’, he uses this term ‘to suggest that

---

<sup>26</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>27</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>28</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>29</sup> In a famous eight-minute talk called ‘The Creative Act, (1957)’ Marcel Duchamp put forth the idea of a ‘coefficient of art,’ by which he referred to the discrepancy, inherent in any artistic proposition, between intention and actual realization, setting out to define this gap by a sort of ‘arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.’

art is not a set of objects or events, distinct from the larger set of objects and events that are not art, but rather a degree of intensity liable to be present in any number of things'.<sup>30</sup> Hudson sees this sliding scale as a way of describing the varying degree to which something is, or contains, art. From this position Hudson can promote a wide range of socially-engaged activities that are, to some extent or other 'artful'. Viewed in the context of the Turner Prize, one can understand that for Hudson it is not a question of whether Assemble's Granby 4 Streets project is art or not, it is enough that to some extent it is art.

### Criticality

The response to Assemble winning the Turner Prize has been nuanced and varied, perhaps reflecting the views on socially-engaged arts practice more generally. For Jeremy Till, Head of Central Saint Martins, their success is:

A signal that the traditional categories of 'art' and 'architecture' have been dissolved, and for me this is all for the best. The point is not whether they are architects or artists, but how they use their creativity and thinking to address issues – of making, of collaboration, of social engagement.<sup>31</sup>

This view is perhaps best exemplified in the work of the American artist Theaster Gates (b. 1973), the 'poster boy for socially-engaged art'.<sup>32</sup> Gates' multi-faceted practice encompasses social activism, urban regeneration and community development in economically deprived areas of south central Chicago. Gates has developed a circular economic model, which means that funds raised from the sale of his art objects are reinvested in the buildings from which the object's material first emerged. Gates chooses to use the money to redevelop and refurbish these empty properties, creating a number of

---

<sup>30</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>31</sup> <http://blogs.arts.ac.uk/csm/2015/12/08/assemble-win-the-turner-prize-2015/> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.artesmundi.org/news/theaster-gates-announced-as-winner-of-artes-mundi-6> [Accessed May 2016]

residencies and studios under the guise of his Dorchester Projects including the Black Cinema House – a place not only for local people to learn film-making and editing skills, but to study and celebrate the work of Chicago’s black film directors. Superficially at least, the work of the Turner Prize winners would appear to be rooted in the same forms of social engagement as the work of Theaster Gates. However dig a little deeper and it becomes clear that the cultural and financial contexts differ dramatically.

In realising work such as *In the Event of Race Riot* (2011), created from two decommissioned fire hoses – coiled tightly and set within a frame of recycled wood, or *Shoe Shine with Old Growth (Him)* (2012), a precarious assemblage evoking issues of power and social position made from reclaimed wood, Gates reuses the salvaged material to create recognisable art objects. These, and many objects like them, have been exhibited and sold in a number of large institutions including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Armory in New York and dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, whilst his work is represented by a selection of galleries including Jay Jopling’s White Cube. Gates understands the potential for socially-engaged practice even as he exploits and manipulates the excesses of the international art market, albeit for admirable purposes. *Bank Bond* (2013) saw the artist recycling marble tiles from a bank’s basement in order to issue 100 financial ‘bonds’, each work sold for \$5000 raising half a million dollars towards the refurbishment of the former bank in Chicago. As Gates explains, ‘The Art Bond will allow you to be a participant in the recreation of the space and secure your name on a marble wall as a founding contributor’.<sup>33</sup> Rather like the proud plaques on a Victorian library wall confirming the beneficence and social standing of the great and the good.

Indeed Gates’ work – which I will be assessing in greater depth in Chapter Three – is steeped in art history and art world references, ‘particularly’, as Mark Godfrey noted in an article for *Frieze* when referring to the work using architectural salvage, ‘the practices of Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-

---

<sup>33</sup> [http://whitecube.com/news/theaster\\_gates\\_bank\\_bond\\_edition/](http://whitecube.com/news/theaster_gates_bank_bond_edition/) [Accessed May 2016]

Clark'. Godfrey points out that Gates's practice is not only 'a new manipulation of the art market but also a compelling reversal of sculptural history', as Gates brings buildings back into use there is 'no more entropy, no more transformations of abandoned buildings to create temporary anarchitecture'.<sup>34</sup> Gates himself has written that 'I leverage artistic moments to effect real change'.<sup>35</sup> Speaking at the time of the Turner award, Will Gompertz, the BBC's arts editor confuses and conflates the work of Gates and Assemble, suggesting that they are both 'trading in the name of "art" to fulfil a community-based social enterprise'. He believes that they are 'leveraging the value we place on the word "art" and the work artists produce' to pursue legitimate social enterprises.<sup>36</sup> It is perhaps indicative that many popular commentators are prepared to accept that the Turner Prize award automatically conveys the attributes of contemporary art upon its winners.

Assemble though, do not locate their work within an art discourse. Speaking in the days following their nomination, Assemble member Anthony Engi-Meacock, said: 'It's just not a conversation we have. I mean what is an artist? There is no answer to it'. Maria Lisogorskaya, also from the group added that sometimes they were designers or architects, while 'sometimes they were plumbers or campaigners'.<sup>37</sup> Upon their nomination and following discussions with Alistair Hudson who may well have drawn their attention to the circular economics of Theaster Gates, Assemble established the Granby Workshop.<sup>38</sup> The workshop is located in one of the former corner shops and employs up to nine workers and apprentices manufacturing small decorative items, such as door knobs, fire surrounds, curtain fabrics and lamp shades that had been developed by the collective. In a move that rather highlighted the introspective nature of the other Turner Prize nominees Assemble then replicated the interior of one of the

---

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.frieze.com/article/designs-life/> [Accessed May 2016]

<sup>35</sup> Theaster Gates, 'Statement' in Theaster Gates: 12 Ballads for Huguenot House, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and documenta (13), 2012, p. 23

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-35031707> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/07/urban-assemble-win-turner-prize-toxteth> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>38</sup> Hudson has consistently praised the artist since winning the Artes Mundi 6 in 2015. Indeed Hudson is on the jury for Artes Mundi 7 and one of the nominees is Amy Franceschini, founder of Future Farmers. The group focuses on creating international projects that challenge systems of food production and transportation.

Granby houses within the Tramway art space and populated it with the objects from the workshop. 'We're really keen to use the platform of the Turner Prize to set up a new social enterprise, which makes products for homes', Assemble's Lewis Jones said. 'So for the show we've built a showroom for these products. They're not art-world prices, they're priced based on how much they cost to make. They're made by hand in Liverpool'.<sup>39</sup> For Adrian Searle, writing in the *Guardian*, Assemble's win 'shows a revulsion for the excesses of the art market, and a turn away from the creation of objects for that market', he believes that their installation at the Turner exhibition 'must be seen not as a work, but as a model of work that takes place elsewhere; not in the art world, but the world itself'.<sup>40</sup> In his article for *e-flux*, Morgan Quaintance fears that in the current national climate where public subsidy for the arts is being ruthlessly cut, where higher education is being turned into a business and where artists and institutions are under pressure to make the economic case for art, the award 'will undoubtedly send damaging ripples through the art world'.<sup>41</sup> Searle adds that 'the danger of projects like theirs is that it will be seen to replace government intervention, leading to further withdrawals of public funds and further atomisation'.<sup>42</sup>

More importantly Quaintance argues that, unlike Assemble, formally trained contemporary artists bring a distinct form of critical engagement to their work. He points out that although there may have been a 'reduction of technical-skills-based-learning in UK art education', he believes that 'rigorous conceptual training in which the development of critical faculties is encouraged and challenged through discussion, group critique, lecture and written assessment has taken its place'.<sup>43</sup> Quaintance believes that contemporary art is a critically engaged field 'producing critically engaged actors who are uncomfortable with

---

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-34404547> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/07/turner-prize-2015-assemble-win-by-ignoring-art-market> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>41</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/07/turner-prize-2015-assemble-win-by-ignoring-art-market> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>43</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

state power and its various methods of citizen subjection' and he suggests that 'nowhere is this more thoroughly critiqued' than in socially-engaged practice'.<sup>44</sup>

A number of commentators noted the lack of any reference to the social and political context within which Assemble had been working, when they gave their winners speech at the awards ceremony. There was no mention of the Granby 4 Streets CLT or their long-standing struggle against managed decline and social deprivation. When asked why they had not used the televised opportunity to raise awareness of the housing situation in Toxteth, Lewis Jones of the collective said, 'We did consider that, but what can you say in sixty seconds that doesn't sound too gloating, or pithy to understand'.<sup>45</sup> However as a commercial business, Assemble would have been acutely aware of the need to retain the patronage of clients, and not to cause upset or offence and thereby risk unsettling potential business partners. They had not become involved in the Toxteth project through political or artistic imperatives but from being appointed by a wealthy investor who may have further projects in the pipeline. For Quaintance, their inability to articulate the social context 'may have something to do with the fact that they are not artists'. He suggests that:

Because Assemble are not and do not claim to be from this discipline [socially-engaged practice], because they are not critically engaged, and because they are a firm of architects employed to creatively fulfil a design brief, however open, theirs is an acritical almost completely depoliticized response to a highly politicized social situation.<sup>46</sup>

However in seeking to deflect the perceived lack of criticality, Hudson believes that Assemble are 'part of a long tradition of art working in society, they don't occupy the realm of the single genius solitary artist. This is collective activity

---

<sup>44</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/07/urban-assemble-win-turner-prize-toxteth> [Accessed December 2015]

<sup>46</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]



working within society, not in the hierarchical structure of the art world'.<sup>47</sup> He suggests that 'these are artists working in very specific circumstances to make something happen, to make something change. It's very positive for the future of art – they are trying to *do* something rather than just represent something'.<sup>48</sup> For Hudson, Bruguera and Wright, the radicality of the 'useful' lies in its rejection of the established art world order and in particular the notion of the spectacle. 'This is what's happening' contests Hudson, before adding, 'It is working away from art as entertainment'.<sup>49</sup> In nominating Assemble though, Quaintance accuses Hudson of making 'a hollow, tokenistic gesture of pseudo-radical intent' and of 'instrumentalizing' non-artists in order to 'introduce and legitimise' his *useful* ideology.<sup>50</sup>

## Autonomy

A particularly interesting debate, entitled *Art, Useful or Useless?* took place at Teesside University on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2015, shortly before the Turner Prize award was announced. It involved Alistair Hudson and Pavel Buchler – international artist and Professor at Manchester School of Art. Following a presentation by Hudson containing many of the ideas outlined above, Buchler responded that 'useful art is an oxymoron' and in very Kantian terms, proffered that for him 'the uselessness of art is the very purpose of art'.<sup>51</sup> Buchler concedes that 'there is a social need for creativity – but we are not talking about art'. He was particularly indignant that Hudson could assume the authority to talk about art as though it was a self-evident domain of human endeavour, 'it is not', he exclaimed, 'it is a very special category of human endeavour distinguished precisely by not fitting any other'. Buchler asked, 'what is the usefulness of dance or poetry?' Quoting Stéphane Mallarmé's view that 'the poem is the object escaping', Buchler went

---

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/turner-prize-2015-housing-estate-collective-nominated>[Accessed April 2016]

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/12/turner-prize-2015-shortlist-nominations-assemble-bonnie-camplin-janice-kerbel-nicole-wermers> [Accessed December 2015]

<sup>49</sup> <https://vimeo.com/134189412> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>50</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>51</sup> <https://vimeo.com/148607435> [Accessed April 2016]

on to suggest that ‘art is the thing, the object escaping its condition and what is the condition of the thing?’ he asks, ‘it is its thingness, the practical purposes for which it can be used’. Buchler went on to cite Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack* (1914) to illustrate his point that you could hang bottles to dry on the sculptural form – but not on the art. Buchler felt that Hudson’s activities were giving in to the pressures of instrumentalism and capitalism, as ‘it is the alienation [brought about by] the practical considerations – what Adorno calls the ‘practical life’ – which is the key feature of capitalism’. In a reference to Hannah Arendt, Buchler went on to argue that ‘there is a human necessity for this domain [art], this identity that goes beyond all utility’.<sup>52</sup>

In looking at the relations between contemporary art and the instrumentalizing pressures of utility, an interesting light can be shone through the reading of John Roberts’ texts on autonomy, negation and critical distance. Roberts is particularly interested in how Adorno defines autonomy in art, ‘first and foremost as a *social relation* between art’s production and reception’, and that art needs to set itself against the institutional arrangements, social circumstances and market forces in which it finds itself.<sup>53</sup> Roberts contests that Adorno’s concept stands in defiance of those who believed that in order to divest itself of the constraints of the market, art needed to insert itself directly into everyday life:

For to dissolve the function and utility of the artist into that of the activist or technician is to remove the singularly critical function of his or her place as a producer in art’s advanced relations of production, his or her capacity to produce non-instrumental ‘thought experiments’.<sup>54</sup>

Roberts believes that practitioners of socially-engaged, post-relational art forget this, pushing art into non-aesthetic reason in order to secure maximum utility or effectiveness. He argues that this just forces the artist into a position under the ‘dominant instrumental interests of the culture’ and weakens the role of aesthetic reason. Roberts believes that the artist needs to maintain a position outside of the ‘hands-on’ engagement in social activism and that an important

---

<sup>52</sup> <https://vimeo.com/148607435> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>53</sup> John Roberts, ‘Revolutionary Pathos, Negation, and the Suspensive Avant-Garde, p. 721.

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, p. 720.

critical distance is achieved by the artist pursuing a practice ‘without fully investing ideologically and socially in these activities’.<sup>55</sup> It is this, he contends, that reinforces art’s autonomous position. Roberts proposes that it is art’s ‘capacity to move across aesthetic reason and non-aesthetic reason, art and non-art, [that] is the very condition of its renewal’.<sup>56</sup> This is where he brings together the ideas of autonomy and determinate negation, an argument that will resurface when discussing the work of Theaster Gates. He ventures to suggest that art needs to be in a position of continual negation – always seeking to escape the instrumentalizing power of the culture industry. For ‘without distance and negation ... art loses what marks it out as ‘not-of-capital’, by sublating itself into the capitalist everyday, the new art becomes effectively either a form of social decoration or a form of social work’,<sup>57</sup> or capitalist plaything. Gene Ray insists ‘that without its autonomy, art under capitalism can no longer claim to be art’.<sup>58</sup>

Stephen Wright acknowledges the historic importance of Immanuel Kant’s twin concepts of the ‘disinterested spectator’ and ‘purposeless purpose’ of art (the latter is particularly relevant to this context). They created the space within which art’s autonomy flourished and presaged an explosion in the scope of artistic endeavour, however for Wright and many others, autonomous art has come at a cost, for he believes ‘the price to pay for autonomy are the invisible parentheses that bracket art off from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm’.<sup>59</sup> Wright suggests that many practitioners are redefining their engagement with art, ‘less in terms of *authorship* than as users of artistic competence’, insisting that art should foster more robust use values and ‘gain more bite in the real’.<sup>60</sup>

At the heart of Wright’s theory of usership lies the concept of the 1:1 scale, as

---

<sup>55</sup> Roberts, p. 722.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, p. 722.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts, p. 721.

<sup>58</sup> Gene Ray, ‘Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector’, *Third Text*, Vol.21, Iss.3, (London: May 2007), p. 243.

<sup>59</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>60</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

Wright notes in *The Lexicon*, 'Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward usership rather than spectatorship are characterised more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale'.<sup>61</sup> He suggests that, as useful art seeks to escape its modernist autonomy, rather than employing representations, scaled-down models or assisted ready-mades, artists are grappling with full-scale initiatives at the 1:1. At the scale of the 1:1 it becomes difficult to discern the difference between the actual thing or event and the artistic intention, Wright contends that artist's practices 'are both what they are, and propositions of what they are'.<sup>62</sup> This leads him to suggest that these practices have a 'double ontology' – 'a primary ontology as whatever they are, and a secondary ontology as artistic propositions of that same thing', although he readily accepts that practices with double ontologies at the 1:1 scale do not immediately appear as art. Indeed, 'they don't look like anything other than what they also are; nor are they something to be looked at and they certainly don't look like art'.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps the most radical step for Alistair Hudson to take would be to shake off the awkward and inconvenient associations with contemporary art altogether and accept that the successful socially-engaged creativity that he strongly supports can best be described as 'critically-engaged design' or 'good architecture'. Which begs the question: in order to also work as art, must the initiator consider that her work has a double ontology and want it to work as both art and real life? And if the initiator doesn't consider their work to possess this double identity can a curator nominate it anyway? In what he believes to be a final irony, Morgan Quaintance suggests that 'the new conservatism of utility' and 'the rhetoric of use values' have been deployed to close down 'the same expansive, inclusive and progressive nature of contemporary art that enabled an architecture group to be nominated for the Turner Prize in the first place'.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>62</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>63</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>64</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

## **Chapter Two: Art, the Architectonic and Future Works**

## Introduction

From the start of my doctoral research it had been important to engage with architectural theorists and researchers. I wanted to understand their interests and concerns with a view to incorporating these enquiries into my wider investigations of social engagement, functionality and use in relation to contemporary art. Indeed considerations of the *architectonic* – objects and spaces of utility – has been a cornerstone within the development of my own practice. Peter Osborne, writing in his 2013 publication *Anywhere or Not at All*, believes that since the 1960s ‘architecture has been a primary bearer of the conceptuality of contemporary art’ and that “‘architecture’ is a term without which contemporary art would be hard-pressed to continue to exist”.<sup>65</sup> For Osborne, the architectural aspect of contemporary art is that of a ‘socio-spatial effectivity’ and that it represents art’s ‘social being in the world, its aspiration to effect change’.<sup>66</sup>

The Sheffield School of Architecture has established a considerable reputation for its critical engagement with the profession and for its strong social conscience, I was fortunate that Dr. Stephen Walker was happy to open a dialogue and in November 2014 we were able to meet and exchange ideas for collaboration at the Architectural Humanities Research Association conference in Newcastle upon Tyne. Twelve months later I approached Stephen with a view to instigating a project with the School that would involve working more closely with staff and students, engaging with their fields of study and taking part in the studio sessions. I had identified an M.Arch module called Future Works, led by Dr. Renata Tyszczyk, that sought to address issues of energy, industry and making against the backdrop of the increasing implications of climate change. The module emerged in response to the 2008 Climate Change Act and its UK cross-party commitments to the reduction of carbon emissions by 2050 ‘that promise to have huge impacts on industry and the built environment’.<sup>67</sup> Future Works was also part of the AHRC funded Stories of Change project that aimed

---

<sup>65</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, (London; Verso, 2013), p. 141.

<sup>66</sup> Osborne, p. 142.

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/architecture/march/studios> [Accessed February 2016]

to revive stalled public and political conversations about energy by looking in a fresh way at its past, present and future.

Both Renata and associate lecturer Julia Udall were happy for me to witness, interrogate and engage with the themes and ideas emerging from the module over a six-month period. This involvement, and my responses to it, culminated with an exhibition of work entitled *de-,dis-,ex-*. at the Bloc Projects art space in Sheffield in October 2016.<sup>68</sup> This chapter seeks to reflect on the conversations, proposals and ideas that occurred during that time, together with my own enquiries and research, by considering the development of each of the three exhibited art works in turn.

---

<sup>68</sup> In adopting *de-,dis-,ex-*. as the title for the exhibition in Sheffield, I was consciously referencing a publication from 1998 -*de-,dis-,ex-*. Volume two, *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity* edited by Alex Coles and Alexia Defert.

## Part One: *Future Primitive* (2016)

*The art space occupies an area ten metres long and five metres wide, it sits at the end of one leg of a 'U' shaped set of low buildings constructed around a secure courtyard accessible from the lane. The exhibition area sits within a single-storey brick building with one long elevation of metal-framed windows and a timber-framed saw-tooth roof with West facing blacked-out glazing, the roof rises to six metres at the apex. The walls have been boarded and painted white, the concrete floor has been painted dark grey.*

*'Future Primitive' (2016) consists of three distinct formal elements. On the floor towards the centre of the space, six 2'x4' sheets of repurposed white painted plywood, are held in a relationship - like the vanes of a windmill - by a water-jet cut and rolled steel hub. A short distance away a similar locus accommodates twelve gently curved smoke-fired ceramic blades and next to this, leaning against the wall, a turbine of six rusted steel plates are held in a fully welded radial assembly.*

## Energy

'Energy' the impetus behind all motion and activity is 'the capacity to do work'<sup>69</sup> or 'the power to do work'<sup>70</sup> and derives from the Greek *energeia* 'action, act, work'. Energy – its generation, distribution, use and mis-use – was a central concern to be addressed within the Future Works M.Arch module at the Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA). Future Works had a central role as part of the AHRC funded Stories of Change project whose focus was on energy and community. The over-arching project aimed to reveal the dynamism and diversity in the relationship between society and energy in the past and present in order to catalyse the popular and political imagination regarding potential low-carbon futures. However, research had shown that many people felt

---

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/energy> [Accessed November 2016]

<sup>70</sup> <http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/62088?rskey=FGDATq&result=1#eid> [Accessed November 2016]



disengaged, disempowered or actively hostile to the kinds of changes to the UK's energy system required to meet the targets embedded in the 2008 Climate Change Act. The project attempted to create a more energetic and plural public debate, promoting a more imaginative sense of the scope for action.

The support of the AHRC had allowed Future Works to initiate connections with a number of partner organisations, establishing working relationships with various groups in the Derwent Valley area of North Derbyshire, including the Derwent Valley Mills Trust, J. Smedley Ltd, Derby Museums and the Transition Town groups in Belper and Melbourne. One of the site visits included time at J. Smedley Ltd. who manufacture fine knitwear under their own name and for a range of up-market brands, they are one of the longest established factories in the country having been on the same site since 1784. As a consequence production takes place in a labyrinthine warren of buildings from various time periods nestled together next to the river. Within the context of the discussions on their energy use it was interesting to note that the original water-wheel housing had recently been uncovered, still relatively intact. Rising concern among businesses more generally, regarding increasing energy costs – which are only likely to rise further on the back of carbon taxes and investments in renewable energy – have prompted interest in the possibility of businesses generating their own power, much as they did two-hundred years ago. As part of the day's events the SSoA students had been briefed by Smedley and Gripple Ltd – a Sheffield based company – to investigate options for re-introducing river-based energy generation. Ian Jackson of Transition Town Belper, when interviewed for the Stories of Change archive, described how he and his fellow activists had been working for over five years on an increasingly convincing study to re-employ mill infrastructure at Strutt's Mill on the river Derwent to generate hydro-electric power for the town. Their scheme sits alongside an impressive range of community projects looking to deal head-on with our overreliance on fossil fuels. However this project together with many like it were dealt a fatal blow with the government's decision at short notice in 2015 to reduce the feed-in tariff payable to small-scale energy generation schemes.

Listening to both company executives and community-based activists I was struck by the extent to which they felt that the impetus to deal with the challenges of energy use – whether financial or ideological – lay at the local level. A number of interviews within the Stories of Change archive reinforced the view held by many of the contributors, that central government was too compromised and too encumbered to deal quickly and effectively with the need for innovation and change. Ian Maclean, the Managing Director of J. Smedley believed that companies were making huge strides to reduce their energy use ‘despite the lack of leadership from central government’. The students, in addressing the needs of their prospective clients, developed a number of schemes and ideas involving small-scale and community-based energy generation exploiting wind, solar and hydro-power. Through researching historic precedents they proposed to re-introduce regional or city-wide ‘micro’ grids and to re-establish the visual and audible links to energy generation. In making energy generation ‘noisy’, the students hoped to increase awareness among the populace of the resources required to generate electricity and instil a greater sense of its value.

In considering the site visits, the dialogue and the students’ response I was reminded of a previous period of concern for energy use in the early 1970s. The oil crisis of 1973 – when the oil producing countries of OPEC had restricted production – had engendered enormous concern for energy security and painted a clear picture of what it would be like to live in a world coping with a limited oil supply. Domestic power cuts and a three-day week for industry highlighted the country’s dependence on oil and was an early example of the increasing interdependence of global trade. This sense of vulnerability reinforced an already established concern among the radical movements of the time, of the need for alternative sources of community-based renewable energy. In 1976 the editors of *Undercurrents* – part of the left-leaning underground press – published *Radical Technology*, a hands-on guide to building and harnessing small-scale technologies at the level of the home and the neighbourhood.<sup>71</sup> The publication became a touchstone for the

---

<sup>71</sup> *Undercurrents* - ‘the magazine of alternative science and technology’ was founded by Godfrey Boyle and published bi-monthly in England between 1972 and 1984.

development of *Future primitive* encompassing a daring and challenging vision of the future, ‘a fundamental re-examination of the role of technology in modern societies’.<sup>72</sup>

Together with information on sourcing and acquiring materials, the book sets out – through diagrams, illustrations and instructions – proposals for re-purposing existing machinery and incorporating it into energy generating devices. The imagery and language is strangely historic and yet still forward thinking and utopian. It contributed to a growing sense that I wanted the art work to sit in an ambiguous temporal location, suggestive of emerging concepts of de-centralised local energy generation but at the same time as relics from a forty year-old technological experiment. The time-shift was echoed in the rediscovery and possible re-employment of two-hundred year-old river-based energy-generation infrastructure, a time period that had witnessed the introduction, exploitation and decline of steam power and centrally generated coal-fired electricity.

## The Hand

UNESCO has listed the Derwent Valley as a world-heritage site due to ‘its series of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century cotton mills and an industrial landscape of high historical and technological interest’.<sup>73</sup> The valley is recognized as the birthplace of the industrial factory system, the Silk Mill in Derby sits on the site of the world’s first ‘manufactory’ established in 1704 by John Lombe to spin silk. It is believed to be the first time that a building had been designed and constructed with the sole intention of housing machinery specifically made for its location, and operated by a workforce trained to carry out a limited set of specific tasks. Over successive decades Lombe, Jedediah Strutt and Richard Arkwright refined the system at different locations along the river Derwent until, with the development of Cromford Mills in the 1770s, Arkwright was building housing,

---

<sup>72</sup> Godfrey Boyle & Peter Harper ed. ‘Introduction’, *Radical Technology*, (London; Wildwood House, 1976), p 6.

<sup>73</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1030> [Accessed December 2016]

schools and churches whilst employing entire families, including children as young as seven, to work twelve-hour days. This historical perspective added a certain weight to the M.Arch module's consideration of the place of making and manufacturing within their deliberations.

My practice has consistently sought to engage with different technologies of production and has often combined components manufactured through sophisticated commercial manufacturing techniques with the hand-made and the found. I had noted that both the Silk Mill in Derby and the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) in Rotherham were partner organisations of Future Works within the Stories of Change network. The AMRC had been established in 2001 as a joint venture between the University of Sheffield, the aerospace corporation Boeing and Yorkshire Forward. The facility grew rapidly as it added other high-technology partners such as Rolls Royce and now occupies seven large buildings on its own technology park. The most recent development is Factory 2050, 'a reconfigurable factory' that has 'cutting edge manufacturing and assembly technologies, advanced robotics, flexible automation, next generation man-machine interfaces and new programming and training tools'.<sup>74</sup> Following a number of visits to both institutions, I became particularly interested in exploring what the AMRC's vision of the future entailed and what connections, if any, may be drawn out between the 'world's first factory' and the factory of the future less than fifty miles away. The future, much like the past, entails protecting exclusive production techniques and maintaining a control on knowledge and information in order to extract a financial reward. The AMRC carefully controls access and intellectual property is jealously guarded behind blank walls in an uncanny echo of the fate of John Lombe, who was murdered in 1722, allegedly on the orders of the King of Sardinia, for stealing the secrets of silk spinning while working for an Italian producer.

Sheffield has a long and well-recognised history of manufacturing, particularly in the making and forging of steel, including the invention and development of stainless steel. The period of collaboration with the SSoA took place within the

---

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.amrc.co.uk/about/background/> [Accessed November 2016]

context of a city-wide celebration of making organised through ‘The Sheffield Year of Making 2016’. In continuing the exploration of ‘making’ in my own work I chose to use a modern zinc-plated steel sheet for the central hubs of *Future Primitive*. The components were cut from the plate using a computer-controlled high-pressure water-jet cutter, implementing instructions created in a computer-aided-manufacturing programme by the machine’s operator. The flat components were then rolled to form rings, a task I undertook myself on a piece of equipment that would be familiar to nineteenth-century steel workers before a friend welded the rings closed using relatively unsophisticated equipment housed in a tumble-down shed. I chose to exploit these varied methods of production as a further reflection on the principles laid out in *Radical Technology* – an ad-hoc use of readily available fabrication processes both formal and informal – a practice familiar the world-over yet standing in antithesis to the Factory of the Future.

One of the themes explored by John Roberts in his book *The Intangibilities of Form* (2007) is the relationship between artistic labour and the labour of industrial production, or ‘general social technique’ – which for Roberts encompasses emerging scientific and technological innovation as well as industry and mechanical reproduction. After speculating on the place and legacy of Duchamp and the ‘un-assisted readymade’, and on deskilling and reskilling in contemporary art, Roberts states that ‘the readymade may have stripped art of its artisanal content, but this does not mean that art is now a practice without the hands of the artist and without craft. On the contrary, art’s emancipatory possibilities lie in how the hand is put to work *within*, and by, general social technique’.<sup>75</sup> It could be argued that contemporary art is more intimately connected with general social technique than ever before, within my own practice I look to exploit the results of both non-artistic productive labour and outsourced immaterial labour.<sup>76</sup> For Roberts ‘the readymade not only

---

<sup>75</sup> John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, (London; Verso, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> In this context immaterial labour refers to those tasks centred on conceptual activity, largely in the digital realm, that have become more prevalent as the service economy has increasingly replaced industrial factory-based production. The term, originally coined by Maurizio Lazzarato in 1997, was used extensively by Negri and Hardt in their publications *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004). They defined immaterial labour as ‘labour whose aim is to produce immaterial goods’ (*Multitude*, p334) whilst acknowledging that

questions what constitutes the labour of the artist, but brings the labour of others into view'.<sup>77</sup> Indeed I draw upon my own experience in industrial production to explore further the role of the artistic hand. Roberts too believes that 'the hand still remains key to the "aesthetic re-education" and emancipation of productive and non-productive labour'.<sup>78</sup> The reskilling that Roberts refers to are the strategies that contemporary artists adopt when negotiating their place in relation to general social technique. Indeed he believes reskilling is the attempt by artists to distinguish art from general social technique through the physical intervention in, and manipulation of current and emerging technical processes. In drawing together the materials for assembling *Future Primitive* it was important to continue the engagement with non-artistic production. Six steel pressings were recovered from a commercial waste re-cycling operation and welded into one of the central hubs. A further iteration exploited pre-cut 2' x 4' sheets of plywood – a versatile and strong material created by bonding together veneers of timber running at right angles to each other – and manufactured in huge volumes in dedicated production facilities.

## Making

What it is 'to make' sits at the core of my art practice. This activity may include 'to bring into being by forming, shaping, or altering material' or 'to put together from components' but would also include 'to frame or formulate in the mind'.<sup>79</sup> Indeed our relationship to 'making' was a central concern to be addressed within the period working alongside the architectural students. I have become particularly interested in the concept of 'critical making' a term coined in a publication from 2008 by Matt Ratto – Associate Professor and director of the Critical Making lab in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto.<sup>80</sup> Ratto created the term in order to 'theoretically and pragmatically connect two

---

'the labour involved in all immaterial production, we should emphasise, remains material... what is immaterial is its product' (Multitude, p111).

<sup>77</sup> Roberts, p. 24.

<sup>78</sup> Roberts, p. 98.

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make> [Accessed November 2016]

<sup>80</sup> Matt Ratto, 'Taking Things Apart/Making Things Together: A Critical Making Experiment.' Royal College of Art/Imperial College, London, UK, April 22, 2008.

modes of engagement with the world that are often held separate – critical thinking, typically understood as conceptually and linguistically based, and physical "making", goal-based material work'.<sup>81</sup> In an interview with Garnet Hertz, Ratto explained that 'we tend to think of criticality as a particular form of thinking, one in which we pause to reflect, and step briefly away from action in the world in order to reason and consider these actions'.<sup>82</sup> He believes that 'the activity of being critical is mainly thought of as one bound up in language and to some degree outside the actual world, critical thinking as it is theorized and as it is taught is first and foremost a linguistic practice'.<sup>83</sup> However he believes that when we think of making we have a tendency to consider it as the opposite of thinking – as a 'form of habitual or rule-following behaviour' – and that there is a strong inclination to consider 'making as a conceptual and programmatic'.<sup>84</sup> Although firmly grounded on the notion of critical scholarship as defined by the 'Frankfurt School scholars such as Adorno and Benjamin', Ratto was seeking ways to balance what he felt was the 'linguistic bias' that persisted within material semiotic theories. As he states in the interview 'this is the source of the cognitive dissonance that one feels when hearing the phrase "critical making" – critical we see as conceptual and making is seen as non-conceptual'.<sup>85</sup> Based initially within a university English department Ratto sought to link 'material modes of engagement with a critical reflection on our technical environments', looking for ways to link deep reflection and critical theory with making practices. For Ratto the act of making – the process itself – can reveal insights not captured in the final object. The 'lived experience of making' can deepen our understanding of the socio-technical environment, for he sees critical making 'first and foremost as a way of learning and exploring the world'.<sup>86</sup> In an echo of the social engagement of the original proponents of critical theory, Ratto believes that critical making is deeply political and that by raising an awareness

---

<sup>81</sup> Matt Ratto, 'Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in technology and Social Life'. *The Information Society*. 27 (2011), p. 253

<sup>82</sup> Garnet Hertz ed, *Conversations in Critical Making*, (PACTAC, CTheory Books, University of Victoria, 2015), p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Hertz, p. 35.

<sup>84</sup> Hertz, p. 35.

<sup>85</sup> Hertz, p. 39.

<sup>86</sup> Hertz, p. 40.

of the constructed nature of our environments we can link agency with a 'deeper analysis about why the constructed world is the way it is'.<sup>87</sup>

Having completed the hubs for the *Future Primitive* assemblies I sought to combine them with other material objects that would expand the narrative of making. Given the extended conversations around energy, its generation and use that had been taking place in the SSoA module, I decided to reference the development in turbine technologies at AMRC by manufacturing twelve ceramic blades that would slot into the final steel hub. However these vanes would be made from general-purpose stoneware clay, rolled and cut to shape by hand before being dried on a curved former and smoke-fired in a backyard kiln. In certain dystopic futures we may need to rediscover technologies of making currently lost to domestic-scale production, a situation anticipated within the 'protect and survive' era narrative of *Radical Technology*.

In his own development of the conceptual framework of critical making Garnet Hertz contends that Matt Ratto's framing of critical making as primarily a process 'limited its ability to disseminate critical thought through objects'.<sup>88</sup> Hertz believes that focusing exclusively on the development process limited the reach of critically made things to challenge the wider public's understanding of the relations between society and technology. He argues that 'objects are effective as things to think with' and that they can link concepts in a different way to language. Hertz maintains that 'although constructed objects are often imprecise in communicating ideas in comparison to language, things have the strength to hit you powerfully and forcefully'.<sup>89</sup> Striking a final note of accord in their conversation together, Ratto suggests that 'with its emphasis on critique and expression rather than technical sophistication and function, critical making has much in common with conceptual art'.

---

<sup>87</sup> Hertz, p. 45.

<sup>88</sup> Associate Professor in the Faculty of Design and Dynamic Media at Emily Carr University, Vancouver.

<sup>89</sup> Hertz, p. 4.



## Part Two: *Escape* (2016)

*The assembly occupies approximately 2.5 metres by 2.5 metres of wall space and consists of 38 panels in one of two distinct triangular forms. The panes are cut from found 5mm orange polystyrene sheets and are held together using black plastic cable-ties. The arrangement is a development, an unfolding of a geodesic dome that spreads in an undulating form across the wall's surface.*

### Architecture

I first contacted Stephen Walker – Reader in Architectural Theory at SSoA – during the summer of 2014, shortly before formally starting my PhD research. It was during our early conversations that I talked about my interest in the work of Ken Isaacs – an American architect working in the 1950s and 60s – who had developed a series of radical living structures that he believed offered a chance for people to fundamentally change the way they organized their lives and, therefore, society at large.<sup>90</sup> I had created a number of art works exploring the spatial and organizational qualities of Isaacs' designs for a system of 1.2 metre softwood-framed cubes. Configured in stacked groups of four or six, these cubes and panels – sitting in the centre of domestic rooms – allowed for the configuration of sitting, sleeping and work spaces entirely independent of their structural surroundings. Isaacs – who also developed a number of exterior living structures – believed, along with a number of post-war architects and designers that humankind could be encouraged to 'tread more lightly' on the earth in more communal, interdependent and economic shelters.<sup>91</sup> Richard Noble suggests in his essay *The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art* (2009) that 'the utopian hope of radical social transformation... remains one of the most important legacies of modernism'. For Noble, the utopian is 'the impulse or aspiration to make the world better either by imagining a better way to be or actually

---

<sup>90</sup> 'Work bigger than furniture but smaller than architecture' Several of Isaac's proposals were gathered together in his self-published title *How to Build Your Own Living Structure* from 1974.

<sup>91</sup> 'I saw and felt the necessity for major simplifications and recognition of positive earth relationships and environmental change therapy to release us all from the high-tech maniacs' Ken Isaacs (1974)

attempting to make it so', although he recognises that it is hard to identify a single common aesthetic strategy he notes that 'the architectural model' is one of the forms that 'tends to recur'.<sup>92</sup>

My interest in the radical architecture of this period was part of an on-going enquiry into what Martin Herbert describes as 'sifting defunct modernism in search of something useful'.<sup>93</sup> In his text *An Archival Impulse* (2004) Hal Foster believes that archival artists 'seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text and favour the installation format'.<sup>94</sup> Foster suggests that archival art, by re-visiting and sifting the past, can uncover discarded moments hinting at new directions: 'these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again'.<sup>95</sup> Although I am not necessarily interested in interrogating 'the archive', per se, I am interested in the fact that Foster felt that by 'probing a misplaced past' we may be able 'to ascertain what might remain for the present'.<sup>96</sup> Foster has also described his notion of the 'diachronic axis'.<sup>97</sup> The diachronic, he suggests, sits in tension with the synchronic, and describes an axis through time – in other words, how later moments reposition prior moments.<sup>98</sup> In an interview with Alex Coles from 1998, Foster, drawing on Freudian concepts, states that 'there are exchanges and relays between the past and the present that cannot be charted simply in terms of style and form. The relation is one of continual displacement, revision and subsumption'.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Richard Noble, 'The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art', *Utopias*, ed. Richard Noble, (London, Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> Martin Herbert, 'Sifting Defunct Modernism in Search of Something Useful', *Ruins*, ed. Brian Dillon, (London; Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p. 89.

<sup>94</sup> Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* No.110, (Cambridge, Mass: Autumn 2004), p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Foster, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Foster, p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), p. xi.

<sup>98</sup> Synchronic linguistics aims at describing language rules at a specific point of time, even though they may have been different at an earlier stage of the language. A diachronic approach considers the development and evolution of a language through history.

<sup>99</sup> Hal Foster, 'Trauma Studies and the Interdisciplinary – An Interview', *de-,dis-,ex-. Vol Two. The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (London: Backless Books, 1998), p. 165.

It was during our discussion on the work of Isaacs that Stephen Walker suggested that I might be interested in *Architecture or Techno-utopia* (2010) by Felicity D. Scott. In her book Scott explored a number of utopian architectural experiments that took place during the 1960s and early 1970s as Modernism and post-war idealism waned. Scott, too, noted that:

It seems appropriate to ask, especially in the current moment of protest against global social and economic injustice, human rights violations, environmental destruction and yet another cynical, imperialist war, whether dissent ends inevitably in melancholy, disengagement and nostalgia. At issue, then, is whether there are other lessons to be learned from those earlier failures, lessons at the nexus of architecture, technology and politics that might open into other possibilities.<sup>100</sup>

The figure of Richard Buckminster Fuller looms large in Scott's narrative and although familiar with his more prominent schemes, it was interesting to note just how pervasive many of his ideas had become during the period. Most notable had been his development of the geodesic dome, a structure first created as a Planetarium in Germany in 1926 by Walther Bauersfeld, a technician at Zeiss. Buckminster Fuller's original vision had been to systematically retool the industrial system to mass-produce dome components on assembly lines, thereby turning 'weaponry to livingry'.<sup>101</sup> Embraced by 1960s 'drop outs' as environmentally sound and as a radically different alternative to establishment building practices, the geodesic dome also appealed to the same interest in technological futures that had engaged Buckminster Fuller's original adopters; the military.

Looking back on this period, Lloyd Kahn who had self-published *Domebook 1* in 1970 and was 'largely inspired by R. Buckminster Fuller', suggested that 'as

---

<sup>100</sup> Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia*, (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 2007), p. 153.

<sup>101</sup> The full quote is 'It is now highly feasible to take care of everybody on Earth at a higher standard of living than any have ever known. It no longer has to be you or me. Selfishness is unnecessary. War is obsolete. It is a matter of converting our high technology from Weaponry to Livingry'.

Fuller romanticized science and technology, the geodesic dome became a metaphor to builders for the space age and the age of transcendent science'. 'Fuller' Kahn stated, 'implied that the lightest weight transparent dome was an image of structure in its purest manifestation and that you were somehow in touch with the universe in building a dome'.<sup>102</sup> As Scott notes 'domes were, for a short while, the counterculture's architecture of choice'.<sup>103</sup> 'Drop City' – the original and archetypal counter-cultural rural commune established in Colorado in 1965, 'sprang' according to Scott, 'energetically and haphazardly from the communes' drug fuelled anarchy and the detritus of American consumer culture'. Drop City represented an escape from the rigid and oppressive lifestyle of an older generation and, according to Scott, 'would soon play a role in the exodus of the urban hippies to rural sites in the West and Southwest'.<sup>104</sup> She suggests that the domes offered 'symbols of quick escape from the cities' and quoting commune member Bill Voyd she suggests that the Drop City occupants believed themselves to be 'self-exiled strangers, immigrants on our own native soil'. Writing in his publication *The Alternative; Communal Life in America* (1970) though, William Hedgepeth believes that the dome builders understood dropping out not as a 'cop-out' but as producing 'outposts, testing grounds, self-experimental laboratories, starting points for whole hallucinatory metropolises'.<sup>105</sup>

I first constructed a piece of work in response to these themes and the mathematics of the geodesic dome in early 2015, exploiting the skeletal structures of modified found umbrellas held in tension with 3D printed jointing components. Assembling my geodesic structure from the material waste of our pan-capitalist present continued to resonate with the ruins of Fullerian utopian modernity. This was particularly the case when viewed in the light of more current concerns regarding migration, dislocation and precarity. As pressure grows on societies through population growth, globalisation and climate change we are seeing large numbers of people on the move for a range of economic

---

<sup>102</sup> Lloyd Kahn, 'the Dome', *Domebook 1*, (Shelter Publications, 1970), p.109.

<sup>103</sup> Scott, p. 155.

<sup>104</sup> Scott, p. 155.

<sup>105</sup> William Hedgepeth, *The Alternative: Communal Life in New America*, (New York; MacMillan, 1970), p. 20.

and social reasons. Families are relocating to fast-growing 'shanty' towns on the edges of large cities, assembling ad-hoc dwellings from freely available and found materials. As Richard Sennett noted 'migration is the icon of the global age, moving on rather than settling in'.<sup>106</sup> It is the consideration of this conflation of utopian idealism and survival imperatives that has given rise to my interest in the geodesic dome. It is the notion of 'escape' – particularly as articulated by Zygmunt Bauman – that unites these themes:

Semantically, escape is the very opposite of utopia, but psychologically it is, under present circumstances, its sole available substitute: one might say its new, updated and state-of-the-art rendition, refashioned to the measure of our deregulated, individualised society of consumers. You can no longer seriously hope to make the world a better place to live in; you can't even make really secure the better place in the world which you may have managed to carve out for yourself.<sup>107</sup>

Richard Noble, Professor of Art at London's Goldsmiths College, acknowledges that for art works to be utopian they need to offer two things that seem 'to pull in rather different directions: on the one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit' while at the same time – and here he references Ernst Bloch – there is some insight into the 'darkness so near'. That is to say, the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to *escape* the here and now in the first place'.<sup>108</sup> Over the following twelve months I produced a series of dome-based forms, before creating the piece of work that would eventually become *Escape*. Working with sheets of 5mm polystyrene foam that I had found in an adjacent building, the triangular panels were assembled into a completed dome form. After some weeks the assembly was de-constructed in such a way as to form an opened-out, two-dimensional development that became reminiscent of a denuded and hostile landscape.

---

<sup>106</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, (New Haven CT; Yale University Press, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times*, (London; Polity Press, 2007), p. 104.

<sup>108</sup> Noble, p. 14.

## Anticipation

In recent years reports of accelerating sea level rise, species extinction, shifting weather patterns and stressed landscapes have become increasingly common. Although we are well supplied with scientific information about environmental change, we often do not have the cultural resources to respond thoughtfully and to imagine our own futures in a tangibly altered world.<sup>109</sup>

This paragraph is taken from the flyleaf of *Anticipatory History* (2011) a publication from Uniform Books that brings together articles emerging from an AHRC-funded project at the University of Exeter. *Anticipatory History* as the title suggests, seeks to engage with history in order to anticipate change, where 'change is part of the past... not just part of the future', highlighting 'history that calls attention to process rather than permanence'.<sup>110</sup> In the context of anticipatory history art is both provocation against and solace towards newly contextualised, and rarely benign, futures. As a discipline that plots routes from past to future through the prism of our current understanding anticipatory history shares much in common with contemporary art.

We study the past not in order to find out what really happened there or to provide a genealogy of and thereby a legitimacy for the present, but to find out what it takes to face a future we should like to inherit rather than one that we have been forced to endure.<sup>111</sup>

Walter Benjamin, upon whom Foster draws, believed that 'every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.<sup>112</sup> Benjamin was particularly critical of the historicist

---

<sup>109</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, Simon Naylor and Colin Sackett, ed. *Anticipatory History*, (Axminster; Uniform Books, 2011), flyleaf.

<sup>110</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, Simon Naylor and Colin Sackett, p. 10.

<sup>111</sup> E. Domanska, 'A conversation with Hayden White', *Rethinking History*, Vol.12, Iss.1, (London, May 2008), p. 3-21.

<sup>112</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, (London; Collins-Fontana, 1973), p. 257.

notion whereby history proceeds chronologically through a chain of cause and effect reasoning, assuming the onward acceleration of progress. He insisted that history should stop ‘telling the sequence of events like beads on a rosary’,<sup>113</sup> and operate instead through a ‘telescoping of the past through the present’. Rather than linear, causal notions of history, Benjamin preferred the metaphor of a constellation to describe a spatial relation of events and contexts in which the historian should relate the present to the past. In his *Arcades* project Benjamin describes the role of the ‘historian as *chiffonnier*’ or rag-picker, sifting through and picking over the refuse of history – collecting and bringing together interesting pieces.

Anticipation is the act of taking up, placing, or considering something beforehand: it is ‘to take action in preparation for something that you think will happen’. The geographic term ‘anticipatory adaptation’ is used in the discussion of climate change to describe action taken before impacts are felt. Perhaps the art work that has been created in response to the themes and ideas explored within the Future Works collaboration can be seen as a constellation of ‘anticipatory objects’.

## Material

‘Do you ever wonder what an object’s next life might be?’ so asks architect Jennifer Siegel in *Microtopia*, a film by Jesper Wachtmeister.<sup>114</sup> I have become increasingly engaged by the ideas concerning the past and future life of objects. I believe that the central activity of re-using found materials and commodities already engages in a fundamental way with issues of resource use, global iniquities and the neoliberal exploitation of nature, but the practice also raises questions concerning our relationship with objects. Inevitably when re-purposing items of our material culture, thoughts drift to speculating on an object’s previous role as well as the place and context in which it was used and may yet

---

<sup>113</sup> Walter Benjamin, p. 259.

<sup>114</sup> Jesper Wachtmeister, *Microtopia*, (Sweden; Solaris Filmproduktion, 2013), <http://vimeo.com/ondemand/microtopia/77603793> [Accessed December 2014]

be used. My practice has consistently appropriated things at-hand, re-using objects that are readily available, re-purposing the everyday and re-working discarded or abandoned items. This process seems to be one of the few ways in which to resist, what Benjamin HD Buchloh termed ‘the almost totalitarian implementation of the universal laws of consumption’.<sup>115</sup> The argument is well worn yet, for me, it is an important commitment to create the art work from materials that in themselves reflect on the over exploitation of resources and our wasteful consumption. My approach also gained some impetus from Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Postproduction* (2002), particularly his argument that ‘the artistic question is no longer ‘what can we do that is new?’ but ‘how do we make do with what we have?’” and that ‘it is no longer a matter of starting with a ‘blank slate’ or creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production’.<sup>116</sup> Claire Bishop reiterates this point in her 2012 article for *Artforum* stating that ‘questions of originality and authorship are no longer the point; instead, the emphasis is on a meaningful re-contextualisation of existing artifacts’.<sup>117</sup> John Roberts also reiterates my own view that incorporating commercially manufactured objects draws attention to their unremarked upon ubiquity in trans-global trade, or as he eloquently phrases it ‘art invites both productive and non-productive labour into its realm as a means of reflecting on the conditions of both art *and* labour under capitalist relations’.<sup>118</sup>

In 1961, William C Seitz, then associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated his landmark survey exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. Seitz defined the medium of assemblage as consisting of works that are ‘predominantly *assembled* rather than painted, drawn, modelled or carved’ and made up entirely or in part of ‘pre-formed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials’.<sup>119</sup> The American interpretation of ‘assemblage’ emerged at the same time as their adoption of the Duchampian ‘ready-made’, giving an added impetus to this 1950s’ and 60s’

---

<sup>115</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ‘The predicaments of Contemporary Art’, *Art Since 1900*, (London; Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 677.

<sup>116</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, (New York; Lucas and Sternberg, 2002), p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> Claire Bishop, ‘Digital Divide’, *Artforum*, (New York; September 2012), p. 21

<sup>118</sup> Roberts, p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, (New York; MOMA, 1961), p. 11.



American version of the artform. It was the work undertaken by Picasso, Braque and Schwitters –particularly their *papier collé* from the early years of the twentieth century – that could be said to have created the initial impetus to mix up traditional and unexpected materials. Picasso's *Mandolin* (1914) made from wood remnants was described as 'neither sculpture nor painting, nor architecture' by Alfred H Barr Jr. Indeed the collage, bricolage and constructivist work undertaken at the beginning of the twentieth century by a number of the historical 'avant-garde' artists opened out into an enormous field of artistic possibilities through the rest of the century. The critic Clement Greenberg noted in his essay *Sculpture in our Time* from 1958, 'the new sculpture tends to abandon stone, bronze and clay for industrial materials like iron, steel, alloys, glass, plastic, celluloid etc.' He went on to state that the new sculpture can be simply put together; 'it is not so much sculpted as constructed, built, assembled, arranged'.<sup>120</sup> The whole history of Modernism in art is inextricably linked with assemblage in its various forms and suggests a fundamental relationship between the emergence of the consumer society and the incorporation of cast-off or valueless detritus of modern life into art works. Curator Sandra Leonard Starr notes that 'assemblage is the only artform that consistently reminds us of the processes that brought it into being, as the use of real objects and materials from daily life evokes the activities we have pursued in order to live'.<sup>121</sup>

In assembling *Future Primitive*, I chose to exploit sheets of roughly painted plywood that had been salvaged from a previous art work and bore the history, marks and physical alterations from their earlier role. These destructive layers of use leave 'traces' rather like a palimpsest of entropy. The materials for *Escape* – polystyrene and nylon – are both products that have been synthesized from oil-based polymers, they reflect on the ubiquity of plastics in our everyday lives and environment. I am particularly interested both in the fact that 'found materials' have complex associations that can be experimented with and that, at the same time, as discarded and rejected objects they communicate

---

<sup>120</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Sculpture in Our Time', ed. John O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957 -1969*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 58.

<sup>121</sup> Sandra Leonard Starr, 'Assemblage Art; A Pocket History', *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, (Los Angeles; James Cocoran Gallery, 1988), p. 9.

a great deal about our relationship with resources and consumption. Lea Vergine believes that 'in disposing of waste we cover our tracks, art strips them bare and offers a glimpse of our destination'. She goes on to suggest that 'the anarchic salvaging of rejects and scrap by painters, sculptors and photographers is also a type of utopia and as such coagulates and dissolves with the passing of time'.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Lea Vergine, *Trash: From Junk to Art*, ed. Lea Vergine, (Milan; Electra, 1997), p. 5.

### Part Three: *Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil* (2016)

*An eight-minute video loop is running on a wall mounted monitor screen. The video appears to show a rusted and crudely assembled hand tool slowly rotating and tumbling in black space while spot-lit from above.*

#### Use

In May 2016 I spent a day at the Silk Mill in Derby engaged in a number of workshops organised by Future Works, exploring our relationship to energy use. There is considerable debate within the wider national and international context regarding the best way to tread a path toward a sustainable energy future against the backdrop of the increasingly evident effects of carbon emissions on our climate. Whatever decisions are made regarding the exploitation of fossil fuels, the use of nuclear or renewable energy sources and the control of so called 'greenhouse gases', we will all need to learn to use energy much more effectively in the future. According to John Thakara, Senior Fellow at The Royal College of Art, 'American citizens today use more energy and physical resources in a month than their great-grandparents used during their whole lifetime'.<sup>123</sup> However this increase will be dwarfed by the escalating demand from fast-growing economies such as China, India, Brazil and Mexico, as their citizens expect to enjoy the fruits of technology long enjoyed by their Western contemporaries.

Engaging with change at the local level was a theme consistently explored through the Future Works module. One area of human endeavour that has been essentially local throughout Western democracies until relatively recently, is the growing of food. As Thakara points out, 'the industrial system that keeps cities fed consumes ten times more energy running itself than it delivers as nutrition that you and I can eat'.<sup>124</sup> He goes on to state that 'agriculture and food now account for nearly 30 per-cent of goods transported on Europe's roads; in the

---

<sup>123</sup> John Thakara, *How to Thrive in the Next Economy*, (London; Thames and Hudson, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> Thakara, p. 53.

UK 25 per-cent of car journies are to get food'.<sup>125</sup> Despite the complexities regarding land use and ownership there has been a significant increase in the number of urban agricultural projects in industrialised nations. In a wide variety of approaches, individuals and groups are seeking to re-establish a commitment to locally grown food. Thakara believes that:

A powerful grassroots movement has given us community-supported agriculture and box-schemes, the 100 mile diet and Slow Food. Sales of vegetable seeds have skyrocketed; backyard chickens are now commonplace; and schoolyard gardens, organic farms, and farmers' markets have proliferated.<sup>126</sup>

In responding to the Future Works research themes, I became increasingly interested in the idea of creating a tool that might be used for breaking up and lifting areas of hard surfaces and thereby allowing access to the productive soil below. As Bill Mollinson, one of the founders of the permaculture movement notes – when discussing the future of agriculture and energy use – ‘a lot of land with potential for food growing will have to be de-paved’.<sup>127</sup> The ‘liberation of the soil’ began in the United States as an illicit form of activist action, with ‘small groups of guerrilla de-pavers, wielding pickaxes and wheelbarrows’,<sup>128</sup> removing hard surfaces to reveal the underlying soil bed. The notion of removing unnecessary hard surfaces – of returning the soil to productive use, of growing food closer to the point of need and thereby reducing the overall energy requirement fed into the development of the art work. Mollinson believes that ‘there is enormous potential to transform suburbia into a semi-agrarian patchwork of communities for localised food self-sufficiency’.<sup>129</sup> In drawing the obvious connection to the liberation politics of May 1968 – by titling the piece *Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil* – I sought to make a connection of radical intent, activism and direct action.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Thakara, p. 67.

<sup>126</sup> Thakara, p. 53.

<sup>127</sup> Thakara, p. 53.

<sup>128</sup> Thakara, p. 54.

<sup>129</sup> Thakara, p. 54.

<sup>130</sup> Drawing a reference to one of the memorable slogans painted onto Parisian walls in 1968 ‘Sous les pavés, la plage!’ (Beneath the cobblestones, the beach!)

My practice has often engaged with the implications of the functional art object. On this occasion I chose to assemble the de-paving tool from parts of previously used, but damaged or redundant hand tools. The object was an ad-hoc assembly welded together utilising leftover steel bar and configured to offer the breaking and levering functions that would be required of the tool. This object was informed by – indeed it emerged out of – my critical engagement with *Arte Útil* and Usership theory. It was during this period that I attended the Arte Útil Summit at mima in Middlesbrough, discussing social engagement, agency and the place of art with Tania Bruguera, Alistair Hudson and Stephen Wright. I explored the critical arguments concerning *Arte Útil* in my previous chapter and in the art work too, I wanted to complicate the reading of useful art in order to explore the ambiguities of the functional art object. I chose to do this by negating the object's utility, by offering only an image, a representation of the tool and not the tool itself. The image of the tool would suggest utility but would serve no practical use, although it may be useful in generating discussions and debate. Furthermore, the revolving animation had been made possible through a sophisticated high-definition 3D laser scan that I had commissioned from a commercial business, who also created the rendered files from which the video was generated. These highly detailed digital files, created using emerging digital tooling and non-productive immaterial labour, could also be used to create a simulacrum of the tool manufactured in a metal alloy using sophisticated 3D printing technologies. In theory therefore, the information for producing the tool could be sent instantly to a production unit anywhere in the world, for activists to de-pave their locale. As with *Future Primitive*, I chose to emphasize a type of ambiguous temporal placement: the image of the rusted and worn object was shown in a museological frame, in black space with spotlighting suggestive of the display of archaeological artefacts. I sought to engage again with the diachronic axis. Was the object evidence of a pointless social experiment or a prized future relic? What social relations lay congealed in the object at the centre of this piece of work?

## Object

In *Detours of Objects* his introduction to *The Object* – one of Whitechapel Gallery's *Documents of Contemporary Art* – Anthony Hudek quotes Jean-Francois Chevrier's maxim: 'Every object is a thing, but not everything is an object'.<sup>131</sup> However to mischievously paraphrase I would propose: Not every object is a thing, but everything *is* an object. I suggest this primarily as a response to the emerging ideas connected with 'speculative realism'<sup>132</sup> and 'object-oriented ontology'.<sup>133</sup> A world where, according to Hudek, 'the object, whether thing, tool, commodity, thought, phenomenon or living creature, has regained its rights, freed from the subject's determining mind, body and gaze'.<sup>134</sup> In his book *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) Ian Bogost noted that everything that we tend to see as a discreet object, is of course made up of other objects. A wooden chair leg is made up of fibres, capillaries and lignin; these, in turn, from cells, water and sugars all the way down to fundamental quantum particles. The leg though is also part of a chair, an interior, a house, town etc. Everything can be seen as an object made up of other objects. Hudek suggests that, for Martin Heidegger, the thing – in distinction to the object – is 'autonomous and self supporting', that it is 'assertive of its independence, its presence as well as nearness'. Objects, in contrast, are everywhere in equal measure neither near nor far. However Bill Brown (Professor of English at the University of Chicago and close friend of the artist Theaster Gates), sees an 'audacious ambiguity' regarding objects and things. In *Thing Theory* from 2001, Brown suggests that 'you could imagine things as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects'. However Brown believes that, at the same time, things are the 'amorphousness out of which objects are materialised by the (ap)perceiving subject'. He sees a 'simultaneity' an 'all-at-onceness' of 'the object/thing

---

<sup>131</sup> Antony Hudek, 'Introduction/Detours of Objects', *The Object. Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London; Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> In 2007 a seminar at Goldsmiths College brought together four main proponents of what would be called 'speculative realism': Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton Grant.

<sup>133</sup> See Graham Harman, 'The Third Table', *100 notes-100 thoughts series*, Vol 85, (Kassel: dOCUMENTA 13/Ostifildern- Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

<sup>134</sup> Hudek, p. 16.

dialectic', because for him 'the story of objects asserting themselves as things is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing names less an object than a particular subject-object relation'.<sup>135</sup>

W. David Kingery points out in *Learning from Things* (1996), that 'tools are artifacts as well as signals, signs and symbols. Their use and functions are multiple and intertwined. Much of their meaning is subliminal and unconscious'. He goes on to note that 'some authors have talked about reading objects as texts, but objects must also be read as myths and as poetry'.<sup>136</sup> Brown also acknowledges the 'sensuous or metaphysical presence' by which things exceed their materialization, 'the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems'.<sup>137</sup> In one of his early essays on language and translation, Walter Benjamin speculated on the concept of a language of things, a mute and magical medium of material community.<sup>138</sup> Hito Steyerl, writing in her 2012 essay *A Thing Like You and Me*, believes that for Benjamin 'things are never just inert objects, passive items or lifeless schucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, which keep being exchanged'. She believes that in Benjamin's later thought in particular 'modest and even abject objects are hieroglyphs in whose dark prism social relations lay congealed and in fragments. In this perspective, a thing is never just something, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces is petrified'.<sup>139</sup>

I have speculated in the past as to whether the 'tool' might exist as a transitional object, rather like toys and fetish objects. The term 'transitional object' was first coined by the British paediatric psychologist D.W. Winnicott in the 1950s. Having identified the object as more than 'a thing in itself' he created the term to describe an object, such as a teddy bear, that has a quality for a small child of being both real and made-up at the same time. For Hudek, 'the toy, like the relational art object, is unpredictable; there is no telling when it will lose its aura

---

<sup>135</sup> Bill Brown, Thing Theory, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 28, No. 1 (Autumn 2001), p. 4.

<sup>136</sup> W. David Kingery, *Learning From Things*, (Washington; Smithsonian Press, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>137</sup> Brown, p. 5.

<sup>138</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (1916), *Reflections*, (New York; Schocken Books, 1978).

<sup>139</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'A Thing Like You And Me, 2012', *The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London; Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), p. 49.

and lapse into thingness'<sup>140</sup> American artist Mike Kelley made use of soft toys and dolls that he found in thrift stores to express childhood and repressed memories, adolescent rites, traumas and fears. These objects carry a particular kind of weight and unstable meaning because they oscillate between worlds. I have been interested in whether the term could be used to describe other kinds of objects with an unstable set of relations. For instance, in my earlier work *Backyard Furnace* (2013) I assembled an art work that was also a tool for smelting aluminium, by re-combining everyday items; a metal waste bin, a steel mop handle, a stainless steel cocktail shaker, a discarded hairdryer etc. The tool worked perfectly well and afterwards the whole furnace, (plus bricks and charcoal) took its envisaged place in the installation *Liquid Living* (2013). Did the object's status oscillate between functional tool (outside the gallery) and art work (inside the gallery)? I took this duality further with *Urban Bodger* (2014), assembled from found materials, this wood-turning lathe was engaged with and operated by visitors to the exhibitions. Simultaneously, it was a tool of utility and an art work. Can a 'model' be a transitional object? In a recent paper Dr. Teresa Stoppani, Head of the School of Architecture at Leeds Beckett University cites a 1985 issue of *Gran Bazaar* where Piera Scuri observes; 'The model is perhaps the most ambiguous and most deceptive medium of representation'. Stoppani goes on to state that 'the model oscillates between object and concept (and object again)... when the model loses this dynamic between transition and translation and presents itself as a resolved object it no longer is 'model''.<sup>141</sup> These ideas seem particularly relevant in the context of the *de-,dis-,ex-* exhibition in Sheffield, where a number of the pieces could be understood as models for something as yet unrealized. Is it possible for the work to exist in a space of tension between assemblage, construction and model? In a conversation regarding his 2014 show at The Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, the artist Ian Kiaer explains that, for him, 'The model can hold multiple associations and also remain unknowable. It could just be a very particular form that is impossible to describe, or a piece of material that stands in, or acts as a

---

<sup>140</sup> Hudek, p. 22.

<sup>141</sup> Teresa Stoppani, *From Model to Modeling*, Talk at The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. June 2014. Transcript, p. 3.



foil to something else. The model is both evasive and ridiculously precise'.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps in the end, as for much else in art, it is the model's ambiguity that has value, for as Stoppani notes 'The model is suspended between conception and realisation, both its own realisation and the realisation of the work which it informs or refers to'.<sup>143</sup>

## Repurpose

From the outset, the Future Works M.Arch module at the Sheffield School of Architecture sought to engage with the future of energy use and manufacturing by identifying and examining historic points of resonance for 'new points of departure'. By understanding previous attempts to harness and control energy sources, students were encouraged to see what could be re-adopted and re-used. Earlier solutions were viewed, not as backward or unsophisticated, but as ideas and technologies with untapped potential – capable of reintegration into a flexible network or constellation of energy supply. In an early note for the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin gave architecture a central place in his theory and critique of history: 'Architecture is the most important witness of the latent "mythology"'.<sup>144</sup> The 'mythology' to which Benjamin refers is the positivist ideology of automatic historical progress. For Benjamin architectural artifacts, particularly the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, make visible the transience of the 'new' and the lie of the promise of progress in commodity culture by physically embodying outmoded styles. Urban environments, made up as they are by buildings and structures in various states of construction, dilapidation and ruin, highlight the continual turnover of fashion and capital, and act as metaphors for, and images of, the operation of history.

The School of Architecture more generally and the Future Works module in particular explore the notion of architecture as part of a much broader geographic and sociological field. Their approach is echoed by Peter Osborne,

---

<sup>142</sup> Ian Kaier, *Ian Kaier: Tooth House*, Exhibition Catalogue, (Leeds; HMI, 2014), p.15.

<sup>143</sup> Stoppani, p. 4.

<sup>144</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, (Frankfurt and Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), p.1002.

who believes that ‘architecture should no longer be understood to refer to one or the other side of the opposition between design/plan and building’. He sees the deepening historic ambiguity of the profession as crucial, for he believes that the term ‘architecture’ is now ‘distributed across conception and materialization in the traditional senses’.<sup>145</sup> Julia Udall, associate lecturer on the module, maintains an engagement with architectural practice in the city through her association with Studio Polpo – an ethically-based social-enterprise architectural practice whose work focuses on an engagement with social, environmental and economic sustainability. Studio Polpo have been at the forefront of helping retain the unique ‘little meisters’ workshop spaces in Sheffield, these clusters of independent yet interdependent workspaces evolved to house the cities’ metal-working and cutlery trades in the Nineteenth century. The Bloc Projects art space, within which the *de-, dis-, ex-* exhibition took place, is part of just such a group of buildings. Originally built to house metal workers producing specialist knife blades for the catering industry, the workshops are now home to painters, potters, silversmiths and various other craftspeople. In a final and important contextual echo of my own work these buildings have been re-purposed and re-used. The layout of the buildings around a central courtyard, the large windows and modest room sizes are re-employed to satisfy different requirements. There are interventions, alterations, additions, marks and traces that attest to its past and reflect its current position and role. For Peter Osborne, the architectonic has functioned as a ‘signifier of the social’ in contradistinction to post-war Western art that has been ‘locked in the prison of a restricted understanding of its autonomy’. ‘In this respect’, he goes on ‘architecture – like design more generally – *is an archive of the social use of form*’.<sup>146</sup> Each of the three works exhibited at the conclusion of the six-month residency draw to some extent on this archive. Each art work draws together historical fragments, technological processes and ideas of social reorganization – interrogating the diachronic to explore ‘a possible future wrapped up in a possible past’.<sup>147</sup> Foster believes that a certain frustration with the predominant art discourse leads archival artists ‘to recoup failed visions in art, philosophy and everyday life into

---

<sup>145</sup> Osborne, p. 142.

<sup>146</sup> Osborne, p.141.

<sup>147</sup> Herbert, p. 92.

possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations, to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia'.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> Foster, p. 22.

## Conclusion

In adopting *de-, dis-, ex-* as the title for the exhibition in Sheffield, I was consciously referencing a publication from 1998 -*de-, dis-, ex-*. *Volume two, The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity* edited by Alex Coles and Alexia Defert. Coles, Professor of Transdisciplinary Studies at Huddersfield University, whose other publications include *DesignArt* (Tate Publishing 2005), has established a considerable reputation in theorizing the field at the meeting points of art, design and architecture. Whilst referencing the contributions of Julia Kristeva and Hal Foster in the introduction to the book, Coles suggests that ‘new sites [of interdisciplinary practice] can only be progressively opened up’ by ‘maintaining the degree of uncertainty that interdisciplinary work bears’.<sup>149</sup> In seeking to engage with staff and students at The Sheffield School of Architecture and the M.Arch studio/ research module Future Works in particular, I believed that an enriched criticality could be brought to bear upon the development of my own art practice. I sought to offer a different perspective and approach during discussions, presentations and workshops, that on the whole were marked by the range of contributions from historical, sociological and cultural fields as well as business and commerce. Both lecturers and students attended the final exhibition, extending and deepening the dialogue at the interface of art, architecture and theory within a context of rapid social change. A fully documented and annotated version of the exhibition will be uploaded to the AHRC Stories of Change archive website for future researchers to access.

Architecture – as envisaged and put into practice within Renata Tszczuk’s and Julia Udall’s Future Works module – opened a field of engagement that was both challenging and thought provoking. I was particularly struck by the extent to which the students were pressed into dealing with real-world issues in live projects that involved hands-on physical interventions as well as communication graphics. The parallels between the student’s engagement and the core principles of *Arte Útil* were striking and reinforced an increasingly firm conviction that useful artistic interventions and devices were already being vigorously

---

<sup>149</sup> Alex Coles, ‘Introduction’, *de-, dis-, ex-*. *Vol Two. The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (London: Backless Books, 1998), p. iii.

pursued within the architectonic field. In the previous chapter I questioned whether the proponents of *Arte Útil* would drop the attachment to contemporary art and instead embrace the notion that socially-engaged creativity could best be described as ‘critically-engaged design’ or ‘good architecture’? Indeed at the Arte Útil Summit in 2016 Tania Bruguera announced that she no longer wished to be known as ‘an artist’, turning her attention instead to a direct involvement in Cuban politics. Theaster Gates, on the other hand, has developed his artistic practice *starting* from a base in urban planning and politics, through ceramics and onto socially-engaged practice. Following an appreciation of the role of collaboration and participation evident within the geographic and sociological context of the SSoA project, I intend to give due consideration to the deeper and multi-layered social engagement within Gates’ practice. It is an understanding of his practice and the place of the useful public space as well as the object that forms the foundation of the third chapter of the thesis.



*de-,dis-,ex-*. Installation view



*Future Primitive* (2016)



*Future Primitive (2016) part*



*Escape (2016)*



*Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil (2016)*

## **Chapter Three: Art, the Architectonic and Theater Gates**



## Part One: Social Engagement

### The Collector

On October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015, just a matter of weeks before Assemble were confirmed as winners of the Turner Prize for that year, Theaster Gates hosted the opening event at The Stony Island Arts Bank in Grand Crossing, South Chicago. The Arts Centre was the latest addition to an increasingly ambitious programme, led by the artist, to create a series of community-oriented cultural buildings in the blighted and predominantly black inner-city neighbourhood. Designed by William Gibbons Uffendell and built in 1923, the savings and loan bank was once a vibrant part of the local community before being abandoned in the 1980s and left to deteriorate for the next thirty years. Shortly before it was due to be demolished Gates persuaded Rahm Emanuel – the recently elected mayor of Chicago – to sell it to him for one dollar on condition that the artist raise all of the \$3.7m required to bring the building back into use. It was at this point that Gates created the initial one hundred \$5000 dollar ‘art bonds’ etched with the slogan ‘In Art We Trust’ – together with the artist’s signature, onto marble blocks salvaged from the bank’s urinals. White Cube agreed to waive their commission when selling the art works at Art Basel Miami in 2013, in the proven expectation that the pieces would continue to circulate at ever-increasing exchange values on the international art market. As Gates acknowledged ‘People are already trading them up. They are functioning like a real bond’.<sup>150</sup>

The Arts Bank now houses exhibition spaces, a bar, a Japanese tea café, a bookshop, meeting spaces and a floor of offices for the Rebuild Foundation and a community bank among other organisations. Most importantly for Gates the Arts Bank now offers a permanent home to four archive collections that the artist has acquired over the last ten years. The second floor houses the sixty thousand antique glass lantern slides rescued from a skip that had belonged to the University of Chicago’s art and archaeology department (the University now

---

<sup>150</sup> Theaster Gates interviewed by Tim Adams, *Observer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2015.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

insists that these were donated to the artist). The third floor has a collection of vinyl records by the producer and DJ Frankie Knuckles, widely regarded as the ‘godfather of house music’ – Gates acquired the albums after Knuckles died in 2014. While the top floor holds a collection of four thousand objects of ‘negrobilia’ acquired by Chicago-based African-American businessman Edward J. Williams between the 1920s and 1990s – ‘in an attempt to remove offensive materials and stereotypical images of the black diaspora from circulation’.<sup>151</sup> Most importantly, the Bank also houses the extensive archive of the Johnson Publishing Corporation, established by African-American entrepreneur John H. Johnson. The company published *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines that ‘have documented and presented black lifestyle, black aspiration and achievement as well as black history and thought to a mass public in an unrivalled manner’<sup>152</sup> for over seventy years. ‘I think the bank is the clearest total work’,<sup>153</sup> Gates has said ‘I could work my entire life on the Johnson Library collection and be absolutely satisfied and content’.<sup>154</sup>

These collections, sitting alongside ‘the fourteen thousand books on art and architecture purchased from the failed Prairie Avenue Bookshop’<sup>155</sup> now housed at Dorchester Projects’ Archive House and the eight thousand vinyl records from the bankrupt Dr.Wax music shop now located in the Listening Room, represent an important aspect of Theaster Gates’ artistic oeuvre. The glass slides, the vinyl record collection and the Johnson archive have all featured in exhibition installations in Europe and America – including *12 ballads for a Huguenot House* at dOCUMENTA 13 and *My Labor is My Protest* at White Cube in London – both in 2012. For the piece *Raising Goliath* (2012) Gates suspended a huge 1967 red Ford fire truck on cables and pulleys, counter-weighted by a large steel storage unit housing bound copies of *Jet* and *Ebony*. John Colapinto, writing in *The New Yorker* magazine, believes that this is ‘Gates’ way of suggesting that the burdens of history can be lightened by

---

<sup>151</sup> Rebuild Foundation. <https://rebuild-foundation.org/> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>152</sup> Lisa Yun Lee, ‘Everything and the Burden is Beautiful’, *Theaster Gates*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2015), p. 56.

<sup>153</sup> Yun Lee, p. 93.

<sup>154</sup> Yun Lee, p. 93.

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

acknowledging African-Americans' rich culture'.<sup>156</sup> Elsewhere in the gallery Gates installed an extensive library from the Johnson archive together with access ladders, reading tables and chairs. Gates' use of this material resonates with strong echoes of Hal Foster's notion of the 'archival artist', collecting and exploring archives that, according to Lisa Yun Lee, 'include that which is no longer deemed valuable, the obsolete, the swept-under-the-carpet'.<sup>157</sup> She believes that the Stony Island archives 'have something to say about the barbarism of a society that allows them to be cast off, forgotten and devalued'.<sup>158</sup> Walter Benjamin believed 'that there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism', a statement borne out in both the Williams and Johnson collections.<sup>159</sup>

Gates' need to rescue and reuse evidence of the material world extends beyond the archive to encompass all manner of architectural salvage that is recycled and repurposed into objects and interiors – stating 'I am concerned with the creative reuse of materials'. He goes on to explain that 'I am always finding use for what seems discarded or broken or abandoned, make do and mend at the scale of the object and also at the scale of the city'.<sup>160</sup> The artist's expansive studio and adjoining parking lots are neatly stacked with pallets of salvaged and hoarded materials. Colapinto describes that when 'walking around the workshop, with its emphasis on the handmade – its implicit refusal of the new digital world order – it feels like a very modern medieval guild'.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> John Colapinto, 'The Real-Estate Artist: High Concept Renewal on the South Side', *The New Yorker*, January 20<sup>th</sup> 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>157</sup> Yun Lee, p. 52.

<sup>158</sup> Yun Lee, p. 52.

<sup>159</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999).

<sup>160</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>161</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

## The Developer

The Stony Island Arts Bank launch was also part of the opening nights' events for the inaugural Chicago Architectural Biennial, firmly establishing the venture and the four near-by Dorchester Projects' buildings within the city-wide conversation on urban development. This is something that Gates is both passionate about and experienced in, 'growing up, I'm watching the West Side [of Chicago] get systematically deconstructed' Gates recalls, 'I'm watching the destruction of the most beautiful buildings in my neighbourhood'.<sup>162</sup> Following the completion of a degree in urban planning Gates worked for five years for the Chicago Transit Authority. 'I was a city planner' he says, 'I knew that our city was a machine to be understood and that if you could understand it you could make it work on your behalf'.<sup>163</sup> In an interview with Tim Adams for the *Observer* in 2015, Gates explained:

I knew immediately after graduating that the kind of tactical planning I wanted to do I wouldn't be able to do through a traditional city department. I realised it was actually developers who changed cities. It bugged me that the people with the most agency, the most entrepreneurial spirit, were also the people with the least consciousness about the needs of place. I went after having more agency...<sup>164</sup>

By 2007 Gates had an arts outreach position with the University of Chicago, which is situated in the city's South Side rather like a secure bastion of privilege set amidst an almost exclusively black inner-city ward of high crime and daily violence. The institution has the largest private security force of any public body in the United States. Gates purchased a small bungalow a short walk away for \$130,000 and then witnessed the destruction of the community wrought by the subprime mortgage crisis. In 2008 he bought the empty property next door – fearing it might become a centre for criminality, for just \$16,000. This was the

---

<sup>162</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>163</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>164</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

building that became the Archive House – the first of the Dorchester Projects, a community resource, venue and communal kitchen. As Gates' standing in the art world grew, the neighbours were joined by collectors, gallery owners and critics. Kavi Gupta, Gates' gallery owner, remembers 'taking, one by one, every affluent philanthropist in Chicago down to Dorchester, and the minute they saw Theaster they were, like, "How can we help?"' In 2010 Gates set up The Rebuild Foundation; a not-for-profit company, to run, programme and secure long-term finance for the continuation of the Dorchester Projects and the Stony Island Arts Bank.

At the end of 2016 a far from complete list of projects under the foundation's auspices include the following: Dorchester Industries – an apprenticeship and training programme, Bing Art Books – an art and design book dealer, The Ash Project – exploiting fallen timber to manufacture furniture, Dorchester Art & Housing Collaborative – a mixed income 32 unit housing project, Black Artists Retreat – an annual arts convention, The Archive House, The Listening House, The Black Cinema House and The Stony Island Arts Bank together with projects in St. Louis and Omaha, Nebraska. In addition Gates is Director of Arts & Public Life, a university-funded body that runs the Arts Incubator – a \$3m complex of galleries, cafés and studio space, and oversees the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts. He is the Director of Place Lab, a partnership with the Harris School of Public Policy that is undertaking engagement projects in Gary; Indiana, Akron; Ohio and Detroit.

In 2012 Gates acquired a 28,000 square foot former Anheuser Busch distribution plant for use as a studio, in which he employs a team of sixty artists and makers – an enterprise described by John Colapinto as 'creating an atmosphere a bit like Warhol's Factory but with a socially conscious edge'.<sup>165</sup> He has been handed a million-dollar commission to oversee the installation of the new subway terminal on Ninety-fifth Street, that included a fee of \$250,000. Gates has also recently purchased a three-acre development site in Chicago dubbed 'the Monastery' and is running an \$11m renovation of a sprawling public

---

<sup>165</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

housing complex on Seventieth Street in partnership with a private developer. In something of an understatement Colapinto suggests, 'At times, Gates seems less like an artist who works in buildings than like a developer'.<sup>166</sup> However for Lisa Yun Lee writing an almost hagiographic essay, 'Everything and the Burden is Beautiful':

Rebuild provides an institutional structure that is comprehensible to foundations, art patrons and community members. Rebuild enlists teams of artists, architects, developers, educators, community activists and residents to work together to integrate the arts, apprenticeship trade training and creative entrepreneurship into a community-driven process of neighbourhood transformation.<sup>167</sup>

It would certainly appear sensible for both Gates and the large numbers of people now directly and indirectly employed by the organisations that he helped found, for the administration and financing functions to be run entirely separately. Even so, Colapinto, whose piece for the *New Yorker* magazine described Gates as 'The real-estate artist' – a label that Gates himself now uses – notes that 'Gates is now a significant landowner on Chicago's South Side',<sup>168</sup> all of which must seem rather strange for a man who, at the beginning of 2007 'was a somewhat overlooked potter and frustrated town planner'.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>167</sup> Yun Lee, p. 96.

<sup>168</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>169</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

## The Trickster

During the five years that Gates worked at the Chicago Transit Authority he had continued to make pots – an activity that he had taken up during his undergraduate years. When he quit his planning job in 2005 he returned to university and completed a multidisciplinary Masters in urban planning, religious studies and ceramics. This was followed by a short period studying African religions at the University of Cape Town and he then spent some time in Tokoname, Japan. It is here that some of the myth-making starts, for depending on the source, this was either a few months spent staying with a Japanese family or a year spent studying Japanese ceramics under the tutelage of master potters. On taking his job at the University of Chicago in 2006 Gates was thirty-three and ‘very confused’ according to his close friend Hamza Walker, who concedes that ‘pottery was at the center of his artistic life... but pottery is its own artisanal ghetto – a beautiful one, but a ghetto’.<sup>170</sup> Gates found that he was producing bowls that cost several thousand dollars to make but that sold for only \$25. In an interview with Gary Younge he reflected on his predicament:

I decided that the reasons were: I’m a nobody, so the bowl is a nothing; the bowl looks like a lot of other bowls that are mass produced you can buy for even cheaper than \$25; the bowl has no magical context that would help get it valued in other ways. If I could be somebody; if I could elevate the bowl beyond the everyday context, would people value it more? That became my social experiment.<sup>171</sup>

Through his connections with the Hyde Park Art Center, Gates had become increasingly aware that the contemporary art field held greater opportunities for him, ‘I would look at their world and say “Wow that’s so fascinating! Those people are fascinating” Because I knew they didn’t want me in their camp as a

---

<sup>170</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>171</sup> Gary Younge, ‘Theaster Gates; The Artist Whose Latest Project is regenerating Chicago’, *The Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/oct/06/theaster-gates-artist-latest-project-is-regenerating-chicago-artistes-mundi> [Accessed January 2017]

potter'.<sup>172</sup> In a lecture at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2010 Gates described 'the twelve years of struggling to find a way in a world filled with white craft potters'.<sup>173</sup>

In 2007 Gates held a series of soul-food dinners at the Hyde Park Art Center to honour his mentor, Yamaguchi, a gifted Japanese potter who fled Hiroshima for Mississippi where he married a black civil-rights activist and formed a commune. They built a pottery and the evenings' soul-food sushi was served on some of Yamaguchi's plates. Indeed the guests were joined by the master potter's son and Gates presented himself as the potter's protégé. The dinners were a great success and most of the ceramics were sold for relatively high prices. Not long afterwards Gates revealed the hoax, explaining that the son had been an actor and the entire story a fiction; 'the audience had been tricked'.<sup>174</sup> Rather than drawing criticism however, John Colapinto mentions that local curators Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton 'noted the power of an artistic language to invoke, to compel, to falsify first, if need be, the thing one wishes into being'.<sup>175</sup> With this show entitled *Plate Convergence* Theaster Gates had reinvented himself as a conceptual artist.

By all accounts, Gates is personable, engaging and friendly. 'He is an energising presence, precise in his movements, comfortable in his skin. His voice is rich in cadence; occasionally he will burst into song'.<sup>176</sup> He is noted for his ability to adjust his demeanour, stage presence and language in order to best suit his audience's expectations. Colapinto observes that 'Gates is possessed of a flexible speaking voice that, to suit his message and the mood of his audience, can embody half a dozen different characters... In performances, he often projects a teasing, elusive persona that puts an oblique

---

<sup>172</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>173</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>174</sup> Yun Lee, p. 83.

<sup>175</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>176</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]



spin on his social critiques'.<sup>177</sup> Indeed as one observer noted at the Stony Island opening 'Gates spoke about his vision – first in a British accent, then in an American one – his volume gathered strength. "Amazing things can happen in the black community!" he said, finally shouting "All these people on the South Side!"'.<sup>178</sup> Gates, you feel, is someone who had to get used to adapting to his immediate environment quite early on. From a young age he would leave home in the run-down black neighbourhood to attend high-achieving schools on the affluent North Side. As he himself has noted 'I've walked two worlds since fifth grade'.<sup>179</sup> Tim Adams remarks that 'In conversation he slides easily between registers, from knowing bursts of street slang to situationist theory'.<sup>180</sup>

As Gates' practice developed it incorporated a wider range of artistic expression including the staging of a community performance and debating space during a showcase for emerging artists at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary art, tours to the West Side shoe shine stand called Shine King, where Gates shined shoes; to the instigation of the Black Monks of Mississippi, a group of musicians 'who played droning music while he sang mournful cadences that evoked slave spirituals and Zen chants'.<sup>181</sup> The Black Monks consist of a loose and growing collective of Chicago-based musicians and, occasionally, priests that Gates writes for, performs with and directs. The group allows Gates to explore different aspects of his performative practice 'drawing from a deep reservoir of spiritualism and the aesthetic of call-and-response' to collapse the distinction between performer and audience.<sup>182</sup> In 2012 The Black Monks performed at Ronnie Scott's in London to coincide with Gates' exhibition at White Cube, the club noted that 'Gates' performances are highly animated, since for him, sound only works in conjunction with movement of the body'.<sup>183</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>178</sup> Zeenat Nagree, <https://www.artforum.com/diary/id=55103> [Accessed February 2017]

<sup>179</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>180</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>181</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>182</sup> Yun Lee, p. 47.

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.ronniescotts.co.uk/performances/view/1127-theaster-gates-and-the-black-monks-of-mississippi> [Accessed February 2017]

## The Communitarian

In a conversation with Carol Becker, Professor of the Arts and Dean of Faculty at Columbia University School of the Arts, Gates acknowledges that ‘Because of my training, the city is my medium’, adding later ‘Space is the material of the city, I’m engaged in an open dialogue concerning the challenges of people’s right to the city’.<sup>184</sup> It is the organisation of space, the creation of place that underpins Gates’ practice, indeed a commitment to, and a fostering of community is central to his activities. He has stayed firmly rooted in the Grand Crossing neighbourhood despite his increasing success, stating, ‘I’m interested in, “what happens when you stay?”’<sup>185</sup> For, as Mayor Rahm Emanuel acknowledges, ‘He didn’t get known here and pack up and leave. He dug deep’.<sup>186</sup> As Gates admits in a conversation with Perry Chen, the founder of Kickstarter:

The reality in the neighbourhood that I live in, is if I don’t constantly reconcile what I have against what other people don’t, either I need to leave and be around people who have what I have, or I’m constantly engaged in this kind of dynamic flow of opportunity and sharing. And that just feels like smart living.<sup>187</sup>

As Gates was growing up his family attended the New Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church every Sunday. It was here that, as a gifted tenor, he became director of the youth choir at the age of thirteen, while in the pews he was taught that he had a philanthropic obligation. In the interview with Colapinto, Gates reflects on the lasting impact of the church’s teachings, “To whom much is given much is required”, said another way: “The pie gets bigger when you give it away”. Those are simple Bible lessons that kids learn’.<sup>188</sup> Gates draws on an

---

<sup>184</sup> Carol Becker in Conversation with Theaster Gates, *Theaster Gates*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2015), p. 16, p. 28

<sup>185</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>186</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>187</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MsIDkPsGHg> [Accessed February 2017]

<sup>188</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

intriguing mix of religious obligation, communitarian spirit and black consciousness to drive his vision. ‘I was born into an ideological framework that believed in collective endeavour. I didn’t get here by myself, self-made. Biography and geography matter,’ he has stated.<sup>189</sup> Yun Lee believes that Gates does not see ‘social forms of art’ within the history of black creativity, but rather that it ‘relies on community and collective praxis and is characterized by industrious and improvisational making it up as you go along – otherwise known as the art of the hustle’.<sup>190</sup> Talking to Tim Adams, Gates offers:

When you have nothing, when you come from nothing, then you lean on people and you let them lean on you. This gross individualism that middle classness taught us to believe in, it was really an erosive ideology against all that.<sup>191</sup>

Drawing on his boundless energy, Gates acknowledges that ‘I’m just trying to do the best that I can given my calling. I wake up early, and I feel driven to get things done’.<sup>192</sup> Adding, in his conversation with Adams, ‘In my body I felt for a long time that the best political act, the best faith act, is always an act, an action’.<sup>193</sup> ‘I’m a believer in transformative acts’ he explains to Perry Chen, before going on to suggest that this can include ‘signing a deal, making a pot or singing a song’.<sup>194</sup> The act, the action, the doing, are significant tropes within Gates’ practice and this often involves improvisational or collaborative activities. ‘The first “strategy of hope”’, he suggested to Tim Adams, ‘lies in a philosophy of pride in things done well, made well’, before going on, ‘sweeping matters, shovelling matters, it matters that it is done well. How you centre a pot matters. The willingness to elevate super-modest things is either in you or not. I think

---

<sup>189</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>190</sup> Yun Lee, p. 47.

<sup>191</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>192</sup> Becker, p. 22.

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>194</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MsiDkPsGHg> [Accessed February 2017]

that was born in me'.<sup>195</sup> He has suggested elsewhere that a late reconciliation with his father – a tar roofer, and an appreciation of the skills his father had acquired over a lifetime – was reinforced when completing tar paintings together. 'I think we focus too much on the finished work – and not enough on the methodology or process' Gates offered in his conversation with Carol Becker.<sup>196</sup>

In the summer of 2013 Gates installed the latest iteration of his artistic project *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The artist 'has created a studio for making ceramics, which enables the exploration of skill and craftsmanship while training apprentices in the production of porcelain tableware and bricks'.<sup>197</sup> The ceramics studio brought manufacturing into the gallery space, promoting an understanding of the making process and encouraging dialogue about labour and skill-transfer. As the gallery literature explained, 'The making process is the art, the visitor is transported and invited to openly interact with the maker and the art of making'.<sup>198</sup> Gates explained 'I decided I would create an opportunity to reflect on production. Production as an act of importance unto itself, not production for the output of a particular thing'.<sup>199</sup> Talking about the project to Tim Adams, Gates suggested that he wanted to 'make the thing that makes the thing. I was interested in the idea that I could make a pot – or I could make a pottery. I started making wheels and kilns. I wanted to make bricks. And if I could do that then hundreds of people could do it, maybe thousands of people and we could build cities...'.<sup>200</sup>

---

<sup>195</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>196</sup> Becker, p. 12.

<sup>197</sup> <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/the-spirit-of-utopia> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>198</sup> <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/the-spirit-of-utopia> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>199</sup> Yun Lee, p. 67.

<sup>200</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

## The Assembler

In conversation with Lisa Yun Lee, Gates explains ‘I’m very interested in thingness, how things have or don’t have value, how the owners of companies that create things establish value, how the art market thinks about things’.<sup>201</sup> Bill Brown – author of *Thing Theory* and a colleague at the University of Chicago – has written about the act of collecting and the role of the object and has undoubtedly influenced the artist’s understanding of ‘object relations in the expanded field’. Gates began assembling art objects in 2009 utilising leftover materials from the *Archive House* conversion, creating over-sized shoe-shine stands and reinvesting money from their sale into the next *Dorchester Project*. Yun Lee believes that in this way Gates pulls off the ‘extraordinary feat’ of reversing the process by which certain things are deemed valueless and useless in society, ‘redeeming them as a form of privileged uselessness that is exclusively reserved for works of art’.<sup>202</sup> Brown suggests that Gates manages to produce worldly objects that avoid the business-as-usual process of reification, describing the artist’s practice as an act of ‘redemptive reification’. In an essay for the catalogue of *My Labor is My Protest* (2012) at White Cube, Brown states:

Redeeming a neighbourhood (the community, the space, the objects) promises something other than revitalisation-as-usual: not simply turning the valueless into something valuable, but sharing a transvaluation of values, some recognition of the ignored yet integral worth, and the congealed history, that inheres – right there – on the corner, in these bricks, in that strangely stained concrete: the worth that your habits of seeing haven’t let you see.<sup>203</sup>

In a review of the exhibition for *Art Agenda*, Gil Leung acknowledges that certain works, such as the de-commissioned stitched red, white and blue fire hoses of *Gees American* (2012) ‘seem to gesture specifically toward the

---

<sup>201</sup> Becker, p. 67.

<sup>202</sup> Becker, p. 67.

<sup>203</sup> Bill Brown, ‘redemptive reification (Theaster Gates, Gathering)’, in *My Labor is My Protest*, White Cube, London, 2014. p. 36.

transformation of obsolescence into cultural equity'. However a number of the exhibits, *Roofing Exercise* (2012) included, address the unrecognised value of labour itself. Quoting the artist, she suggests that the Gates' primary concern is not about producing art works or building cultural centres but is about 'the appropriation of agency itself'.<sup>204</sup> Gates has acknowledged that he is motivated by 'the desire to see everyday people having control over their lives, a direct engagement', he made this comment to Hannah Ellis Petersen during a discussion about *True Value* (2016), an exhibition that took place at Fondazione Prada in Milan in 2016. In this show Gates transplanted the interior of an entire redundant hardware store from his neighbourhood in Chicago, including all 30,000 objects that lined its displays. Petersen notes, that for Gates, the hardware stores are the gatekeepers of expertise, 'They represent the valuable knowledge of plumbers, electricians and builders, the "shamans" of this world, as Gates reverently refers to them'.<sup>205</sup> Gates rues the loss of small local businesses like these, asking if the hardware store could 'be a stand in for the failure of local economy globally?' 'The more modern society devalues the skills of the craftsmen', he says, 'the more removed it becomes from the elements that make and hold together our material world'.<sup>206</sup> In a telling final comment, he states that 'there is as much knowledge in a screw as in a book'.<sup>207</sup>

In reviewing the place of the object in his practice, Gates often cites the term 'leverage' to explain his approach when using the creation of art objects to fund his community based work.

I think when people buy art, they're buying lots of things. They're not just buying an object. People believe with me that this larger work is important. As a result they believe that the minor work is also important and that there's a way in which one can't exist without the other.<sup>208</sup>

---

<sup>204</sup> Gil Leung, 'Theaster Gates's 'My Labor is My Protest'', *Art Agenda*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012. p. 1.

<sup>205</sup> Hannah Ellis Petersen, 'Theaster Gates on the Nuts and Bolts of Life', *The Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/14/theaster-gates-nuts-and-bolts-fondazione-prada-milan> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>206</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/14/theaster-gates-nuts-and-bolts-fondazione-prada-milan> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>207</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/14/theaster-gates-nuts-and-bolts-fondazione-prada-milan> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>208</sup> Becker, p. 31.

Gates creates objects of utility – such as chairs, tables, storage shelves etc – which take their unremarked upon place within the remodelled interiors, however he then selects certain pieces – some functional, some not – and elevates them to objects of art. The artist is treading a difficult path in his relations with the art market, creating objects to sell through his appointed galleries – a single piece having sold at auction recently for \$250,000 – while denigrating the art world as a whole. ‘I’m the hustler who’s just willing to admit this is all a fucking hustle’, he acknowledged in the interview with John Colapinto. ‘like, you think that Art Basel Miami isn’t a fucking hustle? He went on, ‘for a hundred and twenty-five square feet we got to pay seventy-five thousand dollars... it’s a fucking real-estate scandal’. Colapinto went on to state that for Gates, ‘selling urinal scraps to fund culture in a neglected ghetto is beating the art world at its own hustle’.<sup>209</sup> In the same interview he acknowledged that as his work became more sought-after, he ‘realised that the people who were calling me up and asking if they could have a deal right out of my studio – that they were, in fact, just thinking about the market, and that I would leverage the fuck out of them as they were leveraging me’. For Gates, this mutually exploitative transaction is a way ‘to fund the struggle’.<sup>210</sup> However, it becomes clear as one reads a wider range of interviews, that the cynical ‘hood rat’ is just one of Gates’ many performative personas. Assessing *My Labor is My Protest* with a comment that could just as easily be an assessment of the artists’ entire output, Leung suggests that:

[It] is not just about the production of art works though; it is far more centred on how art production relates, via distribution and exchange, to the creation of communities and markets. Gates fully invests in art’s transformative potential as *fetish* to generate revenue for his larger social and cultural collaborative projects.<sup>211</sup>

---

<sup>209</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>210</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>211</sup> Leung, p. 1.

## Part Two: Where is the Art?

I think I'm a full-time artist, a full-time urban planner and a full-time preacher with an aspiration of no longer needing any of those titles – Theaster Gates.<sup>212</sup>

### Object as Leverage

For his exhibition at White Cube, London in 2015, entitled *Freedom of Assembly*, Theaster Gates presented *Ground Rules* (2015) a pair of large works made from the varnished wooden floorboards removed from a high-school gymnasium. Re-assembled out of order, the coloured markings for different sports gave the pair 'of handsome wall panels', according to the art critic Adrian Searle, 'the look of a mid-century modern painting'.<sup>213</sup> Other work in the show had been assembled from further materials stripped from the South Chicago hardware store: the pegboard carried the random remains of price-tags, labels and cup-hooks – a reflection on the out-moded and the redundant. But as Searle notes 'These kinds of plays are pretty familiar gambits. We are all used, I think, to seeing what looks like abstract art in the everyday'. Even the wall-hung roofing works made from asphalt membranes, roofing paper and tar, 'recall', for one critic 'Barnet Newman or Frank Stella paintings'<sup>214</sup> and reminded Searle 'of Antoni Tàpies, as well as lots of muscle-bound painters who mistake brutal materials for honest work'. For the art critic, 'Gates *Freedom of Assembly* is a play on modernist manners and devices'.<sup>215</sup>

And here is an arrangement of forks, the kind used on forklift trucks. They climb the wall like a Donald Judd sculpture, in two rows. Nearby, another pair of forks hold up a beautifully carpentered pallet of glazed

---

<sup>212</sup> Huey Copeland, 'Dark Mirrors: Theaster Gates and Ebony', *Artforum*, issue October 2013. <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>213</sup> Adrian Searle, 'Nuts, Bolts and Art: The Man Who Turned a Hardware Store into Hard Cash', *The Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/28/theaster-gates-freedom-of-assembly-white-cube-london-review> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>214</sup> Tom Snow, 'Theaster Gates: My Labor is my Protest', *This is Tomorrow*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2012. <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/theaster-gates-my-labor-is-my-protest> [Accessed February 2017]

<sup>215</sup> <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/theaster-gates-my-labor-is-my-protest> [Accessed February 2017]



building bricks. If these are a reference to Carl Andre, another sculpture nearby is a direct take on Brancusi's *Endless Column*.<sup>216</sup>

Yun Lee accepts that the de-commissioned fire-hose works – *Civil Tapestries*, *Flag Series* (2012) and Gates' various tar paintings were strongly influenced by Jasper Johns and Frank Stella respectively and that the artist's submission for the Artes Mundi competition in 2014, *A complicated Relationship Between Heaven and earth or When we Believe*, 'seems to reference Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955–59)'.<sup>217</sup> Perhaps Gates sees the classic American modernist canon as just another archive to interrogate or even plunder. Huey Copeland<sup>218</sup> suggests in his text 'Dark Mirrors: Theaster Gates and Ebony', for *Artforum* in October 2013, that these works and others are 'positioned in the gallery as Afro-modernist ripostes to the white past masters of abstract art and civil society' and yet acknowledges that 'when seen in a gallery setting, these objects by themselves can be uneven in quality and effect'.<sup>219</sup> As Copeland recognises, 'Gates' practice has garnered support from "mainstream" audiences, discourses and institutions. The latter though have relatively little to say about the actual works of art he puts on display, those linchpins of his circular ecosystem'.<sup>220</sup> In his *New Yorker* article, Colapinto recounts a telling comment from curator and friend of Gates, Hamza Walker; "There's a charisma, enthusiasm, where you're willing to forgive..." He stopped himself and started again. "Is it about the sculptural object?"<sup>221</sup> Walker admits in the interview, that at first he was 'non-plussed' by the directness of Gates' fire-hose sculptures and racially themed installations: 'There is an earnestness that almost comes from a naïve vantage point... some of the moves I would look at and say "I can't believe you would do that – or anybody"'.<sup>222</sup> Colapinto summarises Walker's view of Gates' approach as being 'free of the willed

---

<sup>216</sup> <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/theaster-gates-my-labor-is-my-protest> [Accessed February 2017]

<sup>217</sup> Yun Lee, p. 68.

<sup>218</sup> Huey Copeland is Associate Professor of Art History at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

<sup>219</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>220</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>221</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>222</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

cynicism and self-referential ironies typical of academic artists'. 'It turns out', Walker suggests, 'he is much better off for not going through the [art school] system, because there's something else on his mind that didn't get beat down'.<sup>223</sup> Perhaps, as Gates himself has admitted, the art objects should be seen primarily as a source of funding – as leverage – for the larger and more ambitious social projects. With collectors and museums eager to get their hands on manifestations of what the artist has called his 'shine' and on the larger social interventions that they represent. As Copeland states:

For all their historical weight, without the additional charge of Gates' performative presence or a specifying self-reflexive frame a la Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, or Renee Green, the sculptures risk appearing as commodities cynically extruded by the circuitry of the artist's practice, as opposed to activated participants in his on-going spatial transformations.<sup>224</sup>

What then of Gates' projects of social engagement, where do they fit in the contemporary art landscape? And, despite the artist's renunciation of the epithet, what do these projects tell us about the current place of social practice? As Ben Davis acknowledges in 'A Critique of Social Practice Art: What Does it Mean to be a Political Artist?' published in the *International Socialist Review* in March 2016, "'Social practice" as a genre has been around in one form or another for a long time'. Before going on to accept though, that in the United States 'the idea of charging art with a concrete social mission is having a bit of a moment'.<sup>225</sup>

## Social Practice

There are a number of artists who have had a direct influence on Gates' work, including Rick Lowe – an African-American artist based in Houston, Texas –

---

<sup>223</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>224</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>225</sup> Ben Davis, 'A Critique of Social Practice Art: What Does it Mean to be a Political Artist?', *International Socialist Review*, Issue 90, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016, <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

who in the early 1990s bought a row of abandoned 'shotgun houses' and together with other local artists refurbished them for low-income families. Calling the development *Project Row Houses* (1994), Lowe framed the act not as urban renewal but as an art installation that drew 'symbolic and poetic' attention to the problems of homelessness and racial discrimination. Edgar Arceneaux, who worked on Lowe's project, went on to found the Watts House Project – a not-for-profit organisation that gathers artists, designers and residents together to renovate homes as well as the fabric of the community itself. One might also propose *FOOD* founded in 1971 by Gordon Matt-Clark, Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard, an art community restaurant celebrating communal cooking with an open kitchen, or Marjetica Potrc's *Dry Toilet* (2003) an ecologically safe, waterless toilet that was installed in a district in Caracas that had no access to the municipal water grid. As well as acknowledging the influence of some of these precedents, Gates also cites the work of Samuel Mockbee – an architecture Professor at Auburn University, who was enlisting students to transform scrap materials into houses for poor African-American families in rural Alabama during the 1980s. In the wider artistic field, certain projects are widely cited as valuable examples of social practice, such as the Dutch artist-activist Rebecca Gomperts' *Women on Waves* (1999-), a boat that provides abortions to women in countries where abortion is illegal, using the freedom granted by international waters; or Danish group Superflex's *Guarana Power* (2003), an attempt to help Brazilian small farmers develop a commercial soft drink to compete with corporate cartels. As Claire Bishop acknowledged in her 2012 publication *Artificial Hells*, a comprehensive attempt to historicise these kinds of works, 'This expanded field of post-studio practices currently goes under a wide variety of names',<sup>226</sup> before attempting to corral them together under the following definition:

The hallmark of an artistic orientation towards the social... has been a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. To put it simply: the artist is

---

<sup>226</sup> Claire Bishop, 'Introduction', *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso, 2012), p. 1.

conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and a producer of *situations*.<sup>227</sup>

Bishop believes that participation is important because ‘it re-humanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production’.<sup>228</sup> Bishop hoped to retain many of the more political or activist-led endeavours within the artistic field of ‘participation’ by viewing them through a prism of theatrical or performative art practice.

Perhaps the most contested domain of theory and practice that has impacted on socially-engaged art, is that of ‘relational aesthetics’.<sup>229</sup> In his publication of the same title from 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud defined the approach as ‘a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’.<sup>230</sup> Ben Davis believes that Bourriaud ‘explicitly pitched the idea as a form of constructive opposition to an over-commodified world, a way of recovering moments of communal experience’.<sup>231</sup> Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, writing in the March 2011 issue of *Third Text*, contends that “‘relational aesthetics’ was characterised by a naive idea of presence and a greatly exaggerated faith in the space of art [that] soon came to appear as nothing more than PR for the art institution and a small group of its most privileged agents’.<sup>232</sup> Davis agrees, believing that ‘relational art’ came under sustained attack for being ‘essentially mystifying, staging pretend moments of togetherness and obscuring the very real divisions that split the world, with a happy rhetoric of ‘participation’”.<sup>233</sup>

---

<sup>227</sup> Bishop, p. 2.

<sup>228</sup> Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>229</sup> In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud used work by a number of artists to illustrate his proposals on social relations as art form. Including work by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Phillipe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe

<sup>230</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon: Les Presses Du Reel, 2002), p. 113.

<sup>231</sup> <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>232</sup> Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, ‘Scattered (Western Marxist-Styke) Remarks about Contemporary Art, its contradictions and Difficulties’, *Third Text*, Vol.25, Issue 2, (London: March 2011), p. 205.

<sup>233</sup> <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

The attempt, as the Conceptual artists had found before them, to escape the commodification process was gradually undone – as the institutions and the market had no problem reducing the transitory and ephemeral nature of human relations to objects and commodities. Indeed for other critics, Hal Foster and Claire Bishop among them, relational aesthetics actively pursued and embraced capitalist methodologies. ‘It seems to aestheticise the nicer procedures of our service economy (invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments)’.<sup>234</sup> Bishop believes that ‘these participatory artists fail to recognise that so many aspects of their art practice dovetail ... perfectly with neo-liberalism’s recent forms – networks, mobility, project work, affected labour and so on’.<sup>235</sup> Davis contends that against the back-drop of an art world increasingly dominated by a ‘grotesque display of wealth’, a growing number of artists have looked to examples like Lowe’s *Project Row Houses* as the basis for a practice that feels more real. In summary, he suggests that;

‘Social practice’ thus, can be seen as something like a radicalization of a recent trend, picking up on the intellectual armature of ‘relational aesthetics’ but attempting to give it a more explicitly political edge to escape the latter’s incorporation into the art industry.<sup>236</sup>

### The Business Artist

Since the beginning of the 1980s the neoliberal tsunami has wrought sweeping changes throughout western culture. Brian Holmes believes it to be ‘a change driven ahead by the transformation of society on the business model’.<sup>237</sup> He believes that the artistic institutions were co-opted to ‘create a culture for the total mobilisation of all the valuable, productive elements of the population’.<sup>238</sup> In his view art has capitulated to the demands of the market and that many of the

---

<sup>234</sup> Hal Foster, ‘(Dis)Engaged Art’, *Right About Now: Art and Theory Since the 1990’s*, ed. Maria Rakia and Margriet Schavemaker, (Amsterdam: Valiz 2007), p. 78.

<sup>235</sup> Claire Bishop, ‘Participation and Spectacle’ *Living as Form Artist Talk*, <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/talks.htm#!prettyPhoto/0/>. [Accessed November 2016]

<sup>236</sup> <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>237</sup> Brian Holmes, ‘Artistic Autonomy and the Communication Society’, *Third Text*, Vol.18, Issue 6, (London, 2004), p. 547.

<sup>238</sup> Holmes, p. 550.

practices described above have relinquished their position of autonomous criticality. Holmes believes ‘that the values of transnational state capitalism have permeated the art world, not only through the commodity form, but also and even primarily through the artists’ adoption of managerial techniques’. Art writer Jennifer Thatcher agrees, when commenting on artist Mark Leckey’s re-enactment of Chris Anderson’s business bible *The Long Tail* (2006) at the ICA in 2010, she contends that ‘there has been a final convergence of artistic and entrepreneurial values, with artistic values co-opted into entrepreneurialism, then entrepreneurial values co-opted back into artistic practice’.<sup>239</sup> This could very well describe Gates’ practice, Huey Copeland believes that the artist made his name by ‘both perverting and making good’ on Andy Warhol’s desire to be a ‘business artist’. Gates himself has stated that, ‘economy, as the master philosophy, has won. Capitalism as the dominant gene is winning’.<sup>240</sup> Copeland goes on to suggest that Gates is ‘the business artist for the new millennium, which is to say a development artist and an entrepreneurial creator of “public-private partnerships”’.<sup>241</sup> Ben Davis points out that, for a small subset of superstar artists:

The new realities of art production have made it possible to transform themselves into boutique industrialists, licensing out their cachet to help brand a wide variety of products and events. In effect they function as the heads of design firms, with objects being just one of the various product lines they are engaged with turning out (if still the most central).<sup>242</sup>

For Claire Bishop it is the concept of the ‘project’ (of which Gates has many) that is of primary significance, as it foretells of the bureaucratisation of much post-relational art. She suggests that ‘A project aspires to replace the work of art as a finite object with an open-ended, post-studio, research-based social process, extending over time and mutable in form’.<sup>243</sup> Bishop describes today’s

---

<sup>239</sup> Jennifer Thatcher, ‘Crunch Time’, *Art Monthly*, No. 332, (London: December-January 2009-10), p. 8.

<sup>240</sup> Becker, p. 25.

<sup>241</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>242</sup> Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013). p. 135.

<sup>243</sup> Bishop p. 216.

working life as a succession of projects based on successful connections with others, 'what is valued and gives status in this world is the ability to be adaptable, flexible and intellectually mobile'. Bishop goes on to point out that although the term was introduced into the artistic field in the 1990s to describe a 'more embedded and socially/politically aware mode of artistic practice', it is at the same time a working 'strategy for creative individuals under the uncertain labour conditions of neoliberalism'.<sup>244</sup> Neoliberal administrations on both sides of the Atlantic have sought to promote social participation in the arts, in order, Bishop believes, 'to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatized world'.<sup>245</sup> <sup>246</sup> From the perspective of 2016 Ben Davis notes:

What appears at one juncture to be radically opposed to the values of art under capitalism often later appears to have represented a development intrinsic to its future development, for the simple reason that without changing the underlying fact of capitalism, you cannot prevent innovations in art from eventually being given a capitalist articulation.<sup>247</sup>

Gates' de-centred practice is engaged with so many different corners of the expanded field of post-studio practice that it is perhaps inevitable that aspects of his work will appear to contradict each other. However it cannot go unnoticed that while Gates' art objects reflect on the issues of black civil rights and the general disregard for black labour, and that the refurbishment of derelict black neighbourhoods reflect on trenchant discrimination, he is evangelical in his embrace of the capitalist structures that led to these situations in the first place. Even in socially-engaged practice, Rasmussen believes there is rarely any true criticism of the capitalist structures and that 'this is very much a matter of compromising with the established system, of cooperating with it in the hope of

---

<sup>244</sup> Bishop, p. 216.

<sup>245</sup> Bishop, p. 14.

<sup>246</sup> In his essay entitled 'The Art of the Third Way' for *Art Monthly*, No. 241 In November 2000, JJ Charlesworth argues that New Labour's enthusiasm for the 'knowledge economy' and 'creative Britain' informed the development of the government's approach to cultural policy, which saw culture as a 'vehicle for economic and social regeneration'.

<sup>247</sup> <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

repairing some of the damage it causes'.<sup>248</sup> As Copeland accepts, 'it is tempting to lambast Gates' art for its alignment with what Beckwith has termed "late-latest capital's capitulations"', before adding that Gates has 'taken as models those forms of private property – the house, the corporation – whose construction within the Western bourgeois public sphere might seem antithetical to the principles undergirding black liberation'.<sup>249</sup> In his book *Dark Matter* (2011) Gregory Sholette asked the following question:

Is it possible that this enterprise culture has so de-radicalised artists that something approaching an historic compromise or *detente* is taking shape whereby artists gain improved social legitimacy within the neoliberal economy while capital gains a profitable cultural paradigm in which to promote a new work ethic of creativity and personal risk taking?<sup>250</sup>

In assessing Gates' praxis, Jeffrey Deitch former Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, believes that:

His special fusion of art and community activism has made him the kind of artist that people are looking for today. It's not just about addressing issues of art about art, and art about self-identity; it's a new vocabulary, a new approach. The success of his work is measured by its actual impact on the community.<sup>251</sup>

The final sentence is perhaps the most telling, for it suggests an artistic assessment based on *measurable* social outcomes and plays into the hands of those critics, like Claire Bishop who believe that 'the rhetoric of social practice actually dove-tails quite nicely with an overtly neoliberal agenda of replacing government-run social services with well-meaning volunteers offering creative

---

<sup>248</sup> Rasmussen, p. 206.

<sup>249</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>250</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 117.

<sup>251</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]



entrepreneurial solutions'.<sup>252</sup> Huey Copeland concurs, believing that Gates' endeavours 'reflect the extent to which nonprofits, rather than government agencies, are now viewed as providers of crucial services and as "agents of change", a term favored by postmillennial plutocrats and policy wonks alike'.<sup>253</sup> In his article, Ben Davis points out that despite a successful and expanding outcome for Rick Lowe's project, the housing problems in Houston have grown enormously over the last twenty years and that 'juxtaposed against this tremendous need, the handful of properties that the Project Row Houses maintains seems like a drop in the bucket'. He goes on to ask 'Is this "social practice" strand of art a starting point for addressing social problems, or a distraction that keeps us from seeing their true extent?'.<sup>254</sup>

### Critical Distance

John Roberts' position regarding the value of determinate negation was discussed in Chapter One, but it bears repeating in the context of Gates' practice. Roberts believes that the contemporary artist needs to maintain a position outside of the 'hands-on' engagement in social activism and that an important critical distance is achieved by the artist pursuing a practice 'without fully investing ideologically and socially in these activities' and this, he contends, reinforces art's autonomous position.<sup>255</sup> In his opinion practitioners are pushing social practice art into non-aesthetic reason in order to secure maximum utility or effectiveness, he argues that this just forces the artist into a position under the 'dominant instrumental interests of the culture' and weakens the role of aesthetic reason. Claire Bishop too, has argued for an appreciation of aesthetic reason, and even aesthetic judgement, rather than measure the worth of participatory art practices based solely on the outcomes (or even the intentions) of their social interventions.<sup>256</sup>

---

<sup>252</sup> Bishop, p. 13.

<sup>253</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>254</sup> <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>255</sup> John Roberts, 'Revolutionary Pathos, Negation, and the Suspensive Avant-Garde', *New Literary History*, Vol.41, Issue 4 (Baltimore: Autumn 2010), p. 722.

<sup>256</sup> <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/talks.htm#!prettyPhoto/0/>. [Accessed November 2016]

As Ben Davis states, in a strong echo of Stephen Wright's theoretical proposition concerning the 1:1 scale:

The very fact that 'social practice' focuses on tangible issues means that, quite often, its aesthetic aspect is downplayed. Consequently, as it is theorized, the genre often becomes indistinguishable from simple museum outreach, or any other vaguely progressive type of work with some creative connection.<sup>257</sup>

In his article 'What's the Use? Museums Take on Social Practice' for *Frieze* magazine in 2014, Sam Thorne recites an amusing story centred on Tania Bruguera's call to arms – 'It's time to put Duchamp's urinal back in the restroom!' Queens Museum – which has been an important ally in Bruguera's quest for *Arte Útil* – invited the artist to install a replica of *Fountain* (1917) in the institution's toilets. A day later, though, Duchamp's 'R Mutt' signature had vanished, cleaned away by maintenance staff. 'Perhaps this accidental erasure was only appropriate. Even in a museum, art becomes harder to discern once it's been put to work'.<sup>258</sup>

Could Gates be seen as the archetypal *Arte Útil* artist? His *Dorchester Projects* (2009-) has made it into the Museum of Arte Útil as Archive Nr. 062. On the museum website Gates explains that in seeking answers to how cultural and economic disparity happens, he started with presentations 'in the form of little abandoned ceramic houses and drawings or performances that spoke to the issue. And I just got tired of pointing a finger at it and wanted to actually do something about it, challenge it in a real way'.<sup>259</sup> A notably direct reference to Bruguera's own maxim, 'I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing'.<sup>260</sup> Much of Gates' practice falls outside the walls of this particular museum and it is interesting to note that no further or more recent work appears to have qualified for inclusion. It may well be that the co-curators

---

<sup>257</sup> <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>258</sup> <https://frieze.com/article/what-use> [Accessed January 2017]

<sup>259</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/projects/dorchester-project/> [Accessed February 2017]

<sup>260</sup> Nato Thompson, 'Living as Form', *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012), p. 21.

believe that Gates' practice fails sufficiently to 'Challenge the field within which it operates', – one of the key definitions of *Arte Útil*.<sup>261</sup> Gates, one feels, has his eyes firmly set on what he believes to be the greater prize – the activation of community – and is significantly less concerned with accusations of instrumentality. He is not particularly interested in critically-engaged art except as a useful device for generating institutional interest and selling work. Indeed, one suspects that for Gates the notion of the autonomy of art is too closely allied to concepts of individualism, and therefore stands counter to his belief in the importance of committed, interdependent communitarian relationships. It could be argued that Gates has initiated the Archive House, the Listening House, the Black Cinema House etc, for the users and that the value of the work is activated – is realised – by the usership and not the field of contemporary art.

Theaster Gates, although widely read, has little formal art education and, perhaps as a consequence, has no difficulty in slipping between art historical categories, labels and identities. 'A signature of Gates' works is his ability to embrace the hybridity of cultural signifiers', writes Yun Lee.<sup>262</sup> However, as noted previously, for Morgan Quaintance, a lack of formal art education also leads to an artistic position lacking in critical engagement. He concludes that a contemporary art education is required to produce 'critically engaged actors who are uncomfortable with state power and its various methods of citizen subjection'.<sup>263</sup> Those aspects of Gates' practice that might be considered most critically-engaged – the objects referencing black civil rights and labour – are perhaps the weakest elements of his output, only gaining value through their association with the greater participatory schemes. Yun Lee concedes that 'the art world has claimed him (for now)', implying that this may well change.<sup>264</sup> Over time his production has only grown more expansive and complex, 'constantly shifting to meet his own outsize ambition as well as the demands and criticisms

---

<sup>261</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/about/> [Accessed February 2017]

<sup>262</sup> Yun Lee, p. 84.

<sup>263</sup> <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/teleology-and-the-turner-prize-or-utility-the-new-conservatism/2936> [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>264</sup> Yun Lee, p. 84.

of the communities within which he operates'.<sup>265</sup> Copeland believes that his practice can be said to:

work with and against a particular admixture of aesthetics, theories, contexts, and attitudes; white guilt, the archival turn, DIY aesthetics, the uplift impulse, parafiction, actor-network theory, and, perhaps unavoidably, privatization and the concomitant proliferation of nonprofits and NGOs.<sup>266</sup>

In their conversation, Carol Becker asks Gates if he believes that the positive art world response to his work is related to the end of postmodernism and whether we have become 'weary of taking the world apart?' In response, Gates offers, 'It seems some of us are trying to put things back together'. However he acknowledges that 'projects that are successful are largely symbolic' In his interview with John Colapinto, Gates admits that the impact of *Dorchester Projects* has also been largely symbolic, whilst in the same article Hamza Walker accepts that social change in South Chicago has not included 'reaching thousands of children, getting them to lay down their arms'. 'But' he goes on 'We all know these neighborhoods all across America, so we're asking ourselves, "Well how is it going to get fixed? And who is going to do it?" There's a will but not a way. He represents a way'.<sup>267</sup>

### A Double Ontology

The common tendency for socially-engaged artists is to adopt a paradoxical position in which art as a category is both rejected and reclaimed, as Bishop notes, 'they object to their project being called art because it is also a real social process, while at the same time claiming that this whole process is art'.<sup>268</sup> In *Artificial Hells* Claire Bishop makes an interesting reference to *Arte de Conducta* (2002-09), an art school conceived as an *Arte Útil* work of art by Tania Bruguera. Based at her home in Havana and run with the help of two staff, it

---

<sup>265</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>266</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>267</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>268</sup> Bishop, p. 55.

was dedicated to providing training in political and contextual art for art students in Cuba. Bishop acknowledges that the ‘art is both symbolic *and* useful’, refuting the traditional Western assumption that art is useless or without function. ‘This concept’, suggests Bishop, ‘allows us to view *Arte de Conducta* as inscribed within an on-going practice that straddles the domains of art and social utility’. Writing prior to the publication of Stephen Wright’s *Lexicon of Usership*, Bishop then states, ‘Bruguera’s practice, aiming to impact on both art and reality, requires that we grow accustomed to making double judgements, and to considering the impact of her actions in both domains’.<sup>269</sup> I am reminded of Wright’s words – when commenting on the potential of *Arte Útil* – that the intention of the ‘usological’ turn is to get more traction, ‘more bite in the real’. For as Copeland accepts, when quoting the cultural critic Romi Crawford, ‘Gates has effectively mobilized and generously shared both his practice and his properties, creating unique spaces for black cultural exchange, arts education and youth outreach’.<sup>270</sup> He has used his energy and drive to help create a number of social enterprises employing dozens of people – directly and indirectly, whilst also offering extensive opportunities for students, interns and early-career artists. Grappling with the range and scale of engagement undertaken by Gates, one is tempted to draw again on the concept of ‘double ontology’ from Stephen Wright. Objects, spaces, actions, and relationships having ‘a primary ontology as whatever they are, and a secondary ontology as artistic propositions of that same thing’.<sup>271</sup> Ultimately, as Wright makes clear,<sup>272</sup> it is Gates’ complex performative personae that anchor his work as art:

To describe practices in these terms is to make them inherently reliant on *performative* capture to repatriate them into the art frame – otherwise, their secondary (artistic) ontology remains inert, and not so much disappears as fails to appear in the first place.<sup>272</sup>

---

<sup>269</sup> Bishop p. 249.

<sup>270</sup> <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201308&id=43114> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>271</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>272</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed December 2016]

The sheer range – breadth and depth, of Gates’ practice is perhaps, best explained by the proposition that he is viewed primarily as a post-relational performance artist by the supporting institutions, enacting different personae in many different cultural scenarios. Comfortable and relaxed in many guises, it becomes difficult – as with all actors – to discern the real from the overtly constructed. Wright adds that ‘from the perspective of institutional theory, this [failure to repatriate] is intolerable: what is not performed as art, is not art’. Despite the equivocal response to much of his object based work, the institutional support for his ‘performative capture’ – whether musical, craft-based or theatrical – allows Gates the continued luxury of freedom of endeavour whilst making efforts to redistribute some of the art market’s vast wealth. Yun Lee accepts that ‘Gates polemically embraces a set of paradoxes around spectacle and pragmatism, preservation and renewal, art and commerce’. However, in defence, she concludes that ‘Theaster Gates is not only an artist, but also a trickster, performer, activist and urban provocateur... there is no simple art historical imperative in his expansive practice’. ‘But’, she goes on to warn, ‘don’t call Gates a “social-practice” artist, no matter how tempting and easy that may be. It is a label with which he prefers not to be identified’.<sup>273</sup> In a relevant and telling addendum, Wright goes on to suggest that perhaps the art ‘disappears from that secondary [art] ontological landscape altogether in order to gain traction somewhere else’.<sup>274</sup>

In a little over ten years Theaster Gates has achieved a level of output and project completion that would satisfy most people’s ambition for a life-time’s work. Whatever the future position of his artistic standing, the legacy of his rescued archives, his promotion of process and making, together with the cultural facilities will endure. Gates has recently stated that ‘I no longer use “art” as the framing device. I think I’m just kind of practising things – practising life, practising creation’.<sup>275</sup> For, as Gary Younge acknowledges, ‘To refer to Gates as an artist somehow misses the mark. Gates has a narrative people want to buy into. And if some of it is smoke and mirrors, much of it is now bricks and

---

<sup>273</sup> Yun Lee, p. 44.

<sup>274</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>275</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MsIDkPsGHg> [Accessed February 2017]

mortar'. Yun Lee acknowledges that, 'Gates troubles the art world even as he charms it', before confirming that lately, 'he has taken on the mantle of activist, partly because the term "socially-engaged artist" is too insipid, and partly because "activist" is simply more accurate'.<sup>276</sup>

Gates may be moving to a point where, like Tania Bruguera, he is prepared to push his work out of the 'art' ontological field altogether. His work could be said to be particularly successful within its primary ontological field and that perhaps he, like Alistair Hudson, should let go of the art-world support structure and accept that the value of their endeavours can be acknowledged within the architectonic field. Critically-engaged contemporary artists, on the other hand, need to continue their attempts to escape instrumentality, taking on the mantle of determinate negation. John Roberts believes that what drives this negation 'is the very "asociality" of art under capitalism, the fact that for art to remain art (rather than transform itself into architectural design, fashion or social theory) it must experience itself as being "out of joint"'.<sup>277</sup> That is to say, 'that art seeks to emerge as something other to the conditions that call it into being'. For Roberts, 'new forms of commodification form the heteronomous, but productive, site of new forms of autonomy', for despite arts' constant submission to the demands of entertainment and commerce 'this tradition of negation continues to produce work of quality and value'.<sup>278</sup> Indeed as Roberts states:

Without this drive to 'autonomy' art would simply cease to exist as a tradition of aesthetic and intellectual achievement and, more importantly, as a means of resistance to the heteronomy of capitalist exchange.<sup>279</sup>

Art is that which *starts* from a position of negation. – John Roberts.<sup>280</sup>

---

<sup>276</sup> Yun Lee, p. 96.

<sup>277</sup> John Roberts, 'Art and its Negations', *Third Text*, Vol. 24, Issue 3, (London: May 2010), p. 290.

<sup>278</sup> Roberts, 'Art and its Negations', p. 290.

<sup>279</sup> Roberts, 'Art and its Negations', p. 290.

<sup>280</sup> Roberts, 'Art and its Negations', p. 290.

## Afterword

Pavel Buchler, whose heated debate with Alastair Hudson entitled *Art, Useful or Useless?* was referred to in Chapter One, suggests that ‘being an artist... does not mean doing different things than others do, but instead doing things differently’.<sup>281</sup> This point has come to resonate for me during the development of my practice throughout the period of my doctoral research. I have sought to develop a critical distance from which to approach familiar questions concerning the impending impacts from climate change and the likely implications on social inequality and the environment. Working with students and staff at the Sheffield School of Architecture meant addressing the same current architectural, geographic and social concerns that they were engaged with, but looking to bring a different sensibility to the exchange. I often found myself ‘at odds’ with many of their underlying assumptions but began to recognise that, for me, the lot of the artist *is* to be unsettled, unattached and uncommitted. This position offers unexpected even uncomfortable outcomes that will therefore elicit unpredictable responses and possible new directions of thought. Buchler – a noted artist, writer and teacher – believes that ‘the artist is always an itinerant, a messenger, an explorer, who operates in or among others’ territories’.<sup>282</sup> In his essay *Somebody’s Got To Do It*, he states:

Modern society undoubtedly needs creativity, critical imagination and resistance more than it needs works of art. It needs artists with their ways of doing things... It needs them for what they *are*, rather than what they *do*.<sup>283</sup>

It is perhaps this position of critical distance, linking as it does with John Roberts’ notions of resistance and negation that most clearly informs my current artistic approach. I experienced many years at the ‘coal-face’ of capitalism and became increasingly dis-spirited by the powerful and unbridled market forces driving an unsustainable obsession with novelty and the ‘new’. This experience

---

<sup>281</sup> Pavel Buchler, ‘Somebody’s Got To Do It’, *Somebody’s Got To Do It: Selected Writings by Pavel Buchler since 1987*, ed’ by Nick Thurston (London: Ridinghouse, 2017), p. 146.

<sup>282</sup> Pavel Buchler, ‘There is a Difference Between Knowledge and Know-How’, *Somebody’s Got To Do It: Selected Writings by Pavel Buchler since 1987*, ed’ by Nick Thurston (London: Ridinghouse, 2017), p. 148.

<sup>283</sup> Buchler, ‘Somebody’s Got To Do It’, p. 146.



of the instrumentalizing power of financial interests has inevitably informed my subsequent development as an artist, for as Theaster Gates has acknowledged 'for art to matter it has to be firmly rooted in the autobiographical'.<sup>284</sup>

Bringing together the epistemologies of both my design background and my art practice through the PhD research process has opened a space within which to re-consider the notion of the 'functional' art object. The challenge of running a design business meant developing new objects of utility whilst satisfying a demanding range of production, financial and market constraints. These requirements were framed by the unique context into which each new product emerged, placing it within a highly complex cultural field. The same could be said for the art object, in the end it is the frame of reference within which the item sits that determines whether the object will be viewed as a functional art object or a product of utility. Who – which institution, organisation or company – stands behind the work, determines how it is presented, perceived and ultimately, received. However this customary, and usually well-managed, process reached an almost comical impasse at the Turner Prize 2015 exhibition, with gallerists and collectors unsure whether to purchase Assembles' household products from the show for fear that they would indeed remain as door-knobs and fire-surrounds and not complete the mystical transformation into objects of art.

Peter Osborne noted that, for him, the architectonic is a signifier of, and an archive of, the social use of form. I believe that sculptural works exploiting these familiar and resonant forms evoke an unsettling set of future historical associations and have the capacity to 'hit you hard and forcefully'.<sup>285</sup> My long-standing interest in the 'language of things' has been reinforced through an appreciation of the concept of 'critical making' as developed by Matt Ratto and others and discussed in Chapter Two. A position echoed by Gates who believes that 'production is an act of importance unto itself, not production for the output of a particular thing'.<sup>286</sup> For me, the material, the mode of production, the process of production itself (together with the object) can embody a different

---

<sup>284</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/03/theaster-gates-artist-chicago-dorchester-projects> [Accessed December 2016]

<sup>285</sup> Hertz, p. 4.

<sup>286</sup> Yun Lee, p. 67.

kind of criticality, a different way of reflecting on our social constructs. I continue to be drawn to the dormant ambiguities inherent in used everyday objects and their potential role as transitional and unstable signifiers.

The challenge in writing this thesis has been to articulate the research into fields of activity that have come to inform and influence the development of my art practice whilst at the same time accurately reflecting back on these artistic developments in order to illustrate the realities of 'practice-led research'. I have been fortunate that the interests and concerns that informed the original research proposal have continued to guide my art practice over the past three years. Indeed it appears in retrospect that my interests in the role of the object in socially-engaged practice, in methods of making and resource use, together with an interest in materiality have all chimed with similar concerns emerging in the wider artistic field. The challenge that lies ahead is to continue to offer the critical perspective of the artist.

## Bibliography

- Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Times*, (London; Polity Press, 2007)
- Becker, Carol, Lisa Yun Lee and Achim Borchardt-Hume, *Theater Gates*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2015)
- Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, (London: Collins-Fontana, 1973)
- Benjamin, Walter, *Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).
- Billing, Johanna, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007)
- Bishop, Claire, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, No. 110, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, Autumn 2004), 51-79.
- Bishop, Claire, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso, 2012)
- Bishop, Claire, 'Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?', *Artist's Talk, Living as Form*, (May 2011), <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/talks.htm#prettyPhoto/0/> [Accessed November 2014]
- Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2005)
- Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay, How Art Reprograms the World*, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002)
- Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Le Presses du Reel, 2002)
- Boyle, Godfrey and Peter Harper, ed. *Radical Technology*, (London: Wildwood House, 1976)
- Brown, Bill, *A Sense of Things*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003)
- Coles, Alex and Alexia Defert, *de-,dis-,ex-. Vol Two, The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*, (London: Backless Books, 1998)
- Davis, Ben, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013)
- Day, Gail, 'Fear of Heteronomy', *Third Text*, Vol.23, Iss.4 (London: August 2009), 393-406
- Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1995)
- DeSilvey, Caitlin, Simon Naylor and Colin Sackett, ed. *Anticipatory History*, (Axminster; Uniform Books, 2011)

Dillon, Brian, ed, *Ruins*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011)

Flam, Jack, ed, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, (New York: New York University Press, 1979)

Foster, Hal, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, No. 110, (Cambridge, Mass: Autumn 2004), 3-22

Foster, Hal, 'Arty Party', *London Review of Books*, (London: December 2004), 21-22

Foster, Hal, *Design and Crime, (and Other Diatribes)*, (London: Verso, 2002)

Foster, Hal, *The Return of the Real*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996)

Godfrey, Mark, Catherine Wood and Lytle Shaw, *The Present Tense Through the Ages*, (Cologne: Walther Konig, 2007)

Hertz, Garnet, ed, *Conversations in Critical Making*, (PACTAC, CTheory Books, University of Victoria, 2015)

Holmes, Brian, 'The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique'(2001-2), <http://transform.eipcp.net/transveral/1106/holmes/en> [Accessed December 2012]

Holmes, Brian, 'Artistic Autonomy and the Communication Society', *Third Text*, Vol.18, Iss.6 (London: 2004) 547-555

Hudek, Antony, ed, *The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014)

Kingery, David W. *Learning From Things*, (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1998)

Millar, John Douglas, 'The Ethics of Discomfort', *Art Monthly*, No. 354, (London: March 2012), 11-14

Noble, Richard, ed, *Utopias: Documents in Contemporary Art*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009)

Osborne, Peter, *Anywhere or Not at All*, (London: Verso, 2013)

Rasmussen, Mikkel Bolt, 'Scattered (Western Marxist-Style) Remarks about Contemporary Art, its Contradictions and Difficulties', *Third Text*, Vol.25, Iss.2 (London: March 2011), 199-210

Ray, Gene and Gregory Sholette, 'Whither Tactical Media', *Third Text*, Vol.22, Iss.5 (London: September 2008), 519-524

Ray, Gene, 'Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector', *Third Text*, Vol.21, Iss.3 (London: May 2007) 241-255

- Roberts, John, 'Art and its Negations', *Third Text*, Vol.24, Iss.3 (London: May 2010) 289-303
- Roberts, John, *The Intangibilities of Form*, (London: Verso, 2007)
- Roberts, John, 'Revolutionary Pathos, Negation and the Suspensive Avant-Garde', *New Literary History*, Vol. 41, Iss. 4 (Baltimore, Autumn 2010), 717-732
- Roberts, John, 'In Character', *Art and Language in Practice*, Vol. 2 Critical Symposium, (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1999), 161-174
- Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman*, (London: Penguin, 2009)
- Sennett, Richard, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006)
- Scott, Felicity D. *Architecture or Techno-utopia*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007)
- Sholette, Gregory, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 2011)
- Steyerl, Hito, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', *e-flux*, No.21 (December 2010) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/181> [Accessed November 2014]
- Thurston, Nick, ed, *Somebody's Got To Do It: Selected Writings by Pavel Buchler since 1987*, (London: Ridinghouse, 2017),
- Thakara, John, *How to Thrive in the Next Economy*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015)
- Thompson, Nato and Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionist's*, (North Adams: MASS MoCA, 2004)
- Vergine, Lea, *Trash: From Junk to Art*, ed. Lea Vergine, (Milan: Electra, 1997)