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Making Encounters: Witnessing the sociality of things and places

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Introduction

This research considers the potential changes implicated in a shift in art making methods from “making–from”, towards “making-with” audiences, things and places. This small shift in language has broad implications. It gestures towards a changes in human relation to materials, an understanding of “things” as matter in flux, and perhaps leads to ways of being in the world that pays close attention to the powers and lives of nonhumans. Within the visual arts some discussion of these shifts can be found under the terms “new materialisms” and the “material turn” (Barrett and Bolt, 2013) and in the wider field of cultural studies as “vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2010). I hope to add to these discourses by bringing attention to art making that works with the generative potential of ‘things’ in art making events. This paper itself forms part of a process of exploration: it is intended as both a proposition and a generative tool written to help me better understand my own instincts in the studio, the relationship of art to daily lived experience, and as a way to think forward with the expanded field of “spatial art practice” (Jane Rendell, 2006).

Finding involuntary sculptures

The art practices I foreground involve exploration of the way things and matter act with art makers. The *Involuntary Sculptures* (XXXX, 1933) feature six things that were found and then photographed in close focus, black and white against lightly textured, transparent glass shelves. Their physical gestures were foregrounded, in the photographs they sit curled, rising, fallen or folded. The *Involuntary Sculptures* were first published in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* (Minotaure, nos 3-4, 1933) and have recently been republished in *Found Sculpture and Photography from Surrealism to Contemporary Art* (Deleuze and Kelly, 2013) from where they continue to trouble traditional sculptural approaches. It is believed that Brassai took the photographs, with subtitles added by Salvador Dali (Deleuze and Kelly, 2013: 14). However, at the time of their initial publication they were not credited to either artist and human authorial agency was sidelined by their attribution to “XXXX”.

The objects featured in the *Involuntary Sculptures* defy fixity, they are things in flux that may have once been: a bus ticket (transformed by the fiddling of fingers), a blob of toothpaste, a worn scrap of soap and a bread roll rising. I suggest that the *Involuntary Sculptures* highlight forms that crystallise out of situations. These forms appear to have been transformed with humans and within places such as pockets, ovens and basins. The formation of these things hovered at the edges of human intent until they were found by Dali, and watched by Brassai's camera, and even then, their making involved a gentle nudge that re-contextualised them as art objects. The title *Involuntary Sculptures* suggests a denial of conscious human involvement in their making and their attribution to XXXX might stand in for the agencies of other things and places.

Art making and things

In order to reflect on human agency within socially assembled art practices, relations between human and matter need to be examined. Power relations and intricate local connections between people, materials, things, ideas and objects form the nexus of art making assemblages. Anthropologist Tim Ingold unpicks the seemingly obvious line between things and organisms, unsettling the assumption that artifacts are made via the imposition of human ideas on the passive surface of the world. In *The Perception of the Environment* Ingold questions traditional making as driven by the assumption that 'the world of substance - of brute matter - must present itself to the maker of objects as a surface to be transformed.'(Ingold, 2000: 339). In order to unsettle this human centric position, Ingold applies 'growing' (normally associated with organic unfolding from within the genetic coding of nature) to movements of matter that take in human and non human agencies. His re-thinking of human-material relations may be applied to art making, where artworks can be understood as things in flux that continually become with artists and the world. Ingold posits that artifacts do not spring from ideas formed in the minds of humans but rather come 'into being through the active unfolding of that field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material.'(Ingold, 2000, 342). He later expands this theory in *Making* (2013) where he describes people joining forces with lively materials, with no chance of certain outcomes, wherein the maker adds 'his (sic) own impetus to the forces and energies at play' (Ingold, 2013, 21). Ingold's theories perhaps build upon Deleuze's assertion that artists join with the world to make visible invisible forces (Deleuze. 1981: 56). This paper proposes art making as

act of improvisation, or a real-time performance that is instinctive, unpredictable and generative, and through which artworks emerge.

Framing making as improvised collaboration between artists and matter provides a way to rethinking sculptural approaches. Within the visual arts, 'new materialist' discourses currently reflect on the shift away from subject to object dichotomies towards artworks as assemblages of agencies. In *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the arts* Barbara Bolt posits 'art as collaboration . . . matter as much as the human has responsibility for the emergence of art' (Barrett and Bolt, 2013: 6). I apply this understanding of collective or heterogeneous making to consideration of art practices that take in found sculpture and everyday things. Ingold's writings alongside new materialist approaches provide ways of understanding the handling of things in flux in art making. However, they do not take us all the way towards the "lightness of touch" or quieting of human agency evident in the *Involuntary Sculptures* and that I seek to explore through my own and other art practices.

In order to delve into the implications of collaboration with nonhuman agency undertaken in the *Involuntary Sculptures*, I look to the recent observational approaches from cultural theorist Jane Bennett and sociologist Bruno Latour. Bennett takes a critical vitalist approach and describes a world of things that are active and moving with forces of "thing-power". This power manifests as 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett, 2010: 6). The power and liveliness of things underpins Bennett's "vibrant materialism", which seeks to expose the agencies of materials, places, animals and other life forms. The politics of Bennett's theory are revealed in her aim of fostering more attentive encounters between people and things in order to influence the ways humans operate within ecologies (Bennett, 2010, x). Paying attention and bearing witness are key methods, where Bennett calls for a 'cultivated, patient sensory attentiveness to non human forces operating outside and inside the human body' (Bennet, 2010, xiv). Bennett frequently uses Bruno Latour's term "actant" to describe the potential and sources for action that are both human and nonhuman, or a combination of these things (Bennett, 2013:9). Latour suggests that 'action is not under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, a conglomeration of many surprising sets of agencies' (Latour, 2006: 44). I examine the operation of assemblages of humans and nonhumans that act co-extensively and socially in art practices. A key method in such art making improvisations involves

close encounters with, and observations of, actors. I posit that the *Involuntary Sculptures* suggest a mode of engaging or collaborating with 'things' and places whereby human agency is reduced in order to highlight the complex social potential of nonhuman collaborators. I observe that in art making, approaches of this kind start from situated, embodied encounters between people, places and things, which are often mediated by digital (or photographic) media. The following recent examples expose these tendencies.

Australian artist Bridget Currie's work *Trees Among People* (ongoing) is a series of photographic images taken thus far in Japan, Australia, Sweden and Britain. Currie finds and photographs trees that have been modified, trained, killed or maintained by humans. The photographs each document one tree, highlighting evidences of human touch, gesture and violence. Traces of interaction vary from scars, to splaying, trained or fused branches, to acts of care, repair and propping.



Figure 1: Bridget Currie, *Trees Among People* (ongoing) used with permission of the artist.

The human-to-tree actions documented by Currie remember powerful physical acts where the trees chosen have assumed new shapes in response. All of the trees photographed by Currie present fascinating sculptural form: they are gnarled, bumpy, and lopsided or sprout limbs asymmetrically. The scale and positioning of the tree-forms are reminiscent of monumental public sculpture, and this is an associative connection that is reinforced by their situation in public parks where they perhaps stand as powerful urban memorials to “nature”. Some of the trees remain alive in a traditional sense (with new foliage and limbs growing) while others are better described as large stumps, carved with a chainsaw. In her making, Currie traverses an uncertain line between the organic unfolding of nature and human-tree becomings. I suggest that the work pursues a question as to what intervenes in the relations between people and plants. As did Dali /Brassai in the *Involuntary*

Sculptures, Currie finds sculptures in environments that unintentionally form sculptures from human and non-human interactions.

The *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* (2014) were a series of weekly live nighttime atmospheric sound broadcasts (every Saturday night for a month) from different empty buildings in Port Adelaide, Australia. I developed this project for FELTMaps site-specific art project and with technologist Heidi Angove.



Figure 2: Project documentation, *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* (2014). Image used with permission of the artist.

Microphones were set up in empty spaces and placed so as to transmit the sound generated with place ecologies. Audiences tuned in via a live Internet radio station and heard the creaking of buildings (as their matter shifted with temperature changes), the movements and calls of creatures (humans and nonhuman) and other sounds harder to identify. The work amplified the experience of listening to quiet sound by utilising “liveness” as the sound was broadcast in real-time and positioned audiences on the unpredictable edge of constantly revealed moments. The work brought attention to the replete local worlds in empty buildings and created a platform that offered the potential for audience members to form fragile connections with places. Listeners tuned in from their own environments. Unpredictable nighttime

soundscapes intermingled with their own places leading to dispersed and individualised encounters with the work.

Works such as *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* depend on chance encounters that occur in situations that enable sound events where the making is in the immediacy of aleatory interactions. Listeners and places become 'co-authors' where work existed between them in real-time connected moments. Artist and critic Salomé Voegelin affirms listening as a generative state when she describes silence as producing its subject via anticipation in the potential and tension between each small shuffle and click. In Voegelin's reckoning, perception is active, creative and even tactile and the touch of sound might even have physical effects where tiny sounds might be felt through the skin and jolt the listener, or 'contingent ephemerality ... becomes material through my fleshy encounter' (Voegelin, 2011,90). *Trees Among People* and *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* propose ways of working with things and places in flux (rather than fixed objects or passive materials). In the works discussed, the artists have not radically changed, deconstructed, or intervened with the things, sounds and places encountered. Their approaches included performing with them by creating frameworks or instigating events that activate or highlight the sociality of things and places.

A key quality linking the works discussed, and holding them to the side of the 'material turn', may be their tendency towards dematerialisation. The works described in this paper perhaps form a seemingly contradictory category of "post-object" materialist approaches. Impermanence, emphasis on the ephemeral and use of photography are key characteristics both described in Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's essay, *The dematerialization of art* (1968), and in evidence in the examples I have cited. Emphasis on process and performance also puts my examples into a lineage of works that might be thought of as dematerialised. However, the works I discuss depart from dematerialisation in their approaches to matter. In Lippard's view, de-emphasis of "material aspects" is a key defining characteristic, and despite their ephemerality, the works I discuss foreground the liveliness of things and vibrant materiality. Both artists treat the cities implicated in their works as living systems, and the artworks are immanent in encounters - in part constructed by the artists, and wherein documentation (use of the camera, the sound recording equipment and radio broadcaster) served to both contribute the event and bring art making into its nexus.

In conclusion, this paper is a tentative proposition written to test the connections between my own and other's artworks that involve an approach typified by making-with things and places in acts of collaboration. Initiated by my fascination with the *Involuntary Sculptures*, this inquiry pursues a quiet vein that tends towards the actions of finding and recording when working with collective experience both human and nonhuman. Art making (informed by the theories of Ingold, Bennett and Latour) may be thought of - not as acts of human mastery over materials - but as encounters with the forces of vibrant matter and things in flux. I suggest that the emphasis on watching and following assemblages of actors with "sensuous attentiveness", as posited by Latour and Bennett, provide ways of understanding a tendency towards finding and witnessing in art making practices.

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