Who Else Takes Part?
Admitting the more-than-human into participatory art.

Simon Pope

St. John's College

University of Oxford

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Please refer to the following webpage for documentation of accompanying artworks:
http://www.tinyurl.com/whoelsetakespart

(40,187 words)

Abstract

This practice-led research concerns how participatory and dialogic art practice can come to terms with conditions after the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000), the epoch when humans were recognized as 'an earth-changing force' (Lorimer 2015). These forms of art practice draw heavily on a social-constructivism that emphasizes human cultural endeavour above all else. But if we are to live in an epoch when humans can no longer presume to have mastery over nature (Plumwood 1993), then how can such a anthropocentric practice remain tenable? Indeed, it now seems impossible, inappropriate even, to make such a clear distinction between humans and others things. This is not to claim the end of the human. Rather, it is an invitation to think the 'more-than-human' (Whatmore 2002; 2006), and to ask, who else takes part with us in the social forms enacted through participatory and dialogic art practice after the Anthropocene?

In doing so, this research turns towards aspects of new materialism (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2015), and despite the associated risks – most obviously an accusation of "vulgarity" in insisting on the materiality of relations which subtend cultural and social ones – concludes that the benefits abound as the rest of the universe suddenly becomes our kin (Haraway 2015), our collaborators in research (Barad 2007), participants in art, and interlocutors in dialogue.

This research is conducted *through* art (Frayling 1993), and is presented as a series of artworks and accompanying printed publications. Together, they attempt to admit the more-than-human into art practice – both as things and as a concept.

Cover of printed edition: interior of Quaker meeting house, Oxford

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2015

Introduction

This book is written out of concern for how participatory and dialogic art practice can come to terms with conditions after the Anthropocene, after the era when humans became a geo-physical force. These forms of art practice draw heavily on a social-construction that emphasises human cultural endeavour above all else. But if we are living in an epoch when humans can no longer presume to have mastery over all other things, then how can such a human-centred practice remain tenable? How are we to begin to move beyond the epoch in which a small number of humans aspired to dominate all other human and non-humans? Indeed, it now seems impossible, inappropriate even, to make such a clear distinction between humans and others things. This is not to claim the end of the human. Rather, it is an invitation to think the *more-than-human*, and to ask, *who else takes part* with us in the social forms enacted through participatory and dialogic art practice after the Anthropocene?

The non-human is a burgeoning influence across a range of neighbouring disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences. This book is a response to the practical and theoretical challenges that this presents to those human-centred practices in art that are preoccupied with humans-among-themselves, and the forms of the social that they construct for themselves. The urgency of this is felt even more acutely in an epoch typified by catastrophic climate change and unfettered

fossil-fuel exploitation, when the fate of humans and all other earthly things are understood as inextricably entangled. This raises the prospect of doing politics not only among ourselves, but with those who would ordinarily be segregated from us by that ever-widening "line in the sand" as alien, as non-human, as not "us." This is why thinking the more-than-human is made all the more pressing for all anthropocentric practices – including those in art – which maintain the so-called Great Divide between culture on the one hand, and nature on the other. The wider "post-human" project attends to the questions that inhere in modern ways of thinking, thinking the human differently, in itself and in relation to others. The more-than-human, as part of the post-humanist lexicon, encourages us to think of what exceeds and joins with the human, not what comes after its demise. Thinking the more-than-human also signals a renewed interest in materialism, and is both an end to the presumption that the world is either an entirely human cultural construction, or that its material aspects are separate from or exclude the human.

As its title suggests, this project admits the more-than-human in a number of ways, not only inviting the concept into a relationship with art practice, but also as an acknowledgment of agency of more-than-human things. In doing so, it calls on participatory and dialogic art to invent ways that *all* things, human and non-human alike, can take part in hybrid social worlds, collectives, assemblages, ecologies, publics, communities, however

we choose to define them.

My own conclusions are that despite the risks associated with a turn towards materialism – most obviously an accusation of "vulgarity" in insisting on the materiality of relations which subtend cultural and social ones – the benefits abound as the rest of the universe suddenly becomes our kin, our collaborators in research, participants in art, and interlocutors in dialogue.

Indeed, the dialogic, as a disposition towards others, is this book's secondary preoccupation. This mode of practice has been criticized for its focus on artists' attitude above all else, yet this is precisely the aspect of art practice that, I suggest, prepares us to take part in our more-than-human worlds. Rather than glossing over the antagonistic attitudes of modern and avant-garde for the sake of aesthetic ambition, we can point to the disposition already rehearsed in dialogic and participatory practice as one which lends itself to this task of bridging the so-called Great Divide between nature and culture.

This publication is a companion to a number of artworks, (a list of which can be found towards the end of this book) which have been produced so as to conduct this research project through art. They embody and emphasize aspects of this thesis in various ways. The texts in this book take the form of correspondence with those people who took part in artworks over the course of this three year project, and who have been significant

interlocutors in the thinking of this thesis. They are arranged thematically to address conventional aspects of research, such as methodological concerns, ethical considerations, and accounts of specific artworks discussed in relation to theoretical concepts.

At a public *vive voce* event at the Quaker meeting house in Oxford on 20th November 2015, these correspondents are invited to continue the thinking of these themes and concepts, opening up the thesis again through a process of relating and exchanging.

"Who is missing?" you may ask. "Who else takes part?" While the texts in this publication address only human participants, other texts and artworks which accompany this book give some indication of my attempts to admit the more-than-human into my work in practice, as *things*. The more-than-human as a *concept* emerges as a recurrent theme in the following texts.

Simon Pope
5th October 2015
Oxford

Table of Contents

Page 1 — To Ruskin School of Art
Research proposal
19th January 2012

Page 5 — To Annemari Ferreira, John Hammersley, and Rachelle Viader Knowles
The dialogic as disposition in art and research
15th September 2015

Page 18 — To Michael Pinsky and Stephanie Delcroix
The "snowball"
22nd September 2015

Page 31 — To Central University Research Ethics Committee
re. Research ethics application
14th January 2015

Page 36 — To Anthony Gardner and Daria Martin
re. Presentation of thesis
26th June 2015

Page 41 — To Nicholas Thornton & Mererid Velios
re. Primary Agents of a Social World
17th March 2015

Page 45 — To Helen Wilson
A Song, a Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament
2nd October 2014

Page 53 To Lara Goodband
A Concatenation of Things
11th June 2015

Page 63 To Senta German & Alison Roberts, and Ashmolean workshop participants
A Splendid Kindred Soul, and The Social Worlds Of Objects
22nd June 2015

Page 83 To Jim Harris
re. A very extended châine
21st July 2015

Page 88 To Wendy Coburn
re. Art & Social Change
22nd January 2015

Page 92 To Saskia Warren
Forward Back Together and the materialities of taking part
17th August 2015

Page 112 To Malcolm Bull
Participation and the prospect of a more-than-human politics
19th September 2015

Page 116 To Alex Murdin
re. Material Ecologies
20th July 2015

Page 134 To Jamie Lorimer
The ecological thought
16th July 2015

Page 155 To Matthew Fuller
An Assembly of Things; Art after Michel Serres
9th July 2015

Page 162 To Nina Wakeford
The social imaginary & material realities
27th September 2015

Page 169 To Deborah Robinson & workshop participants
re. Art After The Anthropocene
3rd August 2015

List of Artworks

References

Acknowledgements

To Ruskin School of Art
19th January 2012

Research proposal

In developing an art practice which has often either explicitly defined itself as "participatory" or "dialogic," or by implication, as "relational," the focus of my attention has been on human subjects as participants within the artwork. For example, the research project *Walking Together* (2005-9) explored the various social modalities of walking as a contemporary art practice by examining various ways of 'being together' produced through walking; in subsequent artworks I've worked with processes of negotiation, and dialogue through walking together, using 'walking and talking' as a method, somewhat akin to those described by Anderson (2004). Within this work, human subjects are acknowledged as participants in a dialogic relationship with the artwork, or with the artist; nonhuman entities are *made use of* as metaphor, terrain or conduit. This research asks how these nonhuman "things" could be understood as participant, to extend the range of who is understood to take part in dialogic and participatory artwork.

The most vociferous criticism of this field of practice has been made by Claire Bishop, who, having identified an 'ethical turn' in art criticism following the 'collaborative turn' in art practice, charges practitioners

and theorists alike with failing to see this work as an 'artistic operation' but rather as a form of activism (cf. Lacy 1995) This practice, Bishop argues, is primarily an attempt at 'strengthening the social bond' (2006), (or perhaps, less sympathetically, as a 'homeopathic' treatment for societal ills (Bishop in Dusan 2009). Bishop reserves the artist's right to be 'perverse, indirect, or antagonistic' towards the world, including toward its human subjects, such as in the work of Beecroft or Sierra (2009). This is in direct and dramatic contradiction to the common-sense of participatory art, where the artist surrenders 'the security of self-expression for the risk of intersubjective engagement' (Kester 2004a) to focus on 'building consensus' (Lacy 1995). Throughout Kester's book *Conversation Pieces*, we are reminded that it is through dialogue that this encounter can be staged, and which establishes the democratic framework 'within which the various participants can speak, listen and respond' (2004a). Yet Bishop is critical of this idea that relations within relational artworks, such as that of Tiravanija, are 'fundamentally harmonious' (Bishop 2004, p.2004); she draws upon Nancy's *Inoperable Community* to argue that this is only the case 'because they are addressed to a community of viewing subjects with something in common' (2004). This is compounded by Laclau & Mouffe, who argue for a 'democracy of antagonism' (in Bishop 2004) – or, more accurately of an "agonism" – of the politics of hegemony and difference, 'expansion and increasing complexity' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Theirs is a critique of a politics which has 'erased'

the notion of antagonism in favour of 'win-win politics.' Under this rubric 'democracy should be envisaged in the form of dialogue,' with 'controversial issues being resolved through listening to each other' (1985). However, this is also to presume that dialogue is itself a smooth operation and conflates the concepts of negotiation, "being together," empathy, "consensus building," and so on. Discussion of dialogue elsewhere would suggest that, for example, negotiation is performed prior to dialogue (Bohm 2004) and that the very process of entering into inter-subjective relations with the Other also presupposes a recognition that subjects appear as just an object among objects to us, prior to our empathetic engagement with them (McIntyre & Woodruff Smith 1989). This perhaps brings us close to Laclau & Mouffe's own thesis, that 'antagonisms are not objective relations but relations which reveal the limits of all objectivity' and therefore that this antagonism may in fact be considered part of an expanded notion of dialogue (1985). That the concept of dialogue can contain with it room for antagonism and difference, is tested further when we consider Graham Harman's argument that Being within Heidegger's philosophy may be expanded to include nonhuman entities (2007). Dialogue, under this proposition, would have to include an array of nonhuman things alongside the human – each having the capacity to transform and be transformed.

The consequences for our understanding of dialogue from this expanded array of interlocutors forms the focus of this proposed research. It will, for instance, consider the way in which 'land' might be understood within art practice, (or indeed cultural geography) when included within a process of dialogue, in a 'more-than-human world' (Whatmore 2006); in effect, the research asks how nonhuman "things" become subject rather than object, and also the impact for social relations when subjects are considered in terms of object-relations (Harman 2011b). In keeping with the environmental theory of Bennett (2009), or the social theory of DeLanda (2006), we could begin to include nonhuman entities - in the form of mineral, garbage, social formations and so on - into the realm of participatory or dialogical art practice, not as environment or "platform" (as in the work of Liam Gillick, for example), nor even as metaphor, but as a "thing" (Bennett 2009) - which can be included within dialogue, alongside our human selves.

To Annemari Ferreira, Dr. John Hammersley and
Rachelle Viader Knowles
15th September 2015

The dialogic as disposition in art and research

Dear Annemari, John, and Rachelle,

I'm writing in advance of my *viva voce* examination event which will be held at the Quaker House in St. Giles, Oxford on 20th November 2015. It was in conversation with both of you that I began to think of the concept of *dialogue* in relation to my doctoral research project, and so I'd like to take this opportunity to set out some thoughts in the hope that you'll be able to take part in the event, and to continue our thinking of this concept in relation to art and research practices.

In the early phases of my project, our exchanges on dialogue were key to transforming my understanding of my art practice's relationship to the processes of research. Thinking dialogue as more than conversational technique played a key role in developing an approach to my doctoral project; although dialogue's etymological root defines it as, "through words," I've come to understand *the dialogic* as more than this, as an ethos by which research can be approached, and indeed, as a way of relating to others more generally. This understanding emerged through conversations with you which inspired and sustained my research. Previously, I was motivated

by a concern with the qualities of relations between people. Now I'm preoccupied with how to admit more-than-human participants into my practice – that is, how "nonhuman" others take part in what has been an anthropocentric art practice which overlooked the transformative relationships with other nonhuman others. I held dialogue as a key concept in my earlier work – albeit in its rudimentary, technical definition – and I would like to think through its relationship to my current work with you here, and so as to catalyze further conversation in the *viva* event, which I hope you will be able to take part in.

My research project, in common with all of our doctoral projects, was motivated by questions that arose from prior practice, attempting to understand them in relation to the concept of dialogue. My own practice was broadly participatory, and involved walking and talking with people as a means of negotiating "a common third." This concept is borrowed from Luce Irigaray, and adopted in my own practice to define the terrain walked over by two people as a third thing held in common, and which mediates their relationship. This work focused on a dyadic relationship as the basis for all social formations – a direct reference artist Stephen Willats, whose *Walking Together For the First Time* (1994), a workshop and its photographic documentation, diagrams the increasingly complex interactions of a social group as new members are introduced. In *A Common Third* (2010) I took two walks – one with cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer,

and the other with Pamela Woof, president of The Wordsworth Trust; they took place in the East of Scotland and The Lake District in England respectively. The processes of route-finding, idle chatter, of getting to know the other person, marked the walks themselves as ordinary, familiar within the context of hill-walking. On return to our starting location we recounted the our negotiations of the route, making an audio-recording which was later played-back in an exhibition context. Ostensibly, this work was *dialogic* in its back-and-forth of speech. It was made "through words." The technical aspects of this work are in keeping with several related modes of art practice including those described by Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' (2002), Homi Bhabha's 'conversational art' (1998), Tom Finkelpearl's 'dialogue-based public art' (2000), and in the 'dialogical art,' defined by Grant Kester as 'an art which can be viewed as a kind of conversation; a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view' (2004b, p.81).

John, in a paper presented at the conference session that you chaired, I introduced my work in terms of John Austin's 'ordinary speech situation' (Glendinning 1998, p.39), 'where "everything goes right" and in which each person takes turn to speak and to listen' (Pope 2009). – echoing also the unproblematized reading of Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' which Kester also calls upon in his writing on dialogical art (2004b, p.81).
In that work, and others produced at that time, it was the

flow of conversation that mattered; silence between people was to be overcome, as the gap to be closed by speech.

In *From Unspoken Landscapes* (2008 with Sarah Cullen) this theme persists: silence impinges on participants as they walk, enforced by wind, by diverging paths; it is this silence that forces the participants apart further still. A "togetherness" is recovered, repaired after the walk, in sessions of drawing and painting while talking together, depicting those disruptive, "wild" places. Interruptions to the ordinary speech situation were a challenge to the "social bond" that held the human participants together. It's the restoration or strengthening of this bond that characterizes participatory modes of art practice in Claire Bishop's terms (2011, p.11; 2006), and without which there are only individuals in this artwork, preoccupied with their own thoughts and feelings, in reverie, perhaps. This work figured an ontology of isolated monads, intact yet alienated from others, expressing a yearning for the imagined unity with fellow human beings. But silence, understood in this way, as a problem to be overcome, underestimates its thinking in relation to dialogue.

Annemari, you introduced the idea of dialogue as more than "conversation" when a group of us met for a session of *The Dialogic*, in this instance held at the art department at Loughborough University in March 2013:

Annemari: I thought of the Bohmian idea of dialogue not necessarily being even the event, or a particular conversation method, or a communication method, but that it's more an attitude or a way of approaching the other

Rachelle: A give and take.

Annemari: What's interesting in thinking about a practice-based research is that – to use another Bakhtinian term quite freely – is this notion of *polyphony* – which I think corresponds quite nicely with dialogue.

N: Who said that about the dialogical being an attitude?

Annemari: Bohm. Although Bohm is very idealistic!

John: But the dialogic attitude is interpreted in different ways: there's Buber's openness to the Thou in the other; the Gadamerian openness to being self-questioned…

In *Between Man and Man*, Martin Buber introduces us to a broader concept of dialogue that exceeds its definition as "through words" to as *a disposition towards others*. He describes two people sat beside each other in silence, 'in any kind of solitude.' While one 'holds himself in reserve, withholds himself,' the other is

'hospitably disposed to everything that may come.' Even in silence, this man's 'unreserve' amounts to dialogue; 'even wordlessly,' dialogue is a *disposition* towards others (2002, pp.4–5).

Buber details three modes of relationship with others: *observing, looking on*, and *becoming aware.* Both *observer* and *onlooker* are 'similarly orientated, in that they have a position': the first, intent on describing others in extensive, categorical terms, while the later 'awaits what will be presented' – that is, for what the other presents of itself (2002, p.10). For the third, the other 'is not my object' (2002, p.11), but that which speaks – not necessarily in the literal sense, as utterance, but as a "saying something to." 'In the house of speech are many mansions,' Buber writes, 'and this one is of the inner' (2002, p.11).

In other words, *becoming aware* is an awareness of the transformation of self on encounter with others; *becoming aware* means that 'I have only to learn something' (2002, p.12) from the encounter with an other. I understand dialogue, in these terms, as openness to transformation on encounter with others, in contrast to their detailed description, or conforming them to a framework or category. Neither is it only a matter of hearing the other in their own terms, or seeing from their point-of-view: here, dialogue is the recognition, and the holding open, of ontological difference; and of being open to transformation on encounter with others whose "world" may be incommensurate with our own. For Buber, it is

through dialogue that we may come to understand this ontological gap, and 'enter a realm where the law of the point of view no longer holds' (Buber 2002, p.9).

But, we wonder, how does this dialogic *disposition toward others* influence our approach to art and research? Our first challenge is in the very idea of disposition, as *attitude*. Claire Bishop, as a stern critic of participatory art, and all of its associated modes of practice, is suspicious that the criteria for evaluating community art are established only on the basis of the artist's attitude to others. Considered as a 'behavioural attitude or moral position,' Bishop decries this focus on *how* community art operates, rather than *what* the art artist and participants do (2011, p.188). A dialogic art practice, defined in terms of disposition to others, is open to just such criticism, its methods or techniques superseded by the artist's disposition or attitude. Even on its own terms, Grant Kester's 'dialogical aesthetic' struggles with this. Kester imagines artworks which employ 'the facilitation of dialogue among diverse communities' and, for instance, 'the creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations' (2004b, p.76). But in doing so, we need to ask, where do artists figure in Kester's ontology? Do they not take part in the event of dialogue, as conversation? Are they detached in the way that facilitation presupposes? In ontological terms, a dialogic practice is relational. People are formed and transformed through their relationships to others, and the artist is entangled in the very web of relations that they suppose

to orchestrate. There is no "observer" or "observed" within this ontology. There is no 'facilitation.' Everyone (and everything, as I hope to admit) takes part.

Bishop's detailed critique may also prompt us to ask *how* criticism such as her own is levelled. A dialogic practice – read through Buber for example – would consider her as *observing* the artworks that she criticises, rather than as *becoming aware* of her own relation to it, and her thinking of it. That would entail a recognition of a different ontology – of dialogic practice for example – and the opening of her own categories to transformation on encounter with others. That is, as a *becoming aware* of the possibility of transformation during encounter. While Bishop demonstrates an awareness of the limitations of her own approach (2011, p.5), her methodology always falls short of the 'poetics' implied by a participatory mode of research – as my external examiner, Mary Anne Francis notes (2014, pp.32–3). As practitioners of 'dialogic' approaches to participatory art practice, I think we're justified in hoping that critics remain open to transformation if they engage with our work; we, after all, attempt to engage their work on its own terms, *as well as* remaining alert to what can be learned, and how we can be transformed through our encounter with them. Our sessions of *The Dialogic* – our "dialogue on dialogue" events held from 2012 onward – are a case in point, where we often spoke of our understandings of Bishop's work as representative of a different "world" of meaning, as written by a different

culture, with its own ontological model. Where we might dismiss this work out-of-hand, as speaking to a different constituency, our dialogic mode perhaps lends to our acceptance of this criticism, in an ongoing effort to understand how our own practices are transformed by our encounters with it, and as a process of *becoming aware* of other ways of thinking the world and its relations.

These different cultures and their ontologies also produce very different ideas of how research is conducted, and in our previous conversations we've talked of this in more general terms, as differences in *research paradigms* – as positivist and naturalist or constructivist, as discussed by Richard Hickman in the context of research in art and design education (2008, p.16) for example. In summary, a positivist approach favours *a priori* frameworks, categories of analysis, and a 'single (measurable?) reality,' while the naturalist approach promotes the social-construction of meaning 'and therefore multiple realities' (Hickman 2008, p.16). A positivist ontology determines that 'the knower and known are each independent of the other,' where in a naturalistic approach 'the two are inseparable' (2008, p.16). This is understood differently in other fields that I've engaged with over the course of this research project where "naturalism" represents a positivist, 'Euro-American' approach to zoology which presumes an 'objectivist dualism' (Candea 2010, p.249). In these terms, a dialogic approach, as a *methodology,* accords with a naturalistic or qualitative approach to research.

Yet we can also sense similarities in both approaches: dialogue, according to Bohm is a suspension of assumptions (2004, p.30), an ambition shared by the critical/analytical approach, which interrogates all opinions through a process of reasoned argument. Rather than refutation and argumentation however, a dialogic approach 'does not attempt to analyze things, or to win an argument or change opinion' (2004, p.30). It asks us to consider all assumptions equally and to recognize them as such. Bohm claims this awareness of our own and others' assumptions as *collective thought* or *participatory consciousness,* where all are 'partaking in the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it' (2004, p.31).

This productive interaction between self and others is exemplified in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin – for all of us a key figure in thinking the dialogic; and I'm drawn specifically to the aspect of his work which Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist describe:

> At the heart of Bakhtin's work is a recognition of existence as a ceaseless activity, an enormous energy, which is constantly in the process of being produced by the very forces that it drives. This energy may be conceived as a force field created by the ceaseless struggle between centrifugal forces, which strive to keep things various, separate, apart, different from each other, and centripetal forces, which strive to keep things together, unified, same. Centrifugal forces compel movement, becoming and history; they

> long for change and new life. Centripetal forces urge stasis, resist becoming, abhor history, and desire the seamless quiet of death. (1984, pp.7–8)

This aspect of Bakhtin's work reminds us of the methodological possibilities which open to us through our dialogic approach; it's the 'plenitude of the world' that fascinated Bakhtin (1984, p.1), and which he ensured through emphasizing 'performance, history, actuality, and the openness of dialogue.' This 'dialogic or relational thinking' is set in contrast to 'dialectical, or partitive, thinking, which is still presumed to be the universal norm' (1984, p.7). The ensuing dialogic ontology, according to Wilma Barrow, 'assumes a reality in a continuous state of flux… the result of the continuous negotiation between different voices in dialogue' (2010, p.65). It's clear that the dialogic, in this instance, is conceived of as a mode of engaging the world in all its diversity, in all its richness, and in the ongoingness of its relations.

In contrast to the dialectic, which operates through the sublation of one into the other – the merging or disappearance of one into the other – Bakhtin's dialogic holds difference as a possibility, and proceeds 'not in cosmic encounter of abstractions but in skirmishes of everyday life with all its contingencies, hesitations, and disorder' (1984, p.8). In Clark and Holquist's words, Bakhtin 'gave chief importance to being "unfinalized" and "becoming"…,' as a means 'to preserve the

heterogeneity' of the world (1984, p.5).

It's this aspect of Bakhtin's thinking that excites me in my attempts to think research and participatory art in terms of the more-than-human. The overt vibrancy and vitality that inheres in his work, and which is expressed in his ontology, spins us outward, towards others and beyond our selves. Our worlds expand, forming and transforming through new relations with others who are equally dynamic and in processes of becoming. How do we articulate this movement towards others, and our seeking to be transformed, through our research?

At the methodological level, and at the paradigmatic level, it perhaps suggests alliances with other researchers, artists, and practitioners which breach disciplinary boundaries, enabling us to recognize an affinity with social scientists, humanities scholars, and with artists who are ordinarily divided from us by technical specialism. It also suggests that our doctoral research is a process of learning, rather than training in how to adopt a position, or to defend an assertion through argument. The dialogic, as a *disposition towards others*, and as a *movement towards others* that Buber and Bakhtin's work suggests, is also *what moves us,* both intellectually, emotionally, and physically in our research, in our art, and more generally.

When Patti Lather writes, 'my thoughts… are on the move again' (1993, p.674), she celebrates the impulsion to take part, to engage in an ongoing conversation with other researchers and their work, as an indicator of the

validity of our research; this is 'validity as an incitement to discourse' (1993, p.673) rather than a search for authority. For Lather, this unfolds during the crisis in representation brought about by 'the effacement of the referent in postmodern culture that has made "the real" contested territory" (1993, p.675). But in a contemporary context, where the Real is making itself known in no uncertain terms – when, 'nonhumans make decisive contact with humans' in Timothy Morton's words (2013) – how is this Real to be let in? How is it to "speak" to us, in our dialogue, in our research, in our art? Katie King asks that our work be evaluated by 'how well it learns and models *how to be affected* or moved' (2012, p.19), not only by other people – by other researchers or artists or others – but that we should seek 'to learn to be affected, meaning "effectuated," moved, put into motion by other entities, humans and nonhumans' (Latour 2004a, p.205; in King 2012, p.274). And this is the very question that I begin to ask in this research, and which I hope will continue to move us in our dialogue…

To Michael Pinsky and Stephanie Delcroix
22nd September 2015

The "snowball"

Dear Michael and Stephanie,

Following the brief conversation that we had at the interview for the Belval residency, I'm writing to you with some further thoughts on the "snowball" method that I proposed to use, and which I've developed in several recent artworks. Stephanie, in our conversation, you asked how the "snowball" functions when nonhuman things are introduced to it, and, if I remember correctly, also on what basis the connections between this hybrid, more-than-human community could be defined. These are questions which preoccupy me, and I'll attempt to expand on them here.

The following notes were compiled prior to a seminar at the Ruskin School of Art in February 2014 as I first attempted to understand how this method of linking together a chain of associations – ordinarily restricted to those within a network of related people – could be adapted to also trace the connections between people and "things" such as the large coal sample, the Lewisian gneiss boulder from previous artworks or, indeed, artefacts from the steel industry at Belval.

The "Snowball" As Research, As Artwork.

In this seminar, I'll reflect upon the ways in which the "snowball sampling method," as it has been formulated in other disciplines, relates to the conversational and group-formation processes used in my recent practice. Drawing on several of my recent artworks as examples, I attempt to understand how analyses of the *snowball method*, developed in the social sciences, relates to its use in participatory art – and as a part of dialogic approach to art practice in particular. In keeping with the wider thesis developed in my doctoral research, it introduces the possibilities for conducting a more-than-human snowball. Examples of other artists' work are used to explore the constraints and possibilities of the snowball as a metaphor for otherwise everyday, familiar social practices; in a sense, this is my attempt to step back from the formalized practices used in social science, admitting that these methods are themselves derived from everyday conversational, social, even dialogic practices, as an attempt to admit other approaches to knowledge into the discipline.

Several of my recent artworks, such as *A Song, A Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament* (2013-14) and *Forward Back Together* (2013), have been developed using a similar process. All call for the identification of participants – specifically, those

that are strongly engaged with a specific object. In *Forward Back Together*, I gathered together people who had transformed or been transformed by Raymond Mason's ill-fated sculpture, *Forward* (1991); in *A Song and A Dance…* it is those people engaged with Dartmoor's tin ore who are brought together, in this example, to write a folk song – "A Song to the Tin."
In each of these works, the technique used to gather people and objects together, into assemblages of "more than human" things. begins with an initial meeting with a person associated with a theme that has been previously identified. Through conversation I ask for the names of other people *or of things* which are related to this theme. Step-by-step, this process begins to gather together a set of interconnected people and objects though a 'chain referral' (Atkinson & Flint 2001, p.2).

In *Primary Agents of a Social World* (2014), my initial contact was with the curator of Big Pit/Pwll Mawr – the National Coal Museum at Blaenavon in South East Wales. Prior to the meeting I'd already identified the theme of the artwork as the gathering together, to form a new "community" or social group from coal, and people and things most strongly related to it. The artwork is the tracing and re-assembling of these people and things into a "more-than-human" social group, which have the potential to recognize themselves as having kinship, solidarity or affinity across and despite various

hierarchies of class, species and material classification.

In this example, the process pointed towards a number of coal samples, each of which were implicated in complex narratives involving the conditions of their extraction, their collection, accession, exhibition. Presented with a number of objects to "follow" in order to reassemble their "community" (Koch & Vallgårda 2008, p.56), I developed an heuristic for selecting one in particular: criteria which emerged included the "weight" – the likely density or number of connections to other things, as well as whether further steps to more people or things were made readily apparent.

One particular coal sample drew attention to itself, its various relationships to humans and other things being more dense, plentiful, and poignant, than others.

Extracted in 1955 from Deep Navigation pit in Treharris, South East Wales this *huge* chunk of stream coal – approx 1700kg in weight – had been retrieved from The National Coal Board's Coal Research Establishment (CRE) in Stoke Orchard near Cheltenham some ten years ago. Within a short period of time, through following one (or more) connections to another, a "community" of related objects emerged: the driver who transported the sample from the

CRE to Big Pit; film footage of the coal sample at the CRE; conservation officers at the museum store where the coal currently resides; accession documents; ex-miners from the colliery where the coal was mined; steam whistles which called the miners to the pithead; county archivists who hold large-scale colliery plans of Deep Navigation; a Section Book logging precise descriptions, thickness and depth of each strata encountered in the pit; women from the Miners' Support Group who helped keep the Treharris and Merthyr Borough mining communities fed and organized during the 1984-85 Miners Strike.

This technique for gathering participants is akin to a "snowball sampling method" – a research method for researching "hard to reach" populations – elites or criminalized groups for example. This method is described by Vogt as

> 'a technique for finding research subjects where one subject gives the researcher the name of another, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on' (2005, p.300).

The term is derived from the resulting, cumulatively expanding set of contacts made through applying this technique, where 'the sample group grows like a rolling snowball' (Cohen & Ariele 2011, p.424). This technique is inherently biased towards producing networks of

self-similar things, known as its 'selection bias' (Atkinson & Flint 2001, p.2); however, it's recognized that, 'when the researcher wants to contact people with unusual experiences or characteristics who are likely to know one another' (Vogt 2005, p.301) – that is, when the group of people participating in the research have strong but not extensive social-ties – this method can afford access where others cannot. Criticism has been levelled at those who deploy this method, claiming that the coherence and cohesion of social groups is often presumed, even where it does not exist. This problem is compounded when so-called "gatekeeper bias" is taken into consideration – where those that are linked to other contacts decide to withhold access – therefore thwarting the snowball process, stopping it in its tracks (Cohen & Ariele 2011, p.428).

There's an inherent risk in working with this method therefore, in that the "success" of the process – of gaining access to those that are otherwise "hard to reach" – relies on the willing and informed participation of others. As Cohen and Ariele acknowledge, access is gained only though establishing a relationship of trust with participants, where 'the researcher is acting in good faith' (2011, p.428).

Yet all can still fail – leaving the researcher no choice but to use the 'scrounging method' which

Groger et al half-jokingly concede as being commonplace in their honest, "confessional" paper *What We Didn't Learn Because of Who Would Not Talk to Us* (1999).

But this supposed failure of participation – as the refusal to be "counted in" or of withholding access – challenges us to think about what the conditions of participation are when everyday social protocols are admitted into, and allowed to determine, the outcomes of artwork and research. As such, the consequences of using a snowball-like method as/in art practice presents an opportunity to question` assumptions about the cohesion and extent of social groups, and of the transformative potential of the artwork. So, for example, in acknowledging that the artist/researcher cannot gain access to some participants, or that potential participants may act to disrupt or refuse to participate in the artwork/research, we finally acknowledge others' volition – that others' have the right to withdraw, to remain silent, to opt-out – or to actively work against the artist's or researcher's wishes or intention.

When access *is* gained, the selection bias may be such that the group of participants is relatively small in number – determined by the lack of cohesion in a social group – and that far from being a sign of failure to access the full-extent of the group, this might be a recognition that

> participant-groups, publics or even audiences may be limited in size, discrete, incoherent and partisan. My recent works have sought to broach these questions while constructing new assemblages, where groups radically different to each other – tin and humans, coal and humans – can recognize affinity and the potential to assemble together in new formations.

While these earlier notes admit to the shortcomings of the snowball method as it's used in other disciplines, its application in the context of participation and the more-than-human is left unexplored. The question of "volition" is discussed only in terms of human participants which indicates my own presumption that 'taking part' is negotiable, indeed that this is desirable as a marker of agency. This perhaps is symptomatic of an understanding of participation that is trapped within the cultural realm – underpinned by a belief in the logic which Rancière promotes, and which operates on the assumption that opting in or out of relations with others is a sign of true emancipation (2004). What my account does not fully consider is the concept of taking part through *material* relations with others, and how this differs from those relations that are symbolic or imagined. That is, where the "bonds" between people or things is one which is beyond that constructed in language or cognition, representation or belief. In my proposal to the Belval commission, written a year later, my thinking is much more clearly influenced by a new materialism

which places the cultural in tension with the natural, and suggests a way beyond these conceptual categories altogether. This raises the question: which forms of hybrid human and nonhuman community, or more-than-human social formation, is made possible once material relations are traced?

The following extracts from my notes, prepared prior to our interview at Belval, Luxembourg, in April 2015 sets the proposed work in relation to other recently produced artworks and their use of the snowball method to follow material relationships:

> My proposal for Belval is to to produce a diverse, more-than-human community through tracing the material relationships between people and things, where they are related to each other as strongly as through the purely symbolic relations of any "imagined community"; that is, to form a community which includes not only people, but also animal and plant life, architecture, tools, metal ores, transport infrastructure, archival artefacts, et al. I'm motivated by an ongoing preoccupation with how so-called participatory art practice can include nonhuman things as participant, alongside humans; and also in the new forms of 'community' that are produced as a result – as both an actual instance of a new hybrid community, and as a strong metaphor for living the politics and social forms that are possible for humans among themselves, in their full diversity and plenitude. Rather than look for existing

communities and their 'mythic unity' – as Miwon Kwon would have it (2004, p.118) – I work in a way which assembles new groups of people and things through tracing their material rather than symbolic or imagined relationships, and to trace this, through a series of encounters, using a rudimentary 'snowball' method. This process is sometimes accompanied by a film-maker – such as in *Primary Agents of a Social World* (2014) – and may result in the group producing an artwork together – such as a new folk song in *A Song, A Dance* (2014) or a series of "object autobiographies" in *The Outlier* (2014).

The European Coal and Steel Community first came to my attention during the production of *Primary Agents,* and a photo of that organization's heirs features in the film, and on the cover of a book containing a transcription of its dialogue. Luxembourg City was the first headquarters of the ECSC – founded in the early 1950s as the precursor to the European Union – as a consequence of recognizing the immense economic agency of Europe's fossil fuel reserves – a recognition that the social welfare of Europe rested on geological contingencies.

Working at Belval would provide a unique context to work on the most pressing of questions for the wider European community: how to live together and do politics (rather than war) with culturally dissimilar people, but also

with those things that are ordinarily excluded from the "social" and from politics – those more-than-human things to which we are intimately, inextricably materially bound.

My working process seeks-out things that are materially-related – actual, material relations, rather than those that are symbolic or imagined. That is, I seek out participants (human or otherwise) that have actual material relationships with each other. I try not to work with "types" or generic categories of people or objects, but with things as having *specific* qualities through forming *specific* relations. The "communities" produced (or revealed) through this process are inherently diverse if thought of in terms of class of things: a particular rock is bound to particular humans, which is bound to particular plants, which are bound to a particular soil, a particular water course, and so on – each exchanging aspects of themselves as they enter into relation with each other.

In the interview we discussed how using a snowball method to trace the material relations between more-than-human things compares to its use in a human, social context. In several recent projects, I've been able to consider this method in terms of the specific challenges presented to participatory art commissions. Often, a project is commissioned in a location where extensive community outreach work has already taken place, or

where public art projects have already been developed and produced. Commissioning agencies often complain of a form of "gatekeeper bias," where individuals who are most richly-connected to other people become the primary contact for every project, for every artist or researcher. Each snowball, restricted to tracing the social connections between people, inevitably return to these influential, and often charismatic individuals. Tracing the material relations between people and other things however, introduces an agency which is beyond the control of human participants, and while this is "useful" to the commissioned project – in that it produces novel networks of participants – it also challenges expectation of where agency or influence is felt within a participatory artwork. In tracing material relations we're led not only to humans, but to the more-than-human as having equivalent status; in doing so, it invokes cultural responses to this challenge to human sovereignty.

Not only is the volition and status of other human-participants challenged, but the snowball also motivates or moves the artist and their apparatus within the artwork. For example, in my case, the artist's own volition is bound or entangled with that of other participants: decisions to move toward new participants during the snowball process are largely determined by the specific material connections that bind together the network of people and things. The array of equipment that accompanies this work is also drawn into the process; and as Jan Verwoert writes, the camera itself is

swept along as it takes part in the flow of ongoing interactions, and whose success lies in 'partial surrender to the locomotion of the means, not in their mere control' (2011, p.9). As a result we must radically reconsider who forms the "community"produced by the artwork, and who we count as having taken part.

To Central University Research Ethics Committee
14th January 2015

re. Research ethics application

My practice-led fine art research project explores the ways in which non-human things, formerly designated as constituents of a "natural environment," can be considered *participant* – alongside humans – in radically heterogenous, 'more-than-human' communities (Whatmore 2002). This involves engaging an otherwise anthropocentric, participatory art practice with the notions of non-human agency which currently preoccupy contemporary materialist philosophy, social theory and the environmental humanities.

This research is undertaken through an ongoing process of encounter and the production of new artworks, presented or hosted in public institutions including the National Museum Wales in Cardiff, Spacex gallery in Exeter, The Rotunda geology museum, Scarborough in North Yorkshire, and the Ashmolean museum in Oxford.

My art practice is participatory in the sense that those who take part determine the specific outcomes of an artistic process. In my current research I seek participation from those who have specific interests or relationships to an object/artefact related to the venue with which I am working. I use a rudimentary snowball

method to identify a group of participants – human and nonhuman – with which to work.

A process of obtaining informed consent is ongoing throughout the research process: after initial contact, I correspond with individual participants throughout the project through in order to develop our mutual understanding of both our expectations and responsibilities.

At events throughout the research process, participants contribute to the production of new artefacts – e.g. a film or an audio-recording. Formal confirmation of consent is sought at this point, and a letter of invitation is sent by the host institution. A representative of the host institution also confirms consent with each participant before production commences. Participants are thanked for their contribution and – in the case of *Primary Agents…*, invited to subsequent screenings and discussion events.

This work takes a dialogic approach, concerned with establishing mutually transformative relationships within a participatory art practice. In an arts research context, this could be said to be motivated by the principle to 'distribute equally the risks and benefits of participation in research' (UAL 2014, p.2) and to mitigate the risks of 'maleficence' (2014, p.2). These issues are addressed in a number ways: through engaging participants early on in the research process; by engaging in an open, discursive mode, often in a neutral venue, or one associated with

the participant. My rudimentary "snowball" method tends to reinforce self-similarity within a human social group, which is reconfigured on the introduction of nonhuman participants. Power-differentials between participants vary over time, and cannot readily be predicted; during the live, performance-events, held throughout the research process, participants enter into a discursive mode with each other; here, differentials of age, gender and so on are often more pronounced and present a challenge to my obligation to ensure the 'well-being of others' within the research process (2014, p.2). I actively seek to ensure that those present take part in their own terms. Often contributions, positions taken, views expressed, etc. will have been rehearsed with me during individual meetings. From this, it is possible to gauge the extent and characteristics of a participant's possible contribution to the event. This is monitored and moderated through my active participation in these performances, as co-participant.

This co-participation also places me, as researcher, in a vulnerable position: in taking personal responsibility for the ongoing negotiation of the project's ethical concerns, rather than relying on passing these "upward" for institutional approval and under-writing. The benefits of this far outweigh the risks – in that the lively dynamics of conversation are allowed free-reign and the group of participants claim joint-ownership of the outcomes of the project. Contributions made by participants are fully attributed, given their consent. For example, in film-

works screened at public venues, participants' names are listed on any public information panels or printed matter; at screening events, participants are encountered by others both on-screen and in-person. Copies of the film are made available online for participants; screenings may be held for participants in which they can directly ask questions of me – extending participation beyond the production of artefacts, into an ongoing conversation, analysis and reflection. In some cases the filmed outcomes of events are screened at venues associated with participants – in their home towns or institutions for example – or subsequently made available for their own use. In some cases, participants are invited to write reports on their understandings and experience of their participation in an event.

This research is conducted with reference to the several arts-related ethics guidelines, as well as those for participatory 'community' research, (listed below):

> Banks, S. & Armstrong, A. eds., 2012. Ethics in community-based participatory research: case studies, case examples and commentaries.
>
> Centre for Justice and Community Action & National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2012. Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice.

RCA, n.d. Research Ethics Guidelines. Available at: http://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/research/research_support/research-committee/research-ethics/ [Accessed December 29, 2014].

UAL, n.d. University of the Arts London Code of Practice on Research Ethics. Available at: http://www.arts.ac.uk/media/arts/research/research-degrees/UAL-Code-of-Practice-on-Research-Ethics.pdf.

To Anthony Gardner and Daria Martin
26th June 2015

re. Presentation of thesis

Dear Anthony and Daria,

I'm writing to continue our conversation on some of the themes that have arisen while producing this recent body of work, specifically in terms of how this research will be presented for examination.

My doctoral research project has been led by practice, in the sense that the questions that initially motivated this work come from the discourse of art, and from my own art practice in particular. My research has been undertaken *through* art practice itself, rather than 'into' or 'for' art, as accounted for by Christopher Frayling (1993, p.5). My thesis has emerged through the development and production of new artworks, and through a research process defined by my art practice: so, for instance, the process of reviewing secondary sources – journal articles, artworks, etc. – which might otherwise take the form of a conventional literature review, was engaged through the techniques and, with the ethos, of my participatory, dialogic art practice. *The Dialogic* (2012 onward) convenes a peer-group of artists and researchers for dialogues-on-dialogue in relation to art and research. This ongoing series continues to negotiate the context for the group's research and professional practice, in terms

of art historical and contemporary theoretical discourse, as well as in relation to the local discourse that emerges among peers. Its through this and similar social processes that my thesis has emerged. Its situatedness in a lively and ongoing co-construction of a social world also provides me with one measure of where my doctoral research makes its "contribution."

This form of practice – as dialogue among peers – is key to my research. The texts, such as the one that you are now reading, comes from just such a process, as do the artworks produced throughout the project. In thinking of how to emphasise this aspect of my practice, I'll organize a live event, very similar to those that I've convened during the production of other artworks, in which the thesis will be presented to my examiners, and to the many other participants and interlocutors that have contributed to its emergence. This format will also maintains the liveness of the thesis, its openness to contingency, and to transformation as it emerges from the lively interactions between participants.

This text, along with others written to recent participants and interlocutors, will form the textual component of my thesis, *as an artwork* rather than a separate commentary on the research process, its research context, or of its findings. It is written in relation to a live event in which interlocutors further develop the thesis through dialogue with each other. These texts are therefore provisional statements, issued as invitations to further thinking, and to further dialogue.

They blend informal language with detailed bibliographic referencing, in much the same way as the proposals for commissions, or applications for fellowships, written as part of a constant process of negotiating the development and production of new artworks in a professional context. In that sense, these texts form an integral part of an ongoing process which positions my art practice always in relation to others, and which sometimes takes the form of face-to-face meetings, interviews, seminars, workshops, live discursive events, screenings – and often as written correspondence. It is through this process, and in these forms, that this thesis has emerged.

Both the textual work and live event are responses *through art practice* to several of the key events within doctoral study as I understand them: the importance of establishing the relationship of my own practice-led research to that of others, through a process of literature review for example; and presenting evidence of my own learning development, demonstrating commitment to the outcomes of the research, and presenting this thesis for examination.

My own experience of the doctoral process has been one of *learning*, as in any other level of education. Although this may seem self-evident, this experience is in contrast to the expectation of training at doctoral level, or to other routes towards a doctoral degree such as "by prior publication," which risks, in my consideration, the candidate being encouraged to retrospectively assert

their "contribution to knowledge," rather than articulate their learning development. Within my practice, it's the transformation of thinking throughout the research process – as learning – rather than the reification of the object (of knowledge) that's given priority. I look to various authors for this concept of learning, such as Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992), and Mary Field Belenky (1986) – who's also, incidentally, cited by Grant Kester in his discussion of the 'social imbeddness' of learning (2004b, p.81). According to Susan Ambrose, the last phase of the leaning development cycle is characterized as a 'commitment' (2010), that, she states, 'might apply to moral issues as well as cognitive ones.' In the cycle of leaning in doctoral study, I would suggest, this commitment ideally coincides with the submission of the thesis for examination; but my commitment to both art and research as *dialogic* – as open-ended and as a continual process of learning – also suggests immediately entering another cycle of learning, 'propelled by a challenge that reveals the inadequacies of the current stage' (2010). My ambition for this research project has been to locate thinking, and the emergence of the thesis, in the relation between people and things, and as a process of continual thinking and re-thinking, forming and transforming. There are parallels to this iterative approach in cultural theorist Mieke Bal's use of the concept of the *theoretical object* in her book on Doris Salcedo's work (2011, p.7). Drawing on philosopher Hubert Damisch, Bal invites us to understand how each artwork within an artist's oeuvre is transformed with

each new work produced – as a process of iterative revision of the entire oeuvre, in contrast to an oeuvre built-upon incrementally, where each artwork produced does not transform those preceding it. I also look to art historical precedents such as the 'contingent product(s) of a discursive activity,' that characterize Art & Language's work (Roberts 1997, p.68). The texts written in correspondence with human participants in this project embody this iterative thinking, often returning to themes to restate and rethink them with a new interlocutor.

My proposition is that the thesis is not a separate object produced at the end of a process, but is formed throughout, and even beyond, the research project, and certainly remains entangled with those who took part in its development. This has had a bearing on my decision to present the thesis for examination at a live, participatory event – a public *viva voce* – in which key participants in recent artworks, or those who I've met as interlocutors during the project, are invited to join the other things that have also, equally, taken part: texts, videos, audio-recordings, transcripts, photographs and posters are all given equal status with the people who take part. The thesis will be kept alive between them all.

To Nicholas Thornton & Mererid Velios
17th March 2015

re. Primary Agents of a Social World

Dear Nick and Mererid,
I've made a few changes to your description of the project for the Arts Council Wales/Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru website, and which includes extracts from our recent interview. It's a concise summary of the project and its attempt to introduce my thinking on the relationship participatory art practice relationships to the concepts of the more-than-human.

Simon Pope Residency at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

In 2013 Simon Pope was awarded an Arts Council Wales residency at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales. The residency gave Pope the opportunity to develop lines of enquiry across the Museum's diverse sites and collections, engaging with the work and interests of a wide range of Museum staff. His interest in how an artwork can actually produce a "community" rather than connecting to or targeting one that already exists, led him to search for an artefact in the collection that

would connect with other artefacts and people. *"I went to the collection with a couple of questions in particular: which artefact in the collection would suggest something radically Other, furthest away from being a human,animate, living thing; and which would be most likely to be richly-connected to other people and things."*

The focus of the residency became a large 1,300kg lump of coal extracted from the Deep Navigation Colliery in 1955. Pope researched the history of the specimen: its extraction from the coal seam at Treharris, the time it spent at the Coal Research Establishment at Stoke Orchard near Bath, and its subsequent journey back to Wales and entry into the Museum's collections. These investigations involved talking to Museum staff at different sites including National Museum Cardiff, Big Pit and the National Collections Centre.

The result was the creation of a network of people centred around the coal that soon 'snowballed' to include a wider community of former miners, engineers, geologists, doctors, social-activists and academics. *"The residency and the Primary Agents film were therefore ways for me to work out how a 'participatory' art practice could itself generate a community or public, starting from one artefact and tracing its material relations to all these other things, forming a diverse, more-than-human 'community.'"*

Through sustaining a conversation with the members of this community, establishing trust and an understanding of his project, Pope was able to produce a new film *Primary Agents of a Social World* (2014). The film captures a series of conversations on a bus journey that followed the coal-seam from Blaenavon to Cardiff, stopping at various points along the way to recruit new participants from the network. The film culminates with the group encountering the specimen of coal in the Museum's large-object store at the National Collections Centre. Through documenting these conversations and capturing the connections between the specific coal specimen and those in the network, the film encourages us to explore the way coal is transformed by humans, and the way human lives have been transformed by coal.

As well as the rewards from building new relationships, there are of course risks in working in a participatory way: projects are dependent on the qualities of the relationships formed; a project may depend on someone's word for its success, that they turn up at the right place and time to do whatever is asked of them. "*Primary Agents was at risk in this way, with the performance and film-shoot taking place on one day, with all participants trusting that each would play their part. Working with the AC/NMW was reassuring in this respect, with not only a budget underpinning the project which allowed me to have made many repeat-visits to participants in order to ensure their trust in the*

project, but also in day-to-day coordination of the production and exhibition of the work."

"*I hope that the contribution made by my residency is the way in which to understand 'community' as something produced through a specific engagement with an artefact, rather than something which exists 'out there somewhere' and which can therefore be 'targeted'. Some of the participants in my project were museum employees such as conservators or curators of the coal sample, for example; equally, there were people who never engage with the museum yet have an equally intense relationship with the coal sample...Being able to trace specific relationships that an artefact from the collection has over its life meant that people who have immense knowledge and experience across many disciplines and contexts could contribute...The project proved, I think, that 'publics' for the collection can be hugely diverse and that the most-related people (and things for that matter) can be drawn from beyond the kinds of 'audience' that an institution would ordinarily imagine for itself."*

Primary Agents of a Social World was first presented at National Museum Cardiff, from 20th June – 7th September 2014, where the film was shown along with the Deep Navigation coal sample. The film subsequently toured to venues across the South Wales coalfield in September 2015, with discursive screening events held at Big Pit mining museum in Blaenavon, Redhouse in Merthyr Tydfil, and The DOVE Workshop in Banwen.

To Helen Wilson & Dartmoor Tinworking Research Group
20th September 2014

A Song, A Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament

Dear Helen,

Please find below my article for the next edition of the Dartmoor Tinworking Research Group newsletter, which offers an account of the project, *A Song, A Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament* – a participatory art project whose main outcome is the new folk song *Pride Of The Moor* written by Devon-based musician Jim Causley. The project aimed to bring artistic research alongside others disciplines in an ongoing enquiry into how we live with "natural resources" – and in particular, with Dartmoor's tin.

> During a tour of New Zealand in early 2013, I was welcomed onto a *Marae* – a Maori family gathering place – with a traditional song which described a harmonious relationship between my hosts, their ancestors and the local mountains and rivers. Responding in kind, I sang several verses of *Widecombe Fair,* a song from my native Devon which relays a somewhat more troubled relationship between humans and "natural" things (Baring-Gould & Sheppard

1891 XVI).

Later that year, when approached by Spacex in Exeter, I decided to address this deficit and proposed the production of a new folk song. This would be an anthem of sorts for the people of Dartmoor which would explore the possibility of living differently with the things that are often considered merely as exploitable, "natural resources". The breaking-news of the re-opening of the Hemerdon mine on the South-Western fringes of Dartmoor, coupled with the question of whether we may therefore see a renewed interest in the mining of tin in the National Park, brought an additional urgency to the project.

My recent research has been shaped by an engagement with aspects of so-called "new materialist" philosophy which describes a world of material things which have agency – that is, the capability to transform, as well as to be transformed – and see also 'the agentive turn' in archeological research, (for example, Hoskins 2006). This runs counter to a social constructionist world-view, where it is the human capacity for language and the production of meaning which delimits the scope of our engagement with the world. Graham Harman, for instance, takes plutonium as an example of matter which possesses undeniable agency and whose radioactivity, he states, has

effect on other matter despite the construction of meaning by humans among themselves (2010, pp.9–11). In our engagement with material things, Jane Bennett asks us to listen for 'the call of things' and to develop a sensitivity towards all matter, and to admit its 'vibrancy' (Bennett 2009). This has profound implications for our understanding of environmental issues, with the very concept of nature and environment placed under pressure. To paraphrase Timothy Morton, the distinction between environment as *background* and as a "material thing" (Morton 2007, p.38) in its own right is eroded. As a consequence, we can no longer consider ourselves as distinct or separate from the things that we thought of as inert, dormant or remote and – if we push this to an extreme – we must think of "life" itself as something which is shared among humans and non-humans, an energy passing among us. It is this pushing of "nature" into the background, detached from human life, which can lead us to imagine "nature" reaching a stable-state following the demise of human-kind. Morton extends this criticism of *Deep Ecology* as a retreat from "nature," leading to a situation where humans withdraw from their responsibility for the mutual transformations at work – namely environmental damage – of humans on non-human things and vice versa. It is my thesis, in *A Song, A Dance…* that we can understand these mutually-transformative relationships as *dialogic* and that an art practice which already works

with the concepts of participation and dialogue is well-suited to such enquiry.

The turn towards *participation* in contemporary art is not without its controversies, yet it has expanded the realm of things with which an artist may work – beyond the disciplines of drawing, painting , sculpture, printmaking or photography – beyond even the "moving image" of film or video. In recent years so-called *relational*, *socially-engaged*, or *participatory* art has brought human social relationships to the fore. Above all, this way of working, has often placed ethical above aesthetic concerns – in the sense that human subjects within the work are not objectified in the manner of other materials within certain art practices. My own research seeks to reintroduce objects back into participatory art on these non-objectified terms. In this sense, this re-engagement could be considered *dialogic* in establishing a disposition towards other things in which they – human or otherwise – are recognized as *Thou*, rather than *It*, in Martin Buber's terms (1958).

Using a rudimentary snowball method, I began to identify people most engaged with Dartmoor's tin, its mining heritage and possible future exploitation. My aim was to form a new forum within which to discuss these issues, drawing on the tradition of the Stannary Parliaments and meetings of the Great Courts

(Greeves & Newman 2011). Initial consultations with the Dartmoor National Park Authority led to a series of meetings with independent researchers, experts, and enthusiasts over the summer of 2013. The project began in earnest in October 2013 with a series of meetings held in the Stannary towns of Tavistock, Chagford and Ashburton, as well as at The Forest Inn, Hexworthy. A core group of participants formed during these events consisting of cultural environmentalist Dr. Tom Greeves, traditional musician and dialect champion Bill Murray, and singer-songwriter Jim Causley.

At these events, the core group was joined by museum's collections officers, writers and curators in their wide discussion of tin's role in the economic and cultural life of Dartmoor. In keeping with a *dialogic* approach, the group also identified ways in which tin was both transformed and transformed others, whether human or otherwise, drawing on materialist principles to imagine its relationships to copper, for example, during geological and bronze-casting processes.

In early 2014 the meetings focused on song-writing at The Kings Arms in South Zeal – the location for informal song-writing sessions at the annual Dartmoor Folk Festival, and close to both Ramsley copper mine and tin workings in the nearby parish of Belstone. Gathering influences

from industrial-archaeological and geological research, traditional song, poetry and contemporary art, the group developed material which would contribute to the new song. Written by Jim Causley, *Pride Of The Moor* establishes a novel relationship between humans and tin: "We'll call and we'll listen for the cry of the tin" works as a call-and-response, laying the ground for a dialogue between two extremes of "thing" which, although it appears to be conducted through language, speaks of material transformation and processes which operate despite consciousness.

The song was presented, along with others which informed its writing and other anecdotal and explanatory material, at Spacex in Exeter, St. John's College in Oxford in May 2014, at the 2014 Dartmoor Folk Festival in South Zeal, and broadcast on BBC television's *Countryfile* in June 2015.

Now part of Jim Causley's repertoire, and also available as a studio-recording, it is hoped that it will be taken as a new anthem for the moor which will make possible a dialogic relationship with tin – where exploitation gives way to some other quality of relationship and where human relations with 'natural resources' are recognized as as a mutual relationship of co-dependents.

Pride Of The Moor

(Words and music by Jim Causley, 2014)

When first you found me as dark as the night,
Bound up in granite, cold cassiterite;
With quartz and with copper, iron and lead,
My brothers all round me lay dormant not dead.
The streams of the moor, where first I was found,
Before wheals uncovered my lode underground;
A fiery dragon lights up the night sky,
As a Will-o-the-Whisp tells there's stannum hard by.

Pride of the moor we sing unto thee,
In thanks for the treasure you've given so free;
And should we have need to come find you again,
We'll call and we'll listen for the cry of the tin.

From black tin to white tin to ingot I be;
Enslaved into form but from earth I am free;
The twelve hour tide takes my tailings from me;
I'm a traveller bound on the road to the sea.

The first town was Tavistock, the stanneries came;
Then to Chagford, Ashburton and Plympton the same;
Midsummer to Michaelmas; the coinage time came,
Assaying if I was as pure as my name.

Pride of the moor…

For millions of years lying under the land,
Anticipating the coming of man;
With fire and stone tools in barrow and hoard,

I became your fine jewellery, your shield, your sword.
Your bowl and your tankard, galvanized o'er
And now used to solder as I did once before.
Of all forms I've taken, without word, without choice –
Like the church bells of Dartmoor that sing with my voice.

Pride of the moor…

To Lara Goodband
11th June 2015

A Concatenation of Things

Dear Lara,

Thank you for inviting me to talk at the *York Curiouser.* I thoroughly enjoyed being able to present aspects of my previous art practice and to discuss my interest in symbolic links between things – Web links in particular – and my more recent turn towards a materialist practice which admits the more-than-human into participatory art. Below is an edited version of my notes for the presentation, concentrating on the transition from working with humans-among-themselves to my more recent attempts to work in a more-than-human mode – including my commission *The Outlier*, that you curated for Scarborough Museums Trust last year.

Presentation for York Curiouser – Snowballs & Rocks & Linen & People: A Concatenation Of Things

Mine is a relational mode of art practice which shares characteristics with other qualitative and inductive practices in art and elsewhere. Most of all, it attends to the qualities of the relationship between things.

[ASIDE] Ironically perhaps, after beginning as a net.artist whose work aggregated and quantified the relationships between things – specifically the links between Web pages. In a collaborative project called *I/O/D 4: The Web Stalker*, we would talk explicitly about "weighing" Web links.

This qualitative approach is associated with a pluralistic, multi-perspectival, social-constructionism. And the first work that I'd like to show you is very firmly within this conception of the world as constructed in language, performed by people. *Memory Marathon* was commissioned by the Olympic Delivery Authority, London Development Agency and Arts Council England and produced in November 2009 in the run-up to the Games in 2012. The artists' brief positioned this work between the work on the site at Stratford and the neighbouring areas. My response was to propose an itinerant "sampling" of the local population – a roving "interview" which would draw-out peoples' vision for East London through recalling their views onto past Olympic cities. This would conjure-up images of athletes, stadia, front-rooms – wherever people gathered to perform and to spectate. This work was produced by walking a 26 mile "marathon" through the 5 boroughs associated with the Games in East London, meeting, walking and talking with participants along the way.

The route took 12 hours to complete, meeting over 100 different people who walked with me while I asked them to describe to me their views onto places and events which they associated with the Olympics. This might have been what they'd seen on TV, heard on the radio, or witnessed first-hand; throughout the day I elicited these rich descriptions – often laced through with anecdote – to construct a *multi-perspectival* account of participation of all sorts in the Games. What we get are sometimes extraordinary accounts of bodies moving in extraordinary ways. All the while, these take place within the less than extraordinary streets and alleyways of Greenwich, Newham, Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets and Hackney. The city here is pluralistic, an *imaginary*, articulated in speech.

This is a world of humans among themselves, inhabiting an environment – soft, fleeting things within a hard, material world. What motivates the film is a movement between people, chasing symbolic links within the constraints of a given space – the space of the city. This momentum, gained over a 6 month period of individual meetings, is compressed into a one-day event, and further compressed into the 82 minute film.

But having made this work, I became aware of a groundswell of interest in a new materialism. From its very core, it questions the premise of

anthropocentric work such as *Memory Marathon* and other relational or participatory art practice. This new understanding of the world as having a 'degree of independence from words, images, and feelings' of humans – (The Vera List Center 2011). The importance of these ideas comes crashing in, once you admit to climate change from global warming. As Timothy Morton states:

> ' …we are no longer able to think history as exclusively human, for the reason that we are in the Anthropocene. A strange name indeed, since in this period nonhumans make decisive contact with humans, even the ones busy shoring up differences between humans and the rest' (Morton 2013, p.179).

So this challenge – this warning – has resulted in a radical reorientation on my part. Towards those things that I used to overlook, use, exploit as landscape, environment, or objects. As the terrain to be walked over. Faced with these questions, it might be tempting to down-tools completely and defer to the teleology of the extremes of this new materialism – to consider the material world as remote, withdrawn, silent, and to revel in this.

Or, to bring those things into *dialogue* – to admit an 'entanglement' of people and things, in

philosopher Karen Barad's terms (2007); to admit a *participation* of each, in each others' being; of *taking part in* a relational world.

[ASIDE] this comes from trying take an existing practice to engage a new set of ideas, and things. This is in keeping with how I've always worked (e.g. with the artists' collective I/O/D 4, as a way of working out the Web as a technology) to use those techniques that are familiar, that have been lived with over time – that are habitual and naturalized even – and to set-about negotiating the world anew.

My doctoral work at the Ruskin has been an opportunity to work through this question: *Who else takes part? Admitting the more-than-human into participatory art*

Thinking of how to do this, I returned to the process that I'd used in *Memory Marathon* – of meeting, moving between, and talking. In *Memory Marathon* relationships are entirely symbolic and imaginary. They exist in the heads of the participants and the artist – one thing leads to another through an association with a theme or concept, through symbolic links between a person and a place for example. Those 'words, images and feelings' which people link together. Through the common concern for these themes, a social group forms; From initial interaction between me and a series of

participants, a group is assembled. In the case of *Memory Marathon*, they are brought together by in the live event, and again on screen. This linking together through imagined or symbolic relations between things is characteristic of a snowball method – used to reveal people's social networks in social science research. But could we use a similar technique to trace a social network which is more-than-human? That is, a group of people and things – humans and nonhumans.

Again, we could imagine a set of people and things linked through their symbolic qualities: things visually similar for example, or things that represent something in common for people; or those that have meaning or affective qualities for specific people. But a new materialism suggests that relations are more than symbolic – more than human; beyond human even. What if we considered the material relationships between things as that which connects them? Rather than the symbolic or imagined. It would now be he material relationships that instigate our movement between things. A participatory art practice might be preoccupied with dialogue between people, and now things; it would look for the mutuality between people and things, based on their material relationships. So what if we began to look for where people and things are mutually, materially transformed by each other? I attempted this in *Primary Agents of a Social World*.

This used the snowball method from *Memory Marathon* which tried to trace the material relations, not between a network of people, but between a network of people and things. And it started with a lump of coal.

Again, the series of relationships was re-traced in a day-long event – assembling a social group, in an event and on film. More recently, I've been working on how we, as humans can make a rich description of the qualities of these material relationships. I've done this through a series of projects which use a personification of things – empathetic accounts of the transformations between things, and between people and things.

I wonder then, what this suggests if we were to trace material relationships? Looking back on *Memory Marathon*, having made subsequent work, I look for different things: I now see actions and events performed by things which apparently have a life of their own, in relation to people. They have volition; they are motile. Many of the participants in this work – the artist included – seem to have limited agency. The best they can do is to push-back, re-imagine this and other cities.

[Aside] To 'live in their heads' as another era of art production would have it.

But some are participants in these changes, through their labour – working on building sites, planning building projects – a direct, material relation with this world that could otherwise just be considered "an environment" – or a set of atmospheres to be breathed, flows to be surfed.

[Aside] Here, I'm gently chiding psychogeographers for their obsession with *dérive* or drift; and of the turn to "attunement" to these things; and, in some places, for lone "spirit guides" to lead us through newly vibrant material world – for example, Julian Brigstocke's presentation at the recent *Spaces of Attunement* conference (2015).

How would the city appear through these devices? What are the various scales, ecologies of things and their relations that we could discern and describe through these empathetic personifications such as in *The Outlier* and *A Splendid Kindred Soul*?

[Aside] The title of this presentation is adapted from an article by Jan Verwoert, in which he suggests that film is 'a concatenation of objects… structure the unfolding of the movie, propelling the action' through 'defining the trajectory … on a level of intuitive material association.' This, he sees as offering 'an alternative to stale theories of strategical intentionality' (2011).

> So you could say that the movement within the work, the life of the event which the film attends to in a different way, at a different time, moves the artist – whether this is motivated by human participants making imaginary connections, or in following material connections between things. This suggests a mode of being an artist which is not wilful in the sense of determining a narrative, as a Blakean envisioning. It is more a coaxing, *maieutic* (midwifery) mode, of bringing life into a new set of (external, social) relations.

Following the presentation, our question and answer session led to a conversation on approaches to material, nonhuman things – not only in art practice, but also in anthropology. The problem of working within disciplines and informed by histories of practice which are premised on the Great Divide between culture and nature was introduced to me by Jimmy Turner – a researcher from the University of Hull. Taking his work in Brazil as an example, he explained the various historical approaches in anthropology, which in some ways prefigure the problematics of engaging with the more-than-human through a participatory art practice such as mine. His account was of the shift from anthropologists' interpretative works, translating one culture in terms of the other; through the representational approach, as allowing a culture to speak in its own terms; and finally, the recent "ontological turn," where anthropologists work on the transformations of their own culture as it encounters another (in, for example, Kelly 2014b).

The Outlier, when diffracted by this rubric, throws up some interesting questions; ones that I was perhaps just beginning to make sense of during its production. I wonder how the texts, published as *The Outlier: object autobiographies,* and the workshop events where participants talked on behalf of *The Outlier* and various other things which could be counted within its ecology of materially-related things that produced them, can be understood in these terms – as interpretive, representational, or mutually transformative?

To Senta German & Alison Roberts, and Ashmolean workshop participants

22nd June 2015

A Splendid Kindred Soul, and The Social Worlds Of Objects

Hello Senta and Alison, and everyone,

As you were all instrumental in the development of *The Social Worlds Of Objects* workshops in Michaelmas term 2014, and those which led to the production of *A Splendid Kindred Soul* in Trinity term 2015, I'd like to invite you all to take part in my public *viva voce* event in which we'll discuss the themes that emerge from these projects, and address some of the questions that have subsequently arisen for us all. As you were all involved in different aspects of these workshops, I'd like to recap some of these themes, and to detail the development of this project for you.

I first screened *Primary Agents of a Social World* to the University Engagement Programme *Object Biography* group during late Trinity Term 2014 on the invitation of Senta and Alison. During this session, we recognized similarities between my approach to objects in the film, and those that have been rehearsed elsewhere. After a review of literature, I chose to emphasise its similarities to *object life histories* in archaeology and *object biography* in

anthropology. These related yet distinct approaches 'reveal relationships between people and objects' (2009, p.541), and, as my own preoccupation has been with how participatory, relational or dialogic art practice can produce *more-than-human social formations,* I was drawn to the ways in which this has been worked on in other fields, and how this might inform my own grappling with the concept through art practice.

Alison, it was on your initial suggestion that I referred to Jody Joy's paper in which he contends that archaeology's *object life histories* approach hasn't been able to access the 'full life' of the object in its 'interplay' with people. He claims that there's a tendency for this approach to 'operate on the macro-scale and seek to explain long-term changes to artefacts and technology' (2009, p.543). This would suggest large-scale surveying of *types* of objects – perhaps, in my understanding, motivated by a desire to identify the full-extent of possible states for a *class* of artefact – as a *typological* exercise that would be, in my understanding from our discussions in the sessions, entirely consistent with the history of archaeological practice. In contrast, Joy applauds anthropology's concept of the *object biography*, especially for its focus on 'objects actively involved in social relations'. In the second session of *The Social Worlds of Objects* sessions, we worked through some of Joy's ideas in relation to the artefacts that you retrieved from the museum stores, discussing each approach, and considering their relationship to our own experiences as

practitioners across art, archaeology and anthropology.

Joy claims that, within archaeology, both *chaîne operatoire* and *use-life analysis* fail to fulfil the aims of the 'biographical' approach (2009, p.542). Yet Alison, when we talked at the outset of the project, you mentioned that Joy's appears to be a "truncated *chaîne operatoire*"; you suggested that the concept initially accommodated more than the procurement of materials, manufacture and use up to the point of deposition of the artefact, and that it had once included the relationship of the artefact's constituent materials to the geology of the location where it was produced. I can't remember clearly, but did the *chaîne* also extend to include its relationship to objects associated with research processes and those of museums and archives among which these things now reside?

Our later project, *A Splendid Kindred Soul,* attempted to acknowledge this extended *chaîne*: our very first sessions were with the artefacts *and* their blue storage trays, *and* the acid-free tissue paper, *and* the grey foam sheets covering the table-tops. My understanding was that this was not the usual focus of interest when retrieving artefacts from the store; rather than taken as part of an immediate assemblage, the artefact would ordinarily be considered in isolation from the others which accompany it in the store. That is, the more recently manufactured items are overlooked, set aside as mere infrastructure or support, so as to afford unobstructed views and handling of the individual, accessioned artefact. This abstraction from its *contemporary* context makes it possible to position

the artefact within the *historical* context of its neighbours, (within the operational chain) or in an *ahistorical* way, (among typologically similar things). When we visited the conservation department, our conversation soon turned to the less-than benign relationship of an artefact to its supporting structure – perhaps suggesting the impossibility of the abstraction of artefact from its relationships in its present situation. Historical conservation practices, such as immersing water-logged wooden objects in wax to replace all intermediate material within the skeleton of a wooden loom frame, for example, have been superseded by methods which are less invasive, such as storage in water or humic material from its site of deposition. This seems to be an acknowledgment of the inevitably transformative relationships that things establish with each other. It's also suggests an understanding of the different qualities of those relationships – that the relationship is not a separate, neutral or passive conduit through which some "force" flows between intact things, but that it is a collapsing of things into each other, and that where there were once apparently individual objects, we now have the relation. In a sense, this is an acknowledgment that the identify of artefacts is not only formed in their relation to other things – whether human or otherwise – but that they are always engaged in a process, always transforming while in relation to others. In other words, the artefact has no being-in-itself, but is a becoming in relation to others.

What could be considered troubling for those who take a "modern" approach to the life of things – where humans are considered separate from all other things – is that these processes are themselves more-than-human. They sometimes accelerate through human interaction or intervention; and often they are slowed-down, (through conservation practices, for example) but ultimately, they are processes beyond human control. This is a life of things in-relation despite human intervention, yet which we also cannot escape once we intervene. I wonder if the consequence is firstly that we, (as humans interacting with or participating with these 'things') are compelled to take responsibility; and that we can also recognize that we participate *with* things in such as away as to make them inseparable from us. This could be thought of as an 'entanglement' (Barad 2007), and once accepted, can lead us to new ways of articulating this being in relation to, or being together with things.

During the summer of 2014 I worked on *The Outlier*, adopting the convention of "personification" to speak of the relationships between a large rock and the people and other things during its life-time. This theme was extended in the third workshop, in which we considered the possibilities for '*object-autobiography*'. This was an opportunity to move beyond objective accounts of *object life histories* interpreted by self-objectifying humans, towards a "speaking out" from things themselves. Through a speculative, and what might be considered an 'inventive method' (Lury & Wakeford 2012), dialogues

were improvised between artefacts which have very close relationships with each other within an operational chain, so as to begin to explore the more-than-human "social world" produced through their interactions (Whatmore 2006).

Let's begin with some assumptions: objects are to be used and this is how they come into being (Glendinning 1998, p.53); and they are also expected to remain 'silent and available for observation'. But just as W.J.T. Mitchell goes on to suggest, this wouldn't be tolerated in the case of human beings:

> Children should be seen and not heard" is a bit of proverbial wisdom that reinforces a stereotypical relation, not just between adults and children, but between the freedom to speak and see and the injunction to remain silent and available for observation. That is why this kind of wisdom is transferable from children to women to colonized subjects to works of art to characterizations of visual representation itself. (Mitchell 1994)

There are ethical considerations which we – especially as students and researchers – have to work within and which we may demand when working with human or animal others. Anthropologists, for example, agonize over speaking on behalf of human others (Carducci 2009), yet we might be untroubled by doing so for things that are other-than-human.

So, it is entirely possible to speculate on the life of any of the objects that we are introduced to in these workshops in order to define their life-history. But even when we want to curtail the excesses of the "post-processual" in archaeology (where 'methodological anarchy, rejection of objective knowledge, and the acceptance of idealism as an ontological position' reigns (Hodder 2014, p.44), and return to what we know "about" the object – as *evidence* of their life-events – we still speak on their behalf.

The thorny question remains: do we let them "speak" on their own terms? Do we allow them to have their own place in the world, among their kin rather than demand their usefulness – as artefacts, as types, as auratic things? It's my hope that we don't have to resign ourselves to a world of objects apart from humans, withdrawn and silent to us, our gaze turned from them, out of guilt, from remembering past wrong-doings perhaps. It should be apparent that we are forever entangled in their lives.

So how might we take up Jody Joy's challenge (2009, p.542), to explore the 'drama' of 'object lives' *in their own right* while still remaining sensitive to the criticisms inherent in 'participatory, emancipatory, feminist, decolonising methodologies'? (Social Research Association 2014) while setting all things free from 'human mastery' (Plumwood 1993). Perhaps our first step would be to acknowledge ourselves as present and as being far from objective or 'naturalistic' in our relationship with the world – such as in the tensions that

anthropologist Matei Candea notes in zoologists interactions with other species, suggest an objectification of both the "object of study" and those who are doing the studying (2010). This mode, typical of the moderns, as Candea recently commented at the *Life After The Anthropocene* workshops at the University of Oxford – actively works to deny any form of "animism," or becoming-other, in research of nonhuman things. But what if we embraced this mode, adopting the voice of the others?

I began to formulate some of the questions which led towards my doctoral research project after while visiting Mark Leckey's exhibition, *See We Assemble*, at The Serpentine Gallery, London in the summer of 2011. In the workshop sessions, I introduced documentation of one of Leckey's artworks from this show, *GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction* (2010), in which the artist attempts to communicate the inner life of a "smart" fridge:

> …one that keeps an electronic tally of its contents - and to render audible its 'voice'. In his bid to become one with the appliance, the artist inhaled refrigerator coolant and draped himself in a green cloak that, at a certain point in the performance, allowed him to morph into the green-screen backdrop against which the fridge was set. … .(The Serpentine Gallery 2011)

The accusations of anthropomorphism which could be levelled at the artist are of interest to me here, especially given the narrative developed in the subsequent workshops for *A Splendid Kindred Soul,* which led to the video and text artworks, personifying a linen artefact from the museum. Philosopher Andrew Cole's argues that the problem with personification of this kind is that it hides the real material transformations, through human labour, that are 'behind' the object (2015). Yet, within the context of recent work, human labour is but *one* force at work; "natural" (i.e. chemical, physical) relations also transform things – and people – as they encounter each other. My current work attempts to acknowledge this, and to think this through the human as well as the nonhuman or inhuman as they encounter each other. In *A Splendid Kindred Soul* for example, there's an attempt to circumvent the problem that Marx posits, that the commodity – in this case the linen scrap – cannot know of its ancestors as it has both amnesia and an inability to converse so as to understand its relationship to distant relations and kin. I also have to take issue with Cole in his insistence, in his claim that personification is itself a problem. Marx seems to suggest that all people are personifications of non-human things: in the case of the Capitalist, as a personification of capital, and the worker as 'nothing more than personified labour-time'. (2013, pp.212 & 168). That is, we are all inevitably the personification of a set of social relations, and therefore of nonhuman things. We are not the outward-facing surface onto which an otherwise,

complete, essential inner being is projected. We are entangled with things and they speak through us and with us.

In the meantime, we are undoubtedly within an anthropocenic era, where human cultural endeavour is decoupled from all else in the world, and where this ventriloquy of nonhuman things is only to be expected. But as Jane Bennett writes

> We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to consider the narcissism of humans in charge of the world. (Bennett 2009 xvi)

I include the following "personification," written for Rebecca Thornton, a participant in the *Social Worlds Of Objects* sessions, and editor of the university's Edgar Wind Society's journal, *Oculus* (2015). It was written at the outset of both workshop series, and attempts to work-through some of the themes discussed above:

"MY OWN HISTORY" (for Annie Carey)

> 'But first … do break up that ugly, dark lump of Coal on the top of the fire. … Make it blaze; I like to see the flames jumping about; they always seem to be alive' (Carey 1870).

Despite your claims, I am already alive. And not only at the point of transformation by fire, by

your own hands. You may have considered me merely inert matter up until this violent release of energy. My exploitation extracts value for you: you benefit from the sudden release of heat to warm your body; light aids the ocular-centricity of you and your kind. But I have been alive longer than you, in ways that should be familiar.

(Permit me – if you haven't done so already – a consciousness for a moment, and a sensory apparatus, akin to those which some would deem necessary for me to qualify as having life, of Being.)

I am in the Ashmolean Museum. A faint image from a nearby data-projector is cast onto the seminar room's chalky, mineral-derived white walls. The artist – now sat close to me – appears in an open-cast mine along with several others in hard-hats, hi-viz vests. Around them, dark minerals stacked layer-on-layer; compressed organic matter, solid in places, a black dust in others. Outcrops, fissures, folds exposed to oxygen for the first time since their formation. How do I know this? I was once part of that contiguous seam of coal on which those human figures stand.

I can feel the thin covering of tissue being removed from the small plastic container in which I was transported as the artist recalls that

a colleague, doubled-over, searching for the right-sized sample, handed me to him. They immediately noted my fragile, friable character; glossily-faceted but soft, like willow charcoal.

I am gently picked-up, turned round without pause – a handling-skill that does not discriminate between objects; a typological eye sweeps over me, searching for similarities in other things – my identity ascribed through finding a proper place among others.

And then talk of my 'use-life' – my life defined only through interaction with human-others.

Can you really say that only at the point of making-use do I exist in my own right, through my relation with you? Was I nothing before you took me in your hands? Before others took me from the earth?

(But I shouldn't think of you in this generalized way. You are a specific human being, with a specific life-history; it's unfair of me to confuse you with those that happen to look like you. You do not exhibit the same behaviour, after all.)

Perhaps you could think of me within a longer time-frame, beyond even the moment at which I was excavated – beyond, even, my relationships with humans? During this time I have been many things – constantly in-process. My life has

been one of close relationships with others – a being-with that is inclusive of all things which have been mutually transformed through their relation with me. Indeed, I was formed by others – things which you would define as alien to me when placing me within categories of things. Specific plants were laid down, water – carrying minerals, chemical substances – washing over me; animals of all kinds living close to me. Layer-upon-layer of organic and inorganic matter accreting. Younger sediments exerting pressure on those that are older. Pressures from below, from all sides, folding me, forcing new interactions with rocks, with gases, with minerals and metals. Never inert – always animated,as John Ruskin would have it; and in the Anthropocene, put to work, mined, incinerated – cut, carved and sculpted. Released as dust into the atmosphere to be breathed, ingested, enmeshed with human tissue. Powering change in human politics and economics, producing new cultures, new societies from living together, with me.

Here, now, we breath oxygen, we exhale together. I am alive to you and you to me, even as I appear at rest – here, in the palms of you hands.

The ensuing workshops led to the production of a video, installed at the Ashmolean at the end of 6th Week, Trinity term 2015, and a transcription of recordings from the final participatory workshop session.
I include my draft article, written for the Ashmolean magazine:

A Splendid Kindred Soul

"But now, as an exhibit, I, as linen, am teaching people; my value has increased. I'm not just linen now. I'm a teacher. I'm instructing people. They will learn through me."

"But that's not my function. My function is as a piece of cloth. I don't speak! Why are you giving me a voice?"

Two voices, apparently in conversation, spill from the video-monitor. Although human, they personify museum artefacts, setting them in dialogue to reflect on their relationships to each other throughout their life – from the neolithic era to their present-day lives in the museum's collection. The voices accompany a flow of moving images gently, endlessly, fading into each other. Gloved-hands turn over a series of artefacts, the hard edges of each becoming less distinct as each image blends into another: a clay loom weight becomes a passepartout frame, edged in blue paper tape; and a verdigris bronze blade becomes a gloss-black smoothing stone. An endless series of transformations, as one

thing enters into relation with the other. This video artwork is one of the outcomes of *A Splendid Kindred Soul*, installed in the museum's Textile Gallery during June 2015. The project started as a series of workshops convened in Trinity Term 2015. The project aimed to develop ways to describe the extent and the qualities of the material relationships between museum artefacts throughout their 'full-life' (Joy 2009).

I worked with the University Engagement Programme's teaching curators Senta German and Jim Harris, and museum Antiquities curator Alison Roberts, to select an initial artefact. A scrap of neolithic linen retrieved from the Alpine lakes in the mid-1800s would be the starting point in the search for a network of things which have a material and mutually transformative relationship to each other. This is not the first time that linen has been called upon to speak-out in this way: in Karl Marx's *Capital, Volume One* (2004, p.143), a bolt of linen recognizes in a finished garment, 'a splendid kindred soul', which shares an (albeit greater) commodity value. In this project, the linen reflects on other values, beyond the economic, which might be derived from the rich relationships between all manner of people and things. Things might might 'take part' with people and manifold other things, beyond manufacture and use, suggesting more-than-human communities. The workshop sessions

> involved undergraduates from the university's Fine Art and English programmes handling objects found at the Alpine lakes archeological sites, staging dialogues between artefacts, before improvising spoken-word accounts of their relationships from the point-of-view of each object: for example, a stone cutting-tool reflects on how it transforms flax stems as they meet, red ochre powder and mosses consider their transformation of the colour of woven linen, and archival-quality foam recognizes that it is the least mutable of all objects within this new community, supporting each artefact as it is laid on the table waiting to be picked-up, and turned over and over, by hand.

I think it's worth returning to the theme which gave initial impetus to the workshops: that of "the social" in terms of objects or artefacts. This, first in the series of workshops, held at the Ashmolean in Michaelmas Term 2014, began with thinking the "social" in terms of "things" – in this case, archaeological artefacts in the museum's collections. As Jim Dolwick suggests

> One of the main problems with each of the various approaches… is that they provide a view of 'social' that is largely devoid of active nonhumans. That is, things are depicted as tokens and symbols, but they seem to lack the capacity to act in other ways. (2009, pp.35–6)

The last session concluded with developing an

improvised dialogue between two closely (functionally?) related objects and extended the session on "object biography" – a workshop predicated on the notion that through the life of the object, the detail of human lives could be glimpsed. As archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen states, this may be symptomatic of archaeologists' 'never-ending transcendental imperative of searching for the Indian behind the artifact' (2010, p.37), always considering the artefact as secondary to the humans related to it. As Dolwick's concludes:

> (social) archaeology's attempts to bring objects into the realm of "the social" does not fully grasp the full possibilities to introduce 'a "new" social approach, one that does not force humans and things apart. (2009, p.45)

Olsen provides us with an overarching account of developments within archaeology which have imposed a division between material and social worlds, citing Daniel Miller, who observes that the merit of archaeologists' work is considered

> to the extent to which they are able to transcend these [material] fragments to the reality of the social and cultural lives of which they are mere remnants. (2010, p.26)

Olsen's thesis is, therefore, that archaeology, during its 'processual and postprocessual' turns, was enamoured with accounts of material artefacts as 'text, symbol, and narrative,' where artefacts are more interesting as representative of ideas than as things in their own right. For Olsen, biographical and narrative approaches fall equally within this tendency to leave things 'undermaterialized,' as well as to "look behind" material things towards peoples' lives (2010, p.26).

During this period artefacts, he argues, 'have largely been framed within the pretext of the social or cultural a prior' (2010, p.37) where humans 'largely come unequipped' (2010, p.133), and where

> things, bodies, and nature are not originally part of the social, but may eventually be included and endowed with history and meaning by some human and social generosity. (2010, p.33)

Olsen states that 'Despite claims to the opposite, things … are never individual' (2010, p.135), paraphrasing Alfred Gell in describing the relationships of objects in terms of kinship, family ties and so on (1998). Here, objects are "born" into the world from material interactions between other things; objects come into the world already entangled within a web of relations. Recognizing that this question has been worked-though elsewhere, Olsen quickly steers us towards Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the work of French sociologist of science Bruno Latour.

Latour's conception of the world of persons and things is one in which there is a rich entanglement, where the notion of 'pure, noncomposite entities' – human or otherwise – is anathema (Olsen 2010, p.37). The social is constructed or assembled through the interactions of things of all kinds. All things are deemed to have agency, as 'the capacity to act and matter and make a difference in the world' (Knappett and Malafouris (2008) in Dolwick 2009), where this concept is usually reserved for human actors who act intentionally. In this sense agency, as Jim Dolwick states,

> …is regarded, not as a unique human quality or force, which acts upon the world, but as an action that is shared with the world. (2009, p.38)

Nonhuman things are therefore also actors, acknowledged as able to mediate, to act as delegate for human action, or to instigate or sustain an action. Dolwick implores us to follow the ANT doctrine, to 'follow the actors' (Callon 1986); and to,

> …listen to what they have to say; take a look at what they are doing; give them the benefit of the doubt; and try to provide accurate representations of their beliefs and actions. (2009, p.39)

But I remain wary that this reiterates a *representational* mode, rather than an *ontological* one, and that this leaves us, as practitioners, outside of the relations, beyond the

ongoing relationship of people and other things in more-than-human worlds. The term "observer" peppers an early ANT paper by Michael Callon for example (1986), and I remain alert to the possibilities that we can attain a dialogical *becoming aware* in our own relations with others, even while we trace their networks of relations with others (Buber 2002, p.10).

To Jim Harris
21st July 2015

re. A very extended châine

Dear Jim,

I'm just on my way home from the interview for the Caroline Villers Fellowship, and thought I'd take this opportunity to write to you with some thoughts on the questions posed to me by the panel, some of which touched upon the themes which have arisen in the discussions that we have had recently, since working together at the Ashmolean museum, Oxford.

My proposal outlined a research project led by art practice, deploying a methodology that will be familiar to you from *A Splendid Kindred Soul* (2015), that is:

> … taking a specific artwork currently in the conservation process – for example an easel painting – I would work with a group of technical art historians and conservation scientists at the Courtauld to develop rich descriptions of the material transformations throughout the extended *châine operatoire* of the painting.

My proposal stated that the project aims:

> to identify and richly describe the more-than-human community of a painting, throughout its 'full-life' (Joy 2009) – from the production of its constituent materials, to its current life within a conservation laboratory.

This would be undertaken through a process of tracing

> the people and the nonhuman things that have had material, transformative relationships with a specific painting currently within the conservation department at the Courtauld … [to] explore the qualities of the relationships between the painting and its "community" …

In the notes produced in preparation for the interview, I began to detail the proposal, working in particular on the relationship of the *châine* and the transformative events that could either be found in documentation or inferred from other sources. I noticed that a former fellowship awardee had invoked the *châine operatoire* in her research, (Farbstein 2011) although this was *restricted* (in the sense that Alison Roberts noted of Jody Joy's work, during development of the workshops) to the production of a specific artefact – a pocketable horn artefact – and the tools and processes employed in its carving. Given my own preoccupation with the material relationships between the people and other things which produce more-than-human forms of community, my research tends to trace a *very extended*

châine of an artefact, drawing an arc from its state as geological matter to its form as cultural artefact. In the case of *A Splendid Kindred Soul* for example, the chain of operations which produced the neolithic linen scrap ranged from the geological interactions which produced the Alpine glacial varves – the silt at the bottom of the lake that encased the linen for thousands of years – to the polyethylene foam sheet on which it was presented to us in the museum's teaching rooms.

This goes some way in my attempt to describe a more-than-human community of things, or a *network*, or *collective* perhaps, if I were more thoroughly Latourian (Turnbull 2010, p.102) – but I am still struggling with a tendency in my work to appear to convey an underlying premise that there are stable objects which establish stable relationships with each other – that is, that there are things and there are relations, and that these entities are separate, and can be considered in isolation from each other. So, in *A Splendid Kindred Soul* for example, the researcher handling the artefact, the nitrile gloves that they wear, and the artefact itself can appear as stable, unified, things-in-themselves, with the relationships that they establish between themselves also appearing as separate entities, with their own qualities – motivated by care, expressed as gentleness, and physically as a degree of pressure, etc. – and which act as a force between objects. The locus of volition, transformative capability, and identity lies deep within each object, which remain withdrawn and inscrutable to all others. This chimes

with Jane Bennett's discussion of the work of Graham Harman and Timothy Morton – two of the most 'staunch and loyal advocates' for objects – and quickly establishes the contradictory and, for Bennett, 'dizzying' aspects of their ontology, where objects are simultaneously 'withdrawn *and* manifest' (2012b, p.225). She writes:

> … just what turns – politically, ethically – on Morton's and Harman's strong claims about the apartness of objects. What difference would it make if I came to experience myself more explicitly as one essentially elusive object among others? What is at stake for social life … ? (Bennett 2012b, p.226)

Yet the disposition of my work – which I understand as being formed through its relationship to discourses and practices that are participatory, dialogic, and relational – makes me suspicious of such an ontology. It is the understanding that we, by which I mean humans, as well as all other things, are formed through our taking part, that participation is intrinsic to all things (Barad 2007), that relations between things are inseparable from those things, that therefore 'Beings do not pre-exist their relations' (Haraway 2003, p.6), and that this produces ongoing, inevitable, mutual transformation. That is, once in-relation, everything changes. For ever. The sheer work or invention required to hold such a web of things together is immense, unceasing, and it suggests a movement, a 'motility' (Bennett 2004, p.356; 2009, p.57),

and an ongoingness that's overlooked in ontologies which appear to me to be systematic, or which can easily deploy mechanical metaphors, (such as Harman 2010).

Perhaps the idea of the *dialogic*, in a Bakhtinian sense, comes closer, as the formation of things through mutual exchange and the centripetal movement towards others (Clark & Holquist 1984, pp.7–8)?

To Wendy Coburn
22nd January 2015

re. Art & Social Change

I'm writing with regard to the recently advertized post of Assistant Professor in Art & Social Change. My interest is in participatory art's potential to produce radically heterogenous, more-than-human communities, such as where rocks, metals and minerals are considered as participant, alongside humans, rather than as "natural resource" to be exploited. I've been working in a European context for my doctoral research, and am excited by the prospect of bringing these ideas into relation with the situation in Ontario, its mining industries and the peoples and other things who live among them.

My current practice-led doctoral research aims to broaden the scope of the social to include more than human beings, and in effect, to re-consider the division between the social, as the realm which includes (some) humans, and "nature," where all others reside, such as those things otherwise overlooked or dismissed as mere background or resource. This also demands a reconsideration of environment as a concept which holds humans at the centre of an otherwise mute and passive world. My own practice is concerned with how a sensitivity to this situation can be developed through the

theory and practice of participatory art. In a teaching context, this is a question that can be asked of all art practices, indeed, of *all practices*, whether within or beyond the academy. These are concepts being rehearsed by a broad range of arts, humanities and social science practitioners, (in the emerging field of "environmental humanities" for example) yet which present significant challenges to others.

I see the strength of the Art & Social Change program as being able to address this shift in paradigm, perhaps more so than many others, through its concern with social and environmental equity and justice. Once other-than-human things are acknowledged as having agency in common with human beings, these issues of justice, participation and democracy become even more complex and new challenges become apparent. As well as an emancipation of all humans, the ongoing project now becomes one of the emancipation and enfranchisement of *all* things, whether human or more-than-human.

I consider these as real and positive challenges in developing the curriculum of Art & Social Change. While there is a proud history of artists working in support of others who are dis-enfranchised, whose practice is one of enabling of agency, strong criticism has been levelled at the value of these practices *as art.* I would prioritize the historical and contemporary discourses which see value in these practices, as *art* as well as contributing to understanding in cognate areas of

study, such political economy and social theory, as well as in activism and other social practice.

While it's perhaps within our own history of practice as artists to stand "outside" of the social, it is increasingly acknowledged, by a burgeoning new materialism, that there is a general condition of "entanglement" of humans – artists included – with all other things. While artists have worked in support of social and environmental emancipation, whether through lone acts of institutional critique, as part of the historical avant-garde, or working in support of environmental activist groups, they often deploy "tricks of the trade" such as destruction, inversion, disruption, abstraction, reversal, distanctiation, "making strange," ironic juxtaposition emptied of context and so on. These conventions are often used without question, as a means to distinguish art from other practices. They are used even in social and environmental activist work, even though they are the same techniques used by those who are rendering the earth and humans as "resource" to be "abstracted" and exploited, and that therefore demonstrate similar dispositions or attitudes towards more-than-human others. I consider this paradox as another challenge for the Art & Social Change program. The question will be one of how art & design education can be transformed, despite the strong legacy of 'the moderns' (Latour 1993) in the educational and professional aspects of our disciplines.

In an institutional context, these questions present opportunities for interdisciplinary working and the potential for this program, and associated research, to connect disparate parts of the university and external partners. Where other approaches to the integration of art, design, engineering with business, technology and government policy are still, arguably based on a fixation with control of both people and "nature," Art & Social Change could contribute to the thinking of alternatives to bio- and geo-engineering approaches to climate change and natural resource exploitation, and indeed to the politics of "humans among themselves."

This is not to claim that the recent 'geological turn,' towards thinking the Anthropocene, doesn't often have, as Kathryn Yusoff suggests, an imperial tone (2013; 2015), but the emerging field of anthropocenic research (Scherer & Klingen 2013) also has affinity with other 'transformative research frameworks (e.g. participatory, emancipatory, feminist, decolonising methodologies)' (Social Research Association 2014). As such, it presents an ongoing challenge to practices of domination, wherever they are found.

To Saskia Warren
17th August 2015

Forward Back Together, and the materialities of taking part

Dear Saskia,

I'm writing this as a way to think through the paper that we presented together at the *Place, Performance, Possibility* conference at the University of Leeds in March 2014, aspects of which I think could be developed further, in particular, the concepts of participation and public, that we attempted to elucidate in terms of my project, *Forward Back Together* (2013). On reflection, I think this work demands some more attention, and perhaps, more explicitly, requires me to bring a more nuanced understanding of these terms into play; after eighteen months of further research, and coming to terms with further aspects of new materialist thinking, I feel better prepared to think them as more complex concepts and, I hope, to continue the conversation that we'd begun. So please accept the following as both a continuation of our thinking of *Forward Back Together,* and as an invitation to the public, participatory event which coincides with my *viva voce* examination.

The questions that I'd like to raise here for us to address are: how is our concept of participation transformed when we consider the materialities of taking

part? Also, in what ways would this hybrid, "more-than-human" formation transform our understanding of what constitutes a "public" for public art?

Forward Back Together, which you took part in at the Vivid project space in Birmingham in 2013, was a live, participatory event – a "script-writing workshop" – which told the story of Raymond Mason's ill-fated public artwork, *Forward* (1991). I organized a live event which gathered together some of the people involved in the commissioning, installation, care, and repair of *Forward*, and who I'd met individually during the previous months of the project's development. This is how I described the project in an email to Caroline Jester, who led the workshop:

> The overarching aim of this project is to explore the notion of 'the gift' in relation to public art and its commissioning. In the case of Forward, the gift to the citizenry or general public of Birmingham was symbolically and actually rejected. This project prompts a questioning of the value of a 'gift' of this kind, not as a measure of generosity, but in its imagining of a 'public'. Perhaps the destruction of the sculpture produced a more engaged public or set of publics that the one imagined for it? Perhaps the commissioning and decommissioning process also defined a genuinely engaged public, also members of the imagined citizenry, yet who are normally excluded from consideration, or overlooked as 'participants.'

A script-development workshop will be held at Vivid's project space and in which a group of people, who constitute the various publics produced by the sculpture *Forward*, will participate. The aim of the workshop is for this group to produce a fictionalized dialogue between pieces of public art in the city. The main protagonist, *Forward*, Raymond Mason's sculpture which was razed in 2004, will describe its life, from the artist's studio in Paris through to its eventual disposal. It will recount the stages at which human agency contributed to its material transformation, from ideation through to its radical "decommission." and enter into dialogue with others in which to explore a range of issues: their publics, their care, their fate, for instance.

The workshop leader will work with participants, improvising an exchange of "direct speech," written in the "first person," from the point-of-view of the sculpture. The workshop will provide participants with the opportunity to imagine a point-of-view, other than their own, from which to describe their own interactions with *Forward* and to imagine those of others. For example, a member of the original commissioning panel will be coached to speak about the commissioning process, as if they were the sculpture, describing, for example, the rooms, the other people, the documents, the outcomes of that process and the consequences for the life of the sculpture; participants will lend their own 'I' to the sculpture, allowing it to talk

> on their behalf and allowing them the freedom, even, to provide an imaginative, fictionalized account of their own actions; (especially where confidentiality issues might arise); they will also contribute to describing other peoples' engagement with the sculpture, for example the fabricators, or the children who climbed on the work.
>
> The workshop will be a half-day in duration and take place in the exhibition space at Vivid. It is envisaged that half of the space will be used with chairs being arranged around a table. An audio-recording will be made of the workshop which will later be transcribed.

My interest was drawn to where engagement in a public artwork relates to the role played in the material transformations of the artwork, such as in its manufacture or indeed destruction, and signalling my intention to read Mason's work through the discourse of participation. Suzanne Lacy's theory, presented as '*Imagined degrees of engagement as a series of concentric circles, each representing a form of interaction between making and witnessing*,' was key to my own understanding (2010, p.179). Given your own work as a cultural geographer on "audiencing," which

> challenges authorial control and curatorial interpretation in specific ways pointing toward the open-endedness of the production and reception of cultural forms, (2013)

it's perhaps important to note here that Lacy's theory was also developed 'as a way of clarifying our thinking about audience' (2010, p.179). That is, as a way of understanding 'audience' as a

> flexible and fluid' category that encompasses every mode of interaction – from the 'genesis' of the artwork, to 'collaborators and co-developers,' to 'volunteers and performers,' to those 'traditionally called audience' to those that experience the artwork through 'myth and memory. (2010, p.179)

In Lacy's model 'genesis and responsibility are paired' (2010, p.179), and are most intensely related at the innermost of the circles where responsibility is attributed to those 'without whom the work could not exist' (2010, p.179). Those most intensely engaged in an artwork are also most responsible for it, according to this formulation.

Events throughout the life of *Forward* seemed to suggest that this intensity of engagement isn't limited to the work's earliest stages, but could also be felt in other transformative events throughout the artwork's history. This is most obviously apparent at the point of its destruction, but also during its fabrication, transport and assembly, its cleaning and repair, in the extinguishing of the fire which consumed it, in its removal and disposal, and so on.

It's apparent that these new, more-than-human participants material, transformative relationships could be counted as being as intense, engaged, and arguably as crucial to the artwork's existence as those who would ordinarily be acknowledged as providing the work's 'creative impetus.'It's in this innermost circle which encompasses 'those without whom the work could not exist' (2010, p.179), and as we have seen, not only based on their engagement during the work's initial phases or "genesis," but throughout its life. The impetus under such an expanded model would include all those processes that transformed the state of the sculpture, not only Raymond Mason's initial musings, drawings and his construction of maquettes, not only the fabricators of the fibreglass components, the council worker who repaired the head of one of the figures, or indeed the two young boys who were accused of setting fire to the sculpture. Of course, this still maintains the anthropocentric model which Lacy constructs for the agency of various participants. In my effort to populate the "innermost circle" with people who formed material, transformative relationships to the sculpture, I also clung to an anthropocentric conception of who takes part, expanding only the range of *people* who take part, and overlooking the various other things – other than humans – whose agency also provided the 'creative impetus' for the work. Where, for example did I account for the agency of the fire and its taking part in the material transformation of the artwork? It's only admitted bracketed as a force with finite effects, and

having its own teleology perhaps, as it emerges, catches hold, rages, ebbs, and finally leaves itself open to being extinguished. But nowhere in my thinking at that time did the fire figure as having equal agency to the people who set, harnessed or unleashed it, even though it – in close-relation to the fibreglass, garbage-scraps, and the oxygen in the air surrounding the sculpture – drew the attention of the press and the fire service equally, and both of whom, I am sure, would acknowledge it as the primary thing which transformed the form and material constituency of the sculptural object. In this sense, the "innermost circle" of the model remains underpopulated in my earlier attempts, and excludes perhaps the most vibrant agencies who took part in the artwork's material transformations.

The premise of *Forward Back Together* was that the "public" of Raymond Mason's *Forward* was different to the one that the artist had imagined. Where Mason had given the work as a gift to the people of Birmingham, my project sought to trace its most intensely-engaged participants, reading the work through Lacy's model in place of the common-sense notion of a "general public" which the sculpture was meant to address. In doing so, *Forward's* aesthetics and the controversies around it were downplayed. However, John Berger, writing of Mason's wider oeuvre, intimates that the 'representation of the proletariat,' which in this case was blamed for its inevitable demise in local newspaper reports, purposefully shunned 'The Aesthetic Principle .' Never,

writes Berger, did the proletariat 'believe in, or act upon, the idea that virtue – or any other quality – might be deduced from appearances.' Rather, 'the Beauty they discovered for themselves was an invisible one closely connected with endurance and companionship' (2002, pp.151–2). In other words, the aesthetics offered by Mason operated through the qualities of the relations between people; relations that were transformed over time, and from a tendency towards togetherness, solidarity through human, cultural invention. Yet this is an account of the symbolic and imaginary relations between people that Berger claims here. The artwork is again merely a third thing mediating between audience and reality in the brash, 'derisory colours of proletarian life' (2002, p.152). But what of its material relations, of the matter of the sculpture and of its public? As philosopher Karen Barad states:

> Matter is not a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse. Matter is not immutable or passive. It does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity. (Barad 2003, p.821)

I want to know – and I think we began to ask this after *Forward Back Together* – what of this other "invisible" thing that binds people and this public artwork? Where are the "enduring companionships" of things bound in material relation with each other?

In *Forward Back Together,* I was intrigued by how we could account for those who took part in these specific *material transformations* in relation to Lacy's model – and to see who else might be admitted into its innermost circles. In this sense, the project sought to valorize *all* the forms of human labour which transformed *Forward,* rather than only those which increased its commodity value, such as might be performed following Karl Marx's analysis of textiles in *Capital Volume One* (2004) – a text which informed other aspects of my research including the development of a separate project at the Ashmolean museum, *A Splendid Kindred Soul.* But more importantly for me in the context of my doctoral thesis, in my attempt to read this project in relation to new materialist theory, I sought to acknowledge *all* of the material transformations which were performed in relation to *Forward* – from its "genesis" to the aftermath of its "radical decommissioning" by arson attack.

This would dramatically increase the number of people that could be included within Lacy's model, not through their densely-woven *symbolic* relationship with the artwork, such as their legal ownership, their understanding of its aesthetic conventions, or art historical meanings, but rather through what might be considered the vulgar materiality of relationships with the sculpture. I refer here to a "vulgarity" in the sense which Denis E. Cosgrove claims for earlier, Marxist, materialist practice, where the 'active role [of] human creativity and imagination' was downplayed in favour of

'materially productive activity' (1998, p.56). Cosgrove is quite clear about the consequences of this, claiming that it raises the question of

> … the relative significance of what are often conceived as levels of decreasing importance within the structure of a social formation, the economic, the political, the ideological and the cultural or symbolic activities of its people. (1998, p.55)

Rather than concede to this form of cultural determinism, Cosgrove presents us with several manoeuvres around the problem, including an analysis of 'materially productive activity' which takes all cultural artefacts as, 'material products rather than something non-material erected on a base which provides the 'necessities' of human survival,' and which

> … demand the interaction of material artefacts – pen, paper, ink, printing press, canvas, oil or brush – with human labour – writing, sketching, editing, painting, chiselling. (1998, p.58)

Of interest to me here, in relation to my thesis more broadly, is Cosgrove's central interest in 'landscape,' as a cultural practice, his materialist reading of which leads him to include in his list of human labour, actions such as, 'earth movement, plant pruning and maintenance' (1998, p.58). However, even after listing the tool-like materials which offer themselves for use in the

production of paintings, prints and sculpture, there's no mention of the other things, soil, plants, animal life, weather and so on, that constitutes the more-than-human 'materially productive' network which take part in the construction of 'landscape' as a cultural artefact. We could take this as symptomatic of a historical materialism which, in its efforts to admit human cultural endeavour as equivalent to nonhuman material things, overlooks, excludes even, the agency of those material things. As in Marx's formulations of human relations to material artefacts, nonhuman things are there to be shaped by humans, through human labour, and for human benefit. The recent turn to materialism has been less reticent in its relationship to nonhuman things, as geographer Sarah Whatmore discusses in *Materialist Returns: Practicing Cultural Geography in a more-than-human world* (2006). In her account of the cultural turn in geography she too notes the significant similarities between cultural and "classical" geography, which, despite their avowed differences

> share an overriding common currency, namely that they both cast the making of landscapes (whether worked or represented) as an exclusively human achievement in which the stuff of the world is so much putty in our hands. (2006, p.603)

Whatmore's concept of the 'more-than-human' (2002; 2006) is productive in this context, describing, 'what exceeds rather than what comes after the human'

(2013, p.36), and which offers a way to understand *who* takes part, and of the 'intimacies' between humans and others. The 'energetic materialisms,' exemplified by Isabelle Stengers work (2013, p.603), figure ways in which things, human or otherwise, are mutually transformed in their encounters and relations with each other; and Whatmore alludes to the wider agenda of this more-than-human project in her account of Stengers' work

> … for whom scientific practices produce reliable knowledge claims only in so far as the questions they address are at risk of being redefined by the phenomena mobilized in them, and who extends this ethos to elaborate an understanding of, even a test for, an adequate political theory and practice. (2013, p.33)

In this sense, the "new" materialist cultural geography joins with the wider post-human project in aiming to

> … re-animate the missing 'matter' of landscape, focusing attention on bodily involvements in the world in which landscapes are co-fabricated between more-than-human bodies and a lively earth. (2006, p.603)

This ontology is far from the one that we have been familiar with in the context of participatory art, whose innovation was to admit the social – as a preoccupation with the relations of humans-among-themselves – into

contemporary art. But if we take seriously the proposition of post-humanism – especially as it's set-out through discussion of the "anthropocene" (for example, in Johnson & Morehouse 2014) – then the hubris of human beings is on the wane, and along with it, the belief that humans can attain perfect knowledge of, and control over the world; the weather, volcanoes, the seas, all animals who live there, and so on, other humans even, insist on surprising us. This is a time when decisions are made by tsunami, mud-slip and viruses, as much as by committee or CEO, president or cabinet office. If this is indeed the case, that this "lively earth" makes demands that are beyond human control, then this suggests that humans of all kinds have no choice but to take part. There are, undeniably, nonhuman things which continue to 'make decisive contact with humans,' as Timothy Morton proclaims (2013, p.179): tidal waves, viruses, volcanic larva, waterborne plastic pellets containing Nonylphenol, known for its 'endocrine-disrupting potential' (Plastic Free Seas n.d.), and so on. And it may be the case that we take part whether or not we want to, whether or not we are aware of it, and 'even if we say we're not' (Morton 2010, p.8). That is to say, there are relationships with nonhuman things that are unbidden, perhaps unwanted, and maybe unforeseen. What's more, even those relationships in which we appear to have volition as humans, bind us in ways that deny the possibility of withdrawal or disengagement.

In the work of Karen Barad in particular, *participation* is an inevitable and inescapable consequence of *any* relationship; the entanglement of humans with other things that ensue from any and all engagements, compels us to think of participation in a more-than-human world in ways that disrupt both the democratic claims of participatory art's practice and discourse, and also its critics' insistence on withdrawal or opting-out as an expression of agency. Barad's dialogue with physicist Niels Bohr's work leads her to consider 'theoretical concepts' and apparatuses as having decisive influence in scientific experimentation – in the sense that they determine what is included and excluded. Bohr challenges the 'representationalist' notion that words simply describe matter, that measurements are an objective category, and that the human being undertaking the experiment stands outside of its interactions with other things. The 'ontological gap' is therefore closed, and 'words, knowers, and things' can no longer be considered separate from each other (2003, pp.804, 813). Rather than a liberal idea of the world 'composed of individuals with separately attributable properties' (2003, p.813), Barad composes an ontology where the 'primary ontological units are not "things" but phenomena,' for which there are no 'independently existing things behind or as the causes' of them (2003, p.818 n.23). In other words, 'relata' do not pre-exist relatings. Things are produced by the 'intra-actions' of discursive practices, which she considers as being material. This distinction between 'interaction' and

'intra-action' is made in order to reiterate the primary agency of *relating*, rather than the static *relation* between extant things, as an ontology of

> dynamic topological
> reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/
> (re)articulations, (2003, p.818)

and rather than individual "things" awaiting their interaction with other "things," each with inherent properties, we're presented with a universe in which 'things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties,' (2003, p.813) produced by the complex and iterative intra-actions between people, words and things. Barad's is therefore an ontology of 'relations rather than "things",' (2003, p.813) which results in *entanglements* where 'individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating' (2007 ix). They are the

> effect of the intra-active engagements of our
> participation with / in and as part of the world's
> differential becoming. (2007, p.361)

As a consequence, Barad can claim that

> Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals
> do not preexist their interactions; rather,
> individuals emerge through and as part of their
> entangled intra-relating. (2007 ix)

The ramifications of this are immense, especially in its challenge to the liberal and 'representationalist' ontology

that holds things, words and people as individual and separate, rather than as 'An entangled web of scientific, social, ethical, and political practices' (2003, p.813).

Barad's ontology suggests a way beyond

> … the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect… (2003, p.812)

In doing so, Barad holds "us" as 'remaining resolutely accountable for the role "we" play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming' (2003, p.812).

This is an *accountability for the way we take part*, for our participation in the "differential becomings" of all that we encounter. Elsewhere, Barad talks of this as *responsibility*, not as a 'right response,' but as 'response-ability, the ability to respond' (Barad & Kleinmann 2012, p.81), which is intrinsic to all processes of relating:

> responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses, but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. (2012, p.81)

So, in this sense, responding and relating are not a matter of volition. We are compelled, to paraphrase Barad, to *meet the universe halfway* (2007), and to do so

without being 'conditioned by any preordained determinate distinctions, such as that between human and nonhuman' (2012, p.81). Our entanglements make such categories redundant.

How does this transform the way that we think of *taking part* as we might understand it through the discourse of participatory art? In art historian Claire Bishop's work, we encounter an ongoing rebuttal of art in which the ethics of taking part obscure both the aesthetic the political (2011, p.28). In her book *Artificial Hells*, Bishop consolidates her criticisms, developed over a number of years in response to the work of Grant Kester and Nicolas Bourriaud in particular, whose work on 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 2002), dialogue (Kester 2004a), and collaboration in art (Kester 2011), causes her some vexation – and which led to further commentary and written-exchanges in several art journals (2004; 2006; 2006a). Her criticisms are levelled at art which attempts to close the distance between artist and audience, and which does so at the expense of the artwork as mediating object. This is an effect of her reading participatory art through the work of philosopher Jacques Rancière (2006b, p.16; 2011, p.18), who, in *The Emancipated Spectator,* argues for the 'unpredictable and irreducible distance' that exists between artist/audience or performer/spectator (2004, p.8). Rancière notes that in the fields of theatre and pedagogy, the orthodoxy of so-called emancipatory modes of practice is to gather a 'collective' by means of

removing the 'spectacle.' An audience in conventional theatre, for example, is deemed passive, 'separated from the reality which always is behind the image' (2004, p.6). A progressive theatre must therefore do away with this mediation, closing the gap between audience and the knowledge of "reality" held by a play's author, and

> the passive audience of spectators must be transformed into its opposite: the active body of the community enacting its living principle. (2009, p.5)

Rancière claims that this mode of practice is predicated on 'the idea of emancipation as the re-appropriation of a self which had been lost in a process of separation' (2004, p.7); Bishop characterizes this as 'an art of proximity, aimed at 'restoring the social bond' (2011, p.28). However, as Rancière argues, rather than the equality between artist/actor and their audience/spectator, this supposedly emancipatory mode of art presupposes their inherent *inequality.* True emancipation, so Rancière claims, comes only through acknowledging the 'equality of intelligence' of performer and audience, and it is this intelligence – the capacity for which is shared by all – that binds the audience together, not their 'status as members of a collective body' (2004, p.8). While this models a group which is in formation through a process of encounter, through the construction of a social bond between people, produced by the knowledge that each has an equality of intelligence, Rancière also insists that it is the very singularity of this

intelligence that also holds audience apart from each other. That each member is also a 'performer' in the "drama" of their own life maintains this "unpredictable and irreducible distance" between all spectators.

In comparison to Karen Barad's ontology, Rancière presents us with so many intact, intelligent human agents moving independently, coming close to each other yet never touching – perhaps never risking the transformation of their individual identify through the kinds of 'entanglement' that Barad describes. Where nonhuman things enter this world, they're as discrete things: images, plays, and the book – key to the story of Joseph Jacotot, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) to which Rancière refers. 'The book is that material thing, foreign to both the master and the student'. It is the 'third thing' (2004, p.7). However, there's no suggestion here of the book, as a material thing, taking part in the transformation of either the master or the student. It is positioned as a thing in between humans, mediating their relationship, abstract and expendable. There's no interest in *its* transformation as it catalyses the collective of master and student, or of the other relations, to other things or people, in which it might be involved. Humans within this ontology remain distanced from each other, and the 'third thing' too remains resolutely separate; absolutely foreign. So, I think it's possible to claim that the effects of this critique of participation in art is to construct an ontology far removed from any which enables us to think the more-than-human. It is far from

any possibility of the 'ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming' (2012, p.81); the ontological gap cannot be breached. In maintaining this distance, in reserving the right of 'associating and dissociating,' Rancière's thinking doesn't sit easily alongside the materialist impulses that motivate my research. It closes down the possibility of unfettered or inescapable, inherent or compulsive merging with human others which the ontology of emancipatory modes of participatory art suggests. I wonder, given Karen Barad's claims, and Timothy Morton's presaging of unbidden encounters with nonhumans or all kinds, how an ontology which promotes the distance and separation between humans can ever prove adequate to the more than-human "universe" with which we are now coming to terms?

To Malcolm Bull
19th September 2015

Participation and the prospect of a more-than-human politics

Dear Malcolm,

Thank you for the discussion of my doctoral research project during my *Confirmation of Status* event earlier this year. I'm hoping that you can join me and other interlocutors to continue the conversation of the themes that have arisen from my research. I'm writing to introduce some questions on participation, and the potential for a more-than-human politics, which I hope that we can discuss further at the participatory event that accompanies my public *viva voce* exam.

In the third in a series of publications, Markus Miessen argues against the 'innocence of participation,' which he considers as a misguided belief in the efficacy of 'negotiation' and 'inclusion' which can lead to 'democratic decision-making' in 'politically complex and consensus-driven' situations. Here, he argues, 'Sometimes, all-inclusive democracy has to be avoided at all cost,' and that we should turn to 'post-consensual practice' where, 'in order to make decisions … someone has to assume responsibility' (2011, p.13).

We could mount a counter-argument against Miessen which would plead for a concept of participation that he defines as 'based on inclusion' and where 'everyone's voice has equal weight within egalitarian society' (Miessen 2011, p.14) – but we can avoid such a well-worn dialectic here. Far from pitting participation as 'bottom-up inclusion' against "top-down," authoritarian structures, we might suggest that there are other ways of thinking participation itself – not as a mode of resistance, or even of democratic decision-making, but as an intrinsic and inescapable mode of being. Rather than a 'tactical' choice which only affirms a structuralist view of the world – as the dialectic of structure and agency, strategy and tactics – through a new materialist reading, to *take part* is inherent, irreversible, and pervasive. In this sense, we could perform a side-step or a move beyond the dialectic that Miessen so energetically constructs. The irony is that, in doing so, the very surrender of decision-making by the masses that Miessen threatens, comes into play in a new and troubling way in the guise of the more-than-human. Miessen asserts that his is 'a way of understanding participation beyond models of consensus as a starting point' (2011, pp.21–2), playing fast-and-loose with the fascist overtones of a 'post-consensual practice.' perhaps giving up decision-making to the a figure reminiscent of Ayn Rand's ever-recurrent *Atlas* (1963) who can take on the moral burden of what becomes a "post-democratic" process. In the meantime, a new materialist filter introduces the spectre of the nonhuman (e.g. Bennett 2004; Harman 2010; Morton

2013), the inhuman (e.g. Barad & Kleinmann 2012) or the more-than-human (Whatmore 2002; 2006) as the decision-maker. While keeping in place our understandings of the power-differentials between humans – that is, while holding to the facts of who owns what, who dominates who and so on – we can introduce another set of actors into the situation that are ordinarily and otherwise excluded.

This is precisely what Eyal Weizman, (who, incidentally, writes the prologue to Miessen's book) claims in defining *forensis* as a

> multidimensional space of politics, law, and economy' in which humans and objects participated in ancient Rome, and which animated objects through *prosopopaeia* – 'the mediated speech of inanimate objects. (2014, p.9)

In Weizman's terms, forensis thus establishes a relation between the animation of material objects and the gathering of political collectives' (2014, p.9) – explicitly indebted to Latour's concept of the collective as distinct from "society" (2004b, p.7; 2005, p.16), which embraces human as well as non-human agents.

With a shift in ways of thinking – beyond the (post-)structuralism that Miessen typifies – our idea of who takes part, and how they do so becomes less straightforward. Rather than an "us" and "them," we begin to recognize an "us" *as* "them" or *as becoming*

"them." This is an epoch, as Michel Serres suggests, in which it is time for an end to the 'game with just two players.' Now is a time 'to let the world enter our political relations as a third party.' And of course, in doing so, it strikes 'a definitive blow to human narcissism' (2014, p.31) that would lead to criticisms of participation as anything but intrinsic to more-than-human relations.

Indeed, if we take the post-human and more-than-human project seriously, it is also a way towards thinking the possibilities of intra-human relations. Perhaps, as Sarah Whatmore states, paraphrasing William Paulson (2001, p.112),

> The crucial point is to learn how new types of encounter, (and conviviality) with nonhumans… can give rise to new modes of relations with humans, i.e. to new political practices. (2013, pp.33–4)

To Alex Murdin
20th July 2015

re. Material Ecologies

Dear Alex,

Thank you for the recent invitation to take part in the panel that you organized with TOPOS in Exeter. As I'm unable to attend in person, I'm writing to you with some thoughts on the symposium theme of "material ecologies," specifically in terms of *A Song, A Dance, And A New Stannary Parliament,* the off-site commission for Spacex that we worked together on in 2013-14. Throughout this project I've been preoccupied with how my self-declared participatory art practice can come to terms with the turn towards non-human things, with theories of the 'more-than-human' (Whatmore 2002), and 'new materialism' (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2015) that's transforming practice across the arts, humanities and social science. Given that participatory art, as well as the other practices synonymous with it, such as 'relational' (Bourriaud 2002) and 'dialogical' art (Kester 2004a), are intrinsically anthropocentric, this proposition presents immediate challenges to the field's *de facto* ontology. *Who* or *what* takes part in such a practice, the artworks and events that it produces? And *how* are these participants set in relation through such a participatory art practice, given its bias towards promoting certain

qualities of relation above others?

My thesis is that things "take part" with humans, that they come into being only in relation to others, that they are transformed on encounter, that they become "entangled" in hybrid assemblages in doing so, and that material transformations take place despite human cultural intervention. This ontology does not distinguish between types of things; it is symmetrical in its dealings with every thing. That these hybrid things can have strong, determining or dominant agency is not in dispute, just that they have agency along with humans. I *am* however, claiming the limits of human influence or agency at the symbolic level. While human action – or more accurately praxis, as a thinking-action, which in Paolo Freire's terms is a 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (2005, p.51) – is the consequence of embodied thought, thought itself, language itself, as a process of symbolic manipulation, cannot have decisive and controlling influence on all things. This is the new materialist rebuttal of psychoanalytic and linguistic, social-constructivist hegemony. It allows humans to recognize their agency beyond the symbolic realm, as well as the agency of all other things. It allows us to clamber out of the semiotic ravine, and engage with the "real" and the agency of more-than-human things.

New materialism claims an agency of matter – that is, that things are in constant, lively exchange and interaction with each other, despite human 'social

construction' of the world (DeLanda 2006, p.3). As an assertion of material fact over human cultural invention, it posits that irrevocable, irreversible *material* relationships are at work, and that 'Coexistence is forced on us, whether we like it or not' (Morton 2013). In some sense, this could be read as a vindication of Deep Ecology, as 'a strand of radical environmental thought' which, according to Peter Van Wyck, defined a 'new *ethical* relationship between humans and the natural world' based, not on the 'man-in-environment image,' but on 'the relational, total field image' (1997, pp.33–4). *According to philosopher Arne Næss, intrinsic to this ecophilosophy, or ecosophy*

> is the idea that we can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence: that there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms… to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness'. (in Wyck 1997)

Although its ontology is apparently non-hierarchical, its attention to the domination of humans over the "natural world" is articulated as a radical "ecocentricity" – leading to claims against it, as expressing a 'palpable misanthropy' (Houle 2004) – in its call for 'significant reduction of human population,' (1997, p.38) for example.

For Murray Bookchin, it was the politics of domination more generally, as a tendency within

hierarchical societies, that led to this domination – of both humans and nature (1974, p.18). As a ruse to deny some people access to the privileged status accorded to the human, it has been deployed constantly, endlessly. Van Wyck attributes the split in North American environmentalism to this distinction between Bookchin's "social ecology," which attends to the domination of human over human, and a "deep ecology," fixated on human domination over nature.

Deep Ecology's ontology presents a glimpse into a world beyond humans and despite them – the 'missing human subject' that concerns Van Wyck in his study of the movement (1997). In this respect, it perhaps shares an affinity with Graham Harman's work where objects are, as Jane Bennett suggests, unfathomable and withdrawn (2012b). There is less room within this 'object-oriented ontology' (Harman 2011a), of thinking the transformational aspects of relationships, of the 'intensity of evolutive processes' that Felix Guattari claimed for his own *ecosophy*: 'the logic of intensities – or eco-logic' (1989, p.136), and of the becomings brought about through Karen Barad's 'social-material enactments' (2007, p.26). Even though I share Timothy Morton's concern with the urgency of our present situation – when 'nonhumans make decisive contact with humans' (2013) – and its manifold, unpredictable futures, I remain suspicious of a philosophy and its ontology which continues to maintain the separation of things, despite scientific evidence to the contrary (Barad 2007,

p.26), and the emerging cultural and political zeitgeist. I am more interested in, and committed to, the various attempts that have been made to count humans back in to the ecological mix.

Jane Bennett's is a *vibrant* materialism – a neo-vitalism (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2015, p.30) – that considers things to be formed in-relation. Others share this enthusiasm: Donna Haraway writes that 'Beings do not pre-exist their relatings'(2003, p.6); and, in the context of multispecies anthropology, Eben Kirksey writes: 'Species emerge as entangled agents torque one another in ongoing loops of multispecies intra-actions' in (2015, p.34). This is in contrast to a historical materialism which, Bennett states

> has tended to emphasize the structured quality of materiality – its ability to congeal into economic classes, stratified patterns of work, and dominant practices of exchange. (2004, p.366)

Bennett's 'thing-power materialism' draws us toward the 'energetic forces' that are at work between all things, and which – and this is what I'm most concerned with – 'induce a greater sense of interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity' (2004, p.367). Bennett does so by introducing the relationship between a materialist practice and "ecology" – where ecology is an ethos which informs an understanding of the world as 'mutual implication' within a 'network of relations' (2004, p.365).

It is both a recognition of the inextricable material entanglement of humans with other things, and also of the forces – or vitality – which impel things to come together, (or force them apart.)

While Bennett's writing first compelled me to embark on this research, I must admit that *in practice* my work leads me towards an alliance with what both Denis E. Cosgrove and T.J. Clark would no doubt have defined as a 'vulgar' form of materialist thinking (1984, p.56; 1990). In *The Painting of Modern Life* for example, Clark avoids the "vulgarity" which would claim

> that the base of any social formation is some brute facticity made of sterner and solider stuff than signs' (1990, p.7).

If I'm to find a way towards recognizing that we take part in more-than-human assemblages, and that we are entangled in them in ways other than through language – through metabolizing plant and animal matter, through ingesting coal dust into our lungs, or hosting *helicobacter pylori* in our stomachs for example – then brute, material facticity of this relationship has to be recognized and taken into consideration. There is no escaping it. It cannot be talked away. Yet this thinking – my thinking – sails close to the 'ecological determinism, henceforth renamed cultural materialism' that Philip Descola warns us of (2013, p.15), and where human agency is again limited or reduced to the symbolic realm while material processes rage around them and through

them. This, I admit, is a risk, and consequence of my introduction to a materialism that I sought out as a corrective to the social-constructionist biases of my previous participatory work. This tendency in my thinking and practice, perhaps typifies an approach that Isabelle Stengers writes of, and which Levi Bryant et al summarize as

> the eliminativist understanding of nature, in which all knowledge except that of physics must ultimately be eliminated…

and where

> Stengers proposes a messier and more complex materialism, one based on struggle among multiple entities and levels and not upon reducing the diversity of the world to a single plane… Stengers asks us not to reduce the world immediately to a mathematico-physical framework, but to 'wonder' about it – to let it upset our established categories and shift our own theories. (2011, p.15)

In shaping my future work, and in the ways that I come to an understanding of the work undertaken here, I hope to continue to search for ways beyond a reductionism of this kind, and to wonder in the ways that Stengers suggests.

The term "material ecologies" is intriguing to me in this context, as it brings together two concepts which resonate with my research. As a model of *who* participates and *how* they do so, the concept of ecology suggests an expansive and intricate network – a diverse group of things in-relation to each other. and beyond the restricted notion of the social that might define the given set of participants in a participatory art practice – at its most simplistic, the 'men-among-themselves' typical of a historical, sociological definition of society (Latour 1993, p.107). I'll turn to a range of new materialist thinking to help me in thinking though this issue, appealing as it does not only to the material basis for relations, but also as a way of defining the basis of an ecological thinking.

Where the term ecology was first used within the biological sciences as 'the analysis of the single species and its place in a hierarchical order of nature' (Berleant 1995, p.4), is now understood to

> encompass an entire community of bacteria, plants, and animals, joined with the physical, chemical, and geographical conditions under which they live. (Berleant 1995, p.4)

It is this, more expansive definition of ecology that might more accurately describes the extent of participation to which I aspire in my recent work. However, an "ecological art", as defined by Christoph Brunner et al, is a term open to various *misunderstandings* including its 'problematic and instrumentally restricted relation

between art and (environmental) politics' (2013, p.10). Theirs is an attempt to resuscitate the 'eco-art', imagined by Felix Guattari in *The Three Ecologies* (1989) from the incipient problems of reproducing 'holistic mythologies of nature' (2013, p.10) to which a simplistic 'eco-art' may fall prey. By invoking Guattari's three-fold ecology – the mental, social *and* environmental – Brunner et al make an appeal for an art that operates across these spheres, as

> an ecological practice, not in the simple manner of connecting many things, but by itself being of an intrinsic ecological and cosmological quality. (2013, p.11)

An "ecological art" therefore, 'involves the reinvention of new ways of being *with* the world and new forms of sociability' (2013, p.15) – which is of specific interest to me, indicating not only an engagement with the real, or the materiality of things, but also a concern for *how* more-than-human others take part. Guattari's proposition in *The Three Ecologies,* as Jim Dolwick elucidates elsewhere (2009, p.32), is a riposte to Lacan's separation of the mental (imaginary), social (symbolic) and environmental (real), where human agency is restricted largely to the symbolic, and where the social is understood in linguistic and psychoanalytic terms. If, as Hal Foster claims, there has been an 'age old mandate … to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real' (1996, p.140), a manoeuvre around the Lacanian theoretical model is necessary for any art practice which actively seeks more-than-human participants.

While we're both familiar, through our research and professional practice, with the literature of participatory art and its various controversies, I've recently been drawn towards discourses in unfamiliar disciplines and fields, to those already alert to questions of *who* participates, and on what terms, in this more-than-human world. During the initial stages of my research, the concepts of community and specifically "the public" had a far greater influence on my thinking, and determined both the literature to which I referred, and the themes that I discussed with my peers. Grant Kester's writing on community and art (2004a), Michael Warner's notion of 'publics and counterpublics' (2005), and Suzanne Lacy's theories of engagement and responsibility (2010) were particularly influential references.

More recently, I've had the opportunity to meet a number of inter-species and multispecies researchers whose ethnographic work describe more-than-human worlds: work on 'companion species' (Haraway 2003; 2008) for example; and those deeply concerned with the qualities of relations between humans and 'invasive' species (Van Dooren 2014) or those that are studied by zoologists and "natural history" film-makers (Candea 2010). Their work suggests a complex inter-relatedness between humans and others, between animal species whose populations are controlled by humans, or which are the objects of study. They tell of the push-and-pull of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, the tensions between an objectifying naturalism and emotional

transformation and attachments. Karan Barad is a profound influence on this work, as it thinks the non-separation of human and animal others. Barad's work suggests an expansive 'entanglement' of *all* things – humans, other species *and* other nonhuman things. This has profound consequences for any practice with claims on participation. Where we could easily account for participants in *A Song, A Dance*, using Suzanne Lacy's 'circles of engagement' for example (2010, p.179), using Barad's schema we would have to describe the whole extent of the more-than-human entanglements of people and things that contribute to the project. Given that the project did not trace human relations to animal species, but to a mineral ore, I wonder at the extent of the "ecology" that the project describes, and on what basis its various "entanglings" take place.

Barad's theory suggests an ecology that cannot be defined simply as a web of solely 'natural' things, nor as a loosely-connected set of humans among themselves. It is at least multi-species and, given the means to do so, can include all manner of things. While this is an important contribution to thinking of *who or what takes part,* as geographer Stephanie Wakefield has warned, this is 'insufficient for geography to ask *what* – connection or not, the human or not' in more-than-human 'assemblages' (2014, p.452). There are echoes here of Claire Bishop's criticisms of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* whereby she claims, 'all relations that permit "dialogue" are automatically assumed to be democratic

and therefore good' (2004, p.65). Later, in *Artificial Hells*, she cites curator Maria Lind to accuse participatory art of being limited to 'using art as a means for creating and recreating new relations between people' and as 'the proposition of a "model" or prototype for social relations' (2011, p.21). Bishops concern here is that participatory art allows only specific qualities of relation to be productive within an artwork. Hers is a criticism of the demand for 'empathetic' and compassionate identification' which she considers as 'typical of the discourse around participatory art' (2011, p.25) – as 'cautious, self- censoring pragmatism' (2011, p.26) that disallows other qualities of relationship – especially those which produce 'unease, discomfort or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity' (2011, p.26), and which, even though they can be deployed unproblematically in other forms of art practice, cannot within this participatory mode. I wonder then, if Stephanie Wakefield can ask that other geographers do more than indicate *what* or *who* will take part, should we again take heed of Bishop when she prompts us, as artists, to consider, not just who takes part, but also the qualities of the relations between participants when practicing a participatory art that acknowledges the more-than-human?

A Song, A Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament was devised as an attempt to generate new understandings of human relationships to Dartmoor's tin ore, not only historically, but also within a contemporary context of

renewed interest in mineral extraction in the local area. The re-opening of the tungsten mine at Hemerdon on the south western boundary of the moor brought with it the spectre of possible return to the exploitation of other minerals and metals in or around the national park. Given the deep history of tin, copper and haematite working within the county, there are obvious ironies in considering this a *new* threat – especially given that it's the human-manipulation of the land that now lends to it many of its "wild" characteristics. In keeping with others who recognize the inextricable *entanglement* of humans with nature – for example, this is something emphasized by Jamie Lorimer in the introduction to his book *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* (2015) – *A Song and A Dance* … set out from the premise that humans and all other material things formerly known as nature, are inseparable. Given this, I wanted to acknowledge in the project the various attitudes or dispositions to "natural resources," both ancient and modern (in the terms set-out by Latour (1993), and Descola (2013, pp.61–64) for example).

My proposal to you described the project's rationale:

> Since the closure of its tin mines, Dartmoor's industrial landscape has become normalized as wilderness, seemingly indistinguishable from the results of other 'natural' processes. Yet the gullies and stacks of rock debris are testament of this metal ore's immense influence on the life of Dartmoor and its people. However, the mining period typifies a particular type of relationship with environment and 'nature': one of

> exploitation, of extraction (or more accurately, abstraction) of tin from the land. This abstraction could be said to be a general condition of modern, industrial relations to nature. Yet we are now, arguably, faced with the challenges of defining an era of "post-abstraction"- one in which exploitation gives way to some other quality of relationship. Current land-management approaches establish a stewardship of the land, but we could perhaps imagine a more mutual relationship being established. Perhaps one which seeks to understand the environment, and human engagements with it, as a mutual relationship of co-dependents.

From the outset, this work sought to introduce a different register in which the people who currently live on and around Dartmoor could relate to their various metal and mineral neighbours. In other words – and as a reminder that this was a self-proclaimed *participatory* project – this was an attempt to think-through and exercise an ethics of *taking part* with this former-nature: one that recognized parallels between abstraction in both art and in human relations to other things, including 'natural resources' – of which Dartmoor's tin is representative. This was an opportunity to think "ecologically," to think of the material, social and cultural relationships simultaneously, and to try to invent ways for humans to relate to other things, during the epochal shift towards the post-anthropocenic and 'post-

human' (Wolfe 2009) The project imagined itself at the cusp of an epoch in which the presumption of humans' sovereignty over nature becomes increasingly problematic, where there is increased acknowledgment of their 'entanglement'; while acknowledging past, antagonistic relationships, the project imagined an end to the human ambition to dominate nature through processes of objectification and control – and of the 'huge hubristic possibility' presented during the anthropocene that Bruno Latour and Phillip Descola discuss (2013). While I'm reluctant to appeal to such an emotional register, and feel some reserve in my ambition for this project, I take my cue from various people: from Timothy Morton's various texts on art 'in the age of asymmetry' (2012; 2013), to Bruno Latour in his project at ZKM (2005), Michel Serres in *Nature Seen Through Culture* (2004), and to Jane Bennett in her keynote address to the New School (2011). I feel compelled to respond to Bennett's call for art and artists to enter the fray, to think through and beyond our immediate and increasingly troubling situation with regard to human implication in the warming of the planet and its effects.

In the proposal written to Spacex in April 2013, I stated the aims of *A Song, A Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament* were to

> … to establish the ways in which tin can be brought into a dialogic relationship with people who live and work on and around the moor, seeking a dialogue with it, rather than to

> abstract or objectify it. The results of this will contribute to … developing a critical understanding of the relationship between art, environment and environmentalism.

My work in this context could be accused of being ameliorative, of being reduced to the 'restoration of the social bond' which has been Claire Bishop's criticism of participatory art (2006b, p.12). While Bishop's criticisms are of those practices whose 'main impetus [is] the collective elaboration of meaning' (2006b, p.12), they're made of an art which limits its understanding of the social to 'humans-among-themselves' (Latour 1993, p.5). So while I admit to attempting its restoration, the social bond under consideration here is somewhat novel in the context of the discourse of participatory art. What I hope to grasp through this work, is an understanding of social as far more expansive, hybrid and diverse than is ordinarily the case within more anthropocentric art practices. And I hope that this can contribute to the wider discourse on the problematics and possibilities for art – and indeed life – after the anthropocene.

I have further questions of my work, which I look forward to discussing with you: *A Song, A Dance* … perhaps also falls short of being an 'ecological process' in the manner that Brunner et al describe (2013, p.11), as it remained closed to the direct engagement or transformative interactions with many of the nonhuman things that relate to its *material ecological*. There was still a clear difference maintained between humans as agents

within the work, and all other things that may be considered as having an ecological relation to it. For example, in the parliamentary sessions, nonhuman others were also present alongside human participants, but those artefacts – we could go as far as to call them objects even – remained as remnants of past industrial processes. Within the project's cosmology, these things could be considered as collateral damage from industrial processes, maimed representatives of past injustices. They appeared, accompanied by stewards or guardians, or were retrieved from the moor, as samples/examples retrieved from the debris. But the aim of the project was to listen to a call of things (Bennett 2012a, p.241), (or the 'cry of the tin' as we learned through bending, and listening to, smelted tin-rods) and as an attempt to respond to the tin through a specific community's own artforms. The series of meetings echoed the ancient Stannary parliaments and 'great courts' once held in the towns surrounding the moor and on Crockern Tor (Greeves & Newman 2011). They led to the writing of a new folk song in a form and with language which local musicians have made their own. This is a marker laid down as we work out how to live beyond the anthropocene. This was the event of "first contact" in many ways, but now with an awareness that *the tide has turned*, and that the dominant forces of nature will be visited on us. Our culture, our lives, will be forever changed; new virus will find their way into our bodies, invasive species will thrive, our own populations will depleted, impoverished, run to extinction. Perhaps we

might enter into a new kind of post-colonial relationship: a beneficent nature, recognizing our own cultural mores and the world as we construct it, will let us be. By allocating us "reserves" perhaps, where we can go about our business, with our belief in a separate nature, at a distance? Perhaps we will also be allowed to continue with our mineral exploitations and heightened power-differentials between ourselves, as if nothing has changed. But no. There can be no separation, neither through relativism nor objectification. We are forever entangled. Rather than repeat the atrocities of previous colonial endeavours – of empire's terrible 'Master and Slave' fixation – perhaps now, as Michel Serres implores, 'the game with two players is over and we start with three' (2014, pp.30–1)?

To Jamie Lorimer
16th July 2015

The ecological thought

Dear Jamie,

Thank you for arranging our recent meeting with Prof. Glenn Gibson at the University of Reading, and I look forward to working with you both in the coming months on the proposal for the the human microbiome project. The *Life After The Anthropocene* workshops at the University of Oxford that you convened during the last academic year were hugely influential on the development of my doctoral thesis, and I'm sending you this correspondence as a way to continue our recent conversation on some of its themes: the more-than-human, participation, and ecological thinking in particular.

My doctoral project asks how we can admit the more-than-human into participatory modes of contemporary art, which has led me towards an interest in the ontological aspects of the more-than-human, the ethics of human relations to the things that were once considered (unproblematically) constituents of nature, and in inventing and sustaining practices that are responsive to the conditions of life after the Anthropocene.

Prior to this research project, my art practice was developed from a concern with human social interactions, despite professing an interest in their relationship to land, and pursued through the concept of landscape. Nature, as it could be understood in this work, is separate from human social concerns, and constrained to forms of (albeit contested) cultural representation. As a consequence, the social remained exclusively human, and nature nothing more than terrain for these formations to emerge upon.

My reconsideration of the relations of the social to nature in my art practice through my doctoral research project coincides with the ongoing and extensive attempts across other disciplines to acknowledge ontologies which presuppose the inseparability of nature and culture, and from which new forms of the social, as more-than-human, can discerned.

As the workshops suggested, the concept of the Anthropocene, as more than simply a new geological or stratigraphic definition, denotes the commingling of human and geological forces. As well as the schematic, systematic description of a 'new stratigraphic signature in the Earth's fossil record,'(Johnson & Morehouse 2014, p.453) the Anthropocene also acknowledges 'the increasing power of mankind as part of the biosphere'(Crutzen & Stoermer 2000) and, as you state, an epoch in which 'humans have become an earth-changing force,' but that we shouldn't take this as an indication of the 'triumph of Enlightenment science'

(2015). Far from it, as the papers presented at the *Life After The Anthropocene* workshops demonstrated, the term is being read, through post-humanism and new materialism, as an extension of an ongoing project to think beyond the constraints of modernist and humanist convention. The Anthropocene exemplifies not only the problems inherent in the concept of humanity as homogenous and unified, but also of the human as an individual and autonomous subject. As Kathryn Yusoff states, 'what is not often remarked upon is the supposed unity of the "Anthropos" as it is gathered into the geologic,' which does little to differentiate between the agency of those with 'fossil fuels powers' and those who do not, to take just one example (2015, p.4).

The Anthropocene also assigns overwhelming and decisive powers to humans without considering the agency of other things which they exploit, form alliances with, and so on. When Tom van Dooren asks 'Is it only human agency responsible for shaping the world now?' he implores us to take

> the melding of human and geologic in this term as a provocation to continually question how worlds are constituted in entanglements that are always multi-agentic, always more-than-human,' (2014 n1)

citing your own work in doing so (2012).

And as Kathryn Yusoff also claims, it's only through co-opting organic matter laid-down in the Carboniferous and later exploited as fossil fuel, that humans can lay any claim to being a geophysical force (in Johnson & Morehouse 2014, pp.452–5). This hints at a humanity and a human subject which cannot be considered outside of the more-than-human relations which constitute it. Later, Yusoff writes of the

> inhuman as materially constitutive of the possibilities of life

where

> the inhuman is co-present in its determinations of the subject and yet this geology is mostly bracketed out from subjective experience or placed outside the corporeal body. (2015, p.5)

Here we have a human subject deeply, inextricably bound to its relations to things ordinarily considered as radically "other" – things separated from humans by the *Great Divide* between culture and nature, or more generally the human and all other things.

Through conversations with those involved in the workshops, and from the papers and the literature that they reference, I've learned that attempts to think the enmeshing of humans with other things, defined as the 'more-than-human' (Whatmore 2002; 2006), 'natureculture' hybrids (Haraway 2008), and 'multinatural' collectives (Latour 2004b, p.45), is central

to the wider project within the arts, humanities, and social sciences. This is the post-humanism that Cary Wolfe helps to define (2009), and which Karen Barad (2007), Donna Haraway (1990; 2008), Bruno Latour (1993; 2004b), Michel Serres (1995; 2012; 2014), and others detail in their own ways. In particular, it's characteristic of a more general and ongoing thinking in opposition to 'fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism,' (Wolfe 2009, xv), but specifically, it's the result of thinking an ontology which, according to Michel Serres, is not

> founded on the vision of the world in which man is exceptional and in which man is the only one in nature (2013).

It's to this body of work that I continue to look for an indication of how to understand the fate of humans and all other things as inseparable, however we choose to categorize them: as animal, petrological, technological, microbial or hybrids of each and everyone one of these things, and more.

Thinking the more-than-human enables a quantitative account of *who* takes part, increasing the number of humans and other things who participate in those who participate together, forming ensembles of things from nature, technology and so on. The human is not only extended beyond its corporeal limits, but also from within, as an assembly of minerals, metals, proteins, bacteria, et al.

But this hybrid, more-than human ontology is problematic in my own field of practice, where 'people constitute the central artistic media and material' (Bishop 2011, p.1), and the social is construed as 'the involvement of many people' (2011, p.1). This severely limits who we can admit as participants to the human, to the exclusion of all others. My thesis is a thinking of this constraint on both *who takes part* in participatory art, and *how* they do so. These are questions prefigured by Bruno Latour in *The Politics of Nature,* when he not only asks, 'How many are we?' but also 'Can we live together?' (2004b, p.8). In a recent paper geographer Stephanie Wakefield also calls for us to look beyond *who* takes part in these 'more than human assemblages,' towards, 'how they are taken up and enrolled…' (Johnson & Morehouse 2014, p.441).

How are we to name this 'irruption of objects into the human collective' that Bruno Latour describes (1993, p.21)? Latour shuns "the social," as a term fixated on the human (1993, p.12), preferring "collective" to describe a 'common world that the notion of nature, like that of society, had prematurely simplified' (2004b, p.8). But given the conversations that we've had to this point, I suggest that we align with Jane Bennett's own preference for 'an ecology and human and nonhuman elements' (2009, p.103). The "ecology" that I'd like to think through here is not only a metaphor taken from the natural sciences and used to describe the grouping together of people and things, but more specifically is a mode of *thinking* which can motivate research and art.

That is, it can assist us in *how to think*, as much as to enumerate *who else* takes part.

At the outset of my project, concepts such as "community," "the social," and "the public" had the greatest bearing on my thinking, brought to the fore in the theoretical work of Grant Kester (2004a), Claire Bishop (2006; 2011), Suzanne Lacy (1995), and Michael Warner (2005). These concepts underpinned my thinking on participation prior to this research project, but more recently I've begun to grasp at what ecology and "ecological thinking" means for how I understand the modes of sociality and taking part generated by my artworks.

Because of its association with the practice and discourse of "environmental art," as distinct from my own preoccupation with participatory art, I've been disinclined to consider my own practice in terms of ecology. But as my recent concern has been with who else, as well as humans, takes part in participatory art, I've searched for concepts which no longer presume a human at the centre of the the social, and felt an affinity with the multispecies and inter-species research introduced in the *Life After the Anthropocene* workshops. However, ecology as a term borrowed from the biological sciences, has its etymological root in the Greek *oikos,* as a 'house, domestic property, habitat, natural milieu' (Guattari 1989, p.147 n2). This brings to mind an existing structure, within which an interchangeable representative of a species lives and dies, only to be

replaced by another. While this species is not necessarily human, which corresponds to my own demands to find a non-anthropocentric model of who takes part, it invokes an image reminiscent of structuralist models of agency, where an individual inhabits the social. Understood in this way, ecology too easily suggests set of relations between clearly-defined individuals within a stable structure that pre-exists and survives its inhabitants. We can easily imagine an individual representative of a species struggling for survival within an inhospitable environment of the sort that Matt Candea discussed in his paper (2010), and which makes itself known to us in familiar forms of natural history filmmaking. In this model, the *trophic* aspects of a species' relationships to others are of most interest. Interactions in the food-chain or -web, with predators and prey, and with weather events for example, provide the drama of this individual struggle. The ecology that is claimed here might be more accurately described as a *milieu*, and as Geoffrey Winthrop-Young writes, this has overwhelming 'determinist implications,' where an understanding of the environment – as everything other than the species captured by the zoologist attention or filmmakers lens – is limited to 'something that acts upon and shapes the subject' (2010, p.216). This one-way interaction between individual and environment is too structuralist, too deterministic for my purposes here. Such an ontology limits interaction between an individual and their immediate superiors and subordinates in a hierarchy, or in relation to a transcendental, overarching force to

which the individual could claim no transformative relationship.

Clearly, this model of ecology does little to move us beyond 'the analysis of a single species and its place within a hierarchical order of nature' (Berleant 1995, p.4) to which ecology was meant to provide an alternative. It is far from

> recasting of our sense of environment [as the] process of mutual interaction [that] takes place between and organism and the multitude of factors that constitute its environmental setting. (1995, p.4)

Even Jakob von Uexküll's influential theory of *Umwelt*, as 'a given animal's perceptual life-world' (2010, p.10), and which offers an alternative to "milieu," is also problematic as an model of "ecology" within my thesis. This is especially so, given my emphasis on the mutuality of relationship between things, and the hope for politics and new forms of the social to emerge among heterogenous things. As Winthrop-Young points out, Uexküll claimed that 'Nobody is the product of their milieu – each is the master of his Umwelt,' which figures yet another 'one-way causality' (2010, p.216) which sails close to anthropocenic hubris that many are trying to avoid. However, some aspects of Umwelt are useful to me here in thinking of how an ecology could define an ontology which does not promote the human, or any other species, as dominant. As Doran Sagan writes,

Umwelt present a model of inter-species interaction based on simple semiosis, where animals respond to stimuli in a 'function-oriented systemic process that occurs unconsciously and underconsciously' (2010, p.19). As a result,'Complex systems showing harmony, wholeness, and a subservience of the parts to the whole' are formed from these simple interactions (2010, pp.18–19). There is no distinction between humans and other animals in this respect. Indeed, according to Geoffrey Winthop-Young, Uexküll 'furnishes a notion of a human subject as always already enmeshed in its environment on the basis of operating principles that are similar to those of animals' (2010, p.222).

This is not to say that Uexküll's Unwelt doesn't distinguish between animal species and their worlds. Far from it. Sagan quotes Uexküll as stating

> all animal subjects, from the simplest to the most complex, are inserted into their environments to the same degree of perfection. The simple animal has a simple environment; the multiform animal has an environment just as richly articulated as it is. (2010, p.29)

According to Winthrop-Young

> Animals are promoted by virtue of their human-like ability to construct their own environment; humans are demoted by virtue of our animal-like inability to transcend our Umwelt. (2010, p.222)

This is the crucial challenge to thinking ecologically that Uexküll's Umwelt presents to us. Even while Uexküll performs, in Sagan's words, a skilful 'Umwelt vaulting' which allows us to access the centre of an other's world (2010, p.20), these worlds are still closed to the transformations on encounter with others. Even though Uexküll skilfully tells of 'what it's like to be a blind, deaf tick waiting in the darkness for the all-important whiff of butyric acid' (2010, p.20) in one instance, the challenge that remains is to tell of how the individual and their world is transformed on encounter with others. Sagan suggests that the Umwelt conveys an idea of the world as 'somehow complete' (Sagan 2010, p.20), which is problematic for my current research – and, I think, to the project that we're developing – and challenges some of the assumptions deeply embedded in my recent artwork.

What's missing for me here is an account of the *mutual* transformations which result from interactions between things, and which is inherent to the ontology that I've sought as most productive for my research, (and which I write and talk about elsewhere in this project as stemming from my interest in the dialogic as a *disposition* towards others.) Umwelt presents a specific ontology, or model of things in the world, their 'relations and processes' that you write of (2015). The relationships with others that it defines constitute a world which is perceived as complete. It's described from its centre outwards, from the point-of-view of an individual as representative of a species. In several recent projects I've

attempted to describe just such a world from the point-of-view of nonhuman things as they relate to more-than-human others. Read through Uexküll, this work describes the Umwelt of a number of specific things: a bronze age linen scrap, or a boulder of Lewisian gneiss for example. In a sense, I asserted that 'they too have worlds, and trying to figure out what those worlds are like' (Sagan 2010, p.20).

The problematics of this are familiar to anthropologists, and I'm indebted here to Jimmy Turner of the University of Hull for insight into the methodological shifts within his discipline, and to Martin Paleček and Mark Risjord's paper on "the ontological turn" (2013). When encountering my recent work, such as *A Splendid Kindred Soul*, and *The Outlier*, we're presented with worlds that appear to be totally incommensurate with our own. These Umwelten, even though they stretch the term's original definition and do not relate to the worlds of animal species, are otherwise inaccessible to us who do not stand at their centre. Although my projects attempted an empathetic personification of the rock and textile, it could be argued that this was done in an *interpretive* mode, not unlike that of the anthropologists' who report(ed) on colonized others, interpreting them only in terms of the anthropologists' own cultural categories. Subsequently, the "representational turn" in anthropology encouraged a description of other cultures in their own terms, in their own voice even, but always safely bracketed as "belief,"

as the misinterpretation of signs, through a different cultural lens. This mode presents a shared world that is viewed from different points-of-view, but the objective truth of which is known only to the anthropologist. The recent "ontological turn" recognizes the mutual transformations produced on encounter with others. It also admits that other ontologies are valid in themselves, not as a different (but mistaken) "world view" onto a shared world, or a different belief in the link between symbolic representation and its referent in the world. The world described in this ontology is taken as a different reality altogether.

In this sense, I recognize that in my recent work, and in upcoming projects, there's more work to be done in describing the transformations of each on the other for those who engage through very different ontologies. At the *viva* event I'd like to further discuss the artworks produced last year in these terms; I also wonder if this could offer us a way of thinking how to understand people's interactions with microorganisms in their microbiome, for example, suggesting ways to describe dynamically and mutually transforming Umwelten in the encounter of humans and other things.

I'm curious to find alternative ontologies to those that establish a world as complete or pre-ordained, avoiding the structuralist structure/agency cliché that Latour warns us of in *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Jane Bennett's reading of "ecology" is attractive here, as an ongoing process, as 'a sticky web of connections' where 'humans

are always in composition with nonhumanity' (2004, p.365). The processual aspects of such an ecology strikes me as important for my own research, where the web of connections accounts for both the things that relate to each other, and equally the ongoing processes of things in-relation, where mutual interaction results in and produces dynamic change and transformation of all things that are in-relation. The 'vital materialism' that Bennett neatly elucidates in *Vibrant Matter*, is intriguing to me in its description of both a relationships to others, as a relation of exteriority, as well as implying an energy *in* the relation and *within* the things that relate. What I'm pursuing here, is a way to describe what could be called an "impulsion" or "motivation" in physical/mechanical terms, but which Bennett, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari consider a 'vibratory effluesence that persists before and after any arrangement in space.' (2009, p.57). Bennett sets in motion the idea of material, not as as 'noun or adjective' which 'denotes some stable or rock-bottom reality' (2009, p.57), but as 'heterogenous, itself a differential of intensities, itself a life' (2009, p.58), and suggests a switch to 'a verb, or at least a gerund' that is called for by Donna Haraway (2011, p.9), and by Bennett (2004, p.353).

A *vital materialist* ecology would be one in which connections between things cannot be predicted, are contingent, formed and re-formed in time; they are ongoing, they proliferate; nothing exists within itself but only through vibrant exchanges and interaction with

other things. 'To be ecological … is to participate in a collectivity' (2004, p.365) writes Bennett. This is a crucial conclusion to draw regarding how we understand who takes part, and how things are in relation to each other.

My own project, as I've come to understand, also falls within a wider new materialist project which challenges the social-constructivist bias of my previous work. The liveliness of matter that Bennett puts forward introduces a materiality that has a life of its own, and which is at work *despite* the volition, choice or wilful agency that humans imagine for themselves. Humans, within an ecology thought of in this, way are implicated in transformative processes over which they have no control, and in relation to things which are unstable. They are a "becoming" in relation to others, rather than autonomous "beings."

In this sense, *taking part* is inevitable, and intrinsic to all interactions between things, human or otherwise. This, Karen Barad writes, is *intra-action*, which

> signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction" which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. (Barad 2007, p.33)

Barad is a theorist whose influence was apparent in the conversations and papers in *After The Anthropocene* workshops. Drawing from Niels Bohr's 'philosophy-physics' (2007 xi), Barad's world is one in which taking part is intrinsic, and where 'our participation with / in and as part of the world's differential becoming' (Barad 2007, p.361). In our entanglements we are constantly 'in touch' with others, where 'Each of "us" is constituted in response-ability. Each of "us" is constituted as responsible for the other' (2012, p.7). What's more, this responsibility 'is not conditioned by any preordained determinate distinctions, such as that between human and nonhuman' (2012, p.81). This suggests a mutual responsibility, defined not as a matter of ethics, but as a material and indisputable fact of participation.

Similarly, 'ecological thought,' writes Timothy Morton, 'insists that we're deeply connected even if we say we're not' (Morton 2012, p.8). This statement of allegiance to a realist, anti-correlationist ontology, (albeit antagonistic to new materialism) where things exist beyond and despite the human, is further brought to life by his fellow object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman, in the image of plutonium acting on organic matter, despite their consciousness, their language and their will (2010). This 'radical openness' to nonhuman others, which may come unannounced or unbidden, is another characteristic of a more general 'ecological thought' (2010, p.10). As a mode of thinking, rather than only a model of related things, this surely has a profound

bearing on how we understand who takes part and, and how they do so.

What is intriguing for me is to read this new materialism through the literature of participation in art with which I'm more familiar. Suzanne Lacy's theories of engagement and responsibility, for example, makes a correspondence between engagement and responsibility. Responsibility, in this case, is for the "success" of the artwork itself and is inextricably linked to the degree to which people take part in its development, production, and presentation. These degrees of engagement, represented as concentric circles in Lacy's diagram, are limited to human participants, who are mapped according to roles taken, into which we presume they have volunteered. The more-than-human is absent from this model in several ways, from the unnamed, unaccounted nonhuman others that formed alliances with human participants, to the presumption that humans have volition in deciding the extent of their participation.

Such an inherent and inevitable responsibility presents a challenge to other theorists who've supported art practices which fall within participatory art's cognate fields. Nicolas Bourriaud, champion of "relational aesthetics," writes of his suspicion that if Lévinas is right and that "the bond with others is only made as responsibility," it, 'reduces inter-subjectivity to a kind of inter-servility?' (Bourriaud 2002, p.23). Intimated here is a denigration of, or perhaps simply a reluctance to

admit, a responsibility that may be inextricable, irrevocable, inevitable or intrinsic, and which may underpin or persist beyond all other "bonds" between things. While Bourriaud can decry Lévinas' humanism, diffracted through a new materialism, Bourriaud asserts a human agency, and capacity to choose whether or not to take part, that is no longer tenable.

The tensions between the ontological and epistemic aspects of social-constructionism and new materialist thinking are still being played out my recent work as I try to find ways of enacting the kinds of "entanglements" and "becomings" to which I aspire. This is an aspect of my art practice that continues to draw my attention, and which I hope will be apparent in the public event which accompanies the *viva vice* at the end of this project, and in my correspondence with participants.

Timothy Morton's various accounts of 'the ecological thought' are pertinent here, as just such an impetus for open and lively thinking – as motile thinking. As an arrangement of things, an epiphanic event, and an ongoing process, Morton's ecological thought is prompted by

> the ecological crisis we face … so obvious that it becomes easy … to join the dots and see everything is interconnected. (Morton 2010, p.1)

It describes more than simply the "shape" of an ecology of loosely-connected things. It also presents itself

as that which moves or motivates thinking beyond 'the sciences of ecology,' and into 'art, philosophy literature, music, and culture' (2010, p.4). The ecological thought is an 'ecological awareness' inspired by 'the plenum of unique objects that now impinges on us' (Morton 2012, p.43). This is the 'decisive contact' that nonhumans make with humans, that Morton declaims in *Hyperobjects* – 'even the ones busy shoring up differences between humans and the rest' (2013). It is an event in which there is an awareness of a relation to nonhuman others, and more than this, it also 'has to do with love, loss, despair and compassion' (2010, p.2). There are echoes of the love and strife that Michel Serres charms into his own thesis from Empedocles' (2012, p.69), as forces that hold together or push apart each of the earth's constituent elements. This ecological thought is therefore also an *awareness* from which we are moved to think and act, and which continues to inform what other might call a *concern* (Lather 1993), or *leaning* (Rifkin 2009), which sets us in relation to others, and which I have been thinking in terms of *disposition* (extrapolated from Buber 2002, p.4). This is the radical openness that Morton identifies '… open forever, without the possibility of closing again' (Morton 2010, p.8). This is an ecological thinking, which includes "the thought" as a motivating event, and as an agent. But it is also more than this. In its ongoing negotiation with humans and others – indeed with a less nearly partitioned ontology, of things entangled, becoming – it is also a dynamic process of undoing the legacies of modernism and naturalism. The ecological

thought is active. It is "thinking" as a live and lively process which is open to encounter, admits other ontologies, and promotes mutual transformation. This is a thinking that is a becoming.

Morton reserves the right for withdrawal and for contemplation in our human engagements with the material world (2010, p.9). His object-orientation does not quite allow for the 'moving horizon of exchanges and becoming' described by Barad (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2015, p.23). In this sense, Morton's still falls short of the ontology which describes things that are, as Jane Bennett often states, *motile* – and that move and are moved. Far from an abstract model for thinking, I'm looking for a way to recognize my own motivation in undertaking this research and in sustaining my art practice. As Katie King notes, drawing on Bruno Latour, we must 'learn to be "effectuated," moved, put into motion by other entities, humans and nonhumans' (2012, p.274). The attitude or disposition that I hope to remain alive to here is, in Karen Barad words, that which

> … requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder. (2012, p.2)

In preparation for our planned participatory film on ecological approaches to the human microbiome, I've turned my thoughts to the effects or influence of a new materialism on which forces we recognize as motivating us in our work. What "moves" us towards this work in

the first place, and what moves us within its processes? What moves us as artist and researcher, as well as our apparatus, such as the camera? What moves us between participants and how does this effect the qualities of our encounters, and our accounts of them? These are questions that we can ask as we enter into our project.

To Matthew Fuller
9th July 2015

An Assembly of Things; Art after Michel Serres

Dear Matt,

It was good to meet again this week, and to continue to work on the proposal for our new project – provisionally titled *An Assembly of Things*. Our aim is to generate new understandings of human relationships to "nature" in an epoch where drawing distinction between these terms has become problematic for many reasons, the least of which being – as some will argue – that it contributes to the conditions of the many disasters, crises and states of emergency that are now of common concern, especially global-warming-related climate change – this is a direct reference toTimothy Morton's clarification of *climate change.* Michel Serres refers to this state as one of crisis, but it also calls to mind the states of emergency raised by Georgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt (Federico Luisetti 2011) – all of which are being summoned here to indicate the process of recognizing the manifold harm and destruction wreaked during the epoch that is being termed the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2011). As Donna Haraway writes, with some force and palpable urgency:

> It's more than climate change; it's also extraordinary burdens of toxic chemistry, mining, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people and other critters, etc, etc, in systemically linked patterns that threaten major system collapse after major system collapse after major system collapse. (2015, p.159)

In *Times Of Crisis* Michel Serres asks 'Who will have the audacity to found a global institution where *Biogea* will finally be represented and have the right to speak' (2014, pp.32–33)? Bruno Latour, in his closing remarks in *We Have Never Been Modern,* having expounded on the urgency of the daunting task at hand concludes that 'I have done my job as philosopher… Others will be able to convene the Parliament of Things' (1993, p.145).

Both Serres and Latour call for this representation of things as a response to the what they consider the consequences of the moderns' pathology for separating some humans from others, and all humans from all other things, as a simplification of a possible 'the common world':

> …we shall be obliged to find a successor to the ancient split that separated nature (in the singular) from cultures (in the plural) in order to raise once again the questions of the number of collectives and the progressive composition of the common world that the notion of nature,

> like that of society, had prematurely simplified. (Latour 2004b, p.8)

Theirs are not isolated voices: they are joined most notably by Isabelle Stengers who rallies 'non-eliminativist' approaches (2011, p.379), Karen Barad who prefers 'entanglement' (2007), and Donna Haraway who recognizes hybrid, cyborg entities such as 'naturecultures' (2008).

In our initial conversations we wondered how we could organize an event which would promote a wider acknowledge of this situation. Or, to be more emphatic, we might take Bruno Latour's line: 'Is it asking too little simply to ratify in public what is already happening? (Latour 1993, p.144) – and secondly to invent ways to recognize the new forms of symbiosis made possible once we no longer presume a separation of culture and nature – of humans on one side, and all other things on the other.

We soon found our way to Michel Serres' concept of the WAFEL: a gathering of 'water, air, fire, Earth and life' and an aggregation of all the elements of *Biogea*, 'whose name means Life and Earth.'(Serres 2014, p.33) We recognized that Serres' impassioned and persistent call for such an assembly tallies with Bruno Latour's *Parliament of Things* (Latour 1993, p.142) Both Serres (Serres 2014, pp.32–3)and Latour (Latour 1993, p.144) speak of the 'representation' of things, and I think it's fair to say that our project will have to consider the

problematics of this.

The thesis that's emerging from my D.Phil research project has been motivated by a concern for these questions and themes, asking how participatory art can admit those things which it previously and explicitly excluded as participant in its project: namely things which are not human, and which are therefore incompatible with the concept of the social that underpins art practices such as mine. I've been working on the ways in which an art practice of this kind – and my art practice in particular – can respond to encounters with these things, and become sensitive to those previously considered as background, terrain, objects to be used, overlooked or exploited. One of the blind-spots of this project has been my continued over-looking of the apparatus of discourse that Karen Barad acknowledges as being crucial to specific intra-actions (Barad 2007, p.xi). For all its leaning towards Latour, I haven't amplified this project's own relationship with technologies of writing, for example, or of film-making and, as Barad says, 'the physicality of apparatuses and the ideas they embody – although these technical processes are to be brought to the fore in an upcoming collaborative project with Bevis Bowden – cinematographer and camera-person for *Primary Agents of a Social World* – which springs directly from this research. The project of gathering people and things together as an assembly is close to the artworks that I've developed and produced throughout the span of my doctoral

research project, and I look forward to our project as a further instantiation of its themes.

This is interesting in relation to other places where listening to others has been given renewed credence – that is, in the social sciences and anthropology in particular. I choose this analogy as it's within this discipline that the problems and controversies of the strong dealing with the weak, the rich with the poor, have been worked through. As a discipline, the history of their practice suggests a recognition of the subjectivity, and rights, of those who were previously objects to be exploited, as collateral in the production of knowledge. I draw a parallel with Serres' own claim that the work to be done is to confer rights onto nature – as those things which were previously excluded in the same way that women, some men, all children, et al were excluded from humanity as it was defined by the enlightenment and the law (Serres 2004).

We can also look to the comprehensive work undertaken recently by T.J. Demos et al, first in the special edition of *Third Text* and subsequently at the exhibition and conference at Nottingham Contemporary which gave a detailed account of the art, activism, political and legal processes that are arrayed around *The Rights of Nature* in a pan-American context (2013; 2015).

Serres' is a generous, ongoing, and poetic rendering of a widely-held commitment to establish a more symmetrical relationship of humans with those things

that would ordinarily be group under the title of 'nature'. In *Biogea,* (2012) he attempts to articulate a way to conjoin the Earth and all living things (2012, p.23), building on concepts introduced in *The Natural Contract* (1995). *Biogea* presents a nature which cries out, yet which has not been heard. Serres' returns to imagery and to instances, where the Earth – *Gea* – spews forth or gives birth: the mauve lava from Etna, fallen *alpinists* from the crevasse. Fissures, canals, and caves hold, for Serres, the sounds, the voices of *gea* – where we should return 'to listen to the voices of the biogea'; to rekindle the *mundus patet,* the ancient roman ritual in which on three days in 24th August, 5th October, 8th November. the earth is given its due (Warde Fowler 1912); a gathering at the gaping mouth/vagina of Gea, according to Serres (2012, p.45). Camille Paglia too, reminds us of the forces of such places, and which human, cultural production has often been averse and to which we might be drawn:

> Our focus on the pretty is an Apollonian strategy. The leaves and flowers, the birds, the hills are a patchwork pattern by which we map the known. What the west represses in its view of nature is the chthonian, which means "of the earth" – but earth's bowels, not its surface. (1992, p.14)

And what of art? What are the consequences for art if we are to take heed of Serres? Or of Morton? A new sublime of matter? Should we be awe-stuck, dumb-struck? What becomes of the *modern* in art? Perhaps we

begin to recognize it again, exactly where we thought it had been worked-through and expended, but where the post-modern now looks decidedly modern – it describes a critical engagement *with* modernism, after all; not a way beyond it; this is left to Latour – 'we have never been modern' – as he lists what what we should retain or reject (1993, p.135). From modernism, pre-, and post. What else is to be done with an art practice that takes Serres et al seriously and heeds their warnings?

My thesis is that the dialogic aspects of contemporary art inform that way beyond; and perhaps performing an "ontological turn," (as we see in anthropology) which indicates a way beyond the intermediate, and undoubtedly colonial, modes of interpretation, or representation – of translation or "allowing to speak" – towards a focus on the mutual transformations generated through forming sustained relationships with others (Kelly 2014b; 2014a).

To Nina Wakeford
27th September 2015

The social imaginary & material realities

Dear Nina,

Our various face-to-face and email exchanges during the past couple of years have always provoked my thinking of the social, and participation, as the main themes of my practice, as well as more general questions of disciplinarity and approaches to doctoral research. I'm writing to you as I near the end of my doctoral project with some thoughts on some of the questions which keep arising for me, and which I hope to continue to think through with you…

At a recent screening of my film, *Primary Agents of a Social World*, I was asked "Where is the work? Is it the *film*, or is it the day-long *event* that it documents?" – a question that reiterates some of your own concerns expressed when the film was screened at the Ruskin this summer. I drew on Suzanne Lacy's concept of *Circles of Engagement* (2010, p.179) to suggest that the film operates as a summary of the live event, an encapsulation of it, which is presented to people beyond those who took part in the live event that it records; the film functions to engage a further group of participants in the artwork, albeit engaged in a different register, with different temporalities and intensities. As a 37 minute edit from 8

hours of footage, it is also an *extract,* a summary of the salient points of conversation – by which I mean to say, a flow of conversation which describes the arc of my thesis; and an edit which is driven by listening for keywords, themes, and concepts, that were either already familiar, or that were indications of further research.

But in viewing the film a number of times recently, I'm struck by how the coal appears in the film as both real and symbolic: participants are preoccupied with explaining coal's various material relations with humans and other things, and how these things are formed by their relations – to fossilized spores for example, to human lung-tissue, to "breathing" oxygen and exhaling of carbon monoxide and dioxide. But the images that it presents also reiterate another of the themes that emerges in the film's dialogue: that of social formation. In footage recorded at the open cast mine the coal is seen as a contiguous geological strata lying in relation to others, (limestone, shale and ironstone in particular) we can imagine that the seam's contiguity and hierarchical stratification correspond to the colliers' social reality, especially so when we see the ex-colliers standing shoulder-to-shoulder next to the exposed coal seams, the rank-and-file of human labourers in the fore-ground, their petrological equivalents behind them. Moments later, the film's dialogue reveals the coal's fate: having been compacted over geological time, becoming increasingly solid and stable, the coal becomes dislodged, disaggregated, blasted. We see huge boulders that have

been displaced, dragged out of context, fragmented and crushed into an amorphous mass of indistinguishable, separate particles; fluid, turbulent, chaotic even, with no structure to speak of. No coherence. No *solidarity*.

Social anthropologist – and participant in the film – Martin O'Neill works with "hard to reach" or, in his terms, "hard to engage" communities in the former industrial valleys of South Wales. Responding to the film when it was screened at the national coal mining museum in Blaenavon this weekend, (26th September 2015) he asks us to consider what constitutes the "social bond" now that coal extraction is no longer the area's main industry. It was coal, he suggests, that brought people to this previously sparsely-populated part of Britain. It was coal that determined where and how people lived, the institutions they formed, the relations with each other and with the land. Turning to Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' (2006), he posits that nation and local community alike are produced as a social imaginary – constructed through the force of human will, of collective imagination, sustained through cultural practice. Now that the material conditions of workers' lives, and the society that they constructed, have changed – become intangible even – only the nostalgia of the 'mythic unity' brought about by their material relation to coal keeps them together (Kwon 2004, p.6). Only their imagination prevails.

But my question is of how this social imaginary will be transformed, given our renewed awareness of the material dimension of human life under the conditions of the Anthropocene? How will it be formed once the inescapable reality and tangible consequences of our ongoing material relations with other people and other things is acknowledged? What social formations are produced once we acknowledge these relations with others – the specific material relations that we enter into anew, in which we are already implicated, and that we may be unaware of, or even disavow? Has there been a *solidarity* all along, expressed by material relations, that we have yet to recognize?

Perhaps this is the invocation of "false consciousness" that you warned me of? But, when I ask myself what my motivations are here, what moves me in this work, I have to ask whether I'm setting out 'to debunk their illusions, or to 'uncover their real practice, to probe their unconscious belief, to reveal their double talk,' as Bruno Latour would have it (1993, p.40). No, the "tracing" seems to produce its own social reality, its own social world. I've reconciled this thinking, to some extent, though performing my own "ontological turn" as a way to move beyond the problem which would otherwise lead to critique and the accusation on my part, of false consciousness on the theirs. These are indeed separate realities, produced from markedly different ontologies, produced by very different cultures. They are not "views" onto the same world. They are, in accordance

with the new materialism which I've encountered, different worlds altogether, produced through taking part in specific relations. A belief in an "imagined community" is not to be translated into my own terms, or subject to critique. Nor is it something to be listened to reverentially or gawked at in disbelief. Rather, it can be thought in its own terms, as a correlationism that restates the Great Divide between culture and nature,of humans from all other things, as symptomatic of modern thought. I don't consider my work to reveal this as a false consciousness, just to acknowledge that, while it's incommensurate with my own thinking, it does produce a material reality. Imagining a community still inculcates and calls upon material things, more-than-human things, to sustain its thinking. It is embedded in flags, in laws, in cultural artefacts of all kinds, in processes of manufacture; in those humans who imagine, eat, breath, excrete. They are still bound to the earth, to its chemical processes. So I've tried, in this research, not to speculate on the misconceptions that others might have of their own social lives, but to *take part* in understanding how we, as humans, take part with others in what we could call more-than-human assemblages, collectives, or extended social formations, communities or publics (depending on the histories of practice and discourse that we can access through our disciplinings). Far from a generalized, nebulous one-ness, I am talking here of specific relations: *that* water ingested by *that* body; *that* carbon monoxide emitting from *that* petrol engine; *that* cotton threaded through *that* loom and stitched to make *that* flag in

particular – and if my new materialist commitment develops even further – to specific ingestings, emittings, threadings, and stitchings and the transformations that they activate in the 'Latour litany' of concatenated things (Morton 2011, p.226). I think that this is a way to hold to the "vulgar" material reality that's brought to mind once we think 'the ecological thought' (Morton 2010) – without denying its cultural dimension, without denying its relation to different ontologies. As I look for ways in which this research will keep moving, I can look to precedents for this way of thinking: in Felix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*, for example, in which environmental ecology is considered to have prefigured or rehearsed aspects of a new ontology (1989, p.140), and of new ways of living, of becoming in-relation to others; where the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of human culture encounters the real, the material, with the nature that was once thought of as separate, across the gulf of the Great Divide. What is perhaps different, in a contemporary context, is the newly-felt urgency of human relations with its non-human others under the conditions of the Anthropocene. This is a time when, if we're generous, and perhaps if we act in time, we could *admit* the more-than-human – perhaps as a matter of "opening the door" for new kin – as Donna Haraway suggests recently (2015). For other practices, it might be a case of having to live with a tidal-incursion, floating a raft of drenched furniture as the tide rises to ceiling-level. But "the deluge" is perhaps too much of an artistic cliché to offer any way toward thinking and doing the more-

than-human, especially when events call less for being swamped by the other, than for acknowledging our mutual entanglings, and in taking responsibility for our predicaments. This penchant for relationality has led me towards Karen Barad's work which suggests an even more radical flourishing of "becomings," "entanglements," and "relatings." Things have less distinct edges in Barad's ontology, if any at all, to the point where there are no "things" only "relatings"; and this will leads me, perhaps inevitably, closer to an interest in the work of Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze, and into more conversations with you.

To Deborah Robinson & workshop participants
3rd August 2015

re. Art After The Anthropocene

Dear Deborah and workshop participants,

Thanks again for signing up and taking part in the workshop during Transart Institute's summer residency in Berlin on 21st July 2015, and for the discussion of its themes.

In their *After The Anthropocene* paper Elizabeth Johnson and Harlan Morehouse suggest that the Anthropocene brings 'radical challenges to the structure and habits of disciplinary thought' to geography (2014, p.439). My last proposition to you, made in the workshop, is that this question is of equal importance to artists and other creative practitioners. As mentioned in a subsequent email, I hope that we can continue our conversation on this theme in the next issue of Transart's ELSE journal – perhaps through your own written responses to my expanded workshop notes, below. I look forward to hearing your further thoughts on this.

Next year we will find out whether the International Commission on Stratigraphy has ratified the Anthropocene as a term to describe a new geological epoch 'during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth system' (2015). Whatever the outcome, headlines such as 'Rocks

Made of Plastic Found on Hawaiian Beach' (2014) serve as reminders of the profound transformations that humans perform on other animal and mineral things. Far from being inert matter or undifferentiated environment, we now admit to the complex and entangled relationships that these things have with humans and other beings: the worms ingested into our gut to exercise the human microbiome, the mosquitos co-dependent on the improvised architecture in laboratories, the mercury washed from a paper mill, ingested by the fish which now rests on our plate. All things – human or otherwise – enter into transformative relations with others. The workshop considers the Anthropocene beyond the immediate effects on climate change, and in terms of the qualities of the relationships between humans and other things on the planet produced by those who define their culture as separate from nature. From this, I suggest that those artists who have sought to establish relational practices sensitive to human others are well-prepared to acknowledge more-than-human others in life and in art *after* the Anthropocene.

As geographer Jamie Lorimer states, the recognition of the prevailing conditions of the Anthropocene does not signal the final mastery and control of nature by 'Enlightenment science' (2015). Rather, it registers the effect of human activity on many of the 'places, forms, and processes on this planet,' as an indicator of the extent of humans' influence and their implication in the

condition of the Earth. While Steffen et al claim that the term Anthropocene is 'introduced to capture the quantitative shift in the relationship between humans and the global environment' (2011, p.843) it also describes, I would suggest, the *qualities* of the prevailing attitude of humans towards others (Steffen et al. 2011) and toward themselves (according to Stephanie Wakefield, in Johnson & Morehouse 2014, p.451).

Paul Crutzen – who first coined the term – and others, claim that the Anthropocene is 'widely, but informally, used in the global change research community,' (in Steffen et al. 2011, p.842) and other academic disciplines are moving quickly to understand the profound effects of this concept on their practice – such as we see in geography, in Elizabeth Johnson and Harlan Morehouse's paper *After The Anthropocene* (2014). As part of a continuing post-humanist enquiry, it is a critique of naturalism in science and the consequences of its objectifications and abstractions, as well as 'a critique of linguistic and social constructivism' (Bennett 2012b, p.226). This, in turn, prompts the continued invention of new ways to understand the human in relation to others – whether among-themselves, or in relation to nonhuman things – which do not assert a division between culture and nature, or subject and object. This field has been nourished by the work of Bruno Latour (2004b; 1993), Michel Serres (2012; 1995), Karen Barad (2007), Donna Haraway (2008), Cary Wolfe (2009), and Isabelle Stengers (2011), among others and offers a

materialist response to psychoanalysis, deconstruction and Critical Theory in which, as Jochem Schulte-Sasse states, 'tends *necessarily* towards social and political pessimism' (in Bürger 1984 xvi), and which Sylvère Lotringer claims 'is not an adequate response' (2015, p.374), and the value of which has to be called into question if we are to identify inventive ways to sustain art, and life, under anthropocenic conditions.

If my preoccupation is with how humans and manifold others can live together after the Anthropocene, then it is important to understand how the work of such 'pessimistic' theorists obstruct or frustrate attempts at developing praxes which wonder at the possibilities of a more-than-human social realm. Figures such as Jacques Lacan for example, are characteristic of the influence of psychoanalysis on art discourse in the twentieth century, as noted by Maria Walsh (2013), for example, (and more generally, by Rosi Braidotti who describes

> The hegemonic position acquired by the linguistic branch [of post-structuralism] – developed via psychoanalysis and semiotics into a fully-fledged deconstructive project that simply conquered intellectually the United States. (in Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2015, p.21)

According to Jim Dolwick, in Lacan's work humans have agency only in the *symbolic*, rather than the *real*, and that even within the symbolic realm, 'the social' is

restricted to 'the world of language, symbols, signs, intersubjective relations, ideological conventions, and the Law, the principles upon which societies are based' (2009, p.33 Fig. 5). As artists concerned with expanding the concept of 'the social' to include the more-than-human, we would be restricted to: 'The unconscious, the inner psyche, the 'social' within the mind, often explained in psychoanalytic terms' (2009, p.32). Therefore, where Lacan's influence has become naturalized for artists, we might expect to exercise human (and indeed artistic) agency only in the symbolic realm. What is more, nonhuman others – animals in particular – are denied even this limited agency. As Hal Foster claims, in Lacan

> animals are caught in the gaze of the world; they are only on display there. Humans are not so reduced to this "imaginary capture", for we have access to the symbolic. (Foster 1996, p.140)

But even with such privileged access 'The real is inaccessible to us as humans, as 'the real is the world of matter, outside of language'(Dolwick 2009, p.33). The same criticisms could be levelled at the more recently fashionable work of Graham Harman, Timothy Morton and the other object-oriented philosophers, who offer an 'object-oriented sublime' (Morton, Timothy 2011, p.227): innumerable,withdrawn – the 'mysterious objects' that Jane Bennett identifies in their work. (2012b, p.226).

A materialist approach, on the other hand, provides for a praxis which engages with the challenges of living together with more-than-human others, where the Real – *the material* – is intrinsic to the social. The thinking of the Anthropocene reminds us of the undeniable materiality of the world and of inextricable human entanglements with it. As such, a materialist approach, *after* the Anthropocene, offers ways to understand how artists might recognize and understand their own agency, and that of others, *beyond* the symbolic, and their relation to the real and the material. I would suggest that this is one fruitful train of thought for us, as artists and other creative practitioners to pursue.

This is not meant as a neo-conservative admonition of the (mis)uses of 'citations of French philosophy' in art students' work, nor of the other 'fashionable references in art crits and studio talk' (as decried, for example, by Katerina Reed-Tsocha in Potter (2013, pp.234 & 237). Rather, my attempt here is to indicate ways beyond the various methodological impasses to understanding 'the social,' in terms of the more-than-human. Rather than recount the extensive list of impediments to art practice which come from these approaches, I want to claim that a *materialist* approach offers but one way beyond their influence that we could consider.

The *Art After The Anthropocene* workshop was an introduction therefore, not just to the concept of the Anthropocene and its thinking, but to a wider, paradigmatic shift that is occurring in the social sciences,

humanities, and the arts. I do not mean to exclude the 'hard' sciences here. In fact, part of this project is, as Michel Serres insists in *Biogea* (2012), to (re)unite those practices that have also been divided during the modern period. I would go as far as Latour in stating that this is – finally – an end to the moderns and their Constitution. That is, an end to a situation where 'Nature and Society are totally distinct' (1993, p.46), and by extension, all other casualties of the 'Great Divides' visited on people and things (1993, pp.11–12).

The work is already underway to write the history of art *in* the anthropocene – and, as Vincent Norman proclaims (in Davies & Turpin 2015, p.63), 'to invent new ways of thinking … naturecultures' through art and art history. These inventions will be influenced by the history of practice within our own disciplines, made tangible to us through artists' experiences of training, teaching, and learning.

The sociologist Howard S. Becker states that

> every trade has its tricks, its solutions to its own distinctive problems, easy ways of doing something lay people have a lot of trouble with. (1998, p.2)

These 'tricks' are the means by which we become *disciplined* – accepted as part of a specific community that has access to these techniques, methods and short-cuts to operating on the world through practice. If we think of the 'tricks' that have been handed to us from both

modernist and avant garde art practice, it becomes apparent that they too typify the quality of relations during the Anthropocene. For example, our own moderns understood art's teleology as one of progression toward abstraction – made familiar in the modernist art history which dominated art school curricula, (e.g. Gombrich 1950), before the 'new' social art history of the1980s, (e.g. Rees & Borzello 1986; Frascina et al. 1982). In employing various shock-tactics of the early twentieth century *avant-garde* – negation, distanciation or defamiliarization – our work is validated as we attempt '*épater le bourgeois* naughtiness,' in Grant Kester's words (2004a, p.153). This attitude to others is 'the dominant principle of artistic intent' in the avant-garde, according to Peter Bürger (1984, p.18), who claims this as the *means* by which this approach to art operates, beyond technique (1984, p.18). Ultimately we can appeal to 'the aesthetic alibi' (Jay 1992) – denied to other disciplines – in order to avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of these actions. But if our task here is to nurture practice which works on the problematics of asymmetrical (social) relations, then the question is whether these qualities are appropriate any longer, given the conditions that prevail in the Anthropocene and which we might hope to transform. It could be argued that in "times of crisis" or "times of emergency," artists and others may legitimately use these disruptive means – as they have done so historically. Operations of this kind have often been restricted to the formal properties of an artwork – within the parameters of modernism and its claim to an

autonomous art for example, (such as that which Peter Bürger (1984) aimed to distinguish) – but, as Bürger himself noted, the avant-garde programme was aimed at a transformation beyond the confines of the artwork, and was addressed to *life* itself and its relationship to the wider institution of art. The effects of the use in art of negation, distancing and abstraction would here be more widely applicable. As philosopher Alexei Penzin indicates, there are precedents within the Russian avant-garde in the call for artists to contribute to the task of building the Soviet Union, citing a missive from the Left Front of the Arts:

> What is needed, then, is for the poet not only to "incite," while marching outside the factory to the drumbeat of his lines, but also that he himself work on finishing and remodeling life. (2015, p.9)

Penzin draws on Carl Schmitt's work to bring to our attention a shift in the mode of artistic operation deemed necessary after the revolution – after the 'state of emergency' that Giorgio Agamben discusses in relation to exchanges between Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin in the 1930s and which are elucidated by Colin McQuillan (2011). If, as Walter Benjamin claimed, 'the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule' (2006, p.392), these *avant-garde* tropes could be deployed ad infinitum. But if the Anthropocene is only a recognition of the end of the asymmetrical relations, as described by Timothy Morton

(2012, p.46) and Bruno Latour (1993, p.79), it is only a crisis for the moderns and whoever else claims sovereignty and control over other things – human or otherwise. Artists, and the *means* by which they relate to others, are freed to invent new ways of working, more sensitive to the conditions in which they would choose to live.

Art practices which inherit these *means* from the historical avant-garde are an art *of* the Anthropocene. They constitutes the Anthropocene. It cultivates a disposition towards others which is *antagonistic* and, according to Renato Poggioli, 'the avant-garde looks and works like a culture of negation' (in Bürger 1984). This argumentation will be familiar to those inculcated and interested in the discourse of participatory art, relational aesthetics and so on. The refusal of the dialectic by Kester, in particular, drew the ire of Claire Bishop as it imposes a soft, dialogical communitarianism on the otherwise hard Marxian concept of the 'motor of history' (2006a). In these terms, once the dialectic is problematized (especially as within an emancipatory project) there is no clear, categorical basis for progress. With friends and foe not so easily identified, let alone set against each other, the lines between people, and between things, become blurred – or they become thoroughly entangled – with the risk that one class of thing slips into another, one species forms inappropriately "commensal" relations with another, and – and I suspect that this is the real issue – vested interests

and historical investments of all kinds slip away. If we were to retain the ambition for art to have consequence for life, among the other qualities that Grant Kester seeks to maintain of the avant-garde within a more complex understanding of its histories (2004a, p.153), and in effect, to retain the avant-garde programme which entangles life and art, rather than a Modern appeal to art's autonomy, then the deployment of the *via negativa* that Bishop promotes has serious consequences. In the way that Michel Serres refuses *critique* on the grounds that it ultimately leads to dead bodies (2014) we should remain suspicious of calls to deploy the negative in any circumstance. Timothy Morton invokes Martin Heidegger's warning about, 'burying the world in nullity… in order to prove it,' and continues:

> He sees an inevitable slide towards the very practices which led to the atom bomb being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and which are currently expressed as 'daily drilling, and now "fracking" for oil. (2013)

There is no difference in human relations among themselves and those with other, more-than-human things.

Where else might we look for art that is not *of* the anthropocene? Even within the time-period that the Anthropocene pretends to encompass, there are instances of art and creative practices which are not formed on the basis of either a 'great divide', nor on the

dialectic.

The history of 'environmental art' practices, such as those outlined by Sean Cubitt (2013), examples of which I showed to you (Viola 1979; Welsby 2006), would seem to be the most obvious place to start, but as one of its main concepts associated with the Anthropocene is the entanglement of nature with culture, a concern with the Anthropocene cannot be reduced to a concern with or for the 'environment'. Indeed, what was considered mere environment or background now advances to the fore, to make itself known in no uncertain terms, demanding that we recognize the equality of its agency, and the symmetry of our relationship (Morton 2013). An art concerned with the Anthropocene cannot therefore be elided with environmental art. It is its mode of relationship with the world that comes under scrutiny: my thesis here is that *all* art practice, whether directly proselytising for action against climate change or not, can transform the ways that it engages with others of all kinds in light of the thinking of the Anthropocene and its conditions. Ultimately, this is to assert an ethics of practice – across disciplines – which establishes non-divisive, productive relations with others, accepts mutual transformation and participation as de facto conditions of all things. This is not, therefore, a call for art to be concerned with a *content* that militates against 'climate change', but transforms the *means* of artists' practice (Bürger 1984, p.19). This transformed art practice which, I would suggest, has already been rehearsed in

participatory, dialogic, and relational practices and their discourses – in other words, in the realm of the social as humans-among-themselves, through which a sensitivity to the qualities of relationship between things has been thought and put into practice. This is not an art of activism as such, nor is it "socially-engaged," in that it does not presume an a priori social realm. It is also not "environmental," in that it disputes the term as it invokes notions of passive terrain or 'background' in front of which human 'primary agents' take the lead – to use Jim Dolwick's phrase (2009, p.22). It might, however, be thought of as "ecological" in its thinking, in that it is concerned with the negotiations between various agents and the qualities of their relation to each other, beyond those things once constituting nature – and as such it could join Felix Guattari in a concern for an ecology that's 'prefigured' by 'environmental ecology' but which addresses 'the wider ecological question' – in Guattari's case, 'the whole of subjectivity and capitalist power formations' (Guattari 1989, p.140). It is strongly materialist in its understanding of the inextricable, physical entanglement with other things that human cultural endeavour entails – and in this sense looks to Karen Barad et al to broaden the scope of who and what takes part with whom. It does not see art as distinct from the ethical concerns of everyday life, or of disciplinary practice elsewhere, in their praxis of relating, and being related to, by more-than-human others. This is, then, an art of disposition towards all others, perhaps refusing even to draw the "line in the sand" when expected

between friend and foe that would make its politics more straightforward and its ontology more clearly delineated.

This is where our work begins…

List of Artworks

The Dialogic
(2012-)
http://www.tinyurl.com/thedialogic

Forward Back Together
(2013)
http://www.tinyurl.com/forwardbacktogether

A Song, A Dance, and a New Stannary Parliament
(2014)
http://www.tinyurl.com/songtothetin

Primary Agents of a Social World
(2014)
http://www.tinyurl.com/primaryagents

The Outlier
(2014)
http://www.tinyurl.com/theoutlier

A Splendid Kindred Soul
(2015)
http://www.tinyurl.com/asplendidkindredsoul

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More information, and an online version of this work at: http://www.tinyurl.com/whoelsetakespart

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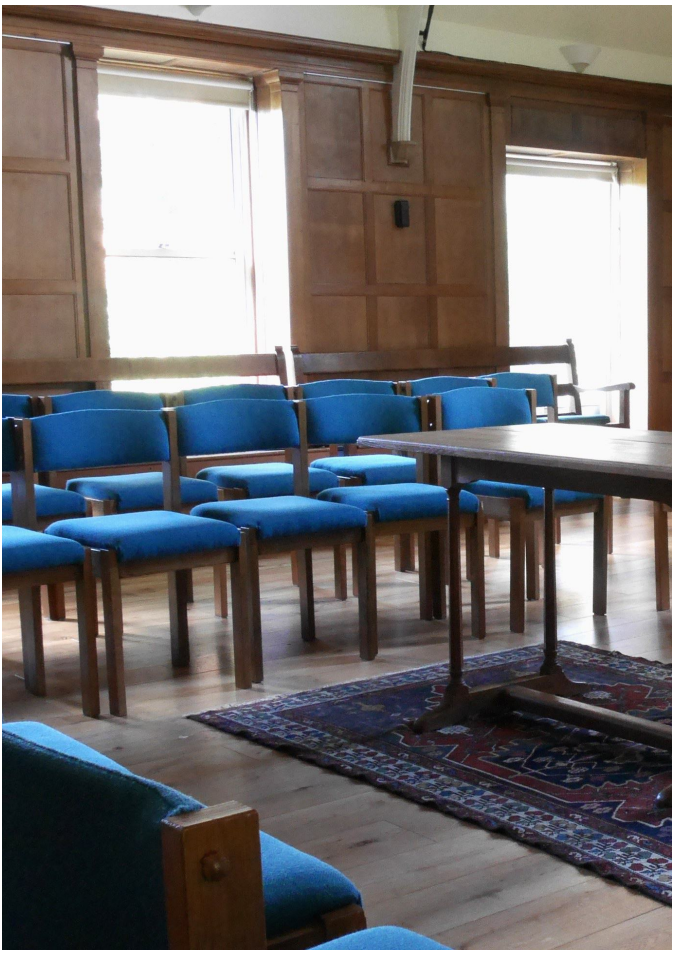

Back cover of printed edition: interior of Quaker meeting house, Oxford