



Aleatory Encounters

Trash and  
New Material  
Ontologies

Gillian Whiteley  
aka bricolagekitchen

## *Aleatory Encounters: Trash and New Materialist Ontologies*

Gillian Whiteley  
aka bricolagekitchen

Hallo everyone. First, I must apologise as I do not speak Spanish fluently so I am going to speak to you in English. I want to thank TRES – Ilana, Rodrigo and Mariana - for inviting me to contribute something to the opening of the exhibition and the launching of their artists' books. I am sorry I cannot be there to share this 'moment of pure presence' <sup>1</sup> with you – but it seems appropriate to present myself as my alterego - bricolagekitchen<sup>2</sup>.

So, here I am, holding up an image of Pan – my playful, prankster talisman – the emblem of one of my ongoing projects - *Pan-demonium* <sup>3</sup>. For me, *Pan-demonium* resonates with the current global political, economic and ecological situation – one in which the hegemonic forces of order have been overwhelmed by a dynamic of chaos and disorder, turning the world 'upside-down'. I use *Pan-demonium* as a metaphor for a critique of global capitalism and its 'devils' - its *pan*-demons - in all their guises. The project is about creating temporary communities of interdisciplinary practice. And I think this has some resonance with what Ilana, Rodrigo and Marian have been doing here in Mexico City. With my disruptive Pan talisman, I hope that some of what follows will evaporate the thousands

---

<sup>1</sup> A reference to Philip Fisher on moments of 'enchantment'. See Footnote 15.

<sup>2</sup> For more on projects and publications see [www.bricolagekitchen.com](http://www.bricolagekitchen.com)

<sup>3</sup> The first manifestation of the *Pan-demonium* project was in New York (see Gillian Whiteley, *Pan-demonium*, New York: AC

<sup>2</sup> For more on projects and publications see [www.bricolagekitchen.com](http://www.bricolagekitchen.com)

<sup>3</sup> The first manifestation of the *Pan-demonium* project was in New York (see Gillian Whiteley, *Pan-demonium*, New York: AC Institute, 2009). Subsequent manifestations have taken place at *The Knot*, Berlin in 2010 and at Sheffield's *Pandemic* event in 2011. See [www.bricolagekitchen.com](http://www.bricolagekitchen.com)

of miles of land and sea between us, so that we can have an aleatory but meaningful encounter about trash and its entangled narratives.

I have to start by saying that I have a long history of interest and connections with the discarded stuff of everydaylife, with things that have been cast aside, with dumped, forgotten, forlorn objects. Apart from wanting to highlight the political economies of waste produced and sustained by global capitalism, for me, discarded stuff has magical qualities and talismanic properties and I am fascinated with this too.

In the Northern industrial steel-city of Sheffield in the 1930s, my grandfather was a 'rag and bone' man. Of course, for Walter Benjamin, as for Charles Baudelaire, the rag-picker – the *chiffonier* – was a peripheral but symbolic figure of modernity<sup>4</sup>, living on the margins of the city, scavenging debris for valuable fragments. The *chiffonier* was part of the urban palimpsest, the collaged city. Today, the *chiffonier* is ubiquitous: the twenty-first century megalopolis, and its satellite landfill sites, are inhabited by foragers, tip-dwellers, dumpster-divers and rag-pickers. Global capitalism thrives on excess production and waste – the wealthy's detritus keeps capitalism in business and provides a living for the poor.

When I was young, my father used to tell me stories about going around the city streets with the 'rag and bone' horse and cart, calling out 'any old iron' – the familiar call which would bring children running from the backyards with stuff they no longer wanted. Then, at home, all the family would sort the heaps of clothes and objects they had collected – wooden toys, ornate picture frames, broken crockery, old household tools - sifting and sorting stuff into piles, weighing the metals, bagging up the wollen jerseys, stacking bits of cardboard – looking for tiny bits of treasure

---

<sup>4</sup> See Benjamin's essay 'On some motifs in Baudelaire' in Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations* [trans. Harry Zohn, edited and with introduction by Hannah Arendt] New York, 1968.

to make something with. The makeshift notion of *bricolage*, making do with whatever is to hand, about which Michel de Certeau wrote so eloquently in *The Practice of Everyday Life*<sup>5</sup> - and resourceful practices of improvisation with found stuff - are deeply embedded in my research, in my artistic interventions and in my curatorial practices.<sup>6</sup> I have spent many years working on the cultural histories of rubbish and engaging both with past and contemporary artists working with trash. Some of this is explored in my recent book, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash*<sup>7</sup>, which considers a range of trash narratives and discourses at particular moments and in specific places.

But, rather than go over any of that here, I want to use this opportunity to respond aesthetically and philosophically to the TRES project. For me, the TRES project operates on many different levels and it speaks directly, and in various registers, to many of my own preoccupations. TRES has created a wondrous taxonomy of trash. Coldly, clinically, forensically, the objects are examined and exhibited. Thousands of cigarette butts are presented like a scientific inventory. The specimens have been through the meticulous process of being diligently collected, organised, logged, classified and numbered. But there is also, here, a sensual evocation of the individual human encounter – lips have tasted the filters, fingers have held the tabs, lungs have inhaled the cancerous substances. Although the butts are lifeless, there is a residue of vitality. Once, an individual human being walked down a particular street, paused for a moment and tossed the butt aside. Who was that person, what were they thinking, what did they feel in that moment? The images invite our empathetic scrutiny, they demand a multisensory gaze – they require us to look longingly and affectively at the discarded debris that the project has painstakingly amassed. These regimented dregs of everydaylife picked up from the streets are ingrained with human remains – like tiny relics of some mysterious

---

<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, [trans. Steven Rendall], Los Angeles, 1984

<sup>6</sup> See Gillian Whiteley, 'Scavenging from margins to mainstream; artist as bricoleur' in Stéphanie Jamet-Chavigny et Françoise Levaillan (eds) *Retour sur l'art de l'assemblage, actes du colloque international*, Les Presses Universitaires de Renne, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash*, London: IBTauris, 2010

sensual public ritual. Their metamorphosis is complete: these mundane objects have become wondrous miniature fetishes.

So, the urban trash project in Mexico City leads me, again, to bring together some thoughts on the poetics and politics of detritus. To ruminate on my own aleatory encounters with trash through the lens of critical and philosophical thinking and, in particular, a recent body of writing which has been called 'new materialisms'. For, despite the toxicity of garbage and its blatant disregard for the environment in which it becomes entangled, I am enchanted by shimmering fragments of trash – by the manufactured plastic detritus which, everywhere, glints amidst the green filigree of leaves and grass.

So, first, some thoughts on 'new materialisms', the vibrancy of stuff and 'thing power'

*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle. <sup>8</sup>

In her recent book, *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett urges us to consider not only the sensuous enchantment of nature but to re-invoke the agency and affectivity of organic and inorganic things. <sup>9</sup> Partly inspired by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, there has been a 'biological' turn in cultural thinking and critical theory. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost note in their recent book on new materialisms, there is something unprecedented about our contemporary situation in which the prefix 'bio-' proliferates: bio-mimicry, bio-technology, bio-politics.

---

<sup>8</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 6

<sup>9</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010

In the life sciences and in physics, material phenomena are increasingly being conceptualized not as discrete entities or closed systems, but rather as open, complex systems with porous boundaries.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1980s, Arjun Appadurai's book on the 'social life of things'<sup>11</sup>, formulated an anthropological approach to material phenomena and emphasized the politics of consumption in relation to the human desire for things. Since then, there has been a protracted debate about the sociology of objects and the processes of commodification under neo-liberalism. Of course, it is imperative to avoid universalist assumptions about human behavior in relation to the things that people keep, cherish or discard. But in a recent reappraisal of Appadurai's legacy, Wim van Binsbergen sought to complexify any simplistic urge to classify 'the West' versus 'the rest', arguing that it remains vital 'to relate the life of things, in one way or another, to the ways in which people give meaning to them.'<sup>12</sup>

New materialist ontologies are about a reorientation to things and matter that conceives it as lively or exhibiting agency. Indeed, there has been a revival in the Bergsonian notion of *vitalism* and in the idea that objects and stuff can have *affective* potential. In her book, Bennett refers back to Spinoza's exploration of the concept of *conatus* – she talks about 'thing power'. Starting from the position that the world is full of animate rather than passive things, she argues that objects and materials are – to use Bruno Latour's term – actants, and that they have vitality and volatility.<sup>13</sup> Living in a world of global, mediatized, commodified experiences, how can this be? What is this 'thing-power'?

---

<sup>10</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds) *New Materialisms, Ontology, Agency and Politics*, Duke University, 2010, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Arjun Appadurai's seminal collection of essays on *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective* was originally published in 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Wim van Binsbergen, 'Commodification: Things, agency, and identities: Introduction' in Wim van Binsbergen & Peter Geschiere (eds) *Commodification: Things, Agency and Identities*, Berlin/Muenster/Vienna/London: LIT, 2005, p. 19

<sup>13</sup> For more on this see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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

As I walk through the woods, a glint of blue catches my eye. It is merely a fragment of non-degradable litter, I should pick it up and remove it to a safe place. Yet there is something evocative and affective about this exquisitely translucent matter. In the moment – and there will never be any moment quite like this one - it is marvellous, I am enchanted. As Jane Bennett notes, to be enchanted is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter, it is to be transfixed. <sup>14</sup> Philip Fisher describes this as a 'moment of pure presence'. He writes

[T]he moment of pure presence within wonder lies in the object's difference and uniqueness being so striking to the mind that it does not remind us of anything and we find ourselves delaying in its presence for a time in which the mind does not move on by association to something else. <sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life, Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 5

<sup>15</sup> Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Harvard University Press, 1998 quoted in Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life, Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 5

In that 'moment of pure presence', and in this one here with you, I am enchanted with the stuff of everyday life which TRES has brought to us all and I invite you to look again - only look more closely this time, as it is vibrant, volatile matter.

Gillian Whiteley, November 2011



*Gillian Whiteley* is an artist-curator-writer, based at Loughborough University. Her interests focus on transdisciplinary practices and cultural production within socio-political contexts, from cultural activism, artists' artists' collectives and sites of transitory utopia, from the 1960s through to contemporary practice. She operates as *bricolagekitchen*, a multifaceted project space for creative-critical practice, emerging from preoccupations with the art and politics of *bricolage*, *assemblage* and trash. Previous exhibitions include *Radical Mayhem: Welfare State International and its Followers* (Burnley, UK, 2008), *Pan-demonium* at the AC Institute, Chelsea, (New York, 2009). Recent publications include *Greasepaint Guerrillas: Clowning as a Subversive Strategy* ([www.stimulusrespond.com](http://www.stimulusrespond.com)) and *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (I B Tauris, 2011). She is co-organiser of *RadicalAesthetics-RadicalArt (RaRa)*,

an initiative based at Loughborough University School of the Arts, with events, network and book series. She is Associate Editor of *Art & the Public Sphere* (Intellect) and is part of the Sheffield-based improvisational collective, *The Gated Community*. See [www.bricolagekitchen.com](http://www.bricolagekitchen.com)