

Gowlett Peaks

Sugars, Protein and Salt (Perfect Fried II) Sophie Lee

Friday 12 September to Sunday 19 October

The rat, the fox; sweet parasites and tired outlaws ¹

Yesterday I stood next to the carcass of a fox. Not only the carcass of a fox but also a city council bin and a cardboard tray of half-finished chips, all of which lay on top of a neatly kept lawn that ran between the metal wall of the Edgbaston cricket ground and the broken tarmacked pavement on which I was standing. As might be expected the fox's fur was dark and matted. The fox's body looked flat, shallow. The fox's face was gruesome: bloodied, eyes manic, tongue hanging. The fox's proximity to the chips was curious, suspicious even. But the most shocking thing about the fox was its anus. The inside of the creature had popped out and now formed a smooth, livid pink mouth just outside its body. I turned around and faced the road as I waited for the bus, but I knew that the fox was still behind me.

The scene I had just witnessed, and in particular the cartoon-like colour and form of the fox-anus, called to mind Sophie Lee's new work *Sugars, Protein & Salt (Perfect Fried I & II)* made for two concurrent shows at IMT Gallery and Gowlett Peaks. Her new video features the traces of human bodies found around her in South London; the smear of people's greasy heads on windows blur the view from the bus. Trash figures large; a compilation of overflowing rubbish bins and discarded fragments wash across the screen while imagined trash characters recite a sometimes manic, sometimes lilting script. At Gowlett Peaks, a series of metal containers or cabinets that combine and mutate details of electrical boxes accompany the video.

This assemblage of man-made and man-produced matter reminded me of Jane Bennett's description, in *Vibrant Matter*, of an encounter 'with the gutter on Cold Spring Lane' in Baltimore, in which she 'glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects'. ² The gutter held the following 'things':

one large men's black plastic work glove
one dense mat of oak pollen
one unblemished dead rat
one white plastic bottle cap
one smooth stick of wood ³

For Bennett this collection shifted between debris: 'stuff' to ignore 'except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success)' and 'things' with 'thing power', i.e. 'stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits or projects'. ⁴ At the heart of Bennett's study is the idea that 'things' are not inert but wield their own power over human activity. *Stuff Theory*, a book by Literary Theorist Maurizia Boscagli, published earlier this year, also makes an argument for a less human-centred approach to matter. While Bennett takes an overtly political tone Boscagli focuses on applying an argument based around the binaries of object/subject to examples of stuff (she defines 'stuff' as 'modern material out of bounds that refuses to be contained by the Western semiotic system' ⁵) in fiction, criticism and cinema.

The idea that objects are potent and have agency is not a new one; between 1927 and 1940 Walter Benjamin, talisman of art theory, wrote his *Arcades Project* which

could be seen as one root of a contemporary understanding of stuff. ⁶ Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway have influenced recent thinking and are both are frequently cited in Bennett and Boscagli's texts. But new materialism has gathered increasing currency in Western theory in recent years, and materials-focused theories such as Object Oriented Ontology have been cited by many artists in what one could cynically see as a way of abandoning conceptual rigour in favour of enjoying materials and objects. Perhaps the refusal to define matter as passive comes from a desire to render visible networks that have become global, abstract and conveniently invisible.

Vibrant Matter calls to mind *The Social Life of Things*, a milestone collaboration between anthropologists and historians led by Ajun Appadurai. While Appadurai's collection of texts specifically circles commodities and the rings of activity that they produce, it contests what Appadurai sees as 'the powerful contemporary tendency... to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words'. ⁷ Bennett's text similarly describes chains of agency where materials affect change: they are 'actors' rather than 'social constructions'. ⁸ When I read Appadurai's book as an undergraduate it stirred heated debate about whether artefacts really could exert power over human situations. I loved it; I was in the 'for' camp. Now I see this excitement for the power of things in Sophie's work.

Stuff: the constellation, collage, mosaic or assemblage

Early on in our discussions Sophie sent me a mood board. One of its images was a Roman mosaic. This mosaic has been with her for a while and has featured in previous works (a dinner she made at Bold Tendencies in 2013 for example). Roman mosaics were used as complex visual codes, the first layer of which was the symbolic imagery they depicted while the second was the materials used. Mosaics were made with pebbles, shells, glass, gold or valuable stone, with each colour connoting access to a different geological site. Every material and colour utilised spoke of the power of the Roman Empire and its ability to access materials by traveling, trading and colonising.

Like these mosaics Sophie's work brings together ingredients or tesserae from different places. Her constellatory approach is akin to Bennett's notion of an assemblage as a group that is not governed by one central object but made up of things that have a 'vital force'. For Bennett the things forming the assemblage have agency but they also develop 'an effectivity proper to the grouping... an agency of the assemblage'. ⁹ Sophie collages matter in a non-hierarchical way, enabling it to perform a greater narrative as a whole. The relationships between things in Sophie's work is often more important than the individual material.

Once collated and set in its grouting the mosaic becomes too static an analogy for Sophie's work. In *Sugars, Protein and Salt*, elements of Sophie's Roman mosaic are lifted from the page, the photograph or the mortar to become animated three-dimensional objects. The coin might be a better metaphor for Sophie's handling of materials and for the assemblages she develops. Her shows at IMT and Gowlett Peaks are two sides of the same coin. The coin's parallel sides exist concurrently but are never simultaneously visible. The coin is a small but potent artefact that has slithered through time and culture; it slides into virtually every layer of human existence and activity. It is active: it engages in, and impacts on, human exchange, activity and relationships.

'They are a really great looking pair of trainers.' ¹⁰

Glut, Excess & Emptiness

There's too much stuff in the world. We know this. We also know that emptiness can dwell in a cycle of endless consumption. A recent National Geographic article highlighted the tragic irony that many of America's families are simultaneously obese and hungry, not because they over-eat but because the food that is most easily and cheaply accessible consists of little other than sugar, salt and fat. ¹¹ Consumption of information, food, or commodity does not necessarily lead to a sense of being sated or satisfied. Fortunately I am more familiar with the feeling of being left empty or unsatisfied by the way that I devour ideas, information and imagery in a much discussed process of next, next, next.

The feeling that I do not digest most of what I look at is necessary when faced with so much. This is what Bennett names the 'hyperconsumptive necessity of junking'- constantly getting rid of the old to make space for the new.¹² On our first studio visit in July 2013 Sophie and I discussed Camille Henrot's video *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) shown at the Venice Biennale. This video, made while the artist was Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow at the Smithsonian Institute, in Washington D.C., epitomises a gluttonous approach to information. Layers of imagery, visual information from sources wildly diverse in their material, location and value, pile up as pop-up screens on a Mac desktop. This encyclopedic work removes hierarchies and flattens everything it comes across into an image on a digital surface.

In a recent performance lecture at Wysing Arts Centre the artist David Raymond Conroy spoke of a loathsome phenomenon that, I am certain, must plague countless others: 'analysis paralysis'. He confided: 'by which I mean the problem, that I suffer from greatly, of being presented with many alluring options and a million potential positions, and being drawn to many but also seeing the problems with each and so in the end doing nothing but feeling increasingly anxious and frustrated about the whole situation'.¹³ The feeling that alternatives have been co-opted and re-packaged leaves people feeling simultaneously overwhelmed and disempowered.

It has become very difficult to even consider making 'ethical' decisions when the production, trade and distribution of goods are so international and so hidden. Artist Ed Atkins describes the drive to 'obscure the reality of... production' in order that technological things maintain their magic and mysticism: 'we use words like 'immaterial' to talk about digital stuff although, pretty obviously, matter hasn't gone anywhere. It's just deflected from our immanent reality to a mine, or indexed on the body of a sweatshop worker'.¹⁴ This disassociation with the tangible, physical world creates nostalgia for a time when we knew what stuff was made of and where it came from. It gives rise to the locally-sourced organic meal, the Slow Food Movement, the cave man diet. The sense that information is broken down to tiny fragments that are produced, exchanged

and traded in processes that are increasingly distant and speedy makes us long for something whole, something bodily.

'The garbage hills are alive...'¹⁵

Things are always on the verge of returning to matter. A single piece of rubbish can encapsulate a series of complicated relationships, hierarchies and decisions within its tiny scale. In order for new things to have power, space must be made for them. The problem of waste, trash, junk or rubbish, arises from endless production, programmed obsolescence and the ceaseless drive for new and better. But the commodity, a 'condensation of social forces',¹⁶ does not lose its agency or power. Things are too potent to disappear; they just get displaced. Like the processes that make them, the procedures that discard and displace things are hidden.

Like the mosaic the rubbish tip is constellatory. It collates stuff from all around the world into a mass of things either on their way to somewhere out of sight where it might be re-used and recycled by the needy, or to a place that has to deal with the 'disposal' of our unwanted stuff on the brink of matter. Both junkyard and mosaic are remnants of human production. They are, like ancient ruins, scattered ciphers of human activity that echo our material, social and economic interests. But what's missing in the rubbish tips, the islands of matter across the world, is intentionality. These unintended piles show a tale of human hubris. If all stuff acts as a mirror on human activity these are worrying reflections of what we've been up to.

'The Young man who filmed this images... lived in an Island inside but was the better between the others... a perfect, pure man.'¹⁷

It is easy to romanticise trash and it is trashy to romanticise the artist's vision. One of the things that Sophie is very keen to avoid in her exploration of the assemblages in the bins, buses and parks around her, is a romantic notion that the artist is someone gifted with a special sight that enables them to find beauty in what others see as useless and ugly. About a year ago, while I was on a Saturday morning walking tour of

Birmingham, a young, extremely drunk man stopped to ask what we were doing. When our guide explained that we were discussing the development of early cinema the man replied that he had assumed that we were looking at the rubbish swirling around our feet 'like that scene out of American Beauty'. This struck me as insightful: we were in a sense trying to uncover something not immediately tangible. With this comment the man informed us that he had our number.

Rather than the wistful suburban cloud accompanied by straining strings in Sam Mendes' *American Beauty*, when thinking of Sophie's approach to trash, I would ask you to think of the strangely magical character of the plastic bag, wonderfully animated by Werner Herzog's droll German tones, in Ramin Bahrani's 2009 short film: *Nothing could destroy me... Flying monsters coming to peck at me. And the darkness began... that world decomposed; it was eaten by monsters, some too small for me to even see. Not me. I remained. I was strong and smart and I would find my maker. Ha!*¹⁸ Herzog's bag has agency. It may not have the ability to capture the love of its human 'maker' but it speaks, it makes decisions and it will not disappear. This bag is caught in a materials purgatory; it is trapped in a liminal space between the human and non-human.¹⁹

Perhaps if we could only hear them all things are communicating. Walter Benjamin proposed that a language of things existed, that it was mute and that its medium was the material community.²⁰ Rather than frantically communicating through *our use* of objects we should be looking for ways of translating the language that exists *between* those objects. If, as he suggested, '[p]aintings gossip' and '[m]ountains and foxes are involved in discourse'²¹, rather than turning away in disgust, I should perhaps have sought a way to understand the material agency and channels of communication between the objects of the bin, fox, chip assemblage I was faced with yesterday. This, I think, is what Sophie is attempting to do with her work.

Elinor Morgan
September 2014

1. This title paraphrases Peter Wachtler in conversation with Jamie Stevens, from *Englisch Literature*, Mousse Magazine no.38, April 2013
2. Jane Bennett (2010), *Vibrant Matter*, Duke University Press, London, p.5
3. *Ibid.*, p.4
4. *Ibid.*, p.4
5. Maurizia Boscagli (2014), *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*, Bloomsbury, London
6. *Ibid.*, p.12
7. Arjun Appadurai (2005), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.4
8. *Op.Cit.*, Bennett, p.21
9. *Op.cit.*, Bennett, p.24
10. David Raymond Conroy, Wysing Arts Centre, 12 July 2014
11. Tracie McMillan, *The New Face of Hunger*, National Geographic, August 2014
12. *Op.cit.*, Bennett, p.5
13. *Op.cit.*, Conroy
14. Ed Atkins, *Head Space*, A conversation between Ed Atkins and Matthew De Abaitua, *Frieze*, Issue 165, September 2014
15. Robert Sullivan, in Bennett (2010), p.6
16. Hito Steyerl (2006), *The language of Things*, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en>, last accessed on 28 August 2014
17. At the time of writing this was one of the comments on Youtube, under an excerpt of *American Beauty*.
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuJ31bu01mM>, last accessed on 2 September 2014
19. *Op.Cit.*, Boscagli, p.11
20. *Op.Cit.*, Steyerl
21. *Op.Cit.*, Steyerl

Gowlett Peaks is a programme of exhibitions and events above the Gowlett Arms curated by Elinor Morgan.

Friday to Sunday, 12-6pm

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