**Embodied Dreaming in the archive**

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**Abstract**

*The research purpose of my article is to use writing to interrogate a sculpture project of my own, using the psychic framework presented in the psychoanalytical theories of Christopher Bollas so as to retrieve actions, methods and process as case studies to support my claim. As a sculptor I will write through the ‘Others’ project to narrate, analyse and interpret my practice as it existed in, with and through the archive. Writing is not the moment of the production of art, but it offers the best opportunity to record my own projects as a sculptor. A photographic record would satisfy methods of observation, description, process and action. However, writing particularly allows me to additionally identify and articulate the theory in sculpture in terms of the work of sculpture itself. My narrative aims to evidence the idea of the psychic dimension of practice within the production of sculpture and, hopefully, contribute to sculptural theory and pedagogy.*

**Keywords**

sculpture

embodiment

psychic

play

drawing

clothing

My archival project has already happened. In 2009, my exhibition ‘Others’ (Gaffney 2009) was presented to the public in the once ballroom of Cliffe Castle in Keighley, West Yorkshire. This exhibition was the result of a commissioned two-year period of being an artist in residence for Bradford Metropolitan District Council Museums, Galleries & Heritage (BMGH). It was the most overt part of the project and a moment of aesthetic encounter for the viewing public, where everything and anything, inside and around the residency, became owned by the audience. But as an artist, it is the physical resolution of my engagement, when thinking through, in and with the archive that interests me here. My exhibition ‘Others’ was mounted within the centre of the museum. Twelve different optically generated and digitally registered images were mounted on individual tombstone-like walls in light box formats. Twelve larger than life light emanating images of embodied clothing loomed in the darkened core of this building and knowingly attracted closer attention from the visitors whose ingress and egress ensued between, through a configuration of three doorways. The originating archive contents could be found in other areas of the museum and thoughts, fictions and responses triggered around the images and towards the museum collections. ‘Others’ delivered the archive in a new way for the entertainment of the viewer. It was made to attract, entertain and provoke fictions outside of the collection.

I am proud of my exhibition. It fulfilled my own personal goals. The exhibitionary moment is and does stand as a body of knowledge in its own terms, without words, and presents a spectacle through which to glance and gaze. However, as a sculptor there is a ‘within’ to this project where the real modes of my enquiry are still behind the spatial and critical structures that form an exhibition. In writing through ‘Others’ I am attempting to release some of the intellectual and practical activity of my sculptural intervention in this particular archive. I have, however, only just started to learn how to write as a sculptor, using words to draw out and retrieve the thinking undertaken in my own projects, some citational, some innovative. It is hard. Narrating this project is an attempt to evidence my idea of the psychic dimension of practice within the production of sculpture, and hopefully contribute to sculptural theory and pedagogy. I am writing my engagement with this particular archive, not to report or promote, but to explicate my approach as a sculptor and get under the skin of the exhibition output. I want to give form to the thought behind what is actually seen in the moment of public exhibition. But it is the antagonism from which it came that I carry forward into my own sculptural range and as a result of my engagement with the archive.

The official exhibition listing put out by Bradford Museums & Galleries stated that ‘new work is inspired by the costume collection’. In the savvy museum climate where strategic audience development and the ensuing mediation to meet this are priority, my new knowledge stayed inside, within and behind the scenes. As an artist I don’t believe in the concept of inspiration. It suggests a relationship with divine influence, and the PR was a light touch on what was a troubled interaction over a two-year period. Cliffe Castle was originally the spectacular mansion of a local Victorian millionaire and textile manufacturer. It stands in hillside grounds with greenhouses, a garden centre, aviaries and a children’s play area, which serves the recreational needs of the landlocked locale like a beach. It is now a large museum with a wide variety of displays. The collections cared for by Cliffe Castle are sourced from the various archives that form the Bradford Museums, Galleries and Heritage Collections, a service that exists to collect, record, conserve, exhibit and interpret the human and natural heritage of the City & District of Bradford. There is a common emphasis in this service on the importance of recording provenance, to place objects and specimens in the context of their unique or distinctive histories of production, ownership and usage (Bradford Museums and Galleries 2015). My exhibition was the result of a two-year period of residency in, within, around and behind the Museum identity of Cliffe Castle, as the general public experiences it. I had access to the service (in terms of people, policy and operations) and the collections archived within their specific collecting priorities: Archaeology, Natural Sciences, Social History, Decorative Arts, Fine Art, International Art, Photographs, Oral History, Technology, Horses at Work, Education. My brief simply was to ‘work around the Cliffe Castle collections’ and produce an exhibition, but I negotiated the clauses ‘alongside current artist’s work’ and ‘a free interpretive approach to the museum collections’. The complex range of displays as a museum rather than a building was my entry point.

I held a series of meetings with the keepers of the archives and walked, talked, questioned, listened, peered at and into boxes, labels, rooms, stores, buildings and lists (see Figure 1). I rotated myself through the different specialisms. For example, I spent a day in natural history learning about taxidermy, a day trawling through Chinese armour, entered the vast object collection forming the leather remnants of the cobbling trade, spent time with the various audiences and users of the museum, sitting in diverse events organized by the outreach team. I learnt that the curators were clearly experienced in being identified as specimens on a par with the archive contents when artists came into the building. They knew and understood their own audience and were as adept as Mark Dion or Fred Wilson with representing narratives. The people in the BMGH Service had real passion for the items they cared, curated, researched, preserved and maintained. I listened to them recount many artists’ residencies and interventions in their museum and the outcomes that could be and had been made. With humble enthusiasm I toured the vast secret storage areas in consciously anonymized locations. I privately developed a dark interior well of anxiety about not meeting expectations.

The archive is structured, ordered and maintained for and by research principles. In order to task and access it your key tool is the inventory. I developed a worrying awareness that what is generative for the sculptor is corrosive for the keeper of the archive! My methods as a sculptor are visual, haptic, accustomed to touch and handling. I am used to making exploration based on physical experiences of the things I know. Working in the context of an archive conflicted with my unconscious sculptural method primarily exercised through mould making and casting. Sculptural methods such as moulding, casting and rubbing were all viewed as destructive in the context of the archive. As resident within the archive I was in a position of antagonism. Rummaging is also not a permissible act in the archive. It became clear to me that I should have an idea in advance, plan and develop a line of enquiry to access the contents. The inventory is a key, but in every aspect of the Cliffe Castle archives, this ‘line of enquiry’ compares in scale to the notion of finding a needle in a haystack. I faced an impasse between my traditional approaches and the rules of the archive. My only point of uniqueness within this context was being a sculptor and I therefore made my next decisions on the basis of this. I returned to the concerns and subject matter of my own practice – the social body, clothing and embodiment. I reduced my engagement to only the costume collection. This was a first line of enquiry decision. I randomly elected to look for the sculptural quality and structural form found in clothing through this archive. I elected to not use a paper inventory and view material samples. Items were brought to me and I had to make a decision, again – no rummaging! History and social context were put before me in the form of extraordinary clothmanship. Fabulous items that had protected and adorned bodies across history were presented and as the day of viewing wore on I become aware of my own act of extemporizing. Evidence emerges that there are some garments of my life experience within this archive. Although collected to preserve the heritage of a northern city, a universal British lived experience is evident. I stopped trying to be a museum researcher. I became the thinking sculptor with a long commitment to working with quotidian objects, particularly if classed or gendered. As a result, I found, with the costume curator, a dress rail of garments. These are agreed, assembled and prepared for institution standard transportation from store to Museum within the appropriate archival conditions.

I am with the archive for ten months before I embark on a sculptor’s moment in March 2008. At this point I decided to bring the practice of the artist’s studio into the archive and set up the hermetic space of an artist’s work-room in a temporary form in a back room of the museum. My territory was defined by a table and a chair and a rail of chosen and agreed costumes which are now ‘once-used clothes’ in my mind (see Figure 2). They have been owned, worn, lived in. They are now fertile triggers of my own memory of lived experience.

**What happened – 1?**

In my own artist’s work space I made a set of rules. I, like many artists, have looked for existing rules and invented my own. I would only work with these clothes. If I couldn’t wear the archived costume my aim was to interiorize the garment to become once-worn clothing. I would have to inhabit it through my imagination to translate the embodiment I sensed within it sculpturally. The archive, even when hanging on a clothes rail, is not a department store. I cannot try on or dress up in these clothes, which was my impulse. Stepping into play I engaged in imaginative pretense. In desperation I plunged into my interior world of ‘becoming’ – stepping into and going inside the selected garments. To do this and replicate form and surface it was critical to find a mode for recording, taking impression, which existed between the distance of the camera lens and the intimacy of a moulded plaster jacket. I used an ordinary flatbed scanner attached to a laptop computer. I began to determine bodies for the clothes by ‘casting’ the garments into a conceived interior space (the space inside the scanner) (see Figure 3). Reflecting upon this itinerant period of studio practice I can see that Cliffe Castle was the project where I stepped into a mode of play derived from a childhood game of my own.

**Playing ‘Girls’ – the psychic framework – 1**

When I was a child my favourite game was one devised with my older sister. It was a game we conceived together but one I was able to play on my own, and continued to do so for many years as my teenage sister ventured into the outside world and away from me. The game had a set of conventions and, although dependent on a dialectical relationship between the two of us, as agents within it, was not oppositional. I always recall it as a game because we would together make a decision to play it. It is one of the games we, as children, performed as imaginative play. We would sit close to each other, at a table usually, but sometimes curled up in adjacent armchairs or lying on the carpeted part of the floor with our heads together. We both had our own paper to draw on and something to draw with, maybe a pencil, but often a biro (and utter luxury if it was a coloured or even a multi coloured biro!). We would draw characters, young women with great fashion sense. And importantly, we would be speaking their parts, conversing. We enacted our characters as we drew them out. They were drawn left to right across the page, then the page would be turned upside down and they manifested left to right across the other side of the paper. When there was no more empty space this would continue across the back of the page. And then, if there was no more paper to use, we would fill in the spaces left with a bolder medium on top of the first layer. The ‘girls’ were postured like Egyptian figure paintings, either full face or side profile. They exhibited small waists, well-formed breasts, low cleavages, long shapely legs and often with hands able to hold handbags or cigarettes. The girls of our drawings were heavily constructed. There were no natural maidens or visually schematized fairies here. They were rich with artificiality, sporting fake eye lashes, metallic blue eye lids (see Figure 4), perms, curls, height extending platform shoes and body-enhancing tailored maxi coats. They were simply aspirational.

They had identities and were women we knew of in our community. I remember drawing ‘Kathy Dooley’ the glamorous guide leader from the church we attended. The ‘girls’ were unmarried and without children, they were unencumbered by any other social female identity, they were free and independent. The legs were particularly important. They often needed no annotation other than the sweeping outlines which formed them, and a well-positioned flick sculpting the knee cap (see Figure 5). This was enough to engender the sheer surface of nylon stockings, probably American Tan. But as our skills developed we rendered patterned tights and then could elaborate graphically on the form of the legs. The fashion styles of Mary Quant and Ossie Clarke were our visual tropes. The drawing of the character’s hair was also important and lustrous inky flicks defined facial contours. Becoming and being these wonderful grown-up liberated Quant mannequins, whom we knew and adored, was our play through enactment. We didn’t play at being horses or do much galloping. We sat inside drawing out being ‘girls’. This is clearly not uncommon in working class British childhood in the 1960s. Grayson Perry accounts:

I used to spend a lot of time indoors drawing. Every week I cut all the dolls from the back of my sister’s Bunty comic, then made them new clothes. (Jones 2006: 31)

Like Perry, we learnt to draw through the Bunty comic which was packed, on a weekly basis, with graphic short stories depicting female protagonists. On the back cover was the character Bunty with various garments ready to cut out and play dressing up with. However, unlike for Perry, Bunty was not a doll for us. She was a character with an identity. I would suggest we advanced the play offered by the Bunty model to our own form of shared play through and within our drawing game. Our particular nuance in play was that together we stepped into the bodies we visualized and lived them out somatically and vocally. The paper which formed the ground for this play was prized but not precious and again the commonality of this is evidenced in Perry’s biography:

My stepfather, when he moved in with us, had brought with him a large roll of thin, light-blue paper that old fashioned airmail envelopes were made from. On Saturday mornings my mother would give Alan Barford and me a sheet of paper and a pencil each, asserting, ‘You’re only getting one piece!’. (Jones 2006: 31)

My most treasured possession for playing girls was a partly used bookkeeping ledger given to me by a friend of my parents who worked in a factory office (see Figure 6).

**Embodied Dreaming – the psychic framework – 2**

The psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas wrote a book called *The Mystery of Things* (1999) in which there is a chapter on embodiment. In contemporary art it is understood that the body is a site of the senses and embodiment is a commonly used term in this context. Bollas offers the reader a psychic rationale for embodiment when he refers to ‘a certain success in becoming a spirit, moving freely as incarnated intelligence’ (1999: 157). He states that the child will feel embodied when ‘they feel they have put their sexual, emotional and memorial life into the world’ (1999: 152). Does this correlate with being 5 or 6 years old, the cognitive stage where a subject gains a sense of past, present and future and a subject forms the ability to predict what happens next? Bollas’s psychoanalytical work is grounded within object relations theory, which describes how experience affects unconscious predictions of the social behaviours of others, with repeated experiences of the caretaking environment forming internalized images, which Bollas informs us in *The Shadow of the Object* (1987) can be place, event or ideology. Citing Bollas, the ideology I would refer to is the complex space of sculpture in Britain. I understand his reading of embodiment to be a liminal moment in the development of a subject, or in Bollas’s terms, object relations. The chapters in *The Shadow of the Object* (1987) use a set of terms common in the belief systems of both British Sculpture and the British School of Psychoanalysis, examples being ‘object’, ‘relations’, ‘material’, ‘transformation’ and the ‘generation of discourse’. Bollas’s text focuses, in one way or another, on what he describes as:

[T]he human subject’s recording of his early experiences of the object. This is the shadow of the object as it falls on the ego, leaving some trace of its existence in the adult. (1987: 3)

This is the effect, in play, where the context is also the complex space of sculpture in Britain, with its inter-generational narrative (Wood 2011: 6). I believe this offers a psychic frame for my own practice as a sculptor who grew and developed creatively within the frame of UK sculpture pedagogy. In defining embodiment Bollas introduces an idea he refers to as ‘Embodied Dreaming’:

Putting the self into the real through play, children are engaged in a kind of embodied dreaming that brings elements of inner life into the world. The quiet continuous embodiments of dream mark the passing of time with signs of the child’s idiom. (1999: 152)

This resonates with my practice of imaginatively playing when making sculpture. I recognize this state when I am thinking through and in sculptural practice. I believe embodied dreaming was occurring in my childhood game of ‘girls’ where I stepped into and vocalized an internally visualized subject which had been drawn out into an object. In the archive, which denied my own haptic investigatory processes and with no permissions for the recreational rummaging of shopping, I stated my desire to simply dress up, try on these garments (in my mind I have now released them from costume – they are clothes, the clothes of others). I use the muscle memory in my drawing knowledge to spatially posture each garment. In this way I not only play girls, I play at becoming a little boy, a grown woman lingering in a chip shop in 1966, or the crazy aunt in her crotched mini dress. These subjects are all nudged and conjured within my memory by my engagement with each individual garment. I entered into the costume archive through the action of embodied dreaming.

**What happened – 2?**

I stand on a chair, lean from the top of a ladder, kneel beside the scanner to cast the garments into and against the parameters of the strange optical space formed within a digital flatbed. A sort of imprint occurs, a sort of form is constructed within the depth of a visual field. The process was optically generated and digitally registered. The forms are embodied, garment-oriented fictions. The method is analogous to the pouring of hot wax into a bath of water where the inherent resistance between the two substances causes solidification into a new form on impact. The postured and manipulated garments hung into the well of the flatbed scanner take form as the digital eye moves across the glass bed. Registration is made. I didn’t have a mould to pour into. I only had the mental model of muscle memory, understood through my action of embodied dreaming, against which to steer the casting of my clothing surfaces. Stepping into play is the key strategy in thinking through and in the archive as a sculptor. Stepping into the real through play is the making of the sculpture. This is the point at which the real is now formed, through play, which brings forward the child’s idiom. I make forms that carry the inscription of my own subjectivity, and therefore by default, classed subjectivity. I therefore make class forms through embodied dreaming. And this is where embodied dreaming becomes and is sculptural thinking. The archive and its ensuing conditions offered useful impediment and highlight an expanded conscious sculptural practice. The extended method of casting I innovated carried into the real my belief of the value of embodied dreaming as a viable mode of sculptural thinking. I touched on practices common to artists – rules, games, imaginative pretense, drawing and, more particularly, embodiment. I used the archive as the site in which to deliberate about sculpture and sculptural thinking. It is important to ask in artist’s projects whether objects from the past in archival conditions can enable us to read the present. By bringing sculptural thinking into the archive I propose that this intervention enabled a model for me to further my proposition that embodied dreaming is a mode of thinking in the sculptural imaginary and in that moment we can effectively read the present.

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