

## **Art, the Architectonic and Future Works**

**A chapter from the forthcoming thesis that forms part of a practice-based fine art PhD by Tom Beesley, at the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds.**

Introduction

Part One

***Future Primitive*** (2016)

Energy

The Hand

Making

Part Two

***Escape*** (2016)

Architecture

Anticipation

Material

Part Three

***Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil*** (2016)

Use

Object

Repurpose

Conclusion

Appendix 1

Images of the exhibition *de-,dis-,ex-*. at Bloc Projects art space, Sheffield. October 2016.

## Introduction

From the start of my doctoral research it had been important to engage with architectural theorists and researchers. I wanted to understand their interests and concerns with a view to incorporating these enquiries into my wider investigations of social engagement, functionality and use in relation to contemporary art. Indeed considerations of the *architectonic* – objects and spaces of utility – have been a cornerstone within the development of my own practice. Peter Osborne, writing in his 2013 publication *Anywhere or Not at All*, believes that since the 1960s ‘architecture has been a primary bearer of the conceptuality of contemporary art’ and that ‘architecture’ is a term without which contemporary art would be hard-pressed to continue to exist’.<sup>1</sup> For Osborne, the architectural aspect of contemporary art is that of a ‘socio-spatial effectivity’ and that it represents art’s ‘social being in the world, its aspiration to effect change’.<sup>2</sup>

The Sheffield School of Architecture has established a considerable reputation for its critical engagement with the profession and for its strong social conscience, I was fortunate that Dr. Stephen Walker was happy to open a dialogue and in November 2014 we were able to meet and exchange ideas for collaboration at the Architectural Humanities Research Association conference in Newcastle upon Tyne. Twelve months later I approached Stephen with a view to instigating a project with the School that would involve working more closely with staff and students, engaging with their fields of study and taking part in the studio sessions. I had identified an M.Arch module called Future Works, led by Dr. Renata Tyszczyk, that sought to address issues of energy, industry and making against the backdrop of the increasing implications of climate change. The module emerged in response to the 2008 Climate Change Act and its UK cross-party commitments to the reduction of carbon emissions by 2050 ‘that promise to have huge impacts on industry and the built environment’.<sup>3</sup> Future Works was also part of the AHRC funded Stories of Change project that aimed to revive stalled public and political conversations about energy by looking in a fresh way at its past, present and future.

Both Renata and associate lecturer Julia Udall were happy for me to witness, interrogate and engage with the themes and ideas emerging from the module over a six-month period. This involvement, and my responses to it, culminated with an exhibition of work entitled *de-,dis-,ex-* at the Bloc Projects art space in Sheffield in October 2016. This chapter seeks to reflect on the conversations, proposals and ideas that occurred during that time, together with my own enquiries and research, by considering the development of each of the three exhibited art works in turn.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, (London; Verso, 2013), p 141.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Osborne, p. 142. <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/architecture/march/studios> [Accessed February 2016]

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/architecture/march/studios> [Accessed February 2016]

## Part One

### **Future Primitive (2016)**

*The art space occupies an area ten metres long and five metres wide, it sits at the end of one leg of a 'U'-shaped set of low buildings constructed around a secure courtyard accessible from the lane. The exhibition area sits within a single-storey brick building with one long elevation of metal-framed windows and a timber-framed saw-tooth roof with West facing blacked-out glazing, the roof rises to six metres at the apex. The walls have been boarded and painted white, the concrete floor has been painted dark grey.*

*'Future Primitive' (2016) consists of three distinct formal elements. On the floor towards the centre of the space, six 2'x4' sheets of repurposed white painted plywood, are held in a relationship - like the vanes of a windmill - by a water-jet cut and rolled steel hub. A short distance away a similar locus accommodates twelve gently curved smoke-fired ceramic blades and next to this, leaning against the wall, a turbine of six rusted steel plates are held in a fully welded radial assembly.*

## Energy

'Energy' the impetus behind all motion and activity is 'the capacity to do work'<sup>4</sup> or 'the power to do work'<sup>5</sup> and derives from the Greek *energeia* 'action, act, work'. Energy – its generation, distribution, use and mis-use – was a central concern to be addressed within the Future Works M.Arch module at the Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA). Future Works had a central role as part of the AHRC funded Stories of Change project whose focus was on energy and community. The over-arching project aimed to reveal the dynamism and diversity in the relationship between society and energy in the past and present in order to catalyse the popular and political imagination regarding potential low-carbon futures. However, research had shown that many people felt disengaged, disempowered or actively hostile to the kinds of changes to the UK's energy system required to meet the targets embedded in the 2008 Climate Change Act. The project attempted to create a more energetic and plural public debate, promoting a more imaginative sense of the scope for action.

The support of the AHRC had allowed Future Works to initiate connections with a number of partner organisations, establishing working relationships with various groups in the Derwent Valley area of North Derbyshire, including the Derwent Valley Mills Trust, J. Smedley Ltd, Derby Museums and the Transition Town groups in Belper and Melbourne. One of the site visits included time at J. Smedley Ltd. who manufacture fine knitwear

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/energy> [Accessed November 2016]

<sup>5</sup> <http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/62088?rskey=FGDATq&result=1#eid> [Accessed November 2016]

under their own name and for a range of up-market brands, they are one of the longest established factories in the country having been on the same site since 1784. As a consequence production takes place in a labyrinthine warren of buildings from various time periods nestled together next to the river. Within the context of the discussions on their energy use it was interesting to note that the original water-wheel housing had recently been uncovered, still relatively intact. Rising concern among businesses more generally, regarding increasing energy costs – which are only likely to rise further on the back of carbon taxes and investments in renewable energy – have prompted interest in the possibility of businesses generating their own power, much as they did two-hundred years ago. As part of the day's events the SSoA students had been briefed by Smedley and Gripple Ltd – a Sheffield based company – to investigate options for re-introducing river-based energy generation. Ian Jackson of Transition Town Belper, when interviewed for the Stories of Change archive, described how he and his fellow activists had been working for over five years on an increasingly convincing study to re-employ mill infrastructure at Strutt's Mill on the river Derwent to generate hydro-electric power for the town. Their scheme sits alongside an impressive range of community projects looking to deal head-on with our overreliance on fossil fuels. However this project together with many like it were dealt a fatal blow with the government's decision at short notice in 2015 to reduce the feed-in tariff payable to small-scale energy generation schemes.

Listening to both company executives and community-based activists I was struck by the extent to which they felt that the impetus to deal with the challenges of energy use – whether financial or ideological – lay at the local level. A number of interviews within the Stories of Change archive re-enforced the view held by many of the contributors, that central government was too compromised and too encumbered to deal quickly and effectively with the need for innovation and change. Ian Maclean, the Managing Director of J. Smedley believed that companies were making huge strides to reduce their energy use 'despite the lack of leadership from central government'. The students, in addressing the needs of their prospective clients, developed a number of schemes and ideas involving small-scale and community-based energy generation exploiting wind, solar and hydro-power. Through researching historic precedents they proposed to re-introduce regional or city-wide 'micro' grids and to re-establish the visual and audible links to energy generation. In making energy generation 'noisy', the students hoped to increase awareness among the populace of the resources required to generate electricity and instil a greater sense of its value.

In considering the site visits, the dialogue and the students' response I was reminded of a previous period of concern for energy use in the early 1970s. The oil crisis of 1973 – when the oil producing countries of OPEC had restricted production – had engendered enormous concern for energy security and painted a clear picture of what it would be like to live in a world coping with a limited oil supply. Domestic power cuts and a three-day week for industry highlighted the country's dependence on oil and was an early example of the increasing interdependence of global trade. This sense of vulnerability reinforced an already established concern among the radical movements of the time, of the need for

alternative sources of community-based renewable energy. In 1976 the editors of *Undercurrents*<sup>6</sup> – part of the left-leaning underground press – published *Radical Technology*, a hands-on guide to building and harnessing small-scale technologies at the level of the home and the neighbourhood. The publication became a touchstone for the development of *Future primitive* encompassing a daring and challenging vision of the future, ‘a fundamental re-examination of the role of technology in modern societies’.<sup>7</sup> Together with information on sourcing and acquiring materials, the book sets out – through diagrams, illustrations and instructions – proposals for re-purposing existing machinery and incorporating it into energy generating devices. The imagery and language is strangely historic and yet still forward thinking and utopian. It contributed to a growing sense that I wanted the artwork to sit in an ambiguous temporal location, suggestive of emerging concepts of de-centralised local energy generation but at the same time as relics from a forty year-old technological experiment. The time-shift was echoed in the rediscovery and possible re-employment of two-hundred year-old river-based energy-generation infrastructure, a time period that had witnessed the introduction, exploitation and decline of steam power and centrally generated coal-fired electricity.

## The Hand

UNESCO has listed the Derwent Valley as a world-heritage site due to ‘its series of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century cotton mills and an industrial landscape of high historical and technological interest’.<sup>8</sup> The valley is recognized as the birthplace of the industrial factory system, the Silk Mill in Derby sits on the site of the world’s first ‘manufactory’ established in 1704 by John Lombe to spin silk. It is believed to be the first time that a building had been designed and constructed with the sole intention of housing machinery specifically made for its location, and operated by a workforce trained to carry out a limited set of specific tasks. Over successive decades Lombe, Jedediah Strutt and Richard Arkwright refined the system at different locations along the river Derwent until, with the development of Cromford Mills in the 1770s, Arkwright was building housing, schools and churches whilst employing entire families, including children as young as seven, to work twelve-hour days. This historical perspective added a certain weight to the M.Arch module’s consideration of the place of making and manufacturing within their deliberations.

My practice has consistently sought to engage with different technologies of production and has often combined components manufactured through sophisticated commercial manufacturing techniques with the hand-made and the found. I had noted that both the Silk Mill in Derby and the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) in Rotherham were partner organisations of Future Works within the Stories of Change network. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Undercurrents* - ‘the magazine of alternative science and technology’ was founded by Godfrey Boyle and published bi-monthly in England between 1972 and 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Godfrey Boyle & Peter Harper ed. ‘Introduction’, *Radical Technology*, (London; Wildwood House, 1976), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1030> [Accessed December 2016]

AMRC had been established in 2001 as a joint venture between the University of Sheffield, the aerospace corporation Boeing and Yorkshire Forward. The facility grew rapidly as it added other high-technology partners such as Rolls Royce and now occupies seven large buildings on its own technology park. The most recent development is Factory 2050, 'a reconfigurable factory' that has 'cutting edge manufacturing and assembly technologies, advanced robotics, flexible automation, next generation man-machine interfaces and new programming and training tools'.<sup>9</sup> Following a number of visits to both institutions, I became particularly interested in exploring what the AMRC's vision of the future entailed and what connections, if any, may be drawn out between the 'world's first factory' and the factory of the future less than fifty miles away. The future, much like the past, entails protecting exclusive production techniques and maintaining a control on knowledge and information in order to extract a financial reward. The AMRC carefully controls access and intellectual property is jealously guarded behind blank walls in an uncanny echo of the fate of John Lombe, who was murdered in 1722, allegedly on the orders of the King of Sardinia, for stealing the secrets of silk spinning while working for an Italian producer.

Sheffield has a long and well-recognised history of manufacturing, particularly in the making and forging of steel, including the invention and development of stainless steel. The period of collaboration with the SSoA took place within the context of a city-wide celebration of making organised through 'The Sheffield Year of Making 2016'. In continuing the exploration of 'making' in my own work I chose to use a modern zinc-plated steel sheet for the central hubs of *Future Primitive*. The components were cut from the plate using a computer-controlled high-pressure water-jet cutter, implementing instructions created in a computer-aided-manufacturing programme by the machine's operator. The flat components were then rolled to form rings, a task I undertook myself on a piece of equipment that would be familiar to nineteenth-century steel workers before a friend welded the rings closed using relatively unsophisticated equipment housed in a tumble-down shed. I chose to exploit these varied methods of production as a further reflection on the principles laid out in *Radical Technology*, an ad-hoc use of readily available fabrication processes both formal and informal, a practice familiar the world-over yet standing in antithesis to the Factory of the Future.

One of the themes explored by John Roberts in his book *The Intangibilities of Form* (2007) is the relationship between artistic labour and the labour of production, or 'general social technique', which for Roberts encompasses emerging scientific and technological innovation as well as industry and mechanical reproduction. After speculating on the place and legacy of Duchamp and the 'un-assisted readymade', and on deskilling and reskilling in contemporary art, Roberts states that 'the readymade may have stripped art of its artisanal content, but this does not mean that art is now a practice without the hands of the artist and without craft. On the contrary, art's emancipatory possibilities lie in how the hand is put to work *within*, and by, general social technique'.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that contemporary art is

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.amrc.co.uk/about/background/> [Accessed November 2016]

<sup>10</sup> John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, (London; Verso, 2007), p. 4.

more intimately connected with general social technique than ever before, within my own practice I look to exploit the results of both non-artistic productive labour and outsourced immaterial labour<sup>11</sup>. For Roberts 'the readymade not only questions what constitutes the labour of the artist, but brings the labour of others into view'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed I draw upon my own experience in industrial production to explore further the role of the artistic hand. Roberts too believes that 'the hand still remains key to the 'aesthetic re-education' and emancipation of productive and non-productive labour'.<sup>13</sup> The reskilling that Roberts refers to are the strategies that contemporary artists adopt when negotiating their place in relation to general social technique. Indeed he believes reskilling is the attempt by artists to distinguish art from general social technique through the physical intervention in, and manipulation of current and emerging technical processes. In drawing together the materials for assembling *Future Primitive* it was important to continue the engagement with non-artistic production. Six steel pressings were recovered from a commercial waste re-cycling operation and welded into one of the central hubs. A further iteration exploited pre-cut 2' x 4' sheets of plywood – a versatile and strong material created by bonding together veneers of timber running at right angles to each other - and manufactured in huge volumes in dedicated production facilities.

## Making

What it is 'to make' sits at the core of my art practice. This activity may include 'to bring into being by forming, shaping, or altering material' or 'to put together from components' but would also include 'to frame or formulate in the mind'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed our relationship to 'making' was a central concern to be addressed within the period working alongside the architectural students. I have become particularly interested in the concept of 'critical making' a term coined in a publication from 2008 by Matt Ratto - Associate Professor and director of the Critical Making lab in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto.<sup>15</sup> Ratto created the term in order to 'theoretically and pragmatically connect two modes of engagement with the world that are often held separate; critical thinking, typically understood as conceptually and linguistically based, and physical 'making', goal-based material work'.<sup>16</sup> In an interview with Garnet Hertz, Ratto explained that 'we tend to think of criticality as a particular form of thinking, one in which we pause to reflect, and step briefly away from action in the world in order to reason and consider these actions'.<sup>17</sup> He believes that 'the activity of being critical

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<sup>11</sup> In this context immaterial labour refers to those tasks centred on conceptual activity, largely in the digital realm, as the service economy has increasingly replaced industrial factory-based production.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make> [Accessed November 2016]

<sup>15</sup> Matt Ratto, 'Taking Things Apart/Making Things Together: A Critical Making Experiment.' Royal College of Art/Imperial College, London, UK, April 22, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Matt Ratto, 'Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in technology and Social Life'. *The Information Society*. 27 (2011), p. 253

<sup>17</sup> Garnet Hertz ed, *Conversations in Critical Making*, (PACTAC, CTheory Books, University of Victoria, 2015), p. 34.

is mainly thought of as one bound up in language and to some degree outside the actual world, critical thinking as it is theorized and as it is taught is first and foremost a linguistic practice'.<sup>18</sup> However he believes that when we think of making we have a tendency to consider it as the opposite of thinking – as a 'form of habitual or rule-following behaviour' and that there is a strong inclination to consider 'making as a conceptual and programmatic'.<sup>19</sup> Although firmly grounded on the notion of critical scholarship as defined by the 'Frankfurt School scholars such as Adorno and Benjamin', Ratto was seeking ways to balance what he felt was the 'linguistic bias' that persisted within material semiotic theories. As he states in the interview 'this is the source of the cognitive dissonance that one feels when hearing the phrase 'critical making' – critical we see as conceptual and making is seen as non-conceptual'.<sup>20</sup> Based initially within a university English department Ratto sought to link 'material modes of engagement with a critical reflection on our technical environments', looking for ways to link deep reflection and critical theory with making practices. For Ratto the act of making – the process itself – can reveal insights not captured in the final object. The 'lived experience of making' can deepen our understanding of the socio-technical environment, for he sees critical making 'first and foremost as a way of learning and exploring the world'.<sup>21</sup> In an echo of the social engagement of the original proponents of critical theory, Ratto believes that critical making is deeply political and that by raising an awareness of the constructed nature of our environments we can link agency with a 'deeper analysis about why the constructed world is the way it is'.<sup>22</sup>

Having completed the hubs for the *Future Primitive* assemblies I had sought to combine them with other material objects that would expand the narrative of making. Given the extended conversations around energy, its generation and use that had been taking place in the SSoA module, I decided to reference the development in turbine technologies at AMRC by manufacturing twelve ceramic blades that would slot into the final steel hub. However these vanes would be made from general-purpose stoneware clay, rolled and cut to shape by hand before being dried on a curved former and smoke-fired in a backyard kiln. In certain dystopic futures we may need to rediscover technologies of making currently lost to domestic-scale production, a situation anticipated within the 'protect and survive' era narrative of *Radical Technology*.

In his own development of the conceptual framework of critical making Garnet Hertz<sup>23</sup> contends that Matt Ratto's framing of critical making as primarily a process 'limited its ability to disseminate critical thought through objects'. Hertz believes that focusing exclusively on the development process limited the reach of critically made things to challenge the wider public's understanding of the relations between society and technology. He argues that 'objects are effective as things to think with' and that they can link concepts in a different

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<sup>18</sup> Hertz, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Hertz, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Hertz, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Hertz, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Hertz, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Associate Professor in the Faculty of Design and Dynamic Media at Emily Carr University, Vancouver.



way to language. Hertz maintains that 'although constructed objects are often imprecise in communicating ideas in comparison to language, things have the strength to hit you powerfully and forcefully'.<sup>24</sup> Striking a final note of accord in their conversation together, Ratto suggests that 'with its emphasis on critique and expression rather than technical sophistication and function, critical making has much in common with conceptual art'.

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<sup>24</sup> Hertz, p. 4.

## Part Two

### ***Escape (2016)***

*The assembly occupies approximately 2.5 metres by 2.5 metres of wall space and consists of 38 panels in one of two distinct triangular forms. The panes are cut from found 5mm orange polystyrene sheets and are held together using black plastic cable-ties. The arrangement is a development, an unfolding of a geodesic dome that spreads in an undulating form across the wall's surface.*

## Architecture

I first contacted Stephen Walker – Reader in Architectural Theory at SSoA – during the summer of 2014, shortly before formally starting my PhD research. It was during our early conversations that I talked about my interest in the work of Ken Isaacs – an American architect working in the 1950s and 60s, Isaacs had developed a series of radical living structures<sup>25</sup> that he believed offered a chance for people to fundamentally change the way they organized their lives and, therefore, society at large. I had created a number of art-works exploring the spatial and organizational qualities of Isaacs' designs for a system of 1.2 metre softwood-framed cubes. Configured in stacked groups of four or six, these cubes and panels – sitting in the centre of domestic rooms – allowed for the configuration of sitting, sleeping and work spaces entirely independent of their structural surroundings. Isaacs – who also developed a number of exterior living structures – believed, along with a number of post-war architects and designers that humankind could be encouraged to 'tread more lightly' on the earth in more communal, interdependent and economic shelters.<sup>26</sup> Richard Noble suggests in his essay *The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art* (2009) that 'the utopian hope of radical social transformation... remains one of the most important legacies of modernism'. For Noble, the utopian is 'the impulse or aspiration to make the world better either by imagining a better way to be or actually attempting to make it so', although he recognises that it is hard to identify a single common aesthetic strategy he notes that 'the architectural model' is one of the forms that 'tends to recur'.<sup>27</sup>

My interest in the radical architecture of this period was part of an on-going enquiry into what Matthew Herbert describes as 'sifting defunct modernity in search of something useful'.<sup>28</sup> In his text *An Archival Impulse* (2004) Hal Foster believes that archival

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<sup>25</sup> 'Work bigger than furniture but smaller than architecture' Several of Isaac's proposals were gathered together in his self-published title *How to Build Your Own Living Structure* from 1974.

<sup>26</sup> 'I saw and felt the necessity for major simplifications and recognition of positive earth relationships and environmental change therapy to release us all from the high-tech maniacs' Ken Isaacs (1974)

<sup>27</sup> Richard Noble, 'The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art', *Utopias*, ed. Richard Noble, (London, Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Herbert, 'Sifting Modernity in Search of Something Useful', *Ruins*, ed. Brian Dillon, (London; Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p. 89.

artists 'seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text and favour the installation format'.<sup>29</sup> Foster suggests that archival art, by re-visiting and sifting the past, can uncover discarded moments hinting at new directions: 'these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike - that might offer points of departure again'.<sup>30</sup> Although I am not necessarily interested in interrogating 'the archive', per se, I am interested in the fact that Foster felt that by 'probing a misplaced past' we may be able 'to ascertain what might remain for the present'.<sup>31</sup> Foster has also described his notion of the 'diachronic axis'.<sup>32</sup> The diachronic, he suggests, sits in tension with the synchronic, and describes an axis through time – in other words, how later moments reposition prior moments.<sup>33</sup> In an interview with Alex Coles from 1998, Foster, drawing on Freudian concepts, states that 'there are exchanges and relays between the past and the present that cannot be charted simply in terms of style and form. The relation is one of continual displacement, revision and subsumption'.<sup>34</sup>

It was during our discussion on the work of Isaacs that Stephen Walker suggested that I might be interested in *Architecture or Techno-utopia* by Felicity D. Scott. In her book Scott explored a number of utopian architectural experiments that took place during the 1960s and early 1970s as Modernism and post-war idealism waned. Scott, too, noted that:

It seems appropriate to ask, especially in the current moment of protest against global social and economic injustice, human rights violations, environmental destruction and yet another cynical, imperialist war, whether dissent ends inevitably in melancholy, disengagement and nostalgia. At issue, then, is whether there are other lessons to be learned from those earlier failures, lessons at the nexus of architecture, technology and politics that might open into other possibilities.<sup>35</sup>

The figure of Richard Buckminster Fuller looms large in Scott's narrative and although familiar with his more prominent schemes, it was interesting to note just how pervasive many of his ideas had become during the period. Most notable had been his development of the geodesic dome, a structure first created as a Planetarium in Germany in 1926 by Walther Bauersfeld, a technician at Zeiss. Buckminster Fuller's original vision had been to systematically retool the industrial system to mass-produce dome components on assembly

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<sup>29</sup> Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* No. 110, (Cambridge, Mass: Autumn 2004), p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Foster, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), p. xi.

<sup>33</sup> Synchronic linguistics aims at describing language rules at a specific point of time, even though they may have been different at an earlier stage of the language. A [diachronic](#) approach considers the development and evolution of a language through history.

<sup>34</sup> Hal Foster, 'Trauma Studies and the Interdisciplinary – An Interview', *de-,dis-,ex-. Vol Two. The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (London: Backless Books, 1998), p. 165.

<sup>35</sup> Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia*, (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 2007), p. 153.

lines, thereby turning 'weaponry to livingry'.<sup>36</sup> Embraced by 1960s 'drop outs' as environmentally sound and as a radically different alternative to establishment building practices, the geodesic dome also appealed to the same interest in technological futures that had engaged Buckminster Fuller's original adopters; the military.

Looking back on this period, Lloyd Kahn who had self-published *Domebook 1* in 1970 and was 'largely inspired by R. Buckminster Fuller', suggested that 'as Fuller romanticized science and technology, the geodesic dome became a metaphor to builders for the space age and the age of transcendent science'. 'Fuller' Kahn stated, 'implied that the lightest weight transparent dome was an image of structure in its purest manifestation and that you were somehow in touch with the universe in building a dome'.<sup>37</sup> As Scott notes 'domes were, for a short while, the counterculture's architecture of choice'.<sup>38</sup> 'Drop City' – the original and archetypal counter-cultural rural commune established in Colorado in 1965, 'sprang' according to Scott, 'energetically and haphazardly from the communes' drug fuelled anarchy and the detritus of American consumer culture'. Drop City represented an escape from the rigid and oppressive lifestyle of an older generation and, according to Scott, 'would soon play a role in the exodus of the urban hippies to rural sites in the West and Southwest'.<sup>39</sup> She suggests that the domes offered 'symbols of quick escape from the cities' and quoting commune member Bill Voyd she suggests that the Drop City occupants believed themselves to be 'self-exiled strangers, immigrants on our own native soil'. Writing in his publication *The Alternative; Communal Life in America* (1970) though, William Hedgepeth believes that the dome builders understood dropping out not as a 'cop-out' but as producing 'outposts, testing grounds, self-experimental laboratories, starting points for whole hallucinatory metropolises'.<sup>40</sup>

I first constructed a piece of work in response to these themes and the mathematics of the geodesic dome in early 2015, exploiting the skeletal structures of modified found umbrellas held in tension with 3D printed jointing components. Assembling my geodesic structure from the material waste of our pan-capitalist present continued to resonate with the ruins of Fullerian utopian modernity. This was particularly the case when viewed in the light of more current concerns regarding migration, dislocation and precarity. As pressure grows on societies through population growth, globalisation and climate change we are seeing large numbers of people on the move for a range of economic and social reasons. Families are relocating to fast-growing 'shanty' towns on the edges of large cities, assembling ad-hoc dwellings from freely available and found materials. As Richard Sennett noted 'migration is the icon of the global age, moving on rather than settling in'.<sup>41</sup> It is the consideration of this

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<sup>36</sup> The full quote is 'It is now highly feasible to take care of everybody on Earth at a higher standard of living than any have ever known. It no longer has to be you or me. Selfishness is unnecessary. War is obsolete. It is a matter of converting our high technology from Weaponry to Livingry'.

<sup>37</sup> Lloyd Kahn, 'the Dome', *Domebook 1*, (Shelter Publications, 1970), p.109.

<sup>38</sup> Scott, p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> Scott, p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> William Hedgepeth, *The Alternative: Communal Life in New America*, (New York; MacMillan, 1970), p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, (New Haven CT; Yale University Press, 2006), p. 2.

conflation of utopian idealism and survival imperatives that has given rise to my interest in the geodesic dome. It is the notion of 'escape' – particularly as articulated by Zygmunt Bauman – that unites these themes.

Semantically, escape is the very opposite of utopia, but psychologically it is, under present circumstances, its sole available substitute: one might say its new, updated and state-of-the-art rendition, refashioned to the measure of our deregulated, individualised society of consumers. You can no longer seriously hope to make the world a better place to live in; you can't even make really secure the better place in the world which you may have managed to carve out for yourself.<sup>42</sup>

Richard Noble, Head of Art at London's Goldsmiths College, acknowledges that for artworks to be utopian they need to offer two things that seem 'to pull in rather different directions: on the one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit' while at the same time – and here he references Ernst Bloch – there is some insight into the 'darkness so near'. That is to say, the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to *escape* the here and now in the first place'.<sup>43</sup> Over the following twelve months I produced a series of dome-based forms, before creating the piece of work that would eventually become *Escape*. Working with sheets of 5mm polystyrene foam that I had found in an adjacent building, the triangular panels were assembled into a completed dome form. After some weeks the assembly was de-constructed in such a way as to form an opened-out, two-dimensional development that became reminiscent of a denuded and hostile landscape.

## Anticipation

In recent years reports of accelerating sea level rise, species extinction, shifting weather patterns and stressed landscapes have become increasingly common. Although we are well supplied with scientific information about environmental change, we often do not have the cultural resources to respond thoughtfully and to imagine our own futures in a tangibly altered world.<sup>44</sup>

This paragraph is taken from the flyleaf of *Anticipatory History* (2011) a publication from Uniform Books that brings together articles emerging from an AHRC-funded project at the University of Exeter. *Anticipatory History* as the title suggests, seeks to engage with history in order to anticipate change, where 'change is part of the past... not just part of the future', highlighting 'history that calls attention to process rather than permanence'.<sup>45</sup> In the context of anticipatory history art is both provocation against and solace towards newly

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<sup>42</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times*, (London; Polity Press, 2007), p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> Noble, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, Simon Naylor and Colin Sackett, ed. *Anticipatory History*, (Axminster; Uniform Books, 2011), flyleaf.

<sup>45</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, Simon Naylor and Colin Sackett, p. 10.

contextualised, and rarely benign, futures. As a discipline that plots routes from past to future through the prism of our current understanding anticipatory history shares much in common with contemporary art.

We study the past not in order to find out what really happened there or to provide a genealogy of and thereby a legitimacy for the present, but to find out what it takes to face a future we should like to inherit rather than one that we have been forced to endure.<sup>46</sup>

Walter Benjamin, upon whom Foster draws, believed that ‘every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’.<sup>47</sup> Benjamin was particularly critical of the historicist notion whereby history proceeds chronologically through a chain of cause and effect reasoning, assuming the onward acceleration of progress. He insisted that history should stop ‘telling the sequence of events like beads on a rosary’,<sup>48</sup> and operate instead through a ‘telescoping of the past through the present’. Rather than linear, causal notions of history, Benjamin preferred the metaphor of a constellation to describe a spatial relation of events and contexts in which the historian should relate the present to the past. In his *Arcades Project* Benjamin describes the role of the ‘historian as chiffonnier’ or rag-picker, sifting through and picking over the refuse of history – collecting and bringing together interesting pieces.

Anticipation is the act of taking up, placing, or considering something beforehand: it is ‘to take action in preparation for something that you think will happen’. The geographic term ‘anticipatory adaptation’ is used in the discussion of climate change to describe action taken before impacts are felt. Perhaps the work that has been created in response to the themes and ideas explored within the Future Works collaboration can be seen as a constellation of ‘anticipatory objects’?

## Material

‘Do you ever wonder what an objects’ next life might be?’ so asks architect Jennifer Siegel in *Microtopia*, a film by Jesper Wachtmeister.<sup>49</sup> I have become increasingly engaged by the ideas concerning the past and future life of objects. I believe that the central activity of re-using found materials and commodities already engages in a fundamental way with issues of resource use, global iniquities and the neoliberal exploitation of nature, but the practice

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<sup>46</sup> E. Domanska, ‘A conversation with Hayden White’, *Rethinking History*, Vol.12, Iss.1, (London, May 2008), p. 3-21.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations*, (London; Collins-Fontana, 1973), p. 257.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, p. 259.

<sup>49</sup> Jesper Wachtmeister, *Microtopia*, (Sweden; Solaris Filmproduktion, 2013), <http://vimeo.com/ondemand/microtopia/77603793> [Accessed December 2014]

also raises questions concerning our relationship with objects. Inevitably when re-purposing items of our material culture, thoughts drift to speculating on an object's previous role as well as the place and context in which it was used and may yet be used. My practice has consistently appropriated things at-hand, re-using objects that are readily available, re-purposing the everyday and re-working discarded or abandoned items. This process seems to be one of the few ways in which to resist, what Benjamin HD Buchloh termed 'the almost totalitarian implementation of the universal laws of consumption'.<sup>50</sup> The argument is well worn yet, for me, it is an important commitment to create the artwork from materials that in themselves reflect on the over exploitation of resources and our wasteful consumption. My approach also gained some impetus from Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction* (2002), particularly his argument that 'the artistic question is no longer "what can we do that is new?" but "how do we make do with what we have?"' and that 'it is no longer a matter of starting with a "blank slate" or creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production'.<sup>51</sup> Claire Bishop reiterates this point in her 2012 article for *Artforum* stating that 'questions of originality and authorship are no longer the point; instead, the emphasis is on a meaningful re-contextualisation of existing artifacts'.<sup>52</sup> John Roberts also reiterates my own view that incorporating commercially manufactured objects draws attention to their unremarked upon ubiquity in trans-global trade, or as he eloquently phrases it 'art invites both productive and non-productive labour into its realm as a means of reflecting on the conditions of both art *and* labour under capitalist relations'.<sup>53</sup>

In 1961, William C Seitz, then associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated his landmark survey exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. Seitz defined the medium of assemblage as consisting of works that are 'predominantly *assembled* rather than painted, drawn, modelled or carved' and made up entirely or in part of 'pre-formed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials'.<sup>54</sup> The American interpretation of 'assemblage' emerged at the same time as their adoption of the Duchampian 'ready-made', giving an added impetus to this 1950s' and 60s' American version of the artform. It was the work undertaken by Picasso, Braque and Schwitters - particularly their *papier colle* from the early years of the twentieth century that could be said to have created the initial impetus to mix up traditional and unexpected materials. Picasso's *Mandolin* (1914) made from wood remnants was described as 'neither sculpture nor painting, nor architecture' by Alfred H Barr Jr. Indeed the collage, bricolage and constructivist work undertaken at the beginning of the twentieth century by a number of the historical 'avant-garde' artists opened out into an enormous field of artistic possibilities through the rest of the century. The critic Clement Greenberg noted in his essay *Sculpture in our Time* from 1958, 'the new sculpture tends to abandon stone, bronze and clay for

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'The predicaments of Contemporary Art', *Art Since 1900*, (London; Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 677.

<sup>51</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, (New York; Lucas and Sternberg, 2002), p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Claire Bishop, 'Digital Divide', *Artforum*, (New York; September 2012), p. 21

<sup>53</sup> Roberts, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, (New York; MOMA, 1961), p. 11.

industrial materials like iron, steel, alloys, glass, plastic, celluloid etc.’ He went on to state that the new sculpture can be simply put together; ‘it is not so much sculpted as constructed, built, assembled, arranged’.<sup>55</sup> The whole history of Modernism in art is inextricably linked with assemblage in its various forms and suggests a fundamental relationship between the emergence of the consumer society and the incorporation of cast-off or valueless detritus of modern life into art works. Curator Sandra Leonard Starr notes that ‘assemblage is the only artform that consistently reminds us of the processes that brought it into being, as the use of real objects and materials from daily life evokes the activities we have pursued in order to live’.<sup>56</sup>

In assembling *Future Primitive*, I chose to exploit sheets of roughly painted plywood that had been salvaged from a previous artwork and bore the history, marks and physical alterations from their earlier role. These destructive layers of use leave ‘traces’ rather like a palimpsest of entropy. The materials for *Escape* – polystyrene and nylon – are both products that have been synthesized from oil-based polymers, they reflect on the ubiquity of plastics in our everyday lives and environment. I am particularly interested both in the fact that ‘found materials’ have complex associations that can be experimented with and that, at the same time, as discarded and rejected objects they communicate a great deal about our relationship with resources and consumption. Lea Vergine believes that ‘in disposing of waste we cover our tracks, art strips them bare and offers a glimpse of our destination’. She goes on to suggest that ‘the anarchic salvaging of rejects and scrap by painters, sculptors and photographers is also a type of utopia and as such coagulates and dissolves with the passing of time’.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Sculpture in Our Time’, ed. John O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957 -1969*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 58.

<sup>56</sup> Sandra Leonard Starr, ‘Assemblage Art; A Pocket History’, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, (Los Angeles; James Cocoran Gallery, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Lea Vergine, *Trash: From Junk to Art*, ed. Lea Vergine, (Milan; Electra, 1997), p. 5.



## Part Three

### ***Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil (2016)***

*An eight-minute video loop is running on a wall mounted monitor screen. The video appears to show a rusted and crudely assembled hand tool slowly rotating and tumbling in black space while spot-lit from above.*

## Use

In May 2016 I spent a day at the Silk Mill in Derby engaged in a number of workshops organised by Future Works, exploring our relationship to energy use. There is considerable debate within the wider national and international context regarding the best way to tread a path toward a sustainable energy future against the backdrop of the increasingly evident effects of carbon emissions on our climate. Whatever decisions are made regarding the exploitation of fossil fuels, the use of nuclear or renewable energy sources and the control of so called 'greenhouse gases', we will all need to learn to use energy much more effectively in the future. According to John Thakara, Senior Fellow at The Royal College of Art, 'American citizens today use more energy and physical resources in a month than their great-grandparents used during their whole lifetime'.<sup>58</sup> However this increase will be dwarfed by the escalating demand from fast-growing economies such as China, India, Brazil and Mexico – as their citizens expect to enjoy the fruits of technology long enjoyed by their Western contemporaries. Engaging with change at the local level was a theme consistently explored through the Future Works module. One area of human endeavour that has been essentially local throughout Western democracies until relatively recently, is the growing of food. As Thakara points out, 'the industrial system that keeps cities fed consumes ten times more energy running itself than it delivers as nutrition that you and I can eat'.<sup>59</sup> He goes on to state that 'agriculture and food now account for nearly 30 per-cent of goods transported on Europe's roads; in the UK 25 per-cent of car journey's are to get food'.<sup>60</sup> Despite the complexities regarding land use and ownership there has been a significant increase in the number of urban agricultural projects in industrialised nations. In a wide variety of approaches, individuals and groups are seeking to re-establish a commitment to locally grown food. Thakara believes that:

A powerful grassroots movement has given us community-supported agriculture and box-schemes, the 100 mile diet and Slow Food. Sales of vegetable seeds have skyrocketed; backyard chickens are now commonplace; and schoolyard gardens, organic farms, and farmers' markets have proliferated.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> John Thakara, *How to Thrive in the Next Economy*, (London; Thames and Hudson, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Thakara, p. 53.

<sup>60</sup> Thakara, p. 67.

<sup>61</sup> Thakara, p. 53.

In responding to the Future Works research themes, I became increasingly interested in the idea of creating a tool that might be used for breaking up and lifting areas of hard surfaces and thereby allowing access to the productive soil below. As Bill Mollinson, one of the founders of the permaculture movement notes – when discussing the future of agriculture and energy use – ‘a lot of land with potential for food growing will have to be de-paved’.<sup>62</sup> The ‘liberation of the soil’ began in the United States as an illicit form of activist action, with ‘small groups of guerrilla de-pavers, wielding pickaxes and wheelbarrows’,<sup>63</sup> removing hard surfaces to reveal the underlying soil bed. The notion of removing unnecessary hard surfaces - of returning the soil to productive use, of growing food closer to the point of need and thereby reducing the overall energy requirement fed into the development of the artwork. Mollinson believes that ‘there is enormous potential to transform suburbia into a semi-agrarian patchwork of communities for localised food self-sufficiency’.<sup>64</sup> In drawing the obvious connection to the liberation politics of May 1968 by titling the piece *Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil*,<sup>65</sup> I sought to make a connection of radical intent, activism and direct action.

My practice has often engaged with the implications of the functional art object. On this occasion I chose to assemble the de-paving tool from parts of previously used, but damaged or redundant hand tools. The object was an ad-hoc assembly welded together utilising leftover steel bar and configured to offer the breaking and levering functions that would be required of the tool. This object was informed by, indeed it emerged out of, my critical engagement with *Arte Util* and Usership theory. The Cuban artist Tania Bruguera (b. 1968) has been refining her notion of *Arte Util* since 2011, suggesting that the term roughly translates as ‘useful art’ but also encompasses the idea of ‘art as a tool or device’.<sup>66</sup> Bruguera believes that ‘art’s function is no longer to be a space for ‘signalling’ problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions’.<sup>67</sup> It was during this period that I attended the Arte Util Summit at mima in Middlesbrough, discussing social engagement, agency and the place of art with Bruguera, mima Director Alistair Hudson and Stephen Wright. Wright, an academic and theorist, published *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* in 2013. The publication took a fresh look at the conceptual vocabulary inherited from modernity and repurposed a number of terms within the contemporary art wordscape. Wright suggests that ‘users have come to play a key role as producers of information, meaning and value, breaking down the long-standing opposition between consumption and production’.<sup>68</sup> Bruguera stresses the importance of use within her conception of *Arte Util*, believing that art should ‘be implemented and function in real

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<sup>62</sup> Thakara, p. 53.

<sup>63</sup> Thakara, p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Thakara, p. 54.

<sup>65</sup> Drawing a reference to one of the memorable slogans painted onto Parisian walls in 1968 ‘Sous les pavés, la plage!’ (beneath the cobblestones, the beach!)

<sup>66</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/about/> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/528-0-Introduction+on+Useful+Art.htm> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>68</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> [Accessed January 2016]

situations' and 'have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users'. Indeed *Arte Util* 'seeks to replace authors with initiators and spectators with users'.<sup>69</sup>

I explored the critical arguments concerning *Arte Util* in my previous chapter and in the artwork too, I wanted to complicate the reading of useful art in order to explore the ambiguities of the functional art object. I chose to do this by negating the object's utility, by offering only an image, a representation of the tool and not the tool itself. The image of the tool would suggest utility but would serve no practical use, although it may be useful in generating discussions and debate. Furthermore, the revolving animation had been made possible through a sophisticated high-definition 3D laser scan that I had commissioned from a commercial business, who also created the rendered files from which the video was generated. These highly detailed digital files, created using emerging digital tooling and non-productive immaterial labour, could also be used to create a simulacrum of the tool manufactured in a metal alloy using sophisticated 3D printing technologies. In theory, therefore, the information for producing the tool could be sent instantly to a production unit anywhere in the world, for activists to de-pave their locale. As with *Future Primitive*, I chose to emphasize a type of ambiguous temporal placement: the image of the rusted and worn object was shown in a museological frame, in black space with spotlighting suggestive of the display of archaeological artefacts. I sought to engage again with the diachronic axis. Was the object evidence of a pointless social experiment or a prized future relic? What social relations lay congealed in the object at the centre of this piece of work?

## Object

In *Detours of Objects* his introduction to *The Object* – one of Whitechapel Gallery's *Documents of Contemporary Art* – Anthony Hudek quotes Jean-Francois Chevrier's maxim: 'Every object is a thing, but not everything is an object'.<sup>70</sup> However to mischievously paraphrase I would propose: Not every object is a thing, but everything *is* an object. I suggest this primarily as a response to the emerging ideas connected with 'speculative realism'<sup>71</sup> and 'object-oriented ontology'.<sup>72</sup> A world where, according to Hudek, 'the object, whether thing, tool, commodity, thought, phenomenon or living creature, has regained its rights, freed from the subject's determining mind, body and gaze'.<sup>73</sup> In his book *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) Ian Bogost noted that everything that we tend to see as a discreet object, is of course made up of other objects. A wooden chair leg is made up of fibres, capillaries and lignin; these, in turn, from cells, water and sugars all the way down to fundamental quantum particles. The leg though is also part of a chair, an interior, a house,

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<sup>69</sup> <http://museumarteutil.net/about/> [Accessed April 2016]

<sup>70</sup> Antony Hudek, 'Introduction/Detours of Objects', *The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> In 2007 a seminar at Goldsmiths College brought together four main proponents of what would be called 'speculative realism': Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton Grant.

<sup>72</sup> See Graham Harman, 'The Third Table', *100 notes-100 thoughts series*, Vol 85, (Kassel: dOCUMENTA 13/Ostfildern- Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

<sup>73</sup> Hudek, p. 16.

town etc. Everything can be seen as an object made up of other objects. Hudek suggests that, for Martin Heidegger, the thing – in distinction to the object – is ‘autonomous and self supporting’, that it is ‘assertive of its independence, its presence as well as nearness’. Objects, in contrast, are everywhere in equal measure neither near nor far. However Bill Brown (Professor of English at the University of Chicago and close friend of the artist Theaster Gates), sees an ‘audacious ambiguity’ regarding objects and things. In *Thing Theory* from 2001, Brown suggests that ‘you could imagine things as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects’. However Brown believes that, at the same time, things are the ‘amorphousness out of which objects are materialised by the (ap)perceiving subject’. He sees a ‘simultaneity’ an ‘all-at-onceness’ of ‘the object/thing dialectic’, because for him ‘the story of objects asserting themselves as things is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing names less an object than a particular subject-object relation’.<sup>74</sup>

W. David Kingery points out in *Learning from Things* (1996), that ‘tools are artifacts as well as signals, signs and symbols. Their use and functions are multiple and intertwined. Much of their meaning is subliminal and unconscious’. He goes on to note that ‘some authors have talked about reading objects as texts, but objects must also be read as myths and as poetry’.<sup>75</sup> Brown also acknowledges the ‘sensuous or metaphysical presence’ by which things exceed their materialization, ‘the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems’.<sup>76</sup> In one of his early essays on language and translation<sup>77</sup>, Walter Benjamin speculated on the concept of a language of things, a mute and magical medium of material community. Hito Steyerl, writing in her 2012 essay *A Thing Like You and Me*, believes that for Benjamin ‘things are never just inert objects, passive items or lifeless schucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, which keep being exchanged’. She believes that in Benjamin’s later thought in particular ‘modest and even abject objects are hieroglyphs in whose dark prism social relations lay congealed and in fragments. In this perspective, a thing is never just something, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces is petrified’.<sup>78</sup>

I have speculated in the past as to whether the ‘tool’ might exist as a transitional object, rather like toys and fetish objects. The term ‘transitional object’ was first coined by the British paediatric psychologist D.W. Winnicott in the 1950s. Having identified the object as more than ‘a thing in itself’ he created the term to describe an object, such as a teddy bear, that has a quality for a small child of being both real and made-up at the same time. For Hudek, ‘the toy, like the relational art object, is unpredictable; there is no telling when it will

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<sup>74</sup> Bill Brown, *Thing Theory*, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 28, No. 1 (Autumn 2001), p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> W. David Kingery, *Learning From Things*, (Washington; Smithsonian Press, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> Brown, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ (1916), *Reflections*, (New York; Schocken Books, 1978).

<sup>78</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘A Thing Like You And Me, 2012’, *The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London; Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), p. 49.

lose its aura and lapse into thingness'<sup>79</sup> American artist Mike Kelley made use of soft toys and dolls that he found in thrift stores to express childhood and repressed memories, adolescent rites, traumas and fears. These objects carry a particular kind of weight and unstable meaning because they oscillate between worlds. I have been interested in whether the term could be used to describe other kinds of objects with an unstable set of relations. For instance, in my earlier work *Backyard Furnace* I assembled an artwork that was also a tool for smelting aluminium, by re-combining everyday items; a metal waste bin, a steel mop handle, a stainless steel cocktail shaker, a discarded hairdryer etc. The tool worked perfectly well and afterwards the whole furnace, (plus bricks and charcoal) took its envisaged place in the installation *Liquid Living*. Did the object's status oscillate between functional tool (outside the gallery) and artwork (inside the gallery)? I took this duality further with *Urban Bodger*, assembled from found materials, this wood-turning lathe was engaged with and operated by visitors to the exhibitions. Simultaneously, it was a tool of utility and an artwork. Can a 'model' be a transitional object? In a recent paper Dr. Teresa Stoppani, Head of the School of Architecture at Leeds Beckett University cites a 1985 issue of *Gran Bazaar* where Piera Scuri observes; 'The model is perhaps the most ambiguous and most deceptive medium of representation'. Stoppani goes on to state that 'the model oscillates between object and concept (and object again)... when the model loses this dynamic between transition and translation and presents itself as a resolved object it no longer is "model"'.<sup>80</sup> These ideas seem particularly relevant in the context of the *de-,dis-,ex-* exhibition in Sheffield, where a number of the pieces could be understood as models for something as yet unrealized. Is it possible for the work to exist in a space of tension between assemblage, construction and model? In a conversation regarding his recent show at The Henry Moore Institute, the artist Ian Kiaer explains that, for him, 'The model can hold multiple associations and also remain unknowable. It could just be a very particular form that is impossible to describe, or a piece of material that stands in, or acts as a foil to something else. The model is both evasive and ridiculously precise'.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps in the end, as for much else in art, it is the model's ambiguity that has value, for as Stoppani notes 'The model is suspended between conception and realisation, both its own realisation and the realisation of the work which it informs or refers to'.<sup>82</sup>

## Repurpose

From the outset, the Future Works M.Arch module at the Sheffield School of Architecture sought to engage with the future of energy use and manufacturing by identifying and examining historic points of resonance for 'new points of departure'. By understanding previous attempts to harness and control energy sources, students were encouraged to see

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<sup>79</sup> Hudek, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Teresa Stoppani, *From Model to Modelling*, Talk at The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. June 2014. Transcript, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Ian Kiaer, *Ian Kiaer: Tooth House*, Exhibition Catalogue, (Leeds; HMI, 2014), p.15.

<sup>82</sup> Stoppani, p. 4.

what could be re-adopted and re-used. Earlier solutions were viewed, not as backward or unsophisticated, but as ideas and technologies with untapped potential – capable of reintegration into a flexible network or constellation of energy supply. In an early note for the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin gave architecture a central place in his theory and critique of history: ‘Architecture is the most important witness of the latent ‘mythology’’.<sup>83</sup> The ‘mythology’ to which Benjamin refers is the positivist ideology of automatic historical progress. For Benjamin architectural artifacts, particularly the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, make visible the transience of the ‘new’ and the lie of the promise of progress in commodity culture by physically embodying outmoded styles. Urban environments, made up as they are by buildings and structures in various states of construction, dilapidation and ruin, highlight the continual turnover of fashion and capital, and act as metaphors for and images of the operation of history.

The School of Architecture more generally and the Future Works module in particular explore the notion of architecture as part of a much broader geographic and sociological field. Their approach is echoed by Peter Osborne, who believes that ‘architecture should no longer be understood to refer to one or the other side of the opposition between design/plan and building’. He sees the deepening historic ambiguity of the profession as crucial, for he believes that the term ‘architecture’ is now ‘distributed across conception and materialization in the traditional senses’.<sup>84</sup> Julia Udall, associate lecturer on the module, maintains an engagement with architectural practice in the city through her association with Studio Polpo – an ethically-based social-enterprise architectural practice whose work focuses on an engagement with social, environmental and economic sustainability. Studio Polpo have been at the forefront of helping retain the unique ‘little meisters’ workshop spaces in Sheffield, these clusters of independent yet interdependent workspaces evolved to house the cities’ metal-working and cutlery trades in the Nineteenth century. The Bloc Projects art space, within which the *de-,dis-,ex-* exhibition took place, is part of just such a group of buildings. Originally built to house metal workers producing specialist knife blades for the catering industry, the workshops are now home to painters, potters, silversmiths and various other craftspeople. In a final and important contextual echo of my own work these buildings have been re-purposed and re-used. The layout of the buildings around a central courtyard, the large windows and modest room sizes are re-employed to satisfy different requirements. There are interventions, alterations, additions, marks and traces that attest to its past and reflect its current position and role. For Peter Osborne, the architectonic has functioned as a ‘signifier of the social’ in contradistinction to post-war Western art that has been ‘locked in the prison of a restricted understanding of its autonomy’. ‘In this respect’, he goes on ‘architecture – like design more generally – *is an archive of the social use of form*’.<sup>85</sup> Each of the three works exhibited at the conclusion of the six-month residency draw to some extent on this archive. Each artwork draws together historical fragments, technological processes and ideas of social reorganization – interrogating the diachronic to

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<sup>83</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, (Frankfurt and Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), p.1002.

<sup>84</sup> Osborne, p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> Osborne, p.141.

explore 'a possible future wrapped up in a possible past'.<sup>86</sup> Foster believes that a certain frustration with the predominant art discourse leads archival artists 'to recoup failed visions in art, philosophy and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations, to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert, p. 92.

<sup>87</sup> Foster, p. 22.

## Conclusion

In adopting *de-,dis-,ex-* as the title for the exhibition in Sheffield, I was consciously referencing a publication from 1998 - *de-,dis-,ex-. Volume two, The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity* edited by Alex Coles and Alexia Defert. Coles, Professor of Transdisciplinary Studies at Huddersfield University, whose other publications include *DesignArt* (Tate Publishing 2005), has established a considerable reputation in theorizing the field at the meeting points of art, design and architecture. Whilst referencing the contributions of Julia Kristeva and Hal Foster in the introduction to the book, Coles suggests that 'new sites [of interdisciplinary practice] can only be progressively opened up' by 'maintaining the degree of uncertainty that interdisciplinary work bears'.<sup>88</sup> In seeking to engage with staff and students at The Sheffield School of Architecture and the M.Arch studio/ research module Future Works in particular, I believed that an enriched criticality could be brought to bear upon the development of my own art practice. I sought to offer a different perspective and approach during discussions, presentations and workshops, that on the whole were marked by the range of contributions from historical, sociological and cultural fields as well as business and commerce. Both lecturers and students attended the final exhibition, extending and deepening the dialogue at the interface of art, architecture and theory within a context of rapid social change. A fully documented and annotated version of the exhibition will be uploaded to the AHRC Stories of Change archive website for future researchers to access.

Architecture – as envisaged and put into practice within Renata Tszczuk's and Julia Udall's Future Works module – opened a field of engagement that was both challenging and thought provoking. I was particularly struck by the extent to which the students were pressed into dealing with real-world issues in live projects that involved hands-on physical interventions as well as communication graphics. The parallels between the student's engagement and the core principles of *Arte Util* were striking and reinforced an increasingly firm conviction that useful artistic interventions and devices were already being vigorously pursued within the architectonic field. In the previous chapter I questioned whether the proponents of *Arte Util* would drop the attachment to contemporary art and instead embrace the notion that socially-engaged creativity could best be described as 'critically-engaged design' or 'good architecture'? Indeed at the Arte Util Summit in 2016 Tania Bruguera announced that she no longer wished to be known as 'an artist', turning her attention instead to a direct involvement in Cuban politics. Theaster Gates, on the other hand, has developed his artistic practice starting from a base in urban planning and politics, through ceramics and onto socially-engaged practice. It is an understanding of his practice that forms the foundation for the third chapter of the thesis.

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<sup>88</sup> Alex Coles, 'Introduction', *de-,dis-,ex-. Vol Two. The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (London: Backless Books, 1998), p. iii.



## Appendix 1



*de-,dis-,ex-.* Installation view



*Future Primitive* (2016)



*Future Primitive (2016) part*



*Escape (2016)*



*Beneath the Street, the Fertile Soil (2016)*