

ALICE ANDERSON: POST-DIGITAL BY PAUL CAREY-KENT

The essence of Anglo-French artist Alice Anderson's practice is the performative exploration of the semi-conscious outcomes of particular states of mind. Those actions typically combine primitive and modern, strong and vulnerable, one-off chance and ritual repetition. Consequently, what may appear autobiographical or reductive is actually mythic and complex. We can see those patterns played out in the various strands of Anderson's recent work. POST-DIGITAL features two of those: the capsules objects and the mesh sculptures. I'll set those in the context of three other streams of her practice: memorised objects, architectures data, and performative drawings.

MEMORISED OBJECTS

Anderson has long been interested in memory, which she explored through short films prior to 2010. She then found herself focusing on the objects in the films, a direction confirmed by the epiphany of dismantling an alarm clock with a bobbin of conductive copper wire inside it. She liked its 'hypnotic' reflections, which triggered the thought that copper could represent the connectivity of a digital world and provide a means of recording items. She developed a weaving technique with copper- coloured thread, the first public application of which was to wind around the Freud Museum in 2011, for which she and her performers had to clamber in and out of the building's windows.

Anderson was drawn to extend these actions to objects, as in her words, *"I always worry to break or lose an object, therefore I have established rules: When one of the objects around me is likely to become obsolete or is lost in stream of our lives, I 'memorise' it with thread before it happens."* She has since made an extensive investigation of memory through copper motion, leading to the major 'Memory Movement Memory Objects' at the Wellcome Collection, London in 2015. There she 'memorised' all manner of things from the complete 'weaving' of what was in her studio to everyday items (sometimes brought to her by the public) to ladders to a car. That practice remains essentially performative: winding wire around objects takes Anderson into a meditative and rhythmic space of repetition, with movements akin to dance.

Anderson connects with the objects in two ways. First, as substitutes for human interaction: she says that in her childhood, she had *"a very hard time connecting with people, and most of the time, my emotions weren't tied up with the person I had in front me, but rather with the objects associated with the moment of my relation with them"*. Second, this is a way of recording and charging objects by printing them with the signature of her movements.

It is, in that sense, practical, not nostalgic. Anderson contrasts that with the 'outsourcing' of memory by digital processes. That's particularly clear when the reflex taking of a photograph substitutes for the attempt to remember – or indeed, originally experience – an event for itself. The thread also gains resonance from myth: Ariadne's path from the Minotaur, Penelope's defensive performance of weaving.

ARCHITECTURES DATA

The Freud Museum building prompted Anderson to explore her first architecture and to measure - rather than sanctify - its space. Her 2015 Paris exhibition, 'Data Space', followed this through by occupying a circular run of rooms on the 5th floor of Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton. Anderson wove around the data formed from copies of the building's features – floorboards, cables, skylights, skirting boards, cables and its lift - and installed them as sculpture. Not only were the features transformed by displacement and their seductive coppery sheen, but they were reshaped either by the process (e.g. the ceiling panels distorted under the pressure of binding) or by the way they were configured (the floorboards were shown in circular formations, the lift cables looped intestinally). It was as if the space was inhabited by a version of itself.

Perhaps the most challenging to make among Anderson's copper wire works is the Saatchi Collection's pair 'Bound', 2011 and '181 kilometres', 2015. The Freud Museum project included the former, for which Anderson wound thread around a giant wooden bobbin, making what she saw as a totem to the undersea cables linking the whole planet. In the Museum context, though, one commentator saw it as reprising a game Freud played with his young grandson in order to calm what he saw as the anxiety of the mothers' absence. Now it looms large, like the inescapable childhood influences underpinning Freud's view of our psychological development. Anderson had to walk the eponymous 181 kilometres to 'spin' an entire 2m wide sphere, a sculptural marathon of free choreography which pushed her meditational intensity to new limits, and emphasised the near-prosthetic role of the thread as an extension to her bodily movements.

With comparable devotion?, Anderson has just completed a permanent ensemble of sculptures at the Eiffel historical building in Paris. It is based on the 3D 'physical' printing with thread of 5 architectural elements of the atrium (5 columns 5 metres high) and 15 data cables suspended in the 2nd atrium as a 375 metre long 'cloud' of connections. The project's curator, Marie-Laure Bernadac, speaks of 'virtual reality becoming ritual reality' through the physical memorisation of the architecture here, and of how Anderson points to how 'we are only at the Stone Age of this technological evolution which has already changed all models - economic, social and ideological. This is not to resist the digital world, but simply to anticipate and make tangible our physiological responses its algorithmic and artificial memory'.

CAPSULES OBJECTS

The Capsules Objects enact the preservative aspect of the Memorised Objects in a more specific and mournful context. As Anderson puts it, *"if an object breaks"* – as opposed to the mere threat of loss which is countered by recording an object with thread – *"Something has gone. I encapsulate the object in steel, I leave it outside for few weeks until it rusts, then I perform a ritual and when the dance is over, everything is repaired. The broken relation is healed"*.

The full series of 'Insouciance' consists of 13 capsules, each containing a real object: bistro table, bistro chair, menu rack, neon box, parasol, hard disk, Ethernet cables, pair of trainers, broom, TV, DVD, coffee cup, ashtray. Such items represent the experiences of many in the outdoor cafes which are an intrinsic part of Parisian culture, but here Anderson presents them as 'broken' – their associations altered by the terrorist events of 13 November 2015.

If the weavings can be read as mummification, these are closer to time capsules, and whereas the copper which Anderson uses is treated to prevent it rusting, the steel is left to rust in its characteristic manner until time seems to personalise the memory. The rust, usually an agent of corrosion and decay, acts as a protective barrier that the artist uses all over her body during the ritual performances. The result is conceptual minimalism: totem-like forms which take their shape from what we cannot see. The obvious predecessor for that move is Manzoni, who claimed to have filled cans with his shit. Perhaps he did, but if not then that too can become part of his sardonic critique of value: Anderson's time capsules, though, really must contain what we cannot prove is there – indeed, if you move the capsule you can hear the object inside.

The accompanying film documentation shows Anderson along with three friends who are, respectively, a dancer, a photographer and a writer, and captures how they respond to the capsules objects once they reach the point of unawareness generated by constant repetition. Anderson explains that she is *"very sensitive to light and sounds, and feel many vibrations and waves in various materials. When the rust from the steel capsules touches my skin, it 'outlines' my body by creating 'boundaries' and I instantly feel more 'concretely' in relation to the world. It is truly stimulating"*.

PERFORMATIVE DRAWINGS

Anderson's drawings, like her sculptures, are the result of ritual performances. The Nocturnal Drawings 'mark' her gestures with thread as she dances around a sheet of paper, unspooling a bobbin of thread which she has placed in a ceramic jar. It's very much a whole body performance. The results are delicately geometric traces of movements performed in the silence of night, when the tinkling musicality of the thread's unspooling can be heard as rhythm becomes shape. Anderson stops *"As soon as dizziness takes place. I immediately cut the thread"*. The drawings are influenced by where they are made, as well as how: switching for example to a different size of paper changes the span of Anderson's movements with radical consequences for the outcomes. One might think of the semi-conscious patterns of Henri Michaux's mescaline drawings, but Anderson seems to have undrugged access to the trance states required.

If the Nocturnal Drawings encode a performance 'for itself', the Barcode Drawings go beyond the digital to provide an alternative means of encoding objects. In her studio, Anderson has a shelf of the barcodes she has cut from the packaging of all manner of everyday items: a bottle of water, a globe, pizza, a fridge, a letter from the bank, many an Amazon parcel. She has used these to work on objects' virtual presence by drawing their digital identities by using a knife to cut into a pastel ground. The process requires an obsessive replication of lines and spaces, made consistent in scale and colour (red, rather than the original black, tying in with

her fascination for that colour). These small canvasses represent, as Anderson sees it, *“the soul of the object”*. As she made them, Anderson found she was wiping off excess pastel, and was drawn to the resulting ‘accidental drawings’ formed by the repetitive gestures of displacing the pastel from the knife onto a cloth. Extreme deliberation has its complementary in chance – though for how long, before the wiping off becomes first deliberate and then automatic, as if cycling back to chance in a new manner?

MINIMAL GESTURES

Where the memory works are partly about preservation, Anderson’s mesh works look as if they will themselves need considerable protection: their delicate squares tremble as you walk past them, poised on the boundary between form and formlessness, and held together by nothing more than static attraction. Anderson makes them by cutting up a whole sheet of copper mesh. When combined by the assumed performance of her intuitive placement, these automatically reconnect themselves as if feeling the need to get back together. The meshes, like the time capsules, originate in public trauma: seeing the type of fence used in migrant camps, Anderson imagined the freeing action of cutting through them. It’s appropriate, then, that the wire is rather sharp-edged, and needs considerable care in handling. The meshes’ mutability suggests memories yet to take shape and how people, too, can re-form. There’s also a built-in potential for separation and an apparent fragility – though the sculptures are actually much more stable and robust than one might suppose.

Anderson, then, has created some compelling groups of work. Looking across them, several common concerns are apparent. Abstract forms emerge from her repetitive and minimal gestures in something of a contrast with Frank Stella’s famous dictum ‘what you see is what you see’. What you see is the trace of what Anderson has done, and her reasons for doing so. Those actions relate to personal and communal histories. Both are potentially germane to the viewer, who is – like the work – caught between an individual’s relation to the concrete things of the world, and the communal context for those interactions, what Wittgenstein called the ‘forms of life’ which make sense of a person’s encounter with the world. The aesthetic that emerges has a minimalist sophistication, but its generation is primitive, even irrational.

And while there’s a strength to the materials Anderson utilises there’s a concurrent vulnerability within the processes and in the artefacts produced. We can see why protection is needed. Consistent with the underlying minimalism, monochrome and repetition are used with rigour, though the effect is not so much to pursue uniformity as to allow different resonances to build up from the obsessive action. We’re more in the territory of Ragnar Kjartansson singing the same song all day than of Charlotte Posenenske collapsing the boundaries between art and industrial production.

We might call the result POST-DIGITAL. Certainly it is informed – indeed, troubled – by knowledge of the digital alternative, and goes beyond it to seek new haptic relationships between people and the physical world. Anderson’s post-digital rituals give us a directness of engagement which a photo in a file cannot. Yet her practice might also be seen, taken as a whole, to be mourning the loss of the pre-digital world, to yearn for the times when rituals were charged with maximum power and objects were restricted to their original selves.