**Title:** Wandering Shards:image as meeting place

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**Abstract:** This essay takes as its point of reference the foreshore of the River Thames at Greenwich in order to develop a series of reflections upon the transformative potential of ‘waste’ material (bone) associated with the site. Things with past origins can be understood not as a repository of secrets to be unearthed, but as material energies exercising power in the present, part of a dynamic of forces and flows. These energies combine with the powers of river tides, foreshore environs and camera to constitute a relational assemblage which through the writing of the text becomes a ‘meeting place’. The ‘image’ rather than representational object, can then be considered as the figurative in Ranciere’s terms as, ‘the intertwining of several regimes of expression and the work of several arts and several media’ (Ranciere 2009, 131). The figurative here becomes the sum of performative powers of material elements as a durational practice of place. This is a question both of aesthetics and ethics, a question of not only how we are situated with regard to the past, but also how we are immersed in an ongoing present.

**Keywords:** Cultural phenomenology, Practice of place, Expanded field of Image, Relational Materiality

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An earlier version of this text presented as a live performative reading accompanied by video projection can be seen at:

'Headstone to Hard Drive III. Spolia, Relic, Data', The British School at Rome,Italy,2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UVzFzJXHVk>

Wandering Shards : image as meeting place

Like many inhabitants of London, I am from time to time drawn to the River Thames. Here, the nervous flickering pulse of dense human activity recedes, giving way to a turbid artery of flowing water. To stand on the foreshore is to be momentarily suspended between the rhythm of the city and the rhythm of the river. Open space stretches out and we seem able to stretch with it.

This past year my various interests in the river, especially its tidal flow, bring me back to Greenwich where I photographed some thirty years previously. My return to this riverbank site also connects me to another earlier period, when as a sculpture student I spent time learning how to record archaeological site excavations. The meticulous methods of hand drawn records revealing successive layers of deposition had then interested me, as a way of considering the process of drawing as one of both revealing and concealing.

Renewing this early interest, I join a group of archaeologists in exploring a section of the southern foreshore. This involves the arduous process of scrubbing structures clean of river silt in order to examine architectural features revealed by the low tide and learn how these have themselves changed over time. We are able to undertake a brief and somewhat hasty process of observation, photographing and drawing before the river inundates the shore once more.

I find myself however, increasingly distracted and wandering away from the site, the patient methods of measuring and recording can no longer hold my attention. Attracted to the drift of rubble and detritus scattered along the beach, I am more interested in the vagaries of what the river throws up on each tide rather than determinedly digging down, exhuming and archiving. Each stretch of the river bears traces of its history and this place is well known for its perpetual offloading onto the beach of shards of bone, fragments of pottery both more and less ancient, clay pipes, and miscellaneous items of everyday rubbish.

It is the bones that capture my attention. Each high tide spills deposits in sinuous mounds which trace the force of the waves against the lie of the land, drying out as a jumble of stained osseous lace. Where do these bones come from? A passing stranger shares his reverie with me, remarking that ‘there seem to have been cannibals here’, whilearchaeologists tell us they are the remains of butchered animals from the slaughterhouses kitchens and tanneries that once lined this part of the river. Absorbing pig, sheep, cow, horse and rarely, human bones, the river acted then as indeed it still does, as a depository of waste to be flushed away.

The anonymous deposits have a certain abject quality, as the living body shrinks from the touch of so many bones stripped of flesh. Some are honeycombed globules or sculpted blades, some blackened or spongy, others brutally sawn about. Heaped up, they shock with the violence of their numbers**,** they are excessive.

Standing on the beach with Martin, an osteo-archaeologist, he tells me,

This one is a thoracic vertebra, part of the backbone in the chest area, ribs come off it. The big blade bit is the spinous process, you can feel the tips of your own if you run your finger down the centre of your back. It is probably a sheep but the spinous process is a bit chunky so it's just possible that it’s a pig.

Martin tells me not that it once was a pig, but that it still *is*. The skeletal fragment appears inert, but in everyday speech, the animate still lingers. At the same time the smooth planar curves of the bone seem to partner the curve of the wash cast by passing river traffic, as if it had been formed simply by the pressure of water.

I feel a melancholy compassion towards the exposed remains of animals who once breathed the air, gave birth, and suffered before their flesh was consumed by humans. Remains which now seem valueless dross, apart from what they can tell us about the human existences they once served. I wonder if my ambivalence about picking them up is some kind of misplaced sentimentality on my part, or whether it is because a ghost of animal sentience still lingers, for they exert an uncanny attraction. Or is this attraction something more primitive, the vague pull beyond memory, of our own fluid beginnings, our cellular heredity?

I read Manuel De Landa’s account of the evolution of animalbones

Soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden mineralization, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. […] Mineralization names the creative agency by which bone was produced, and […] while bone allowed the complexification of the animal phylum to which we, as vertebrates, belong, it never forgot its mineral origins: it is the living material that most easily petrifies, that most readily crosses the threshold back into the world of rocks. (De Landa 2000, 26)

Unlike fossilised bone, living bone is flexible and porous at its core, continuously remodelling itself, a vibrant coral in the ocean of our bodies. Collagen, marrow, calcium and phosphate mineral salts, crystals of hydroxyapatite and stem cells all work together to maintain homeostatic equilibrium and regenerative metabolism. Living bone also contains ‘wandering cells’ called osteoclasts; they bustle around constantly dissolving old bone, while osteoblast cells rebuild, and replenish the material mesh within. It is the work of these wandering cells which eventually allows me to call up between my tongue and teeth the word mineralization, the process which also makes egg shells, the exoskeleton of crabs and tortoises, and gall stones.

While tapping out these words on the screen, I pause to reflect upon the thickening bone in my left middle finger. At 17, this finger became infected and although it seemed to heal then, I can tell that throughout all the years since, under the skin the trauma has caused the bone around this digital joint to grow much larger than the others. The impact of a singular event may have effects that are not immediately visible or felt, but continue to radiate out beyond their source in unforeseen ways.

Standing on the foreshore on the verge of the New Year, the sun even at midday burns low in the sky. Today, I am frozen to the bone. The river bones as usual are here, swept into new configurations. I watch the pull of the tide, feel the rushing of the wind, listen to the threshing of Thames Clipper boat, and the distant grind of the capital at work.

A glowing orange bobs past. The tide is on the turn as the spinning earth enters the new phase of its orbit, carrying our bones once more towards the warmth of the sun. The cyclical diurnal rhythm of repetition and return provides a certain reassurance to existence and the shuttling rhythm of the river bones back and forth both confirms this reassurance and disturbs it, for their indexical link to mortality is a reminder of the limitations of individual human historical time.

The orange bobs back into view. London’s waste is absorbed, taken into the flow of the river and then comes drifting back to remind us not only of our profligacy, but also of the affective evolving power of materials, and the surprising way in which discarded objects take on another life outside their original use value. Rotting rubber gloves, dessicating plastic, fraying rope, rusting transistor parts, dissolving bone, all doing something on their way to becoming something else. Nietzsche called this flux of matter in continual dissolution and resolution ‘will to power’, and Christoph Cox remarks that for Nietzsche ‘the operations of will to power are as evident in the procedures of chemical reaction and bonding, as they are in organic growth and competition, artistic creation and interpretation.’’(Cox 2011,152)

I hold a shard of bone in the palm of my hand. The weight of water has evaporated leaving a hollow walnut like carapace of burnished sepia tinged with chestnut brown. A miniature cranium. It almost floats it is so light, lined on the interior with a delicate tracery of trabecular channels which once held marrow and stem cells. Within the halo of my attention the object seems to metamorphose, coming out of itself; the ghost of the dead animal draws back and allows an architectural vitality to emerge, which is as vividly palpable as the once fleshly living animal. Once my hand is exposed to the shard of bone it seems to act as a conduit to transmit a power of affection, reminding me that I have something of these mineral shards inside me. Feeling this, I have the sensation of being strangely turned inside out.

Manuel De Landa again tells us

The human endoskeleton was one of the many products of

[…] ancient mineralization. Yet that is not the only geological infiltration that the human species has undergone. About eight thousand years ago, human populations began mineralizing again when they developed an urban exoskeleton: bricks of sun-dried clay became the building materials for their homes, which in turn surrounded and were surrrounded by stone monuments and defensive walls. This exoskeleton served a purpose similar to its internal counterpart: to control the movement of human flesh in and out of a town’s walls. The urban exoskeleton also regulated the motion of many other things: luxury objects, news, and food [...] cities arise from the flow of matter-energy, but once a town’s mineral infrastructure has emerged, it reacts to those flows creating a new set of constraints that either intensifies or inhibits them. (De Landa 2000, 26)

Travelling to and from the river’s foreshore as the months pass, my fluctuating preoccupationwith bone casts the environment in a certain light, as if a quality of bone is infiltrating the leaden city skies, the granite and clay underground caverns and the huge glass and steel monoliths. The soft and yielding bodies of strangers moving through the dusty air are each sustained by an invisible architecture of bony fibres. On the south bank at Greenwich stand the stone monuments of the Old Royal Naval Hospital and the Royal Greenwich Observatory, designed to celebrate Britain’s Imperial past and her territorial claim to be at the centre of chronological time through the establishment of the Greenwich Meridian. These historical monuments have become a kind of fossil hardened by history and the powers they exercised largely superseded. On the north bank at Canary Wharf, the brittle cellular infrastructures of the towers dedicated to the ebb and flow of investment capital are themselves vulnerable to infrastructural collapse. Between the two exoskeletons runs the river with its cargo of quickening life and increasing power of inundation, a river whose molecules run through our bodies. The river holds us.

Michael Ann Holly in discussing the romance of writing about objects and images from the past says ‘The objects from the past stand before us, but the worlds from which they came are long gone […] What should we do with these visual orphans?’ (Holly 2009, 64) The shards washed up on the shore at Greenwich did indeed originate in a past world, and scientists use processes of extraction and amplification of the DNA code sealed in the cells of fossil bone to assist in the search for genealogical origins and a placing of them in time. But here, the milieu of the river and its local currents allows them an existence which conjoins with the oozing of the mud, the heat of the sun, and the mineral constituents of the water. Skeletal parts in tune with the time of the river, drift inland, briefly rest and then withdraw. In only intermittent contact with our own transient presence, they resist use value or the pressure to give up their secrets as the residue of dead objects, consigned to the stasis of permanent classification and archivisation.

Rather than following a desire to rescue so called ‘orphans’ from abandonment in order to restore a lost and prefigured past, or resuscitate a presumed ‘dead’ object, can we instead imagine objects from the past as ongoing molecular matter, an energetic and self organizing cluster of singular parts with a rhythm of its own, in conjunction with all the other rhythms the matter comes into contact with? Osteo-material is then no longer trapped in the past as an inert resource for the expansion or security of human knowledge but is a dynamic and affective force responding to powers outside our awareness. While DNA may be proposed as a form of archival storage, biological DNA itself is also a kind of intelligent, self-writing text endlessly redrawing life in dialogue with unexpected environmental influences. This is a power which although our source being, has capacities which lie outside our human centred horizon of purpose.

It is the Spring Equinox, a time when the moon is closest to the earth and its gravitational attraction is strongest. The tide is high, mineral shards jostle and regroup. I feel the resonance in my body of this pulling force, just as my act of writing is drawn towards the force of its object. This act of writing is blind, feeling its way towards a material expression. There is a sensation of a stirring up, a shuffling and mingling, a wavering and a scattering. Drifting thoughts in search of expression temporarily settle as words spelt out, but these words can be dissolved and reconstituted, coming together like strings of molecules only to split apart again. Just as wandering cells break down and rebuild bone inside me, the brain itself has plasticity, and is able to reorganise itself by breaking and forming new synaptic connections between cells in a process of autopoeisis.

‘I see a wave breaking upon the limits of the word’ (Woolf 1996,118). once wrote Virginia Woolf. Word-image here echoes the convolution of mind turning over upon itself, of thought as the matter of language and language as the matter of thought. Rather than a fixed visible form, the word-image becomes a molecular catalyst, engendering the movement of desire coming up against the limits of expression.

Neuroscientists have identified what are termed ‘place’ cells in the brain that enable a sense of place and navigation. Such cells may be scattered far apart or close together as part of a 'place field', they have no definitive pattern. These nerve cells are dynamic, constantly adjusting and remapping the field in response to the current location and experience of the body, and are themselves part of a complex circuit that informs place awareness and place memory. The link between neurological awareness as a creative process of spatialising and the embodied act of inscription then becomes a temporal practice of place informed by the place of the writing.

I am back once more, almost a year to the day since I first began to spend time on the foreshore. The archaeologists too are back, busy at their tasks of scrubbing, examining, and recording. On this occasion as on previous visits, I have been accompanied by a video camera which placed on the shingle before me, frames and registers changes in the scene in front of the lens for a limited period of time. The extent of shore revealed at low tide varies and it takes a keen attention to recognize the turn and speed of the incoming flood tide. I am approached by an observant member of the archaeological team who warns me about the rising of the tide which is surprisingly swift in cutting off exit to the embankment. However, it is less my own presence and more the presence of the recording camera placed on the bone littered ground before me, which is in danger of being washed over and pulled into the river. With each passing boat, the disturbance of water in tandem with the incoming current brings the body of the camera into ever closer contact with the river and the risk that it will be engulfed.

The possibility of instrumental dysfunction draws attention to the camera’s situation as agent in the field. While its ocularcentric framing of the spatial field and sensor sampling may be destroyed through the action of the river, the detachment of the optics of the camera from the human eye provokes the thinking of a new relation to the camera, whether or not it is producing image data. While a digital video recording may produce a material register of time understood chronologically, the time of the presence of the camera also manifests a significant interval of duration over and above its mimetic capacity. The performative presence of the camera in the field through the act of its placing is one which is open to contingency and the generation of multiple outcomes, outcomes which may include its designated function but are not limited by it. The camera can act as a holding relation for the exercise of the imaginary rather than being limited by a built in obsolescence and future fossilisation based on its instrumental function.

The exercise of the imaginary as a creative act materialises as a play of interacting elements, processes which are themselves indeterminate, which may increase energies or deplete them. (The current may indeed, overwhelm the camera and carry it away with the bones into the river. The affect of a video image may be forgotten in a stream of discarded abstract data.) Can performative potential draw in that which escapes the camera’s formulated purview? For the camera cannot see itself, just as standing on the foreshore, I cannot see myself and these words cannot read themselves. Does there need to be the production of another surface representation for the charged presence of the camera within the field to generate an image? If the image is not simply a consequence of the camera’s instrumental capacity but instead is a dynamic field we are always already implicated in, then the question becomes not only how I am situated with regard *to*, but also how river, I, writing, camera, are immersed *in* and in contact *with*.

What is revealed is not necessarily made visible, though we may call it an image. What is revealed is a process of mediating experience, (which the ‘I’ may be part of, but is not fully cognizant of), a relational assemblage of material circumstances gathered together which at any one time creates both a practice and an expression of place, as temporal meeting place*.* The expanded field of the image as meeting place allows the ‘I’ a thinking intervalwhich invites a reconsideration of the integrity of self. This is both an ethical and an aesthetic question. As Steven Connor comments, ‘The aesthetic is important partly because it is a way of holding play and disintegration together [...] the aesthetic as quite simply what keeps us alive […] in which a scattering and loss of energies is part of life forces’ (Connor 2002). Such a process involves risk and the possibility of degeneration and loss. The image experienced as a form of active mediation allows a scattering of shards which are never fully assimilated, escaping conclusion and the forced production and reproduction of the same.

No image then, but as affective relation (aisthesis), a drawing of attention to the invisible in the visible, and an acknowledgement of the desire which is the undercurrent of this text. This is the work of art.

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