“The idea of objects having a social life is a conceit I coined in 1986 in a collection of essays titled The Social Life of Things. Since then, I have continued to be engaged with the idea that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations. Thus, today’s gift is tomorrow’s commodity. Yesterday’s commodity is tomorrow’s found art object. Today’s art object is tomorrow’s junk. And yesterday’s junk is tomorrow’s heirloom.”

Arjun Appadurai, 2006

STUDIO DIALOGUES

The idea began with taking this photograph. We were in a small flea market shop on The Lanes in Brighton, one of the only ones open on a non-market day and during the early phase of Covid lockdown easing. The shop was flowing with the usual paraphernalia. Weathered tools from last century's workshops; Sorry looking Royal Doulton porcelain; unspecified fragments of metal; poor quality kitsch frames; identikit furnitures worn out as one's own; a fridge which may or may not belong to the shop owner. We've always been drawn to these kinds of places, with their ambivalent, curiosity driving yet clumsy materiality. What Jane Bennet calls 'vibrant matter'. Overflowing piles of stuff where things tend to cascade onto one another. Messy, informal, with an unruliness to its staging that at least appears to evade composition and discipline. One never knows how long these things have actually been there for, placing them somewhere between alive and obsolete, trash or treasure, commodities and gifts; transient and enduring; and back again.

My eyes lingered over this familiar scene and rested upon a wooden barrel. It was casually propped with various bit parts, a plinth for some worn out fold up chairs, which almost camouflaged its distinction. The trouble with vibrant matter is that it's often apprehended en mass, in piles that one sifts through with a kind of distracted attention. What caught my eye about the barrel? Maybe it was the wear of the wood, which captured a sentiment, texture and atmosphere that has always been present in the matter that attracts us in our work. Maybe it was the surprising scale of this mundane-familiar-yet-not-really object, we now occasionally see as interior décor for public houses, or as faux-vintage ornaments in shop

spaces. I couldn't immediately put my finger on it but I was compelled to take my phone out and capture it. Bring it into our collaborative dialogue, where images are bounced back and forth leading our practice in new directions. The wooden barrel called out for more attention.

"Though Herodotus mentions palm-wood casks used in shipping Armenian wine to Babylon in Mesopotamia, the barrel as we know it today was most likely developed by the Celts. Around 350 BC they were already using watertight, barrel-shaped wooden containers that were able to withstand stress and could be rolled and stacked. For nearly 2,000 years, barrels were the most convenient form of shipping or storage container for those who could afford them. All kinds of bulk goods, from nails to gold coins, were stored in them."

The barrel gave me a particular orientation on Brighton's heritage. The Lanes, where I encountered this barrel, "remain much as they were in the 18th century, when goods were landed on the beach and carried straight up for sale and distribution from shops and inns among the winding alleys and narrow courtyards" . There are stories of smuggling tunnels that run directly beneath the Lanes, conjuring up myths and legends of dank passages and notorious 'gentlemen' rolling barrels of illicit goods to be stashed and transported to London's black market. The economic crisis sparked by Britain's colonial war in America positioned South Coast towns and villages as hives of resistance to rapid taxation, with contraband gin, tea, coffee, salt and spices imported to quench even 'the palate of the poor'.

"Running round the woodlump if you chance to find
Little barrels, roped and tarred, all full of brandy-wine,
Don't you shout to come and look, nor use 'em for your play.
Put the rushwood back again – and they'll be gone next day!"

Rudyard Kipling, A Smugglers Song, 1906

The history of smuggling still evidently has a grip in Brighton and across the south coast, as an object of heritage, of folklore and myth, of branding. One can go on a tour of the Smugglers Tunnels and Myths & Legends of New Brighton. Stop for a pint at The Smugglers pub on Ship Street or a meal at The Smugglers Rest. If you're a local resident become a member of Rottingdean Smugglers, a society that holds annual torch lit parades - "an edgy, noisy, fantastical evening ... of fire, drumming, costume, fireworks and seasonal fayre. A hybrid night of noise and mayhem." This fits into a rich vein of carnivalesque tradition on the south coast dating back to ambiguous origins and steeped in period aesthetics of burning torches, effigies and fireworks. Lewes Bonfire Night Celebrations might have started with the failed Gunpowder Plot in 1605, the commemoration of 17 Protestant martyrs burned at stake during the Reformation, or to warn of the advances of the Spanish Armada . In Ottery St Mary the Gunpowder Plot is similarly mythologised through an age-old tradition of local families carrying lighted Tar Barrels through crowded streets . These traditions are now increasingly recognized, sought after, consumed in Guardian picture galleries, attracting numbers that burst the seams of narrow town streets. As traditions, myths and public rituals, they continue to provide a space for contemporary carnival, a rare public outlet for eccentricity, free interaction and political dissent to take centre stage.

"It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments."

Franz Boas, 1898

What about the barrel itself? Weathered, stained, rusted, grained, graded. Should we ask where it came from? How it ended up there, in amongst the ad hoc paraphernalia of flea market wares? What its journey or circulations were? What it held as a vessel or how it was held as a possession with a certain role or value? Who made it and where? How was it gripped, cut,

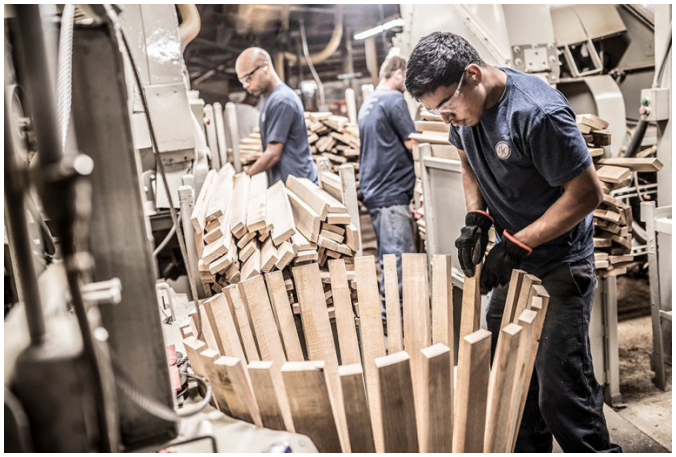
shaped, sanded, fired, bent, bound, rolled, packed, exchanged, emptied, disposed? How many others were crafted by these hands? What other hands held it and when and why?

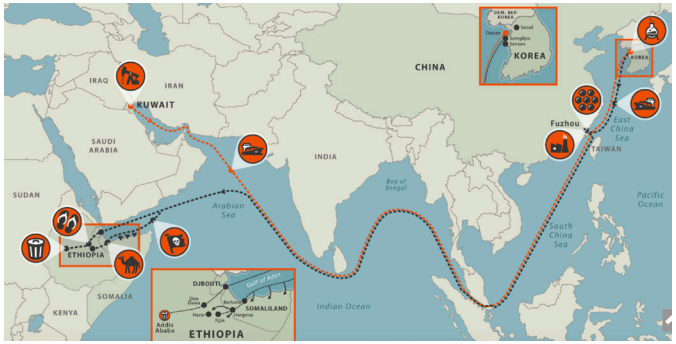
“The idea of the thing itself is a way to capture the stubbornness of the materiality of things, which is also connected to their profusion, their resistance to strict measures of equivalence, and to strict distinctions between the maker and the made, the gift and the commodity, the work of art and the objects of everyday life... the magic of materiality and the unruliness of the world of things. This unruliness thrives on the ephemerality of the artwork, the plenitude of material life, the multiple forms and futures that the social life of things can take, and the hazy borders between things and the persons whose social life they enrich and complicate.”

Arjun Appadurai, 2006

Now we talk about barrels. We find more and more of them and share images over whatsapp messages. Barrels are everywhere. Plastered with promotional stickers and propping up flowerpots in a small pub in Brixton. Sandwiched between three metal stools as a dining station on the promenade of the port town of La Ciotat on the South Coast of France. Large stacks in the forecourt of a warehouse are presented on a thumbnail image advertising the television and film prop company Keeley Hire Ltd. A good friend of ours stands inside a barrel strapped over his shoulders as a costume in an old photograph. The contexts, histories and narratives are expanding, reaching into areas of previously unknown interest.

“If you were an unemployed colonial who wished to learn a trade that guaranteed work, enough to give your family a decent livelihood, then learning the trade of cooper was the way to go.”

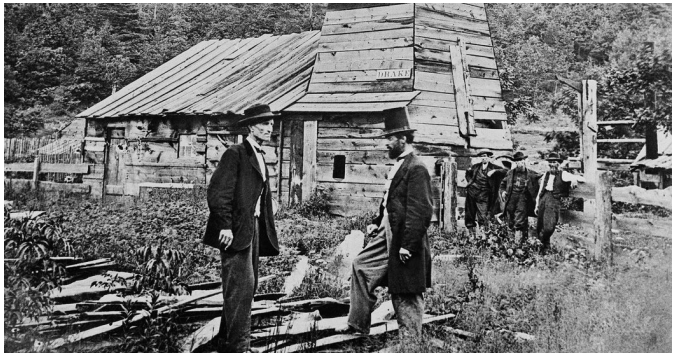


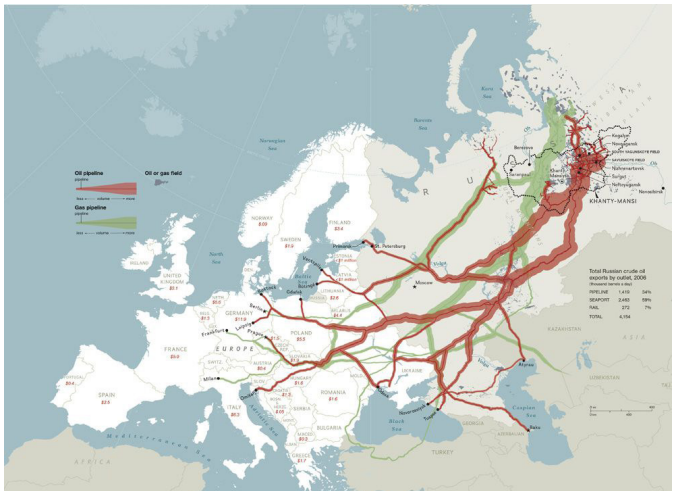


It was somehow surprising to discover that the Cooper trade was the biggest artisan profession during the 17th and 18th century in the West. The Worshipful Company of Cooper's based in the City of London suggests 'origins lost in the mists of time but tracing descent back to 12th century medieval Trade Guilds'. The authority of the guild, to impose regulation and control on the production of barrels, conferred significant power and wealth as the demand for vessels rose with the expansion of sea trade and empire. When encountered in pub gardens propping up pint glasses, it's easy to miss the quiet legacies and social histories of these benign looking objects. Barrels as a primary technology of empire, instrumental in the vast extraction of resources and expansion of capitalist exploitation across the globe. The violence and deep traumas of transatlantic slavery and the enduring legacies of inequality, displacement and racism that persist in those societies that 'developed' from empire's extractions.

"The idea of a social life of things addresses the interactions between human beings and the material world in a way that pays particular attention to the specific reactions elicited by objects. This reflexive relationship in which the existence of people is responsible for the creation of objects and objects are responsible for the creation of the particularities of human existence"

The sociologist Caroline Knowles traces the object biography of a pair of plastic flip flops, "unpacking the lives and landscapes hidden in the plastic" (Knowles, 2015). The task is both sociological and political. Expanding the vantage points from which we might comprehend the vast abstraction that is globalisation by drawing us into intricate stories offered by the perspective of a plastic shoe. Humanising supply chain geographies by following the lives and bodies of its wearers and the trails they walk. We start in Kuwait, with the daily routines of a geologist, a landscape of oil production and the citizens it makes. On an oil tanker we reach South Korea





and the corporate word of multinationals processing raw plastic materials. Manufacturing in China or increasingly Vietnam. Distribution to and through Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia. On reaching ‘globalisations backroads’, a pair of flip flops protecting the feet of a precarious, elderly women who walks miles each day to vend food on the streets in Addis Ababa. Worn out, repaired and finally disposed in landfill to sit dormant for hundreds of years. “From the vantage point of the flipflop trail, globalization looks rather different. It is more fragile and shifting, generating multiple forms of uncertainty in the lives and landscapes it simultaneously sustains and undermines.” (Knowles, 2015)

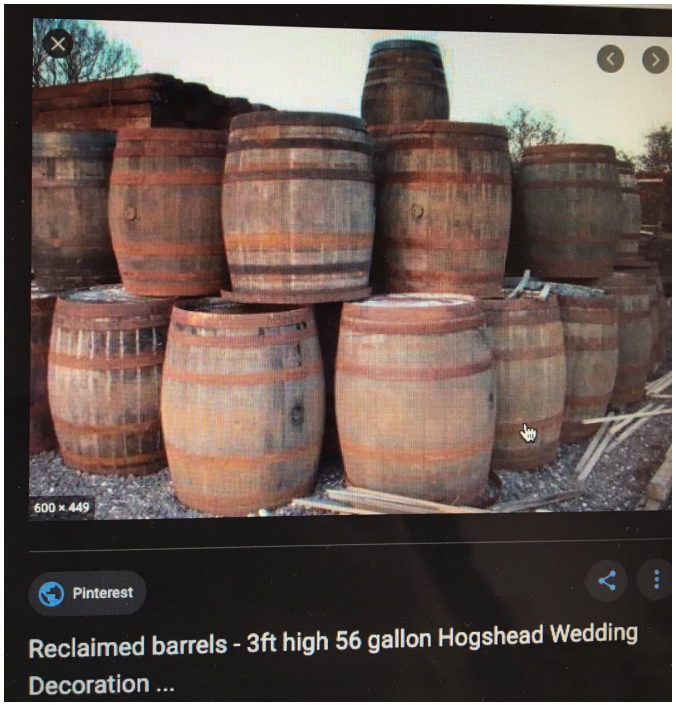
It’s commonplace to talk about a ‘barrel of oil’ even though they are no longer used as the physical container for much of the worlds transport. The 42 US-gallon oil barrel is a unit of measure, an abstraction removed from its material origins in the early Pennsylvania oil fields. “The Drake Well, the first oil well in the US, was drilled in Pennsylvania in 1859, and an oil boom followed in the 1860s. When oil production began, there was no standard container for oil, so oil and petroleum products were stored and transported in barrels of different shapes and sizes. Some of these barrels would originally have been used for other products, such as beer, fish, molasses, or turpentine.” Nowadays oil pipelines run like networks of arteries carving through miles of landscape, connecting global sites of production and their corporate state interests. However, these are not the only markets and barrels of all shapes and sizes continued to be loaded with illicit oil and smuggled from captured fields by Isis to fund their apocalyptic vision of a Caliphate in the Syria.

These slippery relationships of barrels and oil – between material and measure, resource and property, wealth and violence – is possibly what so intrigued artists Christo and Jean Claude in their use of these objects throughout their career. Barrels were used to create an Iron Curtain

blockading the Rue Visconti in Paris, a public intervention as mirror to the divisions and disorder resisting France's colonial suppression of Algerian independence. However, their most ambitious project, conceived for over 40 years and still unrealised, was the creation of an oil barrel Mastaba in the United Arab Emirates. Proposed as the largest sculpture in the world it would feature 410,000 colourfully painted barrels in the form of an ancient Egyptian tomb, and one can't help imagine these barrels as corpses building the blocks of their own burial. A perverse, symbolic commentary on the finitude of a political economy that the IMF predicted, even before coronavirus struck, would exhaust its $2trillion reserves by 2034 .

Barrels have been used as direct vessels of both violence and resistance. Although reportedly used throughout the 20th century, the barrel bomb has come to global attention through their use by Bashar Al Assad's regime during the Syrian civil war. Campaign groups including Amnesty International have produced evidence of the sheer destruction and tragedy of these weapons. Diagrams show the fabrication of these devices and make painfully visible how the barrel itself becomes a deadly shell packed with steel bar and TNT explosives . Their indiscriminate use has been responsible for a substantial part of the hundreds of thousands of deaths from airstrikes during the conflict. Conversely the empty inside of barrels became a site of resistance for African American plantation slaves. It is said that individuals would place their heads inside to hide their laughter from overseers, who would punish any expressions of emotions. "The "laughing barrel" has come to represent the repository of African American humour and the distinctive combination of suppression, resistance, and transcendence that marks African American culture."

Now it's possible to buy old wooden barrels online, even if they still have an active demand in the niches of the whisky and craft brewing industry. There is a whole upcycle economy recirculating oak whisky barrels as



garden planters or landscape features. The barrel in the pub propping up empty beer glasses and cigarette filled ash trays. And we've begun to ask ourselves: What other ways might these old barrels be recycled and reclaimed? What would it look like to 're-cooperate' barrels? To re-make them as sites of social research, artistic practice and critical discourse. What are the object biographies and social histories of barrels? To re-new barrels as vessels – not for beer, wine, rum, flour or cotton - but for carrying traces of empire, trade, heritage and myth. Where would a barrel-trail lead us and what lives and landscapes would it bring to the surfaces?

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