

Treasuring detritus: Reflections on the wreckage left behind by artistic research
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Staging the Wreckage

It is 2006, Rhiannon Jones and Michael Pinchbeck exhibit fragments from their ongoing projects as part of an exhibition at Surface Gallery (Nottingham). Pinchbeck shows 365 mementoes wrapped in brown paper and string from The Long and Winding Road (2004-2009), inspired by the loss of his brother, that involved driving a car around the UK for five years as a vehicle for a one-to-one performance that he presented over 300 times.[{note}]1 Jones shows a film called Archived Actualities that documents her retracing the routes of 1000 scar stories; accidents shared by 1000 members of the public. The collected stories from this project, are used as the starting point for the international project The Art of Conversation,[{note}]2 and resulting design of artistic methodology, The Artistry of Conversation,[{note}]3 for the generation of dialogue.

Jones and Pinchbeck position their work in the gallery so the viewer experiences both at once in a dramaturgy of loss. The mementoes are wrapped digitally with the projected scar stories creating a ‘landscape of emotions’ that is spatially represented (Bruno, 2002: 219). The gallery is transformed into a curatorial Carte de Tendre (de Scudery, 1665), a map of tenderness, through the collision of Pinchbeck’s physical and Jones’ digital wreckage, as detritus from both projects is laid bare. A Carte de Tendre, as Guiliana Bruno describes in Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film (2002), ‘... is a cartographic rendering of intimate experience... an emotional road atlas’ (Bruno, 2002: 244).

This article is the wreckage of their work re-viewed and re-called through the lens of artistic research after 13 years of working both together and apart. Jones studied how dialogue sat on the boundaries of skin, as a frontier concerning both the internal and external world, where the immediate, non-verbal material site of a scar, could be re-considered as an affective stream of dialogic experience, etched into ruptured skin. Jones’ project created a discourse that traced the lines of a scar, and mapped the site of accident. Pinchbeck’s project was concerned with mapping an accident and emotional scars it caused, another Carte de Tendre, a roadmap of loss.

Both artists ask: ‘What remains of personal wreckage after accident, wounding and loss?’ Both projects started journeys of their own, exploring (dis-)embodied memory and how ‘performance marks the body itself as loss’ (Phelan, 1993: 148) or loss marks the body as performance. Both projects were deeply personal in form and content and sat at the intersection between autobiography and what Hill and Paris describe as ‘auto-biology’ (Hill and Paris, 2006: 189). This article proposes that, far from eschewing the detritus of the creative process when engaged in artistic research, it should be treasured. Jones coined the term architactics (Jones, 2016),^{[note]4} which combined the architectural and physical tactics for conversation, to assist the articulation of how dialogue mobilise voices inside and outside of a gallery context.

It is only now on reflection, 13 years since the exhibition, that Jones realises that the film shown was not the finished work, it is no longer enough to outline fragments of intimately shared experiences and anecdotes. The film was a form of wreckage because it was the detritus of conversations. The dialogue that took place between Jones and each member of public was, is, and continues to be, the work. It is from this position that Jones’ work takes a dialogical turn to ask how culture is materially mediated and inscribed within artistic research (St Pierre, 2013: 654). Jones continues to create work that mediates between art and everyday life, orchestrating opportunities for members of the public to become storytellers, to interplay with personal scar story narratives and interface with their own flesh. The notion of physical wreckage has enabled scholarly thinking about how we interact with notions of materiality, body and others.

Pinchbeck and Jones’ work is inscribed by notions of death. The death of a loved one, death of a cell and the regeneration or repair of flesh, of body. The acceptance of wreckage is a continuous re-opening, or re-wrecking. The scar demarcates the rupture and absence of skin, a sense of perforation and loss. Both artists engage with personal histories so that the past can be brought into the present, whether in the form of collected scar stories, wrapped-up parcels or driven and retraced routes of sites of accident. The personal wound, internal and external, acts as ‘... the boundary between life and death, but also refuses to be the boundary and allows life and death to communicate in an alarming space’ (Adams, 1998: 63). That which was destroyed, literally or emotionally, is re-wrecked through artistic research by both artists. Just as a scar is a response to an injury, Jones and Pinchbeck have located methodologies to respond to personal wreckages, to preserve a continuance of a physical expression; of memory, of people, of place.

Wrecking the Stage

Pinchbeck's car project, and the 365 mementoes wrapped in brown paper and string, explored the invisible scars left behind by grief and the literal baggage that makes manifest loss. Projected behind the mementoes was Jones' handheld film, retracing moments of accident and injury. It is here the two projects touched, flickering landmarks of cited accidents, wrapping distorted images on top of brown paper parcels tied neatly with string. The mementoes that were wrapped up lost their emotional charge until they were revealed again during the crushing of the car at the end of the journey, the emotional wreckage becoming literal, memories mangled like the car that housed Pinchbeck's brother's story. In destroying the car at a 'wrecking yard', Pinchbeck was destroying both the vehicle about which the story was told and wrecking the stage on which the storytelling had taken place over 300 times.[{note}]5

The project never ends, like grief, it just changes shape. Like skin cells, that when damaged, restructure and regenerate as a process of scarification. The skin seals flesh in order to preserve. The memory seals loss in order to aid (auto-)recovery. Both projects touch and are touched by skin and memory, abrupt life changing moments that happened to both the artists in mind and body; and that of others. The surface of the car changed, when it was immersed and crushed. The surface of the skin changed, when it was cut and scarred. On reflection, the gallery where the projects collided and overlapped was aptly named for this collaboration, Surface Gallery.

In writing this, both artists reflect on the detritus of their practice, and how in some way, Pinchbeck's car and Jones' scar archive were 'staging the wreckage' of the events that triggered them. Here we explore the act of conversation, in order to ask if objects carry scars like people carry memories. The artists ask what remains after physical and emotional wreckage and propose that instead of seeing this as sediment of loss we should treasure the detritus. Jones now has a collection of artefacts, objects gifted to her, such as; a trainer for the left foot, removed by an air ambulance serviceman, which sits filled with sand, never again to be worn; A pin that held a child's left arm together after a hit and run incident. Conversely, Pinchbeck gifted mementoes to the car on its journey, to the River Mersey, to the 'wrecking yard', to landfill. Among these was a pair of trainers his brother was wearing on the day that he died.

Treasuring the Detritus

It is 2019. Pinchbeck no longer has the 365 mementoes his brother left behind or the car that carried them on their journey. This article seeks value in wreckage and read the ruins of what is left behind. As Tim Etchells, *Forced Entertainment*, writes about the aftermath of an event: ‘Fragments in and of themselves are meaningless. Only by piecing them together can we begin to form a picture of what a performance may have been. The creation of a history is a manipulation of fragments’ (Etchells in Benedetti, 2010: 209). As this too is a manipulation of fragments, a piecing together of our shared history, it is hard to be objective about two projects that memorialise a loved one and that ask others to engage in conversation about moments of pain, scarring and physical change. ‘Thus’ as Walter Benjamin says ‘... the traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel’ (Benjamin, 1999: 91). As such, traces of personal experience of loss cling to this article. For Pinchbeck, The Long and Winding Road has indented and shaped his practice like the indentations of handprints on a clay pot. The vessel was a literal and metaphorical vehicle for the baggage of loss and the journey we take when we lose someone. For Jones, the potter’s handprints that leave marks on the clay vessel act as a metaphor for the haptic nature of conversation and how it leaves a trace on a person. The wreckage of eroding memory implicit in these two auto-biographical projects was embraced by both artists.

There is a road sign in New Zealand, when two roads approach a junction, and where both have right of way. It reads: ‘Merge like a zip’. Both projects attempted to ‘merge like a zip’ the experience of driver and passenger via the mirror, past and present, research and practice, cultural theory and popular culture. Jones continues to collect scar stories, and now she speaks as a contributor as well as collector as she bares a child-birth scar, nicknamed ‘the zip’, marking the past, the present and the future. Sara-Jane Bailes argues that ‘... all invention creates its own demise, which is to say that, invention produces an intrinsic failure whose operative mode is the accident’. She concludes, citing Paul Virilio, that ‘... the accident itself is positive... “Because it reveals something important that we would not otherwise be able to perceive”’ (Lotringer and Virilio, 2005: 63 in Bailes, 2011: 11). In that sense, perhaps these projects reveal the importance of accidents, however traumatic, in revealing what is beyond our perception.

There is an electrical car component designed to kick in after a car accident called the ‘Keep Alive Memory’. For Pinchbeck, the crushed remains of the car he drove in commemoration of

his brother's death, the hundreds of repetitions of recollections of the day on which he died, now over 20 years ago, brought him back to life or, at least, kept alive his memory. For Jones, the act of mapping an individual's scar story, seeing 1000 wounds, created a new form of discourse, that is dialogically, invisibly imprinted into her being. Moments of accident recorded onto fleetingly punctured flesh were woven together with city landmarks, lamp posts, walls, living rooms - now stitched together. The rupturing of flesh, facilitated a re-imagining of '... the body, its embodied relations, and how we imagine and manage them, which is intimately tied to the social: how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world' (Shilling, 2008: 7).

In this rupture, this re-imagining, and re-managing, of our reality, sits our failure to be complete. And in this failure, glistens the detritus that artistic research asks us to treasure. It was in wrecking the stage that Pinchbeck added value to a story that could no longer be told. It was in archiving scars that Jones made skin tissue, that once was wreckage, find its lustre.

Notes

1. The car was later immersed in the River Mersey on 17 May 2009 and then crushed before being discarded in Michael Landy's *Art Bin* (2010). The only criteria for being accepted into Landy's Art Bin was that the work was deemed an artistic failure. Pinchbeck argued that the project had failed to process the loss of his brother and was therefore worthy of acceptance.
2. The Art of Conversation was exhibited at Backlit, Nottingham UK. 22 June – 4 July 2012. Touring exhibition at the University of Georgia, Athens, USA, 25-28 October 2012. Further information here: <https://theartistryofconversation.com/work/the-art-of-conversation/>
3. Artistry of Conversation (2016) is an artistic research methodology designed to facilitate conversations within arts practice for the design of dialogue. It combines performative and architectural theory. It was designed as part of Jones' PhD of the same name from 2010-2016.
4. Architactics aims to make things visible, to see beyond the imprints of one's own environment, emotional and social constructs and to consider what a new materiality of dialogue could be, and how an artist interacts with the body and with others.
5. When the car was immersed in the River Mersey in Liverpool on 17 May 2019, Pinchbeck delivered the following text via a megaphone: 'Thank you for joining me on The Long and Winding Road. This is my car. This is my car history. On the 17 May 2004 I embarked on a journey in a graffiti-covered car from Nottingham to Liverpool. The car was packed with 365 mementoes wrapped in brown paper and string. The journey lasts until the 17 May 2009 when I will drive the car into the River Mersey. It started as a letter. Then the letter became a parcel. The parcel became a suitcase. And the suitcase became a car. This is my car. This is my car history. And this is the end of the road'. A video of the journey to Liverpool, the immersion in the River Mersey and crushing of the car can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/8809660>

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