

GUMMING UP THE WORKS

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I think I only began to notice the volume of chewing gum upon our streets after witnessing attempts to bring about its removal. ^{00:00:08} Heading to a Sheffield bus stop at the end of my working day I found myself diverted around hazard-suited men and hissing steam: at first I imagined a terrible incident—a chemical spill? the aftermath of a crime or some sort of accident?—before realising that all the noise and effort was focused upon scraping mere gum from the pavement. ^{00:00:24}

Thanks to the clean-up, I've become alert to the gum itself. ^{00:00:29} I travel frequently by train, and it is upon leaving station precincts that the sheer quantity really strikes me: radiating out from the exits, the cumulative ejections pock the ground, each sticky surface gathering dirt as keenly as a well-worn Elastoplast. The rail terminus apparently provokes in travellers a collective reflex to void: I tried to observe whether people spat brazenly or surreptitiously littered but I never managed to witness the guilty action; ultimately, it was as if the gum had simply appeared of its own volition, one science-fiction blob propagating another. ^{00:01:01}

I began to investigate the street plaque more closely: I attended to its tonal variety—it ranged from the creamy white highlights of very recently discarded material via a muted infinity of greys through to the sootiest black—and I noted the patterns and distribution of its circular or oval forms against smooth tarmac and rectangular paving. I returned repeatedly to thoughts of analogue black and white photography; perhaps because the subject matter was itself so meagre, the process of image-making seemed to require an elaborate and transformative procedure: I envisaged using a large format view camera, the sort where it is necessary to hide oneself beneath a dark cloth in order to compose the image, framed upside-down, upon a ground-glass screen. ^{00:01:45} My imagination ran on: with the resulting 5" x 4" negatives I would make beautifully modulated prints on weighty silver-rich photographic paper, before selenium or gold toning to ensure their longevity... ^{00:01:58} Whilst I'd initially been attracted to the formal configurations, I think it was something about the visual and alchemical metamorphosis of filthy material into precious metals that sustained my interest. But although the idea was clear to me, and its execution certainly within my technical capability, somehow I never got around to setting up a camera. I made feeble excuses about logistics—since I don't own such kit, I'd have to rent or borrow and without a car to transport the hefty load, the whole thing would be such a palaver to organise. And then there was the location itself—surely not a wise idea to have my head under a cloth amidst the station's hectic throng whilst fiddling with the niceties of focus and exposure on an expensive camera? The fact that either problem

was easy enough to solve with a little help from friends or collaborators but that I failed to do so continued to perplex me. ^{00:02:47}

Across many months I did little other than cogitate, and as I continued to look at the gum, other ideas emerged for its creative translation. For a while, the scatter evoked the relief map of an archipelago of islands in a dark sea, the subtle shifts in colour and elevation suggested for each a unique and strange landscape with curiously varying geology, flora and fauna. Perhaps I could invent their names, imagining what a fictional archaeology might tell me of their supposed history, and thus indicate what future I could dream for them? ^{00:03:18} The trouble was, I repeatedly concluded, this seemed such an over-familiar response: artists are always seeing microcosmic landscapes in everyday places... ^{00:03:26} It had most certainly been done before.

So again I sought alternatives. Sometimes when I stared at the spotty pavement I felt as if my viewpoint had flipped and I was peering instead into murky space, the scene transformed into a dimming cosmic constellation. I considered coating each grubby piece with a transparent, fluorescing paint (though I wasn't quite certain whether such a material even existed) after which I'd illuminate the whole with UV light till the pavement glimmered like the night sky—the stars brought down to earth, so to speak. ^{00:03:57} Although imagination generated the whole thing instantaneously, I knew the reality would involve slow and painstaking work as well as endless negotiation with councils and rail companies about health and safety, access to electricity, and so forth. And what's more, in order to make it happen, the project would surely have to be framed as some kind of commentary about urban degradation, when in fact what exercised me was simply fascination: celebrating gum on the pavement as an aesthetic phenomenon was never going to garner support. ^{00:04:26} Inevitably my enthusiasm waned once more.

In this repeated failure to realise, or even to begin work upon certain ideas, I recognised the affliction common enough amongst creative types, in which one regularly criticises out of existence the projects about which one was at first so excited. ^{00:04:43} Ideas begin to pall: the complexity of realisation seems out of proportion to the modest goal... the work is suddenly recognised as being naïve, self-indulgent, a dull illustration of some philosophical or theoretical truism... or perhaps one discovers that it is far too similar to a work already in existence... The project becomes toxic and is abandoned with relief. What's hard to determine in such circumstances is whether these internal critical voices really have it correct, or whether one ought to discount them and start anyway, trusting that a) some method will be found to deal with the problems or b) that the working-through will itself generate unexpected and previously un-thought possibilities. ^{00:05:22}

At other times there are different obstacles. It's not that one doesn't want to pursue the project, or even that it seems a poor idea, but somehow there's an issue about just getting going. HARRY MATHEWS tells it straight when he acknowledges: 'Like many writers, I often find starting the working day a discouraging prospect, one that I spend much energy avoiding.' 00:05:42 Sometimes it's that things haven't begun as one hoped—here's Mathews again: 'by 10 or 10.30 my day is enshrouded in a cloud of jittery and also resigned hopelessness: I'm not going to get done what I want to get done.' 00:05:54 Or maybe a later appointment impinges upon the headspace one had hoped to clear for the task at hand. GEOFF DYER admits to taking this to quite an extreme: 'it doesn't take much now for me to feel things are intruding on my time. Quite often if I have a dentist appointment at 3 o'clock and I have got up at 9, I feel like, "Well, it's hardly worth doing anything now, is it?"' 00:06:14 In some instances procrastination can even be due to having too many ideas: one doesn't know where to start with them all, the whole seems overwhelming, and the effort of choosing where to concentrate one's efforts is impossible. 00:06:25 And let's not even mention the distractions made possible these days by broadband internet access and social networking... 00:06:32

Ultimately though, I have worked out that my own issues differ from the familiar writerly complaints detailed above. 00:06:39 Most of my own unrealised projects have been artistic rather than written, which could simply be because much of the writing I've done is commissioned and comes with a pressing deadline attached. 00:06:49 It's in my visual practice that I have a creeping sense of pointlessness: why bother to make this thing happen?—an exhibition, say—which will undoubtedly take a good deal of money, materials and effort to accomplish, but will last for a relatively short time and then pretty much 'evaporate', to leave me simultaneously with too little and too much—too little because afterwards it's simply a memory and a one-line entry on a CV; too much because then there'll be a set of prints or objects I'll probably have to accommodate for years. (Many artists' studios are so full of old work that they barely have room to make anything new...) I don't doubt the sensory importance of seeing real work 'in the flesh', rather than its reproduction in catalogues or on the internet, and indeed I'll admit to such an obsession with the materiality and surface of colour photographs that I once asserted I was trying to make prints so gorgeous you'd want to lick them—but I will confess to a general frustration with the exhibition format. Perhaps it is something about the temporal, ephemeral nature of these experiences: I know all too well my own habit of hurtling at speed between shows on my 'to see' list, where I doubtless miss the nuances to which I ought to attend. Or else it's that I'm troubled by my own desire to permanently possess the works—or at least the ones that interest or move me—and to somehow monopolise their attention. Had I the money, maybe I would become

a collector squirreling away my purchases for individual delectation in Hearst Castle-like isolation; it's just as well then that I don't. 00:08:13

Sometimes I think I ought to turn away from art and concentrate wholly on writing instead. 00:08:17 But I know quite clearly that even a moment pondering this is pointless and merely time-wasting because I've a host of these binaries going on in my head—between writing and art, theory and practice, doing and teaching, imagination and analysis, amateur and professional, urban and rural... I could go on. In thinking through this recurrent 'conceptual binarism' what I've finally realised is that I always want both, and I seem to enjoy (perversely) the state of being in a quandary. 00:08:45 This is all well and good in theory—but in practice it brings its own difficulties. When I'm writing, a frustration starts to emerge that I'm not photographing; when I'm working with images, I feel guilty not to be dealing with words. 00:08:57 If I attend to the practicalities of learning my technical craft, I have to forego time that could be spent getting to grips with some matter of theoretical complexity or *vice versa*. In the end, I always dither and worry tiresomely about whatever aspect I'm not then working upon.

As a result, I have had to acknowledge that I'm incredibly slow at any sort of significant production. Whilst my visual work usually begins with an short burst of image-taking—maybe a day or two of intense photography—I soon have to stop because it's as if I'm filled up with images and suffering from a kind of photographic nausea; and once images are gathered then a prolonged period of critical digestion is necessary before I'm at all sure what to make of or with them. Admittedly, when I first review the photographs I've taken, I make three immediate designations—there's the apparently successful picture, those with possibility, and then a host of misfires I can't wait to discard—but I've learnt not to trust my initial judgement at all, and instead to set the pictures aside—often for many months, and sometimes even for years. Many of the things I initially believed to be exciting have waned in their effect, whilst others I'd overlooked—probably because they weren't quite what I intended when I took them—have now assumed a surprising fascination: it's as if I hadn't been able to see what might be of consequence. Sometimes the significance of a photograph only emerges because of its relationship with an image taken subsequently, or when it is paired with one taken years before. 00:10:20 When it comes to my working with words, the process is equally time-consuming: although I can deliver a review to a deadline and with a precise word count, when it comes to what I think of as serious writing for my own agenda, then it's grindingly slow. I inch forward so that a paragraph is squeezed out over the course of several of days and then—across months or even *years*—is subsequently edited, re-edited, re-punctuated, the sentence structures re-worked incessantly. Because I write relatively short

pieces rather than, say, working on a book-length text — I end up rereading each time what I've produced and tinkering with it until its errors have (hopefully) been eradicated. 00:10:59 My pace is limping and slow, so that the reader may (eventually, I hope) glide smoothly on.

Appropriately enough for the theme of this current publication I've increasingly come to describe this creative process as a sort of chewing over and fiddling. 00:11:14 I find it hard to articulate exactly what's going on when I'm working with words or pictures but there's a sort of physical and conceptual mastication, pushing material this way and that, trying to discover what nameless shapes and textures it might possess. Often it's apparently unproductive labour, taking things apart and trying to fix them in some way or just shifting stuff around without making much progress. It is one step forward, and then at the very least, half a step backwards; indeed, at times the activity leaves me exactly where I started as I undo the day's failed work, and sometimes I'm in even more of a muddle than I was at the outset. This fiddling about with the very material of writing is essential, though, for me to get to the moment when an idea finally takes flight and things begin unexpectedly to connect. 00:12:01

As I work, my mind wanders in and out of the activity, sliding between concentration and distraction such that both states seem equally valid to progression. In this state I begin to realise how fascinated I've become with the human propensity for tinkering. 00:12:17 We fiddle absentmindedly with blu-tack as we sit at an office desk, roll and re-roll the sweet wrappers we find in our pocket, whiling away the time till our bus is due, and we squish crumbs we find on the dinner table between thumb and forefinger as we chat after a meal. It strikes me that there's something about eating or drinking that seems especially conducive to this sort of activity — perhaps it even aids our digestion: witness how pub-goers fold crisp packets into triangular packages or tie them in little knots, and how at rather grander social occasions some fashion small chairs from the wire and metal used to cap champagne corks. We tend to fiddle when preoccupied with conversation — people habitually doodle or play with their hair when on the telephone; we pick at our nails, or twist loose threads on our clothing when we're nervous in an interview; and when we're bored by an interminable meeting or stuck in an endless queue, a paper clip provides a welcome diversion to the creeping ennui. Maybe our hands mess about whilst our heads are thinking of something else?

The 2011 *Undone* exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds revealed the phenomenon at work within contemporary art. FRANZISKA FURTER showed *Chlumpä*, a crystalline ball of around five centimetres in diameter, which had been made by repeatedly knotting nylon thread 'without any plan or idea where it would go' during the breaks she took from a series of very labour-intensive

drawings, and NAYLAND BLAKE's wire and chain assemblages were made, he said, in a 'touching-the-thing-and-fiddling-with-it, additive way'. 00:13:48 Such a process reveals a different facet of artistic intentionality, where it is about allowing a process and recognising the import of what one has produced, rather than explicitly setting out to do something in particular. This was manifest too in another Leeds show, *Out of My Mouth: The 'Photosculptures' of Alina Szapocznikow*, which brings me back to the gum with which I began. Presenting work made by the artist in 1971, its accompanying text described her realisation whilst chewing gum that 'an extraordinary collection of abstract sculptures was passing through my teeth'. Like Furter, her realisation came whilst attending to something else — she was polishing a marble sculpture — but once she had noticed the variety of these ephemeral productions, she decided to explore their possibilities and went on to photograph the curious collection of objects her mouth and fingers had more or less accidentally created — the little monoliths, etiolated bodies, cupped and shell-like forms, strange loops anchored at either end by more solid masses... Later, she helpfully advised: 'Keep chewing, look around you' — surely excellent advice for any artist? 00:14:57

Maybe it's something about the plasticity along with its capacity for getting stuck onto/into things, but gum has seemed especially amenable to art practice. JASPER JOHNS, for example, recounts how a story he'd heard as a child in which someone had repaired an aeroplane with chewing gum, had inspired him to affix objects to his paintings. Some years later, Johns takes the multifarious uses to which gum can be put as a metaphor for the conceptual malleability of artworks themselves: 'Publicly a work becomes not just intention, but the way it is used. If an artist makes something — or if you make chewing gum and everybody ends up using it as glue, whoever made it is given the responsibility of making glue, even if what he really intends is chewing gum.' 00:15:43

A variety of contemporary artists have appreciated its physical and conceptual possibilities: GARETH WILSON's 2009 sculpture *Joy to the World* — featuring a pair of tiny runtish dogs, one of which is squatting as if about to defecate — is fabricated from an abject muddle of gum and human hair, whilst FRANZ WEST's *Chewed Gum* involved a thin disc of the stuff rolled out onto a gallery window, its pinkish mottle evoking the fleshy sample of an enlarged pathology slide; and in a neat little play upon its supposed indigestibility, KEVIN VON AEIST once constructed a model digestive system out of variously coloured gum. 00:16:21 That gum is 'low' matter, an everyday product and not therefore 'proper' material for art-making, and that it comes complete with oral and even sexual connotations, has no doubt suggested its use in a variety of art practices concerned with the body. 00:16:36 For her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* HANNAH WILKE crafted it into clitoral and vaginal appendages and applied them to her body so that they

appear as little growths or scars. LISA K. WATTS meanwhile, softened great quantities of gum—too much to chew, she needed to enlist her partner’s help to pummel and stretch it by hand in bowls of water—before adhering the sticky clods between her breasts and a large academic book: during the performance of the *Book of G*, she gradually lowers the book away from her naked body, drawing out the gum into elastic filaments until it snaps comically and her body is freed from the book’s clutches. 00:17:12

Perhaps as a consequence of these artists’ practices, I’ve found myself thinking a lot about the aesthetics of gum. Whilst I found an unexpected beauty in the tonal scatter on urban pavements, I realised that I did not feel quite the same about gum’s presence elsewhere. When I travel by train I seem doomed to find a lump of the stuff—chewers repeatedly use the same hideouts: blobs are squashed surreptitiously at the side of the seat, or they’re rolled into neater balls and carefully balanced towards the rear of the armrest belonging to the seat in front; worst of all, they’re sometimes hidden within the tray, only to be revealed as I flip it open so I can set down my coffee. It’s turned into a kind of obsession: I don’t want to look, yet I’m unable to help myself—my eyes wander of their own volition to the gum’s familiar haunts, and once I’ve seen it, I can’t stop myself from staring. Impossible to ignore, I scrutinise the cream, grey or pinkish lumps I encounter. I note the precise colours, the tooth marks and the varied contaminants (hairs, fluff, specks of dirt, the remnants of other food...) but most of all—like Szapocznikow—I remark their very diversity of form: akin to snowflakes, none it seems are quite the same.

Thanks to my regular meetings with the train gum, I’ve found myself increasingly preoccupied with the conceptual category of the ‘lump’. 00:18:32 The OED tells us that it designates, ‘a compact mass, especially one without a definite or regular shape.’ I explored its synonyms: there is of course the idea of a piece of material, communicated through words like block, wedge, slab, cake, nugget, ball, brick, cube, pat, knob, clod, wad and hunk; wetter stuff is suggested in dollop, glob, gobbet and gob; and then there’s the sense too in which it refers to a swelling, bump, bulge, protuberance, protrusion, growth, outgrowth, nodule or hump... Whilst some of these are certainly desirable (a slab of chocolate cake, a hunk of bread with a pat of butter, a nugget of gold...) lumpiness is generally a pretty negative state; it describes a sauce gone wrong, inelegant attire and—worse—pathological connotations of accident, illness and tumour (a bump on the head, a dose of mumps, a cancerous growth.) It seems lumps are often accidental or precede acts of crafting: they come about inadvertently—one doesn’t set out to get lumps in one’s sauce—and suggest a raw material, yet to be transformed—a lump of clay rather than a delicate cup. 00:19:47 I begin to wonder if the recurrent presence of the lump in recent art offers a third term to Adrian Stokes’ formal distinction between the practices of carving and modeling? 00:19:57

I considered the lumps I ordinarily encounter. In certain upmarket cafés there are bowls containing those satisfyingly irregular nuggets of brown sugar, whilst bars offer wonky miniature boulders of ice (surely ‘cube’ is a misnomer here); there’s the rubbery adhesive used to stick free cd compilations onto the cover of music magazines—my partner rolls it into snotty balls, and often, after having me close my eyes and stretch out my hand as if I might expect a gift, he presses the cold gloop into my palm for a joke; at work there are wads of blu-tack, which gather lint and paperclips in my desk drawer; and outdoors muddy clods accrue to the soles of my boots as I traverse wet ground in winter, whilst bony nodules of flint rise inexorably from the chalk bedrock beneath my allotment.

But it seems to me that it’s bodies of various sorts that have a special propensity for lumpiness, and for the generation of lumpish material. Some people worry incessantly about their lumpy thighs or dimpled belly fat, believing that one dietary regime or another will rid them of this terrible ‘cellulite’. Many animals have protuberances: horses have ergots and chestnuts—both vestiges of evolutionary toes—and some goats have wattles, bells, or ear bobs, which have long exercised an almost erotic fascination for me. Strange bodily productions include the equine *milt*, a fibrous substance rather like a piece of meat or a small liver, which is to be found inside a foal’s mouth at birth: brown in colour and about three inches by four in size it is thought that the milt prevents fluid from entering the foal’s lungs whilst in the womb; it is ejected after birth. Then there’s the bezoar, a lump found trapped in the oesophagus, large intestine or trachea of humans and other animals; often formed from hair (a trichobezoar) or indigestible plant material (phytobezoar), they were once thought to be medicinally powerful and able to act as universal antidotes to poison. (J. K. Rowling even borrowed the bezoar’s magical properties for her Harry Potter books.) 00:21:58 Most commonly of all though, bodies expectorate gobs of spit, produce balls of snot to be dug from our noses, and shit chunky stools...

In fact, excrement is probably the lumpiest stuff I can think of: whilst there’s the chocolate-drop scatter of rabbits and sheep on short moorland turf or the piles of neatish briquettes produced by ponies, surely the most definitively lumpy is the dog log that fractures into nodular sections as it is expelled. I’ve often wondered if it would be possible to take a photograph of dog shit and make it look beautiful—after all, we’ve learnt to transform so many ugly things through differing acts of attention, just recall the furled detritus of BRASSAI’S *Involuntary Sculptures*. Were one to discover a pile of Mr Whippy-style poo, rising to an almost elegant curlicue, I think black and white photography could just about transfigure it, but the dismembered chunks we find in parks and pavements remain pretty irredeemable: KEITH ARNATT’S full-colour picture of a vertical lump of reddish

dog shit, deposited onto a perfect lawn (and against a backdrop of orange nasturtium flowers) perfectly catches the true aesthetic horror. ^{00:23:07} When I got into conversation with a dog-owning friend about the subject, however, I discovered a very different focus upon the formal properties of canine poo: for them, the Arnatt example would be perfect—its ‘pickupability’ is the key—because a good turd is simply one that is neither too liquid nor too scattered, and thus can be cleanly scooped from the ground. Even the medical profession attends to the aesthetic categorisation of faecal forms: seven distinct types are identifiable, it seems, through the designations of the Bristol Stool Scale; these range from hard lumps to the entirely liquid. ^{00:23:41}

Aesthetics and excrement are then far from unrelated. Indeed, some of the students with whom I work are very keen to describe a lot of contemporary art as shit, and in a 2008 essay, which surveys works from the early twentieth century onward, it appears that critic DONALD KUSPIT concurs. ^{00:23:57} As *The Triumph of Shit* makes evident, contemporary art is full of the stuff and he lists a plethora of artists who’ve shown a preoccupation with it in their work: Paul McCarthy of course, and Piero Manzoni, as well as Serrano, Picasso, Dali and Duchamp. ^{00:24:12} Whilst he has some sympathy for those who sought inspiration and materials in trash, which he figures as shit’s substitute (Vincent van Gogh, Bauhaus instructor Johannes Itten, Hans Albers...), he is scathing about what he views to be certain artists’ nihilistic, narcissistic, masturbatory fixation with shit itself: McCarthy and Serrano are singled out for particular criticism. Kuspit says that whilst it was once ‘subversive, transgressive, provocative, shocking, revolutionary’ to use shit in artworks, and whilst more recently ‘shitty rubbish has been rationalized as “institutional critique” and “cultural intervention,” marks of theoretical distinction [...] in acknowledgement of the avant-garde’s supposedly great social impact and ongoing influence,’ in reality today none of this has any effect, ‘since it has become [...] socially tolerable’ and has thus been co-opted into the advanced capitalism which defines so much contemporary art (Kuspit inevitably remarks the Freudian proximity of money and shit...) ^{00:25:12} His concluding paragraph includes a quotation from psychoanalyst HANNA SEGAL: ‘the artistic product is put forward as self-created faeces, with a constant terror that one’s product will be revealed as shit.’ Kuspit seems to believe that this has indeed come to pass. ^{00:25:27}

I’m far less exercised than Kuspit about the amount of shit to be found in art. To me, faeces of various sorts are just matter in the world; excrement is a fact of life and it seems reasonable enough to take an interest in the stuff. I do, however, have sympathy with his critique of those who seek only shock or transgressive effect, which frankly seems the least interesting approach of all. Whilst Kuspit gets especially irate about ANDRE SERRANO’s photographic series *Shit: An Investigation*, in reality its

picturing of a variety of faecal species against bright, multi-coloured backgrounds isn’t at all disquieting—if anything, the images and their titles are merely amusing (he offers Hairy Shit, Tough Shit, Colourful Shit, Simple Shit, Heroic Shit, Evil Shit, Stupid Shit, Light Shit, Yellow Shit, Good Shit, Bad Shit, Bull Shit, Hieronymous Bosch Shit, Romantic Shit and Deep Shit.) ^{00:26:21} I’m more perturbed that we think so rarely about the productions of our body; for the most part we only properly attend to our own excrement when there is something wrong—when we’re ill, constipated or suffering from diarrhoea, when we’ve eaten something that changes its colour alarmingly, when the lavatory is blocked or there’s no loo roll...

The late GILLIAN ROSE was admirably direct about the subject in her memoir *Love’s Work*. She wrote: ‘I need to remove the discourse of shit from transgression, sexual fetishism, from too much interest, but equally from coyness, distaste and the medical text book.’ ^{00:26:54} Having had to undergo a colostomy procedure during her treatment for cancer, she describes the sudden visibility (to herself) of her own excretion now it has been relocated via a stoma, which provides a ‘surrogate rectum and anus’ situated ‘a few millimetres from the centre left of my abdomen, just below the waist.’ ^{00:27:14} She describes what she sees: ‘Deep brown, burnished shit is extruded [...] in a steady paste-like stream in front of you: uniform sweet-smelling fruit of the body, fertile medium, not negative substance.’ ^{00:27:28} WIM DELVOYE’s installation *Cloaca* also made explicit the relentless digestive/excretive process in action. For this piece a chef prepared two fine meals a day and these were then passed through a giant blender, mixed with water, and poured into six jars filled with acids and enzyme liquids, mimicking the bodily activity; the installation then produced genuine looking human turds each day. According to one review: ‘The atmosphere suggested a hospital equipped for a strange experiment—the birth and care of a machine that eats and defecates—a mechanical baby. “Hi,” it seemed to say, “I’m almost like you.”’ ^{00:28:06}

I realise I’ve probably been talking shit for too long and I guess I need to think what brought me here. Whilst the current essay was occasioned first by my noticing the gum on our streets, it very quickly generated a need to chew over the reasons why certain ideas never quite found a form, or have taken so long to realise. I suppose it’s not all that surprising then that I have ended up obsessing so much about form and its lack, as well as mastication, digestive transit and excremental productions of various sorts: I realise now that—of course!—I’ve been seeking ways to conceptualise the processes of research, analysis, experimentation and reflection, which comprise my creative and critical practice.

Since my undergraduate art education, where I learnt that making things could not (should not?) take place without a sustained process of research, I’ve become increasingly preoccupied with ideas of critical and creative sustenance,

with ingestion and assimilation. Having understood that I ought to nourish myself with reading and looking, I developed a habit of libraries, bookshops, galleries, screenings and lectures, from which I set about gathering material in sprawling notes, a proliferation of photocopies (in the era before the internet) and through the marginal annotation of books I'd purchased; these days, that analogue diet is also augmented by web searches, social media and the acquisition of digital files. I took very literally the injunction that I needed to understand the contexts in which I write and make, such that now I am unable to say anything without lengthy research; sometimes this approach seems entirely counter-productive to creativity—there's always another thing to read or look at before I can get on with my own making. It's rather wearying and I frequently feel a bit gummed up by it all.

I've been trying to fathom what's going on here. Is this research a devious mechanism for delaying the actual work, virtuously gathering rather than entering the complexities of production? Or is the research a kind of hobby and my writing merely the compulsion to share treasured discoveries, as certain collectors bore others with the minutiae of their recent acquisitions? I suppose I am a collector of sorts: as a viewer or reader, I'm always on the hunt for 'useful' material and though I'll admit I don't know in advance quite what I'm looking for, I certainly know when I've found it. (Maybe I can discover an apposite idea related to something I've already been pondering; or it might be an unexpected insight that sets me onto entirely another creative path; at times it's the conceptual equivalent of something shiny catching my eye, something so beautiful or intriguing that I determine to work it into a project. ^{00:30:47}) And I suspect this tendency to hunt and gather is exacerbated by my role as a university lecturer, as I'm also on the lookout for material that may assist or interest my students....

At my most feeble I suppose I see the research as reassuring because it enables me to realise—yes—that other more 'significant' people have also thought this thing too. (It can, also have a deadening effect, as when I discover that something I'd believed to be innovative is instead a tired remnant of another's thought.) At my strongest, I consider myself to be engaging in a proper intellectual dialogue with important ideas and thinkers, but sometimes I fear I'm simply banging on about personal fascinations, and that my research and writing mimics the collector's compulsion to acquire all the possible examples of a particular thing. Is it that I hope to prove to others, through the sheer quantity of material I've gathered, that a particular concept has some significance? ^{00:31:41} The trouble is, these archives of ideas, quotations and images fail to keep their focus—my mind/eye is too easily caught by something else and yet another accrual begins; projects spiral out of control, and the field widens rather than deepening (as academia

suggests it ought.) I tell myself that it's a question of curiosity, that what motivates me is always just over the horizon, and that the divergence sustains—indeed *increases*—my interest in the world. I reach for LOUIS MACNEICE's famous lines: 'World is crazier and more of it than we think / Incurably plural.' ^{00:32:17} Yes. Maybe that's it. Or else it's just the relentless butterflying of my mind, and I ought to get a grip.

At those times when I wonder if matters are getting out of hand, I think I ought to seek some assistance in moderating my desire to gather. Cluttergone, an organisation devoted to helping those whose homes are getting out of control, has developed a useful vocabulary for the features they commonly find: on their website I note the use of 'clutter', 'clots' and 'clogs' as well as several terms relating to blockage and digestion. ^{00:32:50} These words resonate for me—creatively speaking—describing aspects of research, making and writing as much as the difficulty of managing a proliferation of stuff. That the artist's accumulative process can be both positive *and* pathological is inherent in artist ZOE MENDELSON's project *This Mess is a Place*, where her recognition of the gathering, sifting and editing within her own making process led her to explore hoarding as a problem. ^{00:33:16} Mendelson asserts that, 'Fine Art embraces clutter and disorder as a tendency within practice (across media—from collage to performance to installation) and exploits it both commercially and critically.' Her recognition of the messiness of art-making evokes IAN BUCHANAN's comments in reference to Francis Bacon that, 'the clutter of the studio is somehow necessary to the production of [...] images, either as a kind of relief from their starkness, or perhaps as their residue. The studio would in this latter regard be something like the work's midden mound, the product of an aesthetic abreaction displacing clutter from the canvas onto the floor and walls of the studio. It's as if to 'unclog' (a favourite word of Bacon's) the virtual space of the canvas Bacon had to 'clog' the actual space of his studio.' ^{34.04}

I look from the screen—where this text is being produced—to my desk, and remark that there's scarcely enough room for me to move my computer mouse amidst the material that litters its surface. The various things I've collected accrue in analogue actuality: books, papers and images rise upon my desk to form prodigious heaps and protrude dog-eared from filing cabinets, whilst digital folders swell with images, and documents with notes and citations. I don't like to put things away whilst I'm working with them; often, the publications and papers I've had to relocate—in order to actually operate my computer or consult new material—linger on the floor in teetering piles beside my chair. ^{00:34:47} In TROLLOPE's novel *The Claverings* this practice is limited to single men: 'The big table near the fireplace was covered with books and papers, and, alas, with dust; for he had fallen into that terrible habit which prevails among bachelors, of

allowing his work to remain ever open, never finished, always confused, with papers above books, and books above papers, looking as though no useful product could ever be made to come forth from such chaotic elements.’^{00:35:13} I’d like to imagine it is a curious species of gender equality to have achieved a similar effect in my twenty-first century flat.

But lest I get too overwhelmed, psychoanalyst ADAM PHILLIPS’ essay *Clutter: A Case History* considers what a messy bedroom, an untidy studio or a disorganised desk might mean, or rather ‘do’, for the person doing the cluttering. Ultimately Phillips asserts: ‘In clutter you may not be able to find what you are looking for, but you may find something else instead, while you are looking for it’^{00:35:44} This forms a pleasing echo of JACQUES RANCIÈRE’s remark in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*—which argues against a master’s pedagogic explication in favour of independent exploration—that: ‘Whoever looks always finds. He doesn’t necessarily find what he was looking for, and even less what he was supposed to find, but he finds something new to relate to the thing that he already knows’^{00:36:05} I think such a willingness to make connections between disparate matters probably preceded my time at art school (indeed it seems to have been with me from the earliest years of my life) but thankfully there too I was allowed a skewed take upon existing canons of knowledge, encouraged to read texts or artefacts against their grain and to creatively repurpose what I found. I roamed at will, pursuing recondite passions or plucking rarely consulted books from library shelves purely because my interest had been piqued by the colour of their spine or an especially curious title. My art education gave me the confidence (eventually) to follow my nose and a sense that what I encountered was malleable, susceptible to recombination, and to yielding unexpected insight or poetry... As a result I may lack a ‘proper’ intellectual training, and I’m probably a bit too eager to find the something else, the something new to relate to something I already know, rather than following an idea through as I ought, but I’m not sure I’d have it otherwise.^{00:37:05}

Neither would, I think, the professor of theatre WILLIAM DAVIES KING, who tells a similar story. He acquired—‘haphazardly’ he says—his grounding in classics, Shakespeare, Donne and Emily Dickinson, but in reality he ‘loved to wander through bound volumes of American Lumberman from the 1940s, Saunier’s *Modern Horology*, and Eric Dingwall’s *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena* (four vols.)’^{00:37:31} King tells how his reading, ‘became about not reading something that I should be reading.’ Instead, he is all at sea: ‘My reading went athwart the university’s hull’, he says.^{00:37:42} And having gone astray reading books stored deep in the inner stacks, he reflects that, ‘I lost and found myself in remote topical aisles of scholarship-wreck.’^{00:37:51} Whilst King’s study *Collections of Nothing* repeatedly attends to the pathologies underlying such reading, ultimately his wayward

exploration seems to have enabled him to progress beyond the well-trodden pathways of ‘regular’ education.^{00:38:06}

King identifies himself as a collector—of books and ideas, certainly—but also of a massive array of product packaging: his memoir lists all the kinds of tuna fish for which he has labels, and describes how his archive includes those from a host of other canned goods—cat food and blueberries for example—as well as diverse varieties of cereal box. He goes on to admit how he also gathers pin badges, “Tamper-evident seal” stickers, varieties of envelope lining, business cards, self-help affirmations...^{00:38:37} He recognises that collectors, whether of physical or conceptual material, ‘all occupy a [...] space that is the enlarged but displaced sense of self.’^{00:38:46} King’s collection is heterogeneous, relentless and he is full of internal oppositions about its progress: ‘The bigger the collection gets, the harder it is to keep. The bigger the collection gets, the more completely it represents me and my history, and the more I feel oppressed by it. The bigger the collection gets, the more extraordinary and “valuable” it is, and the more I mourn the thousands of hours spent assembling it. [...] I love this collection and hate it, and I keep it because it expresses me, though rudely. It is a poor collection wishing it were rich.’ He concludes: ‘It is a burgeoning collection full of emptiness. It is a collection of nothing. That is my title, and I am its lord, its consumer and author and subject and victim.’^{00:38:32}

King’s ambivalence about the status of his collection, and the sense of him being simultaneously in control and at the mercy of his material, is also manifest in his discussion of its shittiness. He reflects on the analytic literature about collectors via WERNER MÜNSTERBERGER’S *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* which insists: ‘It is certain that a child’s early experiences with excretory functions have an influence later on the adult’s ways of giving and taking, of holding back or letting go. Building up “heaps of things” in a collection or piling up money or amassing rubbish such as old newspapers, empty beer cans, or discarded umbrellas, in addition to equally useless items [...] often clearly and quite understandably functions as a bulwark against deep-rooted uncertainties and existential dread.’^{00:40:20} He says wryly: ‘In the end I have a lot of it (rhymes with “shit”), not just books, but heaps of notes and drafts and gallery proofs, and soon there will be a pile of copies of this book’.^{00:40:32} Looking across my desk, and at the piled shelves in my flat, I know just how he feels...

But there are other ways of thinking about the shittiness of stuff, and to do so I need to return to that word ‘midden’, which cropped up earlier in relation to Bacon’s studio. Where I grew up in the North East of England it was a term commonly used for the heap upon which we flung the animal shit cleared from stables and byres. Here the muck would be left to rot down for a year or so until it had transformed into compost and could be liberally

applied to garden or fields. Thanks to this, and to my subsequent years of allotment cultivation when accruing heaps of manure and of kitchen and garden waste forms an essential aspect of soil improvement, I've inevitably come to view the piles on and around my desk, along with the documents accruing within my computer, as a sort of creative composting. ^{00:41:22} In each case, different materials are stacked together, and through time—and the application of a variety of 'digestive' processes—they render into new and fertile compounds; elements are collected and brought into generative proximity, and the sorting, writing and making become akin to turning the heap, speeding the transformation by the introduction of some critical air. ^{00:41:44} I may well have 'deep-rooted uncertainties and existential dread'—and who doesn't?—but ultimately my holding on to a collection of things is, I think, because of what they can *produce* rather than what fearful situation they might hold back.

This material goes through a labour-intensive process in order to effect its transformation. As I sequence photographs and develop essays—on the computer, on paper, on the surface of my desk—I start to organise and reorganise the contents of my heaps, hoping to put like with like or make useful conjunctions, but there's always plenty that won't fit and spills uncomfortably from any category. Some things are maddeningly promiscuous and want to be in several places at once, whilst other material seems important to what I'm doing, but doesn't (yet) connect to anything, however hard I try to force it. MARCEL BÉNABOU articulates such difficulties in his discussion about sorting the cards upon which he has taken notes: 'I am incessantly starting over: I move the cards from one pile to another, I break up piles to create other ones that satisfy me no more than the ones that came before. It is an interminable tavern puzzle, a form of solitaire whose rules I would not know how to explain?' ^{00:42:56} He has it exactly right, I think, that piecing together one's material is puzzling, but that there are indeed rules for how it must be done—albeit ones that somehow evade rational explication. At times it seems a jigsaw, though without the benefit of any picture from which to work; sometimes it demands the application of topological principles in determining potential connectedness; sometimes I feel I'm working at an elemental level, refining, combining and transforming matter into new compounds... It's even felt to me as if I were participating in the sort of variety act where one must prevent multiple spinning plates from crashing to the floor—though perhaps the computer game of *Tetris* is a better analogy, given the relentless rain of new material for which one attempts to find an appropriate slot... Whatever, it's quite exhausting trying to find some order in all of this and it strikes me now that even the images I have for trying to do so lack any kind of consistency...

I sort and sift, differentiating between what forms essential essay, and what becomes digressionary footnote. ^{00:44:02} When writing, material is constantly

evacuated to the bottom of each text: paragraphs, sentences and fragments pile up there—all the stuff about which I'm not certain and can't yet definitively bring myself either to use or to delete. (If I continue the earlier allotment metaphor, then this is surely the scruffy margin at the edge of the plot where rubbish and weeds get flung prior to proper tidying up—or maybe it's the awkward area beside the shed where the mice rustle and the snails congregate, and where lengths of old wood and bits of metal are piled ready for possible use or eventual disposal...) The heaped text itself becomes increasingly full, spilling out into tumbling footnotes, and in actual fact, it seems to me that the notes are the entire point of my writing: whilst the main body of the essay no doubt does its best to corral ideas into familiar patterns, it is amongst the tangle of endless itemisations, miscellaneous subjects and extensive quotation, that I suspect the most revealing things are probably said. ^{00:45:01}

So, although I establish headings, sequences and plans, believing repeatedly that I've discovered some correct, logical structure, it always falls away—inadequate—as I work. There's an awful lot of mess and endless attempts before eventually the clogs and clots start to dissolve or cohere, ideas clumping together or breaking apart to spawn different connections. ^{00:45:23} I have concluded that the only way to progress is very literally to *make* my way through it. ^{00:45:28} In order to get anywhere I have to dive in to the heap almost blindly, nosing wormlike through the ideas and research: I've come to imagine that I take in, digest and condense what I encounter, in order therefore that I may eventually transform rough stuff into a fine tilth of picture and prose. I did once confess to this conceptual narrative in a university lecture—it turned out students didn't much empathise with worms (too wriggly, too slimy?), and someone suggested I realign my associations to think instead of a sleek and velvety mole feeling its way along underground tunnels: they even went so far as to draw an illustration in which I appear as a cute and suitably bespectacled—but certainly talpine—Jo Lee. ^{00:46:11}

Whilst for Georges Bataille the earthworm was synonymous with formlessness, and thus, like the spider, liable to get itself squashed everywhere, the reality is that—collectively speaking—worms are incredibly powerful agents. CHARLES DARWIN figured their significance in his final book, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Worms, With Observations on their Habits*: 'It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organised creatures.' ^{00:46:43} He calculated that there were some four hundred pounds of earthworms (that's around 53,767 individuals) in an acre of English topsoil and that they brought up ten to twenty tons of earth per acre each year—which explained the way that historical sites such as a Roman villa, or the city of Uriconium—now lay several feet beneath the ground. Geomorphologist

DAVID R. MONTGOMERY describes ‘an unseen army of worms’ relentlessly ploughing the land, generating and deepening fertile topsoil (and mourns the fact it is then squandered by erosive cultivation practices...) 00:47:20 Darwin built terrariums in his living room so that he could observe the creatures at close quarters, counting the number of leaves they drew into their burrows and noting the techniques they employed to do so. He used coloured lantern slides to assess their sensitivity to light, blew tobacco smoke at them to determine if they responded to smell, and tested their ability to taste by providing a range of vegetable matter: it seems that they preferred green to red cabbage, enjoyed celery, adored carrot and devoured fat voraciously. As a result of this latter experiment he asserted that worms enjoyed a pleasure in eating—and thanks to their responses to some of the more intense light-flashing to which they’d been subjected, he concluded that their sexual passion was strong enough to overcome their dread of light. 00:48:06

As a child I too was apparently much preoccupied by worms; my mother tells me that I spent my early childhood extracting them from their burrows and constructing new dwellings for them in her compost heaps, and as an adult I’m still fascinated by their behaviour. That they are hermaphrodite no doubt appeals to my preoccupation with binaries and both-ness, and their copulation on a warm, damp night is both sensual and strange: once their moist bodies have aligned and overlapped, the collar-like clitellum secretes a cocoon into which the worm injects its own eggs and the other worm’s sperm; I frequently find these tiny, slightly woolly-looking bundles in the soil. In summer droughts on my chalky allotment, meanwhile, worms may become dormant—or ‘aestivate’ as the technical jargon has it—and in this state they appear to have tied themselves into tight little pink knots... But it’s the relentless ingestion and excretion that most intrigues me—as it did Darwin who was apparently plagued by digestive problems of his own. 00:49:06 As ADAM PHILLIPS puts it, Darwin’s final book ‘commemorates, and rejoices in, the powers of digestion’; Phillips takes matters further considering that Darwin even ‘proposes what might be called a secular after-life: the life of the world that continues after one’s own death’ because they ‘buried to renew: they digested to restore.’ 00:49:27

I like very much this idea of digesting to restore, which also accords with the sense I have of accumulating fertility through the process of composting, *and* through the research I conduct. Of course, neither process takes place quickly. Historian KEITH THOMAS writes about just how long it can take to build up an appropriate store of ideas and materials, whilst recognising the concomitant possibilities and problems of such an approach: ‘Progress depends on building up a picture from a mass of casual and unpredictable references accumulated over a long period. That makes them unsuitable subjects for a doctoral thesis, which has to be completed in a few years.

But they are just the thing for a lifetime’s reading. So when I read, I am looking out for material relating to several hundred different topics. Even so, I find that, as my interests change, I have to go back to sources I read long ago, with my new preoccupations in mind.’ 00:50:23 For myself, I have come to relish the slowness made possible by the lack of someone else’s deadline or word count: it allows me time and space to discover a breadth of material and to roam and read into new or unexpected aspects. I begin to wonder if there could be an equivalent to the Cittaslow movement for academics, campaigning against the relentless drive (in order to gain tenure or career advancement, or to improve institutional standings in the UK Research Excellence Framework) to publish early and publish often; for artists too, there’s the need to keep one’s name visible by continually exhibition—each show is a desperate kind of On Kawara statement: ‘I am alive!’ and I am still making work! How nice it is by contrast to let ideas mature, to find some breathing space...

There is always the danger, however, that without external pressure nothing will ever be completed, and this brings me finally to the question of an ending. My intention for the Pam Flett Press had been to produce a couple of essays per year, each with around six to eight thousand words and a collection of still or moving images, allowing a long-form approach to some theme I’d found to be of interest, and yet also enabling me to respond to contemporary issues with some topicality. But here I am, two years down the line from the last publication, and with a text that is now approaching thirty thousand words, having made/sourced hundreds of images, and (as I write this) it is *still* not with the designers and heading to print... 00:51:51 Whilst the usual excuses about workload in my day job and the difficulty of carving out sufficient concentrated time could certainly apply in terms of my failure to complete matters sooner, the fact that the current edition is so large also suggests that finding time for writing and making isn’t the real issue here. There is clearly something else preventing me from concluding.

I have come to realise that my difficulty in finishing this (or any) work stems primarily from an anxiety of omission: whilst it is still in progress, then the new ideas and examples I encounter (in everyday life, in books, in exhibitions...) can still find a place. It also derives from a pathetic desire simply not to appear stupid or ill-informed: given my improper approach to education I’m hyper alert to revealing myself through some embarrassing mistake or excruciating faux-pas, so whilst the work has not yet been completed the things that I realise I should really have known about can still be incorporated, and the errors and irritations of the text can be corrected or expunged. 00:52:53 So I delay, and fiddle, and chew things over for a few more months...

But it’s also always more than this. The very slowness finally allows me to discover what it is I am actually thinking about. Just as I can’t force my body to digest its meals more quickly than physiology allows, I seem to

need this extended period in order to work out what it is I am trying to produce: and while ever the work remains in process, then it can retain multiple developmental or interpretative possibilities. MARCEL BÉNABOU said that he ‘wanted to end up with a work such that at any moment one would have the impression that anything is still possible, a work in which the meaning would not come from some authorial decree but would be the fruit of an internal progression (whose ultimately being completable one day nothing guarantees)’ 00:53:42

Bénabou elsewhere describes his wish, ‘to find a form that would permit me to integrate the disparate multitude of fragments on one theme amassed over the years and, after having subjected them to an intense distillation, to draw a few pages from the process that I hoped would be strong.’ 00:53:59 He also writes, ‘I imagine ways of reducing a text the way one reduces a sauce’ and as a keen cook, it’s also an analogy I frequently use—though I’m very aware that I’m simmering a strange concoction, given the gallimaufry that forms the current essay. 00:54:14 I’m thinking now about the flavours I’ve been preparing and wonder whether they will cause my readers salivation or nausea... As I research and make, I quite often find myself referring to a sensation whereby I can almost *taste* the way forward and that certain matters connect, even though I can’t yet articulate it verbally or show quite what I mean. Perhaps it’s akin to the way people speak of something being on the tip of one’s tongue, though for me the feeling is located much further back into the mouth—here it’s not about dipping one’s tongue experimentally to sample a flavour, but about the place further back where all the chewed material is gathered before swallowing.

And this thought finally brings me back to the gum with which I started, for it strikes me that whilst gum is not intended to be swallowed, and thus escapes its own assimilation, it’s chewing can trigger digestion of the material already within one’s gut: the mastication generates saliva and initiates peristalsis. 00:55:09 As a lecturer, I can’t help think about the utility of what I do in my own work as forming part of some extended pedagogic project: I’m beginning to wonder therefore if maybe this text—and the Pam Flett Press as a whole—isn’t just a metaphorical gum intended to get people chewing over for themselves the possible connections between apparently disparate things, and to produce as a result a good deal more of that incorrigible plurality in the world. I hope that you will, as Alina Szapocznikow advised, ‘Keep chewing, look around you.’ 00:55:57