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(Uns)table assemblage

Nyree Finlay, Archaeology, The School of Humanities, University of Glasgow

Nyree.Finlay@glasgow.ac.uk

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Abstract: An abandoned table in a forgotten avocational workroom exposes the temporalities of archaeological practice and conventional lithic artefact analysis, and reveals creative encounters around the co-creation of self and stone.

Key-words: Arran avocational flint fly housework lithic analysis

What happens when the past is brought inside? When a table becomes both the site and the subject of archaeological work? The temporalities of a table and its relational properties are the subject of this photo essay and a salvage collection project that became an exposition of archaeological housework; a study in the materialisation of abandonment and entropic encounter.

Abandonment is the stuff of archaeology – the (dis)entanglement of site formation processes, and human and other agencies (Schiffer 1972, 1987). Informed by ethnoarchaeological insights, attention has tended focused on the distant past and at various scales from prehistoric sites to Pompeii and regional settlement patterns (e.g. Cameron 1993; Cameron and Tomka 1993; Schiffer 1985). Ruin has been a focus of archaeologies of the now from an abandoned council house (Buchli and Lucas 2001), to rural farmsteads and urban wastelands (De Silvey 2006; Edensor 2005). Abandonment is equally relevant in the unfolding anticipatory archaeologies of the Anthropocene, and archaeologies of loss and ruination (e.g. papers in Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014; DeSilvey 2017). Schiffer (2013) has drawn attention to the abandoned pursuits of the Manhattan Project and the ruins of early modern scientific experimentation and laboratory practice. In a similar vein, this photo essay examines the materialising properties of abandoned archaeological research activity and the ruination inherent in that encounter.

Over 8 months in 2016, an abandoned table in a forgotten archaeological atelier on the Scottish island of Arran was the focus of a contemporary exploration of the practices of a creative ‘woman-

at-home' archaeologist (Gero 1985) and an exegesis of her self-taught lithic analysis. Fiona Gorman was an avocational researcher and voluntary museum archivist. A graduate of Glasgow School of Art, a school art teacher, a home-maker and a carer. At the time of writing she is an octogenarian living with dementia in residential care. She undertook recreational heritage research during retirement but had collected stones from a young age with her mountaineering mother. With a passion for geology, local history and all things ancient, she took pleasure not only in finding prehistoric artefacts through opportunistic field-walking with friends and local museum co-workers but from the washing, labelling and classifying of these mostly lithic finds. Wearing a dedicated pinny (still hanging on the back of the workroom door) she worked in this room of her own, doing the archaeological housework, bringing the past inside.

A storehouse of archaeological and geological collections as well as a workspace for finds analysis, this upstairs cottage room in a separate property close to her home was in use for maybe a decade. Abandoned and then progressively forgotten, the room is notable for other absences - artefacts removed in the final retreat to the more familiar comforts of home. The room in waiting, the table still set for analysis but left covered with the traces of other events and lithic encounters. The precise timeline of the table is hard to pin down, some of the latest dated interventions occur sometime after 2001-2002 reflected by the contents of the slide container, a dated letter and a bag containing stone balls. Some of the finds reflect the selection of items used in a suite of museum displays she created for the Isle of Arran Heritage Museum around this time (Anon 2004). Perhaps it is not long after this that the table is finally left. The latest dated artefact assemblages in the room, found in a shoebox on the floor and containers on the small table near the door, were gathered off-island in 2006-2007. Around then the room was perhaps infrequently visited over intervening years until it was unremembered for over three years before recording and recovery.

Part excavation, part house clearance, this project brings me back to a table previously visited, back to face the coincidental or fateful complicity that directly entangles my agency with the avocational collector who created it and who accumulated this extensive heritage collection. Our correspondence began in the 1990s prompted by her reporting of Mesolithic flint scatters on Arran (Gorman et al. 1993). Unsuccessful research grant applications followed and I went to live and work on different islands. A phone call to The Hunterian Museum for advice about collection divestment from her power of attorney instigated the salvage project in 2015. Previously, during a visit in 1999, we discussed the lithic assemblages and I first visited this workroom. Back then our talk was of

microliths and the space less cluttered. This time there was initially a deep sense of discomfort and trespass in being in this vacated room, the uncomfortable voyeurism of being witness to a life magnified through the distance of the camera lens. Others have experienced the intimacy of contemporary archaeological and salvage work and the emotional toil that it exerts – the potent mix of the awesome and the abject; the spectacular ordinary of the familiar present (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001; Bjerk 2014; Finn 2014), the challenges of method and metrology (DeSilvey 2013; Webmoor 2014). The disconcerting otherness of seeing something remade in the alterity of a moment.

As an unconventional archaeological site, the table is unsettling. A passive provocation from avocational archaeology that exposes the practices of routine post-excavation and finds analysis. As an artefact itself, it draws attention to the materialising practices of archaeology that generate its own forms of trace and ruination. The compelling complexities of this table site, simultaneously a palimpsest of lithic analysis and a surface used for more creative accumulations, more abstract and ambiguous stone settings. Interrupted, disjointed acts, followed by abandonment and a slow period of decay and dissolution – the phase of the fly and disaggregating plastic. A striking contrast between the ordering and sorting, use of open containers, the systematic rows of bagged and labelled lithics and the bundle of classification notes and typological guides on the table. Captured in earlier archive photographs, are a handful of end-of-roll images of the table during a period of analysis, one is reproduced here. The ghost of the analyst herself off the empty chair, documenting her own solitary practice. Then, a different configuration of the room, fewer finds on the shelves which have since been moved. The table is still in position, the white clean sheet used as a tablecloth the blank canvas of analysis for a row of Mesolithic blades of flint and the local volcanic glass, Arran pitchstone. Material continuity is offered by the floral coaster, Anglepoise light, digital balance, a ruler and the enduring row of multiple plastic sorting containers. Now, the table is a complex and chaotic assembly.

Over time and repeat visits the curious contours of this project became less uncomfortable as the systematic routines and tedium of conventional recording took over and as it becomes more mundane and familiar. Towards the end of the recording process there was my frustration at the pace of cataloguing and the slow clearance of the table; a resigned weariness that it would never be finished; of the room actively resisting being emptied. Frustration competed with feelings of

sadness and a distinct melancholy at this ending: tacit acknowledgement that this constituted the dismantling of a life and the uncertain futures of the divested collection. The conclusion of archaeological recording and the what to do next of interpretation and divestment. Other emotions and responses need to be worked through. Surprise at finding copies of letters I had sent in the pile of papers on the table encouraging this analysis. Long forgotten these also brought back other lost memories and recollections of my life at that time and my previous visit to this space. My collaboration in this work also invoked a sense of fate, duty and professional responsibility to document her practice that was strengthened due to my involvement with it. Both as a material witness to her archaeological work and in other ways as a co-creator in the generation of the archive and the (un)making of this table assemblage. Unlike other house projects this was not prompted by parental death (Flem 2005; Bjerk 2014; Finn 2014) but loss of another kind. In the absence of personal attachment to this stuff, it is the objects themselves that exude a nostalgic aura and affordances of divestment (Miller and Parrott 2009; Ekerdt 2009). While the archive reveals archaeological acts, such as the drying of field-walked finds, that covered other surfaces around the home.

From the start the table assemblage was recovered with a view to its recreation off-site for a future temporary exhibition. To ease its future reinstallation the find number and location of items were pinned to the tablecloth using dressing pins and small stickers. The outline of the more abstract arrangement of loose pieces and some containers faintly pencil-drawn directly onto the tablecloth itself to aid repositioning retracing the contours of dust and heliographs. Now only a trace of these table relations remain but our interventions have generated a new and distinct assemblage that reflects a different material engagement to its former activities. The post-lifting disintegration of several of plastic sorting containers has created other ruin assemblies. Throughout it all the table resists conventional planning due to its shallow temporalities, object fluidities and the physical constraints of the room contents. Even the lifting of the stacked rows of finds bags containing flint debitage created difficulties. Many of these bags had split and become partially decayed insitu by the diurnal sun. The stone contents spilling out –refusing to be contained. What was the right thing to do? try and arrest their movement, perhaps by using spray mount to preserve some integrity for the exhibition or to gain further insights through cataloguing of the contents? In the end the material itself gave an answer as the movement of pieces within bags rendered attempts to arrest the stone flow of flints futile. Flints in the plastic containers persisted in continuous motion. Their

agency made it easier to embrace the intervention of lifting them off the table; and embrace the transformation of the table site to simulacra.

Other agencies were at play – pieces accidentally caught by rebounding measuring tapes, by subtle vibrations through moving around the room, even perhaps by absent-minded, compelling curiosity – items casually picked up and put back down by unseen hands. Between recording visits things move. Repeat photography revealed some of the subtle mobilities of aspects of the table assemblage, acting as a control to resituate pieces but the exposure of movement, this object déjà vu is disconcerting.

Mice, moths, spiders and flies were all agents of displacement, disturbance and the ever presence of the outside in. How to capture some of this post-depositional action and nonhuman activity on the table. Desiccated flies explode when you try and pin them and lifting leads to immediate disintegration. I struggle with the insects, to justify the value of the retention of fly dust. Another sort of futility is trying to systematically collect up all polystyrene and decayed plastic fragments, equally resistant to being pinned, intent on further disintegration and dissolution. It seems to be even more futile an exercise as trying to stop the flow of flints from moving inside the bags and sorting containers. Time to accept this material as an uncontained and uncontrolled assemblage. Unable to commit more time to the full recovery of this natural assembly, defaulting to its photographic representation, I now wonder what was lost in not doing so – of giving in to its discordant decaying materialities, of privileging again the human over the nonhuman. In the field, it generated a melancholy sense of disappointment and doubt, but why the absurd discomfort from not bagging dried-out flies? Perhaps because time and the past itself lies measured in this uncurated decay (DeSilvey 2017). Lacking the ‘entropic chic’ of other more celebrated ruins (Webmoor 2014, 470), it is exactly the absence of care that defines this table as one. The presence of a scrunched up dishcloth at one table corner serves to highlight the absence of routine housekeeping and the inactivity that accumulates debris. Elsewhere in the room, dead bugs inside a roll of finds bags appeared to jump like fleas due to the static when touched, adding to the discomfort and sense of comic revulsion of dealing with the physicality of the intrusion of nature. Mouse droppings, the varied insect dead – not just flies but midges, wasps, moths, slaters, indeterminate frass, webs and other ecdysic matter. All are mixed with a slick of dust, grime and disintegrating plastic particulate.

“An unstable assemblage of faults, fissures and heterogeneous layers” (Foucault 1971, 146), the table is now a compelling artefact of lithic analysis and avocational work practice. An alterity that is made new through observation and by framing the table as a piece of assemblage art, now forever captured in photographs, video and 3D. Here the table is an accidental installation that offers a particular commentary on stonework and the archaeological specialism of lithic studies. Acts and relations are revealed akin to contemporary confessional artwork like the intimate incongruity of Tracey Emin’s unmade “My Bed”ⁱ. The table captures a moment of analysis time and in this respect stands for all forms of assemblage work and the taskscapes of post-excavation projects. The trajectory of lithic analysis is arrested, the flows of stone cease. In these relict routine traces lie other object configurations, different tables. During conventional artefact analysis, such object arrangements are never left unfinished, vulnerable or exposed for so long. Other table sites and (re)assembly works solicit scant academic commentary and go largely undocumented and unspoken. Assemblage work that is characterised by preservation by routine and recollection not record. The sleight-of-hand movements, of stone pieces turned, separated, sorted, observed, measured, of notes made, catalogues created. Fleeting table touchstones to be re-configured, grouped and processed. The ongoing material convoy of specialist archaeological analysis, assemblages in and out, unbagged, examined, rebagged, packed up into boxes, off to the final destination of the museum store. Yet no talk of tables, surfaces silenced in the conformity of professional reporting practice. Such nondisclosure overlooks the sites where meanings are made and everyday acts of resistance, reluctance and repetition occur. It is only in the exceptional context of lithic refitting studies that handling time is ever quantified and nothing to compare with the revelatory contact detail of a ceramic sherd biography (Holtorf 2002).

Back to the room, on the table classification is left, assemblage processing interrupted and replaced by other object assemblies. But as revelatory as the table assemblage is in exposing lithic classification practices, this is not the totality of stone co-creation exposed on the table. Other lithic accumulations reveal more creative engagements and different types of responses in its final pre-entropic stages. Three table arrangements in particular speak to the transitory character of the table and its post-analysis biography when the linear routines become circles. In no particular order, the first, visible on the edge of the table, is a series of chipped stone pieces positioned on a polissoir-shaped stone, a clockwise arrangement of flint and Arran pitchstone cores and debitage.

This might have been a rejected trial piece for one of the museum displays. The second is more ambiguous - a discontinuous circuit of four axehead-shaped stone petals around the central flower of the ceramic coaster. Thirdly, to the right of the table, there is an arrangement of 47 individual pieces of coarse and chipped stone with a single luminous marine shell eye and red deer molar that defies interpretation. An abstract face or spiral motif where its significance lies not necessarily in form but intent. It is a playfulness that reveals creative detachment, perhaps the underlying personal ecdysis of emotional divestment. A phase that embraces loss and reconfigures memories and meaning. All expose the shallow temporalities and diverse engagements of this entanglement of self and stone, revealing the very essence and instabilities of assemblage work. If this is a consequence of what can happen when we choose to “follow tables” (Ahmed 2006, 22), where can other tables lead us?

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ⁱ This installation artwork was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1999. The product of a sexually depressive episode, the unmade bed Emin slept in has stained sheets and is in disarray. Beside it on a rug is other everyday debris including alcohol bottles, used condoms, cigarette butts and slippers. Like other works in Emin's oeuvre it attracted controversy for its intimate subject matter and high monetary value. It is highlighted here as an incidental domestic assemblage that becomes an artwork from the artist viewing it as such, and for the unfolding temporalities that continue to accompany its recent gallery redispays.

Images

























