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The Past, Present and Future of Collecting



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FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGIES

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Pl. 1 Approaching the European Marine Energy Centre tidal turbine (© Laura Watts)

I was standing in a chill wind that bit hard at my chin as the boat skimmed over the white foam of waves. We pushed through the feisty water between low green islands, heading north through the archipelago of Orkney, off the northern shore of Scotland, towards a monument that was rising up from the seabed (Pl. 1). It was an indistinct metal rectangle on the horizon, a gantry with great bulges of water caught around its two legs. This was a monument whose age was measureable in years not decades or millennia: a tidal energy turbine, whose underwater blades turned with the Moon to generate renewable energy.

Archaeology? Yes, as many have argued (Buchli and Lucas 2001, Holtorf 2005, Shanks 1992). As an ethnographer,

however, I had a different interest in the archaeologies of the marine renewable energy device we sailed towards. I was interested in the way in which archaeological approaches to the past can inform ethnographic approaches to the future.

Like the past, the future is not entirely unknown, vanishing over some temporal horizon. As with the past, the future has a materiality; it must be made of stuff: objects, landscapes and people. Durability and heritage, what will remain of the present, is as much a matter of the future as of history. It takes difficult ongoing decisions to establish what will be conserved, what will decay, what will be built. The future does not happen to us; rather we are integral to its conditions

of possibility. The future is imagined and made by us in heritage strategy, in timetables, in roadmaps, in schematics, in prototypes of new technologies. All these form evidence for the future, just as there is evidence of the past.

As an ethnographer I was interested in how the future gets made in everyday practice, in the social and material relations involved in future-making. And it was archaeology that I drew upon as a way of approaching my own disparate fragments of data. I had spent four months in Orkney gathering ethnographic evidence of how the future is imagined and made there. These islands hold the residues of five thousand years of technological invention, from the Neolithic Ring of Brodgar stone circle and village of Skara Brae, to the world's first grid-connected marine renewable energy test site, the European Marine Energy Centre. I was here for this landscape, imbued with a technological *longue durée*. Orkney had been a site of future-making for millennia. Its prehistory was as much a part of its long future, as of its long past.

This was why I was standing aft, looking over the white sides of the boat towards the monumental structure that stood in the powerful tides where the Atlantic Ocean met the North Sea. I was here for a very particular fragment of evidence, and a particular future.

We slowed as the monument grew over us. My neck ached as I looked up at the vast yellow testing platform twenty metres above our heads, its sturdy metal control box hovering in the sky, edges gleaming in the low afternoon sun. Looking down, I saw the ripped and fractured surface of turquoise water begin to break apart. In the portal between its two legs the water began to boil. Something massive was rising up out of the sea.

We had sailed into the tidal energy test site for the European Marine Energy

Centre (EMEC). This was the seascape in which a future for renewable energy generation was being made. Here, in the seeming remote islands of Orkney, closer to the Arctic Circle than to London, the future for a new high-tech industry was being made, with implications for future electricity generation, transmission, and use worldwide.

But the future is not as simple as one test site, one seascape, or any single prototype. Invention never is. The director of EMEC had explained the problem to me. 'We are where the Wright Brother's were after their first flight,' he had said. 'We have proven we can do this, but we have not yet mastered our art.' The story and film footage of the Wright Brother's first flight embody the often assumed 'eureka' moment of invention. But such moments belie the long histories and complexities involved (Bijker et al. 1989, Bijker and Law 1992, Latour 1987). As the director pointed out later to me, that moment of first flight 'is a long way from a commercial airline industry.' Such moments are part of a continuum of social and material practices, not just the prior tests and failures, but the sharing of expertise between people, often around the world and across decades and centuries, who are engaged in similar work; *pace* there is no agreed first flying machine, no agreed single person who invented the telephone. It is the technology of the patents office that ascribes such ownership and produces a singular inventor such as Alexander Graham Bell (Strathern 2001). Yet there remains a story that is repeated over time, a moment that is remembered and passed on. The evidence for the Wright Brother's flight, the film and photos, have been reproduced and referred to for decades as *the* moment when the aeroplane was invented.

Archaeologist Andrew Jones has argued that the repeated referencing of material culture over time, the continuous

reproduction of particular patterns and practices, is bound up with memory making (Jones 2007). Over time one particular moment in a long and complicated series of activities is replicated over and over – like the moment of the Wright Brother's flight, which is only one moment in a history of aviation that includes Chinese lanterns and Air Traffic Control. In time the story and its evidence becomes the moment of invention. But not before. It takes many reproductions, the story worn smooth of its inherent complexity, before it becomes the moment of invention. In essence, eureka-style invention appears to be an archaeological activity.

For me, as an ethnographer, this raised an interesting question: what moments of everyday practice will be repeated and cited in the future? What devices and technologies will be transformed into replicas in a future museum? What moments will become those moments of invention? Moreover, this was not some theoretical question. Those involved in the marine renewable energy industry in Orkney were concerned that the 'moments' were happening but there was no-one to record them, no evidence, no archive. Without evidence there could be no re-telling and therefore no story of invention could be repeated and circulated around the world. I was asked if, out of the hundreds of pieces of evidence I had gathered, the hundreds of thousands of words of ethnographic notes, if in this archive there was some moment of invention for marine renewable energy.

To be clear, I am not interested in prediction, in what the future will be. I am interested in everyday practice, in how the future and innovation gets done. For it is through understanding how the future gets made that there is a possibility of making it differently. For me, archaeology provides an approach to understanding how material evidence can, over time, be

woven into new accounts – for all forms of ethnographic evidence, even notes and digital recordings, are fragments that can be reconstructed in many ways (Strathern 1991). It is what Joshua Pollard calls the generative potential of decay, the creative possibilities afforded by fragmentation (Chapman 2000, Pollard 2004). In my case it is the fragments of evidence of the marine renewable energy industry in Orkney, and how that evidence might be woven in future stories, in future museums; woven into moments of invention perhaps as potent as the Wright Brother's so-called 'first flight'.

It was not until my friends and colleagues at my fieldsite asked for a moment of invention that I realised that I could not, as an ethnographer in the field, see such a thing. A moment of invention takes time to sediment; it has to be reproduced over and over before its importance becomes visible. Only an archaeological perspective seems to make 'eureka' accounts of invention possible.

A white curve was making itself visible above the boiling water at the side of the boat, pushing up through the foam. I felt in my pocket for my cameraphone into which I had downloaded other fragments of evidence already collected. As an ethnographer I might not be able to see a moment of invention, but I could pass the fragments on to another who might.

My evidence included marine maps of the sea around Orkney leased for commercial generation of marine renewable energy. I had slides from a presentation given to a visiting government minister, detailed roadmaps showing the increasing levels of equipment, jobs, housing, boats and the investment needed to meet the European Union directive on renewable energy generation: 20% of electricity should be generated from renewable sources by 2020. I had ornithology impact studies, venture capitalist conversations, entrepreneur visions, local artist visions,

national grid strategies and much else. And now I was here for the largest piece of evidence yet.

The curve before me had broadened to reveal a great white eye that was rising from the sea, an industrial creature floating up from the depths. The great iris of the prototype tidal turbine was open, watching. It rose up the legs of the gantry, majestic and slow and gleaming, until it was high above me; a fibreglass eye whose vision and workings was being honed to see through to the future. The other visitors on the boat were at the rail, grins as wide as mine, hands raised against the sun. I held up my cameraphone and took a photograph.

With this final piece of evidence, this monumental structure, I could send my archive to someone in a rather different location to myself. I wanted to send my archive to someone that could curate these fragments into an account, select which fragments to put together to create a potent story of invention that might be re-told and travel over time. As archaeologists reconstruct a past from fragments of evidence, so this person would be able to reconstruct a future from fragments of evidence – a future in which a moment of invention might exist. I thought of this person as a Future Archaeologist, not because she was *in* the future, but because her method involved reconstructing bits of empirical evidence to produce different accounts of the future. All in the same way as archaeologists and museum curators reconstruct bits of evidence to produce different accounts of the past.

Moments of invention are not only archaeological, they necessitate curatorial work. It requires a responsibility to the future akin to heritage and an acknowledgement that reconstructions of past and future are always political (Bender 1998). What matters is not whether the Wright Brother's flight was

the first, but the effect of its enormously successful claim to be so. It matters whose version of an invention gets re-told and whose evidence is curated. What versions of the future will get made present and which will be silenced? Which acts of invention will be repeated and remembered, and which will not? The Future Archaeologist, her method, is resonant with the creation of a museum of marine renewable energy, made from my evidence as an ethnographer.

As I looked up at what might be its largest exhibit, I wondered what moments of invention such a museum would tell to its visitors. Did such a museum already perhaps exist? For all museums are custodians of the future.

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