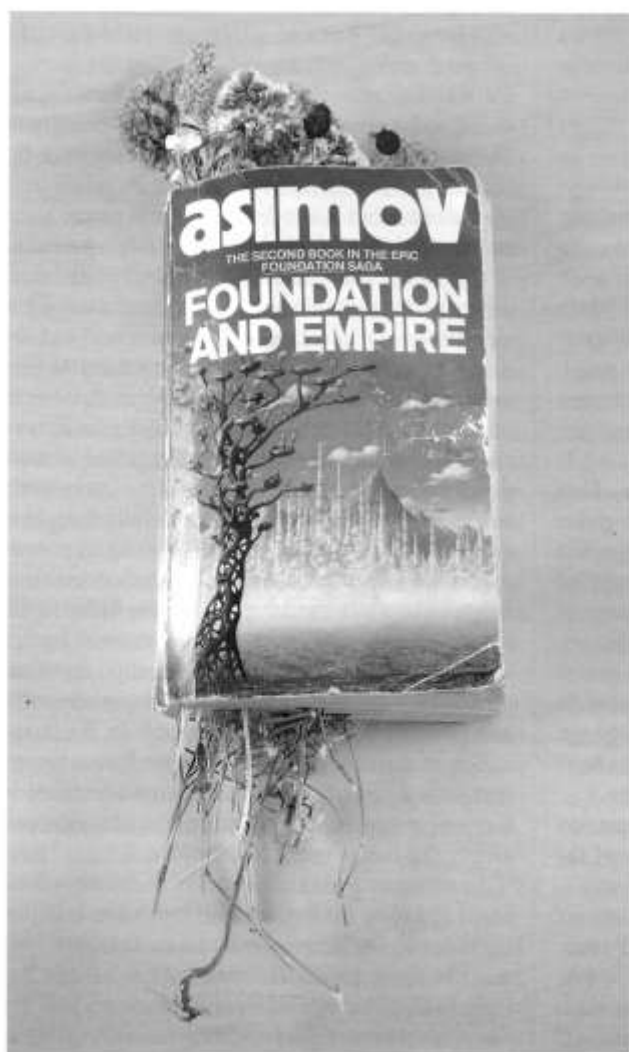


Dan Smith on narrative fictions and the archival impulse in recent art

Unnatural Histories



Heather & Ivan Morison *Foundation and Empire* 2003

SEVERAL ARTISTS HAVE RECENTLY MADE WORK THAT CAN BE READ AS FORMS OF ARCHIVAL PRACTICE THAT ARE NOT DEPENDENT ON MIMICKING THE OPERATIONS OR APPEARANCES OF INSTITUTIONAL FORMS OF ARCHIVE. Rather, they are archival in the sense that Hal Foster – in his essay ‘An Archival Impulse’ – refers to as the will to connect what cannot be connected. The appearance of order, and its alliance with state apparatuses, is replaced by an unstable and personalised ordering of the world. The apparent antinomies of fiction and documentary are exploited as narrative possibilities in the work, for instance, of Jamie Shovlin, Suzanne Treister and Heather & Ivan Morison. A copy of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation and Empire* constitutes the dominant material of Heather & Ivan Morison’s work of the same name, 2003. Wild flowers collected from Mongolia jut out from the pages that have been used to press and preserve them within the pages of the battered and somewhat dated-looking book. There is something familiar about this object. It is surely a homage to Richard Wentworth’s *Tract (From Boost to Wham)*, 1993 – a *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* crammed full of chocolate-bar wrappers. These are inserted into the appropriate pages, alphabetically ordered

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by the correlation of brand name and lexical definition. As a student I remember attending a talk given by Wentworth in which he anecdotally related the genesis of the work. A cheeky assistant had apparently placed wrappers in a copy of the dictionary kept in Wentworth's studio and waited to see how long it would take for the act to be discovered, thus determining how often the dictionary was actually referred to.

Of course this story need not be true, but such a serendipitous origin still has the ability to animate the play of material semiotics. Perhaps *Tract* operates as a metonym for Wentworth's practice. There is a sense of humorous wonder in the manner in which quotidian and accidental elements intersect with formal concerns of arrangement and making. The affinities between these two altered books can be extended to say that *Foundation and Empire* operates similarly. It also signifies the practice of which it is a part. In 2003 Heather & Ivan Morison wrote *Divine Vessel*, a 72,000-word science fiction novel, on a journey aboard a cargo ship travelling between Shanghai and Auckland. Asimov's book was one that they had read in preparation for the task while photographing wild flowers in Mongolia. This whole period was encompassed by their pan-global voyage *Global Survey*. Like Russian matryoshka dolls, one work reveals another. As they travelled and engaged in an idiosyncratic programme of recordings and interventions, they sent messages. To those on mailing lists, emails would arrive throughout 2003. More formally, updates could be read on an LED display unit fitted with a SIM card. These were sent as SMS messages from wherever on the planet Heather and Ivan happened to be.

This in itself is a continuation of the dispatches from Ivan's Birmingham allotment, reports of the progress of his horticultural endeavours, triumphs and disasters alike (see Emma Safe, 'Ivan Morison: Flower Power', *AM*258). Between 2000 and 2002, dramatic gardening narratives were presented as telegraphic but evocative texts printed on square cards measuring 13.5 x 13.5cm: 'Ivan Morison is concerned by a powdery mildew that has appeared on his Green

Bush marrows.' These functioned as both gallery objects and as posted communications. This format has been assimilated into the transformation of Ivan Morison's practice into that of Mr and Mrs or Heather & Ivan Morison. Six of these cards form part of the material generated from their *Global Survey* journey, and the practice is continued as an ongoing activity. While their use of narrative messages retains On Kawara's affirmation of presence, activity and existence, these reports also suggest their own instability as documentary evidence. This tension between actuality and fiction permeates everything done in the Morison name – even to the point of needing to ask whether or not these two individuals exist, let alone whether they really do what they do.

'Earthwalker', their recent show at Danielle Arnaud, further extended the binding of the narrative discourses of science fiction to natural history understood as a discursive narrative. Outside, beehives had been converted into architectural towers that resembled minimalist sculptural objects. The titling of these objects, *Crystal Worlds*, 2006, correlates the internal workings of these once functional devices with JG Ballard's hallucinatory novel, *The Crystal World*. That this novel haunted Robert Smithson's practice is no coincidence. Smithson is certainly present here. His narrated slideshow, *Hotel Palenque*, 1969-72, makes an uncanny return in the form of *Starmaker*, a projected work using medium-format slides and a soundtrack here split over two floors. This work also aligns itself explicitly with science fiction. In part this is through the sounds culled from sci-fi cinema, but is also indicated in its named reference to Olaf Stapledon's novel *Star Maker*, published in 1937. Stapledon's meditation on creation and complexity perhaps illuminates the images of natural history dioramas, industrial-scale horticulture and the British coastline. Whereas Stapledon's narrator travels out of his body on Earth to become an observer of other worlds, the Morisons present home as if to an alien. Science fiction needs to be recognised as more than a stylistic preference. Literary critic Darko Suvin asserts that science fiction can be usefully thought of as the literature of cognitive estrangement, as opposed to unbridled fantasy or the stock elements of folk tales in which anything is possible. Rather, a different, but believable world with an internal logic, a world that has undergone transformation from our own, makes the possibility of other, especially social and political, transformations possible in the imagination of a reader or viewer. Science fiction retains that critical impulse Theodor Adorno identified in forms of autonomous avant-garde artworks – the possibility that things might be otherwise.

In their 2004 work, *Science Fiction Reference Bookcase (In Colour Order)*, a collection of novels that includes those mentioned so far, the Morisons describe the materials as 'Books on Shelf (Only Partially Read)'. This admission must also apply to Jamie Shovlin's *Fontana Modern Masters*, 2005. Shovlin produced 58 watercolours that returned the abstract

covers of these edifying volumes, published between 1970 and 1983, to the realm of painting. The work in Shovlin's currently touring exhibition 'Aggregate' is an expanded return to *Search of Perfect Harmony*, the work seen in the Art Now space at Tate Britain in early 2006. There are three broadly identifiable elements here. The pages of Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* have been excised from personalised and annotated copies in which readers have marked certain lines and passages as worthy of attention. In a parallel model of selection, all text not indicated by these means has been blacked out. *All the Birds in her Garden* dramatises an ordering of the natural world as internal, psychic constitution. The work is orientated around Shovlin's own mother, Valerie, and the integration of garden birdlife into her own sense of selfhood. Valerie is also at the centre of *Search of Perfect Harmony*. Shovlin has composed wax crayon rubbings from sections of jigsaws, displayed in the boxes in which they were once contained. The jigsaws belonged to Valerie. After completing one, she would put it back in the box, dismantling the image into fragments. Shovlin has recovered the largest of these fragments as the indexical source of these works. Each rubbing is produced from a combination of crayons determined by a colour wheel and a theory that complementary colours will produce a neutral grey when overlaid. Practice differs greatly from theory and these combinations are anything but grey.

Like the Morisons, Shovlin is interested in an explicit use of natural history as discourse, imagery and material substance. At times, his use of the gathered material overlaps with territory already mapped out and claimed by Mark Dion. Dion and Shovlin share not only interests in obsessive methodology but also the articulation of archival forms as narrative. Dion often favours installation as a staged tableau vivant, employing spatial relationships as a theatrical fiction paired with phenomenal and material actuality. Shovlin tends more towards a formal approach to space, informed by critical and attentive readings of Minimalism. However, while narrative is often an integral element for both artists, there is a spectral presence of fiction in 'Aggregate', a polluting element of doubt. The source of this is detectable in two other projects by Shovlin: *Naomi V Jelish*, 2004, and more recently, *Lustfaust: A Folk Anthology*, 2006. Both are elaborately constructed fictional archives. The first is a tribute to a gifted teenage girl who disappeared along with her family, a girl whose unusual name is an anagram of the artist's. *Lustfaust* is also a tribute, paid to an influential and experimental underground band that never existed but could have, and indeed possibly should have.

Despite their polluting influence on all Shovlin's archival practices, these fictions are generally plausible. While the works in 'Aggregate' are narrative, and correspond to literary worldmaking, they are not of an explicitly dubious veracity. The paranoid conspiracies that Treister conjures are more obviously fabricated, but no less appealing as fantasies. Shovlin



offers personalised systems, both epistemological and numerical, while Treister revels in paranoid conspiracies. One adopts pseudo-scientific forms, the other fantasises a breakdown between science and superstition in a web of espionage and post-Cold War neurosis. If Shovlin has infected all his archive-inflected representations with the possibility of fiction, then Treister seems to thrive on its overt presence. Presented as theory, it depends on the integration of fiction and reality, but is, of course, mostly fiction. It would also be nice to believe in the paranoid fantasy world of Treister's *Hexen 2039* (reviewed by David Barrett in AM302). Conspiracy theories, like fantasy worlds, offer accountable world views that need not be bogged down with even uglier and disturbing realities. *Hexen 2039* is framed as the work of a fictional character, Rosalind Brodsky, who makes delusional claims to be a time traveller, and spins out an elaborate conspiracy theory that implicates, among other elements, Hollywood cinema, British and US armed forces and intelligence agencies, witchcraft and occultism in an intricate web of affinities and correspondences. The work is composed of different elements – pencil drawings based on photographs, a pseudo-documentary, and most poetically in a series of ink drawings that manage to be simultaneously

Richard Wentworth
Tract (from Boost to
Wham) 1993



Jamie Shovlin
The Twitcher 2004-06

cursive and diagrammatic.

The Morisons, Shovlin and Treister evoke suggestive and timely reminders of a relationship to text and narrative that transformed both art's conditions of interpretation and its objects. I am referring here to a general intersection of literary theory, philosophy and psychoanalytical thought with artworks and art history in the last four decades of the 20th century. Rosalind Krauss's short essay 'Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary', written in 1981, described forms of academic theory, writing by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida in particular, as a perceived threat to literature. This threat, perceived within North American academia, was seen as an undermining and corrosive attack on traditional forms of close reading. Krauss counters these reactionary positions and reads this

poststructuralist criticism as something that can no longer sustain a distinction between literature and criticism: 'Rather, criticism finds itself caught in a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides.' What is created is instead a kind of paraliterature. Paraliterary space, she argues, is the space of debate, quotation, betrayal, reconciliation. Absent are qualities of unity, coherence and resolution that were the traits that were cited as in need of protection from the onslaught of this foreign theory. Similarly, the presence of fiction in these overtly narrative practices of the Morisons, Shovlin and Treister blurs distinctions between literary object and artwork. The presence of active and reflective criticism within paraliterary discourses is also detectable. This integration of criticism enables an inward- and outward-looking criticality. The tension between this criticality and an obsessive and indulgent solipsism is exploited in these practices as a set of destabilising intertextual operations. These works not only operate within a set of interpretative conditions that match Krauss's account, but also construct paraliterary space as practice. This space is ordered, but according to internalised logic, personalised universes in which one element informs another. These artists articulate the archival impulse as literary construction, putting on hold any previous hostilities between literary object and artwork. Alliances with fiction pass beyond citation and into a recognition that it is perhaps inevitably the character of all archival forms. ■

Aggregate is at the Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh until March 20 and Hatton Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne April 7 to May 26 2007. **Heather & Ivan Morison** have been selected to represent Wales at the Venice Biennale of Art 2007. **Suzanne Treister Hexen 2039** will be at New Art Gallery, Walsall April 27 to July 9.

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