

'Kindle: Recycling and the future of the book'

An interview

The following conversation took place at the Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham University, during 'The First Cut' exhibition, 2013. It was published as a chapter in 'Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Adam Smyth is Professor of English Literature and History of the Book, Balliol College, Oxford
Gill Partington writes and researches on the material text, reading and readers

Adam Smyth: Could you introduce the exhibition, and talk about how it started in Manchester, how many artists are in it, and what pieces you're showing?

Nicola Dale: The exhibition is called *The First Cut*. It's curated by Natasha Howes and Fiona Corridan at Manchester Art Gallery and it involves 31 international artists who work with paper. I got involved about 2 years before the exhibition first went on show. The curators came to see me in my studios (Rogue Studios in Manchester city centre). They said they really liked my work and they were thinking of doing a show about paper and said they'd be in touch. Eventually they did contact me and commissioned a new piece, which is 'Sequel', and a piece I'd originally done for the Liverpool Biennial, called 'Down.' After Nottingham the exhibition moves to the to Sea City Museum in Southampton until January 2014.

AS: So all the artists are working in paper, and this was a big hit in Manchester?

ND: Absolutely massive, it broke all the records, the most visitors they've ever had.

AS: Why do think it struck such a chord?

ND: I think it's the immediacy of it; paper is the first thing you play with as a kid, to make artwork. You screw it up and rip it. It's a good mix of work, some of it is illustrative, and some far more conceptual.

AS: The first piece we saw was 'Down.' Can you describe it?

ND: It's a pile of feathers which I've cut from a set of Ordnance Survey Maps from my local library - Withington Library - which couldn't store them any more. They are from the early 70s. It's almost a complete run, 230 maps. They sat in my studio for a while until I was approached by a composer called Ailís Ní Ríain who wanted to collaborate with me. She puts music in unusual places and wanted to do something in Victoria Train Station, Manchester, which didn't happen for health and safety reasons...

AS: Yes, obviously a very dangerous piece.

ND: ... but we approached a gallery called Metal, at Edge Hill station in Liverpool, which has transformed all the old station buildings into community space. It's beautiful, lots of exposed brickwork and nooks and crannies, and we exhibited 'Down' in the accumulator tower on its own under dim lights, accompanied by Ailís Ní Ríain music, which is based on found sound elements. It was spooky and spiritual.

AS: So the piece is a circular plinth and a large pile of what look like feathers, but which on closer inspection are pieces of these maps. How carefully are you interested in viewers working out this is Eton and Windsor, or Darlington? Is the original text part of the work?

ND: Definitely. There's always the danger that people will just glance and walk away. The average time spent in front of an artwork is three seconds, but if you spend maybe four seconds you'll notice that they're maps. I did lots of school workshops, and took them to see that piece, and asked them what the feathers were made of. As soon as they knew that they were maps, they got the piece and were telling me what the piece was all about. It is important that people know that they are maps, but you can't force people to look.

Gill Partington: You mention that you wanted to convey a particular mood, and you felt that the piece was about loss. Can you elaborate on that?

ND: When I first got the maps, it was sad and upsetting that the library was throwing them away. And when I first looked at them, I thought how much the landscape has changed since the early 70s. These maps are a marker of that change, representing places that don't exist anymore, people that don't exist anymore, journeys that can't be made anymore. That's when I hit on the idea of feathers, since feathers that aren't attached to a bird can't fly anymore. It's a sort of celebration of loss, I suppose.

AS: And when it moves to its new location, will it be to some degree reconfigured and remade?

ND: Yes, that's something I keep returning to in my work. I'm interested in sculpture that moves and changes. So much of my work is about time and the effects of time, that's why I spend so long making my pieces; the traditional idea of sculpture is something that is static, but I think it's really interesting to work with a material like paper, like books, because they have the capacity to move, and change and take on the shape of their surroundings, even to the extent of taking on a certain plinth or a certain space. I like that it continues its life, even though it's a celebration of something that has gone.

AS: So do you feel that this piece isn't really 'finished', that it's mid-way through its life?

ND: Yes, I quite like the idea that it could just carry on. Also, because it's open to the public, I know that feathers are disappearing, and I can imagine the pile getting smaller and smaller as the feathers dissipate out into the world, which I think is so nice!

AS: So you'd be fine with someone picking a feather off the top?

ND: It depends who it was...

AS: I think Gill has a few in her pocket.

ND: That's one of the reasons why I like working with these kind of materials; I know that they are going to get damaged, ripped, torn, stolen. That's part of it: I'm not someone who makes work in bronze, that's not what I'm about.

GP: Have you always been interested in paper. Did you have a fascination with it as a child?

ND: Right from the beginning. My mum says I used to pull books down off the shelf and build myself a little fortress and sit inside it.

GP: So you were interested in doing things with books rather than reading?

ND: In addition to reading; I loved reading and art, but I went to a really academic school that looked down on Art. I started an English Degree at Birmingham, but in the first term realised I'd made a massive mistake.

GP: That's interesting because your work seems to operate between literature and art, to take books out of one space and put them in another. Do you think that dialogue between literature and art is part of your work?

ND: I think it must be. It's not uppermost in my mind, but it's definitely in there. Even the work I make that isn't made out of books is inspired by reading.

AS: So it's important to you to have read the books that you use in your art?

ND: Not necessarily, it depends on the piece. There was one piece I made where I decided 'I definitely will not read this book'. It was an Albert Einstein book I found in a shop; *The World as I See It*. But my immediate reaction was 'I'll never be able to see the world like Einstein', so I locked it up, padlocked it and threw away the key.

GP: You made it impossible to read....

ND: So that was actually about not reading, but it was very much inspired by that book; it had to be made with that book. It depends on the piece, with 'Sequel', I didn't read all the reference books I used.

AS: Can you describe 'Sequel'?

ND: It's a twelve-year-old oak tree, that was felled by a friend of mine, and I stripped all the leaves and replaced them with ones I made from the pages of unwanted reference books from charity shops and library sales. I spent about a year making the leaves and sorting them into categories according to the information on each leaf, and when I glued them to the tree I made each branch represent a different branch of knowledge. 'Sequel' is about what's happening to knowledge in the digital world.

AS: Is it a political piece in that sense? Are you protesting against or marking the demise of the book?

ND: I was interviewed by a curator who hit me with a quote from Foucault : 'knowledge is not for knowing, knowledge is for cutting'. She was asking me 'is this about power?' Is this a political statement? I said it's more about power's opposite, it's more about a sense of responsibility to what we have, what we do with the stuff in the world, where it goes, what it means, how it carries on, how we look after it. It isn't overtly political. Once upon a time I thought the disappearance of books was terrible, but I've come to a realisation that you can't fight change or time. Things are going to disappear and there's nothing you can do about it. Nothing that human beings make lasts forever. That's what my work is about.

GP: There's something open-ended about your work. You produce re-makings of the book, which get re-made and change shape. Your work has a kind of transience built into it; you're interested in the passing of time.

ND: Definitely, and that's why I keep coming back to handmade, painstaking process. It's a way of feeling time, of being in time. When you're engaged in a repetitive process, cutting and cutting for hours, your mind goes to a different place. I don't know how to describe it. That's why I opted for art; words didn't feel enough to express what I wanted to.

AS: That lengthy process of making seems to be very important to you, but when we see it in the gallery we have a different relationship to your work. It seems there are two stages; the process stage, which is more intimate and more your own, and the public viewing stage.

ND: I'm still not sure if I will try and combine the two things, and go back to more performative work, but the time I spend making these works in my studio is so private. It's hard to translate that into the public realm; it ends up being about you and the public and not the work.

GP: You did a performance with a work called 'A Secret Heliotropism'...

ND: 'A Secret Heliotropism' is the first altered book work I ever made. I'd been reading Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, about the mechanism of history being like a heliotropism. It was such a visual idea, I instantly knew what I had to do with it. It was a painstaking piece: each page was cut by hand into a strand of leaves, but all the strands are still attached to the spine of the book. So when you tip the book all the leaves fall out, but you can fold it away and close the cover and it looks like an ordinary book again. Normally that folding away process is private, at the end of a show, but people find it difficult to believe the sprawling mess of leaves and strands can be folded back down. At an artists' book fair in Norwich I showed the piece and spent the second day folding it away in front of people. It took about four hours.

GP: The website for that event said 'come and see Nicola Dale transform this work from sculpture into book'. I was wondering what you thought about the word 'sculpture'. There's something about your work that's transient and delicate, not monumental at all. What sort of terminology do you prefer? Do you think of your work as sculpture or as something else?

ND: Well, I do call myself a sculptor, but partly because I don't know what else to call myself. My work is sculptural, it is about form and 3D. But I'm not a traditional sculptor at all.

AD: Is there a community of paper/book sculptural artists now, do you think?

ND: I think there is clearly a worldwide trend for books in art, including artist's books and altered bookworks. But the real community element comes from artist's books, which is more about individual books and limited editions that aren't just 'books' but artworks in their own right.

AS: Why do you think there is that international movement towards paper in art?

ND: It must be for the same reason that I'm interested in it; there is the sense that these things are passing. Once upon a time, people wouldn't dream of cutting up a book, because they were too expensive, but now they're going and they're ten a penny.

AS: Tom Phillips talked about the Mallock book he bought, which was the basis of *A Humument*. He went to a junk shop in Peckham, and bought a book that had to be two pence or three pence. Economy was his opening rule. But can I ask about chance, and the degree to which your pieces are controlled expressions of intention, and the degree to which they're random. 'Down' looks different each time you install it, and looks like thousands of fallen feathers. How much of a role does chance and luck play?

ND: Loads. I do arrange my pieces but I'm not obsessive about it. But once I've done the cutting, I just let the material be what it is and let it fall where it falls. When I went to Norwich with 'A Secret Heliotropism', they thought it would take a day to set up and day to put away again. I said, no, setting up is really easy! I can set it up in a couple of minutes.

AS: I like the idea of the materials having a kind of agency. There's a sense that the book is tending towards some kind of artwork, you're releasing a potential in it...

GP: Yes, how do you feel about what you do to books? Are you destroying them? Are you revealing something? Are you bringing out some sort of potential that's in them?

ND: I'm definitely bringing out a potential in them to make people think about them as objects that can be 'read' in a non-traditional way. Reading for me involves not just reading words, but reading form and texture and shape and shadow and light. So there is that potential within the material to let people see that stuff as well. One of the things I love about books is the feel and the weight, and the fact you can turn the pages and you can fold the corners over. It's not just about the words going into your brain, it's about that physicality as well.

GP: And do you find that you are reading at the same time as you're cutting or re-making?

ND: Again, it depends on the book. With the reference books when I was making 'Sequel', I noticed the colours and forms rather than the words. It was about recognising which pages went in which category. It was thinking about the order of things rather than taking in the information.

GP: So you were filing things, a filing exercise?

ND: It was a kind of filing exercise, yes. I've always been interested in order. So much of my work is about a set of rules that I make for myself, and then I follow those rules until the piece is made. The technique I use is important to me, because I feel if I'm not true to my own rules then the piece is going to fail. I had to do all the feathers individually, because feathers in nature are all different. If I'd done them on a machine, it wouldn't have been true to the idea.

GP: The painstaking care and time that you take; our collection is called *Book Destruction*, but there's something about what you do that's perhaps at odds with that. I get the sense that there's something you really like about the book as an object, and what you do is somehow honouring them, treating them with affection. How do you characterise your attitude to your medium?

ND: I do almost see myself as a rescuer of books. The maps I used in 'Down', I did rescue them.

AS: And the same with the encyclopedias in 'Sequel'.

ND: They were destined for the bin. It was a way of giving them a new lease of life. But having said that, I am destroying them. Even though it seems like a painstaking process to spend a year and half making a single piece of artwork, when you think how long the history of the book is, a year and half is nothing. In the long view, to destroy a book in that time is quite a vicious, quick thing to do.

AS: Have you had any hostile criticism about doing things to books that should be preserved?

ND: I did a public talk in Manchester, and a librarian spoke to me afterwards. I'd said books were disappearing and she said 'books aren't disappearing!' I don't think she understood. She took it very personally. I don't mean that books will disappear in the next ten years, but going back to the idea of the long view; books will go, everything goes.

AS: It seems to function on two levels: you have a broader sense of transience of everything manmade passing, and also a local context of libraries closing, and book pulping and digital culture.

ND: Libraries are changing with the times. In Manchester they are becoming information points. They mirror what computers do for us.

GP: So, the book's place in culture is changing, but into what? Is that a question you're interested in?

ND: Massively. The work that I'm doing at the moment is thinking not about individual books but about the fate of knowledge, as opposed to this thing we call information. I'm thinking about the physicality and heaviness of books compared to the weightlessness of digital information, which is everywhere and nowhere. I'm in the middle of making a new piece using a box of lead type given to me by a neighbour. The first piece I pulled out of the box wasn't a letter, it was a space. I held it in my hand and thought, once upon a time, even a breath or a gap, or a pause in thought had a weight. Now, words themselves are weightless in the digital world. To an artist that's fascinating, because I work with 'stuff', but there's all this stuff now that isn't anywhere.

AS: But you have a very strong digital presence.

ND: Yes, I'd be a hypocrite if I said the digital world is terrible. You have to adapt.

AS: But is that a lesser way of encountering your work?

ND: There is nothing like seeing an artwork in the flesh. [Online] you don't get the same sense of weight and form, you don't get the light and shade, or the detail.

AS: Would you like people to be able to touch your work?

ND: I don't know. It would be destroyed really quickly. Someone once plunged his hand into the centre of 'A Secret Heliotropism'. He thought it was made of metal.

AS: We expect artwork to be monumental and permanent, and have a material toughness, so it's very striking to see your pieces when they are so fragile. The leaves move with a breeze.

ND: Yes, you wouldn't get that sense of movement with an image.

GP: When does something stop being a book, for you, and start being something else? When you look at a book, do you have an idea of the thing you want to do with it? Do you start with a book, and see where it takes you, or do you start with an idea and find a book to suit?

ND: I usually start with an idea, and then I seek out the best materials.

AS: But the maps, and the type were in your studio for a long time as a potential or a future work?

ND: Yes, things sit in my studio waiting for the idea that's right for them to bring out their potential.

AS: Is your work conceptual?

ND: Yes, although it's not what people usually think of as conceptual art; Michael Craig Martin's glass of water on a shelf. The aesthetic and the idea are equally important for me, but it starts with the idea.

AS: The stereotype of conceptual art is that it's solely about ideas, and not about the craftsmanship you practice. There seems to have been a return to craft and craftsmanship in art. Are you part of that?

ND: I suppose I am. I don't think I'm unusual in that. It's a reaction to the YBA mass manufacture approach. It is about intimacy and doing it yourself.

AS: What are the skills you deploy to make a piece like 'Down'? How do you train to do that?

GP: Have you got a HND in book destruction?

ND: I think my skill lies in the ideas rather than the craft. It was to do with the degree I did: it trained me to have ideas and think creatively.

AS: But were you always good at working with your hands?

ND: I was always making things. I started with making my own editions of books, rather than altering [existing ones]. The first book I ever made was called *Aehimmoorsst*, based on Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. I printed and bound my own book, re-ordering every word alphabetically, but keeping all Kafka's punctuation in place. I wanted to metamorphose *Metamorphosis*. At the time I was doing a lot of work about ordering. I took a piece of classical music and put all the notes in order, from low to high.

GP: Have you heard of the edition of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* published by Information as Material [Simon Morris, *Re-writing Freud*]? It has all the same words, but rearranged in a random

order... There's a lot of wordplay that goes on in your work... 'Down,' 'Kindle,' leaves. Are you interested in these dual meanings? Maybe we could talk especially about 'Kindle', because it seems to invite speculations about the digital and the fate of the book.

ND: Kindle is an installation, thousands of candles made from the pages of unwanted books. The title was obviously a play on words, but I'd read Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, in which a sacred library burns down, and the narrator tries to rescue the fragments. He calls it a 'lesser library', and I tried to create a kind of lesser library with the candles. It was in the Old Map Room in the John Rylands library, Manchester: a space with no books, just empty shelves. It seemed a potent place to think about the disappearance of books. I grouped the candles around the room in a secret ordering system, similar the hidden order in the Eco library. I'd come across the compendium of lost words online – obscure words that have fallen out of usage - and chose some of those words and made objects out of the left over book covers that in some way resembled a word. They give clues as to what the word meant but you would never be able to guess it. I was trying to link it to the thought that perhaps in the future people wouldn't know that the candles were made from books, because they would have no idea what books were. I haven't shown it anywhere else because that was the perfect place for it.

AS: It reminds me of a former English literature colleague of mine who said she hated literature, so she had an office with no books in it. Just a single-page photocopy of Freud.

GP: Do you own a Kindle?

ND: No. They are quite beautiful objects, but they need power. A book, you don't have to plug it in, you can take anywhere, fold it, write on it.

AS: So you wouldn't make a piece out of an electronic Kindle?

ND: Um... No. I don't think they will have such a long life. Maybe when they're closer to the end of their life, I'll be interested.

GP: The more we talk, the more it seems like your work is about obsolescence, not just the obsolescence of the book, but what it is that books do. Words disappear, knowledge disappears or transforms. Your work is trying to get to this point where language starts to break down or fail or disappear.

ND: I think that's why I didn't do my English degree. Because words go, and I knew there was another way of expressing that idea. It's a celebration of loss. Not exactly a nostalgia, because it's about moving things on in some way, even if it is only transient.

AS: Maybe there are two kinds of transience; a bad kind with things getting binned, and a more transformative kind. Are there books you wouldn't cut? One of the things that sparked our interest in this topic is the way that the destruction of religious books can be so explosive.

ND: My mum was worried I would cut up a Koran, but I'm not interested in causing offence. I'm not the sort of artist who's interested in notoriety.

GP: Have you ever felt guilty...

ND: No. [Laughs]

AS: In general? But is it important that these books aren't wanted?

ND: Yes. Because it makes more sense to me to use things that aren't wanted. I do have books at home that I would never cut up because I love them too much. But guilt doesn't come into it, because I've never felt like I've destroyed something forever.

GP: I wanted to talk about 'Flashback', which seems to be about book destruction.

ND: It was made specifically for a solo exhibition in Nottingham. It was a while ago, I was slightly more anxious than about books disappearing. I'd chosen individual books to represent an area of knowledge. I turned each book into a sculpture of itself on fire. I'd been thinking about Hitler's burning of books in an attempt to get rid of ideas. The books lined the gallery and it had a flickering effect as you walked up and down.

GP: What about the title?

ND: It was about looking back to books being everywhere, but also forwards to a point when they will have disappeared.

AS: Can you talk about what you're doing at the moment?

ND: I'm working with the lead type I mentioned earlier. I've been cutting very fine tissue paper into rectangles the same size and shape as a piece of type, but making enough of them to weigh the same as the type. It's called *The Weight Between Words*. It's a move away from working with actual books. I'm also doing some work about full stops. A few years ago I carved book out of stone and left it in out in the garden, so it got weathered, with moss growing over it. I've been looking at stories about the end of the world, and I'm taking all the full stops out of them. I've got all the full stops from *Revelations* cut out. They will all be threaded onto a string, and they will be attached to the stone sculpture.

AS: Are most of the pieces you do now commissions, and how much freedom do you have within those? Or are most of the works driven by your own ideas?

ND: It's a bit of both. People have been very generous with their commissions. When Manchester Art Gallery approached me, they said 'just tell us what you want to do', they didn't quibble, even when I came to them with the idea of the tree. They said it would be a logistical nightmare, but do it anyway. I've been lucky with commissions; I've been given the freedom to explore things in a way I want.

GP: A bit of a *Smash Hits* style question, but who or what are your influences?

ND: Mondrian has always been a big favourite. I don't know if you'd immediately see the link, but I think it's the sense of order and rules. And also Thomas Demand.

GP: He makes rooms out of paper?

ND: Yes, they're 1:1 scale: he recreated Albert Speer's offices in paper. It looks incredibly realistic, but you never see the paper sculpture, only the photographic document of it. Also Eva Hesse, and Eva Rothschild, but that's about the possibilities of rearrangement, and work taking on different forms.

GP: Are there influences not necessarily from art, but more everyday practices, things like scrapbooks or pop-up books?

ND: Not really pop-up books, no, but there's a book by Buzz Spector, which was one of the first artists' books I ever saw. He printed a picture of Kafka on every single page, and then ripped them away in increments so that when you open the book it's a torn image of Kafka. Also, my mum is Polish, and in Poland there's a massive tradition of paper cutting. When relatives would come to visit they'd bring books of paper cuts. They're like the snowflakes you make as a child, but incredibly detailed and very delicate, some of them are like lace. I must still have them somewhere. My mum reminded me of it, when she came to the opening of *The First Cut*.