

Luke Fowler - Index Cards and Letters

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In *Mum's Cards* (2018), Luke Fowler's tender and oblique film portrait of the groundbreaking sociologist of culture Professor Bridget Fowler, the card index serves as a proxy for an image of the scholar herself. Shoehorned into cardboard boxes, technology having rendered them obsolete, the cards record the books, scholarly articles and summaries that form her body of research. The portrait is constructed in absence, a generous withdrawal of the camera's image-making power. We see Bridget not through an artist's lens on her face or body, but through her own hand and mind: the physical traces of years of note-taking in brutalist libraries, the careful mark-making of ink on card, a lifetime of intellectual labour and accrued knowledge.

The index card was invented by the Swedish naturalist and physician Carl Linnaeus, and this history places it in the realm of specialist knowledge, of taxonomy, and of classification. It's easy enough to place it in a history of oppressive systems of control. But what if this perspective was flipped? What if we understood the index and the archive not as places of closure and definition, but of an opening up and out? Not the end point of accumulated knowledge, but a new point of departure. In the 1760s what became possible was the potential of scientific coherence through a system of order and ordering, but also something more nuanced and liberatory: the mapping of connections, the possibilities of natural affinities between facts, the production of new knowledge.

In the last two decades, as part of what has become a historical moment of essayistic and biographical films by artists and film-makers, Luke Fowler's preference has not been one of reconstruction of found materials, but of something analogous to this process of identification and affinity. His practical method is one of untangling and assembly. It finds formal voice in his film-making techniques, the commitment to analogue film, the visibility of its associated apparatus, and a rejection of naturalism that highlights the disjunction between recorded sound, the action of the artist's camera and the plethora of data it records: letters, cards, notes, books, musical scores, invoices and receipts.

One of the complexities of Luke Fowler's art is his relationship to technology. If we look at him as a film maker who uses a Bolex camera, for example, it might be easy, but inaccurate, to understand him as an artist interested only in obsolescence. As a musician his work ranges from experimental composition to disco-infused hedonism. As a practitioner, and now noted historian, of sonic arts he is as interested in field recordings and sound sculpture

as the computational arts. Where his art lies is in the recognition of paradigm shifts. In moments of potential liberation, where individuals break with traditions and with professional codes, from psychiatry, in his renowned portrait of R.D. Laing, to avant-garde music in his study of the Canadian composer/performer Martin Bartlett or Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra.

At the heart of this intellectual endeavour is a deep regard for what it means to be human at this point of recognition, rupture and transformation. The personal pain of what it means to step outside established orders, rules, conventions or fields. The work is created in recognition of the fact that we all live within systems and orthodoxies and there are opportunities in, and costs of, breaking them.

Index Cards and Letters places all these concerns in the most personal of registers. Bridget Fowler is the artist's mother. The accompanying film work *For Dan* (2021) traces the arc of the artist's late father, the Australian political philosopher and university teacher John Fowler, through his correspondence with his oldest friend Dan O'Neill.

Dan is a Marxist academic living in Queensland surrounded by an overflowing library of classical European thought, canonical literature and revolutionary agitation. The airmail letters from John Fowler to Dan record the intensity of youth, the curiosity of learning and the instability of migration.

Between the twin poles of his mother's cards and father's letters, the artist has placed a constellation of framed photographs. As a group of works they ask a question that Fowler has been inching slowly towards for more than two decades now: from "what makes us?" to "what made me?". When Bridget Fowler talks about the very deep resonance that her scholarship has, how the "war" between theoretical positions maps fault lines to be prodded at for a lifetime, we glimpse the burden of knowledge on her son.

Bridget is a specialist in social class reproduction, her scholarly subjects include a pioneering study of obituaries, of working women's reading and above all a lifetime engagement with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. John was an expert on medieval thought, how hierarchical societies organised themselves to allocate values, and he taught an important course on Fascism. In his life as an academic he was committed to his role as a student advisor and to the university as a place of radical empowerment.

The knowledge they imparted to their children was of a world that was not "natural" but constructed through deep power imbalances and internalised controls. The culture the artist grew up with – books, music and literature – was what Bourdieu understood as a form of

capital. This progressive milieu of exhibitions and plays, was *habitus*, ingrained habits, skills or dispositions which reproduce – or in this case, challenged – dominant values and relations.

In the photographs, we see formal correspondences. There is the simple, lyrical rhyme between the clutched fist of an infant and the sinews of an adult hand, the glorious shriek of a baby teased with a simple toy. The images are paired: Luke Fowler's own photographs and the family negatives he has reprinted. These are the most personal of moments, including the artist's sister as a baby on her father's knee, yet we also see the index made active, the categories that the camera's interest consolidates. Here are babies, there are exhausted children, this is people reading, that is patterns of light.

There's something that runs deep in these works, that never quite says its name, and that thing is love. Neatly ducking the risk that his two films explore the pieties of maternal devotion, or the clichés of patriarchal authority, instead we understand a son's love for his mother and father, and the ambiguous love of two ferociously bright young men escaping their class destiny in Australia. But in the play of sunlight, harsh on the dark tilled earth of tropical Queensland, and softly diffused by the sedimentary sandstone tenements of Glasgow's West End, we understand that life is also shaped by violence. Bridget Fowler explains her emerging career in terms of economic disruption and physical trauma to two generations of her family. At university she learns not only the nascent discipline of sociology, but a world view - shaped by the political exiles who teach there - about the brutality of power, played out in the regimes her teachers have fled in countries like apartheid era South Africa and dictatorship in Salazar's Portugal. In *For Dan*, we learn not only of a bond of affection and care between two young men escaping the intellectual and political constraints of a sinister and racist Australia, but also of John Fowler's personal confusion and anger at injustice: "my savage aggression and hatred of what the world really is". And of the shocking death of Dan's mum, sitting slumped beside him in the cinema on what had been planned as a day of celebration.

Linnaeus made his cards on stiffened paper. But the card index came into its own after the French revolution when librarians began to categorise the libraries they acquired using the simple expedient of mass-produced French playing cards. The card index was a revolutionary shift, created by a real, violent revolution, as knowledge shifted out of the realm of aristocratic connoisseurship or theocratic control, and into the hands of the secular state, of individuals, the growing profession of librarianship.

The artist's own life has been indelibly shaped by the rupture of his father's premature death in 2000, the year he graduated from art college. It's possible to see now in the two-decade trajectory of Luke Fowler's body of work a history of leftism, and the complex inheritance of

the leftist world view. *Index Cards and Letters* tells us that alongside the broad sweep of historical and intellectual forces, intimately personal histories of love and loss can be assembled from the same material.