Art and archive – imagining the future

Technologies and attitudes that seemed impossible 50 years ago are now commonplace – will this also be true 50 years from now? Artist Joanna Wright shares observations gleaned during her time at CAT.

I’ve been working as the artist in residence with the Zero Carbon Britain research team at CAT this year. Their research focuses on building working scenarios of what a future no-carbon Britain can look like. How we’ll live: what we’ll eat, how we’ll travel, where our power will come from.

My time here has made me realise how much I take for granted the systems I use in my everyday life, and how previously I had not really considered the design of the future as something I might participate in or contribute to, but rather as something incidental, that would happen to me.

Working with the ZCB team has been a challenge at times. Much of the team’s research takes place quietly at computers or on spreadsheets, with regular, robust discussions about what may or may not be possible in their scenario, and for a lay person some of the technical information is complex.

I’m an artist and documentary filmmaker, and I often use existing archive material in my work. Thinking about a design for the future led me to look at film and image archive around the themes of the ZCB report, at how people in the past have imagined the future, and also archive material from the early days of CAT.

A couple of things struck me. Culturally we have consistently found it hard to embrace ideas that break with the status quo. I’ve found film from the 50s saying oil will never run out. News archive of an electric car in the 1940s makes me reflect on why certain technologies were developed and others overlooked. Other material reveals how certain concepts were ridiculed in the past (for example: women, in charge of machines? impossible!), and we can laugh at how old fashioned those attitudes seem now.

In the CAT oral history project a contributor remembers that at the time CAT was founded it seemed absurd to local people that anyone would want to come and try to catch electricity from the wind, because at that time electricity was incredibly cheap. Almost 40 years (and much higher utility bills) later he reflects on how in fact, technologies developed at CAT have shaped not only the Dyfi Valley, but have travelled all over the world.

I found this recollection profoundly moving, both the concept that a handful of individuals and dreamers could and did establish CAT at a time when the prevailing society saw them as crazy, but also how the passage of time allows us to reflect on what was achieved, and could yet be achieved for the future.

Film archive from CAT shows the early experiments with wind turbines. When you look at how these Heath Robinson-like machines began – built with wood and cloth, even an old oil drum – it’s hard to connect them with the offshore wind farms that exist today. In years to come I imagine the ZCB researchers will have had an impact that we can’t yet know.

In 19th century France an artist designed a series of postcards imagining scenarios for the year 2000. Some of these images never came to pass (a whale powered submarine for example) but at least one of them bears a remarkable similarity to Skype.

As part of my residency at CAT I’m asking people to contribute an image or text on a postcard in response to the question “What does the future look like?” The aim is to make a collaborative creative collection of thoughts about the future.

If you’d like to contribute to the future postcards project then email me at futurepostcard@gmail.com and I’ll send you a card to complete. Postcards submitted will be shown at Oriel Davies Gallery in Newtown in August and then buried in a time capsule.

You can also follow the residency blog and find links to some of the archive I’ve mentioned here: www.zerocarbonarchive.tumblr.com

About the author:
Joanna is a Welsh artist who works with documentary film, oral history recording, archives and photography. She lives and works in Bangor, in northwest Wales. She has produced work for broadcast, gallery and site specific spaces, with NGOs and in collaboration with communities internationally. Joanna’s residency with Zero Carbon Britain is supported by the Arts Council of Wales.