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Craft in unexpected places

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Abstract

Within the shifting territories of craft practice, the handmade has become a relational form of contemporary activity that transforms our understanding of place through a hands-on, minds-on process of collective-making. The conceptual significance of craft is activated through a chance encounter with the handmade in daily life. During the article we aim to explore the confluence between crafting, social engagement, volunteering and the realms of education and creative practice that we have both experienced first hand. What will be revealed will be the voices of practitioners collectively exploring cloth's potential as a metaphor for consciousness, carrier of narrative and catalyst for community empathy and cohesion. This will be informed by an enquiry into historical forms of communal crafting drawn from archival research at the Imperial War Museum London and Foundling Hospital Collection housed at the Foundling Museum in London and a primary case study of the workshop 'Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent'. We employ a method used in object-based research: a value system that can be applied to the consideration of cloth as an object of study – namely, the locational, iconographical, archival, aesthetic and transferral. Focusing particularly on the transferral and locational, we will examine the significance of the handmade gesture in particular artistic, political and social contexts. These visual and textual narratives will inform our perception of 'Craft in unexpected places' and bring visibility to a selection of craft interventions by making links between the wide-reaching

possibilities for craft-based practices and their expressive potential within the social and political landscapes they inhabit.

Keywords

craft

handmade

community

well-being

memorial

empathy

women's history

narrative

As has been discussed on so many occasions over the last 30 years, our relationship with cloth is both intimate and universal. This is the extraordinary nature of this very ordinary medium as it folds and holds us. However, for the purposes of this talk, we are looking not at ourselves within the fold. We are attempting to step outside the fold. In doing so, we may identify ways in which we might use that relationship with cloth to create connections between

communities, to give voice to what cannot be spoken, to make visible what has not been seen, to touch that which has been ignored. (Millar 2012)

Introduction

In this article we hope to untangle ways of reading cloth's value by focusing on the way it is made, as much as why it was made, and what cloth represents within the different circumstances of its production. We are employing a method used in object-based research suggested by Mary Schoeser in *Disentangling Textiles: Techniques for the Study of Designed Objects* (2002). Schoeser presents five types of value systems that can be applied to a consideration of cloth as an object of study – namely, the locational, iconographical, archival, aesthetic and transferral. Schoeser recognizes that she is not the first to identify these values within the scope of object-based research. Within this article we consider specifically the transferral and locational value of cloth in three case studies as a way to explore their particular artistic, political and social contexts.

The community aspects of textile craft production and collaborative endeavor have been widely documented, and its particular place in women's history are explored in books such as *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) by Rozsika Parker and in Elaine Showalter's essay 'Piecing and writing', which presents an exploration of the cultural and social collaborations that occurred within the quilting bees of nineteenth-century America. In our more recent history, textiles in the 1970s became a totemic symbol of action, activism and identity. Handcrafted textiles were used intentionally by feminist artists like Judy Chicago, and activists, such as the Greenham Common

women's peace camp, used textiles in association with notions of 'domestic' and 'women's work'. As Glenn Adamson suggests,

As a strategy that held both the traditional home and mainstream art world at arm's length craft was the most material expression of that strategy. It served double duty as a symbol of unjustly quashed creativity and a token of the feminist desire to break out of the stultification of domesticity. (2007: 151)

This type of collective textile collaboration has never really gone away, as its associations and visibility ebb and flow according to the political climate of the time and the potential impact it may have. In the last fifteen years textiles have had a resurgence signifying political, emotional and often charitable collective efforts. To many of us, yarn bombing on trains, commuters knitting, trees wrapped in cloth or wearing knitted sleeves and benches dressed in crochet are part of an everyday strategy to be noticed or to signify a collaborative project, often associated with a good cause. We are desensitized to these practices, and what may have once appeared strange now does not.

One of the most significant and revolutionary developments in the field over this period is the growth of the worldwide web. It is the first place many would go today to see, discuss and share craft textiles with thousands of individuals and collectives. Betsy Greer, who coined the term Craftivism, describes this as 'Taking something new (the Internet) to share something old (the act of making) and plying it to our want to connect'. She goes on to say, 'Not only are the

knitting circles and quilting bees of yore recreated via the Internet, but so are the feelings that they give us' (Greer 2014: 124).

The Internet thus provides artists with a visibility and reach for their practice that can enable and facilitate ambitious collaborative projects. For instance, the Norwegian artist Lise Bjørne Linnert produces work situated in politically significant places. In 'Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent', collective activism is used as a device, placing repeated units (name tags) hand-stitched in rows, to convey the kidnapping, torture and killing of young women on an unimaginable scale in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, taking our understanding of the handmade to the boundaries of our expectations. The project has been running since 2006 in numerous locations worldwide and continues to date (Figures 1 and 2).

'Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent'

Engagement with collective-making has a long history within the textile course at the University of Huddersfield ([Macbeth 2011](#)). The conference *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* (University of Huddersfield, 2012) was the culmination of our experience of working with community-led models of collaboration and social engagement in textile practice and underpins our attempts to embed volunteering-based projects into the curriculum.¹ Bjørne Linnert's workshop 'Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent' builds on this understanding of the pedagogy of volunteering, embodied knowledge and mindfulness as students' use of stitch is reassessed in connection with the deeply challenging social and humanitarian issues the workshop represents. In this case Bjørne Linnert takes our understanding of the handmade to the boundaries of expectation through her invitation for participants to use hand-stitch as a vehicle to retaliate against the continuing murder of women in Ciudad Juárez. The curator and writer

Lesley Millar writes, 'For all of us who have taken part in such workshops it is an extraordinary act of identification, each of us forming an emotional and physical connection with the name of someone who will never be known to us' (2014: 40).

Through communication with Bjørne Linnert via e-mail, a kit arrived from her studio in Norway containing the printed names of disappeared women from Ciudad Juárez, along with white cotton tape onto which we were instructed to embroider each name in red thread. Bjørne Linnert has said, 'We all have close connection to our name. The name is the first thing we write' (n.d.). By hand-stitching onto a tag, Bjørne Linnert activates a responsibility in her audience to do something. Part of a strategy to engage first-year textile students with theory and practice was to involve them directly with work that opened up and expanded the parameters of their experience of textiles, which is often limited to commercial or product-related outcomes. During the workshop each tag was embroidered with a unique script: a gesture that speaks about the situation through individual and collective voice. They sit in contrast to the consistent, solidly formed names industrially woven onto name tags for children in the West and which signify belonging and the certainty of identity. Within the textile studio, the interrelationship between stitch and cloth is activated to build a spirit of communal concentration that moves students from a passive and receptive mode of practice into an active and creative mode that can no longer be considered in isolation to the global political references of the project. At the end of the workshop the hand-sewn tags were posted back to Bjørne Linnert, who adds them to the constantly expanding collection of names.

The artist Brian Maguire, who for many years has been painting portraits of the female victims who have been killed in Ciudad Juárez, is part of a group of people who continue to speak out about the situation. He has stated how, as consumers, we are all responsible for the plight of these women:

Juárez is not happenstance, it's part of an economic construct, *our* economic construct.

These girls make those things like the electrical distributors in cars, they make all the junk – everything – we use all the time. Juárez is a city that does not care about its people, [who are] human fodder for the factories. [...] It's our system. It's the telephone I talk on. (Vulliamy 2014, original emphasis)

The understanding of such grave loss is difficult to comprehend, and this is what Bjørne Linnert and Maguire are keen to explore. For participants engaging in the Bjørne Linnert workshop, an identification with someone through the directness of stitch is simultaneously activating an expression of compassion, an emotion not always easy to express outwardly. This expression is conveyed through the needle as it moves in and out of cloth and demonstrates an authentic, internal and personal voice through the act of tracing of stitches to immortalize a person's name. Many participants in the project are encouraged to consider an alternative site for embroidery that is unexpected within the more familiar context of autonomous modes of making. One student reflects, 'Linnert gives embroidery an act of care through this project as participants have to take time in embroidering each name making people appreciate what these women have been exposed to' (Neesha De Silva, B.A. (Hons) Textiles with Surface Design, 2014). Schoeser states

that the transferral value in objects has the potential to form ‘a subjective intimacy which can be shared in the exchange’ (2002: 8). This is a reminder of the meaningful use of embroidery to discuss multiple issues pertinent to society as a collective effort. The act of stitching can help build allegiance to contemporary issues now central to the field of contemporary textile practice.

Foundling hospital collection

The significance of the hand-embroidered name and its transferral value can also be encountered in the archives of the Foundling Hospital Collection, housed at the Foundling Museum in London. Here we discover a tender and powerful stitch in the foundling tokens, which are markers of an exchange between mother and child. They were created in the tragic circumstances of a mother pleading for her baby’s admission to the Foundling Hospital for want of a better future for the child. Nowhere is this level of fragile hand-stitch more unexpected than amidst the backdrop of the London slums of eighteenth-century England. The small inscriptions and hand-stitched edges have sentiment invested in them. The fabric is a mutually agreed token, formed through a social interaction and exchange between mothers and the Foundling Hospital. At a time of high illiteracy and very poor needle skills in working class women, the tokens present a brave attempt to construct a personal identity by hand-stitching into small fragments of cloth. This personal attachment has symbolic resonance; the cloth is used to represent a mother’s close connection to her child and also the hope that she may one day be able to return and re-establish the relationship.

Schoeser suggests that the transferral value in objects consists in the way they can carry esteem. This can be a monetary exchange, but it can also involve an exchange of emotions. Sometimes, she states, ‘objects invested with memories or emotion relieve the individual of the “burden” of

carrying these thoughts' (Schoeser 2002: 9). The Foundling Hospital accepted a piece of cloth, either cut from an item of the baby's clothing or from the mother's dress, as a form of identification. In the darkened space of the 'Threads of Feeling' exhibition at the Foundling Museum in 2010, the emotional content of the small fragments of cloth immediately hushed the audience to whispers. The scrawling and rough embroidered thread serves as a powerful symbol of love and hope. This is not a subversive stitch but a direct and immediate attempt to communicate through the act of creating a form of identification in hand-stitch.

'The Sheet' and 'Changi Girl Guide Quilt' World War II

Historically, we can find the calming potential of stitch being used in the most abject of circumstances: a World War II prisoner of war camp. An internee, Daisy Sage, later known as Day Joyce (her married name), embroidered in secret at Stanley Internment Camp in Hong Kong during the war, placing over one thousand names onto a bed sheet. The sheet also contains camp diaries in coded words, signs, symbols and colours. She describes this record of the 'big and little things, simple and important things' and reflects 'It was not begun with any purpose in mind, nor was it continued with any after-the-war ideas. It was simply a hand steadying, mind employing, secret thought recorder of my own' (Joyce 1974: 2). The hand-embroidered sheet was created in the most unexpected of places, hidden in between the rugs on her camp bed. No one expected it to be there. Aesthetically the work is challenging; the dynamic composition conveys the constrained circumstances in which it was stitched. Tiny sections were pulled up to work on while the main body of the sheet was left hidden for fear that it would be found by the camp guards. Day describes in her memoir *Ordinary people: The Sheet* that 'In the dead end of adversity I witnessed a consideration for others which makes for greatness and I wish to

commemorate' (Joyce 1974: 2). The war artist Leslie Cole created the oil painting *Civilian Internees in the Far East, WWII, 1945*, which captures the macabre, dark days of Singapore's British women's civilian population. The painting is situated alongside Day Joyce's *Sheet* (1974) in the Imperial War Museum, London. It conveys the spirit of the camp's inhabitants; sheets are draped everywhere, forming canopies, presumably to create shade. It is a purposeful environment, constructed by the indomitable occupants, whose desperate situation is starkly evidenced in the portrayal of their malnourished frames (Figures 3 and 4).

The *Changi Girl Guide Quilt* (Figures 5 and 6) also resides in the Imperial War Museum London. It was created by a group of girl guides incarcerated in the Changi prisoner of war camp in Singapore. Twenty girls aged 8–16 years made the quilt as a surprise birthday present for their guide leader, Elizabeth Ennis. Those who constructed the quilt had to scavenge for every little piece of fabric they could find. Needles were very useful as they were so light and transportable and could be carried almost anywhere to mend or repair garments. In this case the needle was an extremely precious tool to the girl guides as it helped to alleviate the boredom of captivity. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* from 2010 captures memories from one of the surviving members of the girl guide group called Olga Henderson. She recalls how, as their clothes rotted during their internship, they would unpick the thread from the cloth and use it to secretly create the quilt (Grice 2010). In the centre of each rosette patch each girl embroidered her name to commemorate their guide troupe and beloved leader. The quilt itself is delicate and tender, joyous patches of floral cotton lawn, presumably recycled from dresses, alongside patches of bed sheets and rougher textured cloths, embodying a narrative of experience through the materials.

The hand-sewn name carries precious information on cloth. Even the most crudely sewn names convey a particular kind of intimacy, creating a bond between the maker and the recipient and carried in the character of each stitched letter form. This transferral quality brings an emotional value to the object in the exchange. Schoeser writes ‘objects given as a token of friendship, esteem or love represent a double gift – of the sentiment for the objects’ (2002: 9). The stitch forms a gift of exchange between the girls and their guide leader.

In this article we have explored the potential of cloth to reveal contemporary and historical forms of communal-making. In doing so we have started to draw parallels, discover connections and uncover relationships between the significance of collaboration, the impact of the social and the mindful processes of making and the resonance and importance of transferral value. The transferral relies on a shared value system and empathetic feeling-based response, usually used to consider a reaction to someone else. Recently, an empathetic engagement with objects has been explored as a way of counteracting consumer-based design towards a more sustainable ‘emotionally durable’ object (Chapman 2005: 24). This sentiment and philosophy is embedded in the heart of a range of creative and humanitarian projects in recent years and can also be observed in the historical examples of the handmade provided in this article. We craft in varied and complex situations to connect and make meaning: ‘Solitary though we may have become we haven’t given up hope of forming relationships’ (Botton 2012: 27).

Lise Bjørne Linnert’s work is very much in the present, documenting an ongoing, mostly hidden, tragedy. The significance of involving students lies in the pedagogic potential to keep the work moving, debated and contemporary. We learn about Bjørne Linnert’s practice by looking at works from history also made at times of adversity. The significance of every human is recorded

in the stitches and in the time it takes to sew them. ‘Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent’ may be a work created in the present, but this approach to stitch is part of its tradition. Since the first founding token was received, needles and threads continue to act as democratic tools. What these examples have in common is that they demonstrate the central role of cloth and stitch, sometimes as a gift or as an act of defiance, and always as an active remembrance through community action.

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: ‘Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent’, University of Huddersfield, 2015. Image copyright Claire Barber.

Figure 2: ‘Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent workshop’, University of Huddersfield, 2014. Image copyright Claire Barber.

Figure 3: Day Joyce, embroidered sheet, Stanley Internment Camp, Hong Kong, Civilian Internee, World War II. Image copyright Imperial War Museum.

Figure 4: Day Joyce, embroidered sheet, Stanley Internment Camp, Hong Kong, Civilian Internee, Imperial War Museum, World War II. Image copyright Penny Macbeth.

Figure 5: *Girl Guide quilt*, Changi, Far East, Civilian Internee, 1943. Imperial War Museum, World War II. Image copyright Penny Macbeth.

Figure 6: *Girl Guide quilt*, Changi, Far East, Civilian Internee, 1943. Imperial War Museum, World War II. Image copyright Penny Macbeth.

Note

¹ Crafting the Community is a volunteering project that has been run by the Textiles Department at the University of Huddersfield for a number of years to promote and deliver textile craft activities to the wider community. As active players in society, staff, students and external partners create an engaged and interrelated learning experience, mimicking the structure of the warp and weft of cloth itself.