Interview with Angela Maddock

FIONA HACKNEY, Manchester Metropolitan University

Angela Maddock is a cloth-based artist who works with and through the literal and metaphorical language of textiles. She has a PhD from the Royal College of Art, where she is a visiting lecturer and is senior honorary research fellow with King's College, London. She lives in Swansea, where she previously worked at Swansea College of Art and where she continues to contribute as honorary research fellow for Surface Pattern Design. She is a trained counsellor – though no longer practicing – and a mentor. She contributes to clinical humanities teaching for medical students at King's College.

Fiona Hackney: *The theme of our special issue is well-making and the specific ways in which creative making, as a process and a product, can help us feel well. How would you define well-making?*

Angela Maddock: Well, the first thing I want to say is how much I prefer the term well-making to wellbeing. I feel that is really a positive thing, whereas wellbeing is something that maybe happens to you. Wellmaking for me is a lot more about agency and about me and the people I work with doing something for themselves that actually involves enabling. But there's something around making and I think about this very particularly. When I don't have something to work on, to physically make, I have a sense of absence and a sense of not having something around me that I can transform. I think there's a transformative thing about making that kind of has a psychological and also a physical response as well. So it's not just it makes me feel better, I'm actively involved in doing something rather than maybe sitting and musing on the state of the world or the state of maybe my mental health. I've always felt very keen to think of well making as being an act of contributing and building and bringing things together, attaching. So it's just a really positive phrase for me.

Fiona: *So, knitting and storytelling are central to your research and artistic practice.*

Can you tell us more about your own knitting story, how and when you learnt to knit and why it became meaningful for you?

Angela: This is an interesting tale because although my Doctoral thesis is very much about knitting and particularly about a piece of knitting called 'Bloodline' that I do with my mum, I have kind of lost my knitting mojo presently. Looking back on knitting now, I realise how rich it is. I grew up watching my grandmother, we called her nan, who knitted as if her life depended on it. She knitted very badly–her tension was appalling. Everything she knitted ended up being at least two or three sizes too big. She smoked Benson & Hedges cigarettes as she knitted–she always washed everything afterwards–watched things on the T.V. such as the wrestling and the 1970s cop show Starsky and Hutch. I never actually learnt to knit from her, and I never learnt to knit from my mum, who was really a machine knitter, because they were both not very good as teachers. There was something quite mystical about watching my nan. It was as if something magical came out at the tips of her needles. I was very much an observer and a wearer of bad knitting or fun knitting as I grew up!

It wasn't until I was doing my Master Fine Art that I started to knit because I was trying to explore ideas around textile practice in the context of thinking around burden. I was the only person in my peer group doing textiles as my practice, which I constantly had to justify. No one asked the painters to justify painting, but what I was doing was described as domestic. So I taught myself to knit. Interestingly, I taught myself to knit in the English way and then somewhere along the line I thought, "I quite like the continental way or the German way," so I retaught myself. So, I'm a self-taught knitter using You Tube, and working in that way. Anybody is my teacher. I'll go and find things when I need to. I knit very intuitively as well. I'm more likely to knit strange things like nose warmers and things for caressing my fingertips than to knit a garment. I get easily bored knitting garments and I lose my way.

Fiona: *Why knitting in the first place?*

Angela: Knitting was very important because it was about me thinking about my

maternal line. So, there is a very particular story. My nan had her back broken in an industrial accident and wore a steel reinforced corset for as long as I can remember. I always remember her immersive relief at removing her corset before bedtime. So, I had this idea about the steel corset from my nan. I also love circular knitting. It's like puppetry to me, knitting on double pins. I forged six double pins–they're massive things, like manacles. I was knitting with these huge metal rods.

I've always loved the language around anything to do with textiles. I was thinking about how we knit things together, how we are closely knit and the edge to things as well, so being close knit. I gave a lecture at the National Gallery in London on a particular painting–Chardin's 'The Young Schoolmistress'–and the idea of being close knit. How problematic that was as well really, that it's not necessarily an easy thing. So, I was always looking for the tricky bit, the sticky bit.

That's why knitting was important because it seems this totally innocuous thing that people assume is done out of keeping your hands busy. My mum learnt to knit to stop smoking, but for me it was much more about what knitting might express. I've always talked about it with students that arts practice can be a way of putting into language things you can't put into language through words, that doesn't feel safe to explore through words.

Fiona: *Great, thank you. You describe your project Bloodline as 'an affective encounter'. Can you unpack that for us please? I'm particularly interested in your thoughts on knitting and trauma.*

Angela: Knitting and trauma, okay. The first time I did the piece Bloodline with my mum it was an intensely affective experience. We started really close together so we were face-to-face, trying to knit from a cast on edge–really up against each other and negotiating the movement of our hands one around the other. There is traumatic loss in my family. My brother was murdered. In that moment of being very close to each other I suddenly felt incredibly emotionally overwhelmed. We're doing this as a public piece of work. It's a performative piece. I can remember feeling my heart racing, feeling as if I needed to escape the space, my body not coping, that I might be sick, that I might faint

because I couldn't speak. I couldn't tell her how I felt. So I felt all of the symptoms in my body as affect but I couldn't articulate any of them in words. That became quite a repeated moment throughout … so whenever we would meet up, I would take this piece of work and we would knit on it together.

It became more comfortable for me to knit the further I got away from her because close-up I just felt that there was just too much loss and too much pain, but I couldn't say any of it. Unable to put it into words, I felt it as a body experience.

Fiona: *In your writing you describe knitting as a language that can help us speak the unspeakable. You also describe it at times as sticky, unpleasant, and repulsive as well as sensuous and warm. Can you say more about this please?*

Angela: Knitting is a language; it has its own language. There are very particular things about knitting that unless you know the language of knitting, you won't understand the abbreviations and the language that knitters use. It's quite exclusive in some ways. So, I had to learn a new language when I taught myself to knit, which was very interesting. When I think about the language of it being tricky and soft, I think of Freddie Robins' work and Jo Turney's writing, talking about the stickiness and the unpleasantness. The idea of making things for other people feels very appropriate here because making objects for others involves an element of holding them in mind, but also holding them close in a way that is not necessarily always a good thing.

There's an act of smothering that can happen in making or knitting garments for other people. I knitted a jumper for my son, for instance, that I ended up spinning the yarn for as well. It becomes an act of doing that embeds or has within it, or contains within it, some sort of element of sacrifice as well, "I've done this and it's cost me so many hours of my time," but as I'm doing it, I'm also bearing someone in mind or holding them in mind. So, with him, as I was spinning and knitting, I was thinking about him. When I met my husband, he wore jumpers that his mother had knitted for him, and I felt they were a bit about clinging. There's this holding, clinging-ness to the knitting. I remember very clearly wearing a jumper that was knitted for me a while ago and it was much too tight around the neck, and I suddenly had this overwhelming sensation of being

held too tightly by another. I just got a pair of scissors and cut the neck off and that felt really liberating. So, I think there's a stretchiness to knit. A really good knit stretches well. It moves with the body and then comes back to form. An overwhelmingly oppressive knit holds it too tightly and is tethering.

Knitting also is itchy, 'I've heard my Welsh friends use the word 'picky', I don't know the actual Welsh word, in relation to knitting … it's picky and you're always picking at it–it causes skin irritation. A classic example is when I knitted something for my daughter and she was horrified because she said, "I love it mum, but I'll never be able to wear it," because she gets very sensitive skin. If you're knitting for another especially, there's that edge of what is a gift. I find that really interesting.

Fiona: *You pay attention to processes of unmaking as well as making. Can you tell us why?*

Angela: For me everything I do involves unmaking. I thought about this chatting with the students last week and I said, "I seem to spend all my time unpicking things, taking them apart and putting them back together in a different way." I think that relates also to my own training as a counsellor. I worked in the National Health Service and in the third sector. So, I'm very aware that I use the language of counselling or listening and taking on board other people's stories. But I think the unpicking is part of that, the taking apart, the unmaking is very important. I'm currently in the process of taking clothes apart, tearing them as well. I had a huge resistance to cutting that I've written about and I've now started to piece things together. So, unpicking and piecing and remaking, they're things we all do every day. We find ourselves unpicking ideas, reshaping things. I think they're beautiful ways of thinking about trying to resolve problems as well, that you might be able to unpick a problem and place it out in front of you and re-jig it and move it around. So it's very important to me. Also really important on a very practical level is that unpicking allows you to see how something came in to being and it also allows you some sort of slight imagining of the person who made it.

I'm mostly unpicking things that other people made, particularly the jumper that

my nan was knitting for me as she was dying, which I haven't been able to wear for many, many years. I unpicked it rather than unravel it. It's important to think about where you stop in your practice as an artist maker. I could have unravelled the whole jumper, but it was unpicking the seams and finding her stitches, her joining together of the different parts of the garment, which felt significant–to hold those threads and to unpick those stitches.

Fiona: *That's really interesting…*

Angela: Yes. Just looking at her stitches, they're bumpy … she used knots and lots of people say, "You must never use knots in knitting." So, this jumper that I wore for about four years pretty much nonstop became quite matted. It was like a mohair mix, not pure wool or anything because you didn't get that in the 1970s and early '80s. Now it exists as three pieces because the arms have opened, and it seems to have been knitted in one piece with like a neck shape in it. It exists … I didn't take the arms off the shoulders, so it opens and forms this strange crucifix. That felt okay. In some ways my letting go of her was enabled by the unpicking of her stitches. That felt very meaningful at the time. I certainly have not even thought about unravelling that jumper. It's just stayed there. Now it's in a box. I know where it is. I might bring it out, but I don't feel I need to have it around me now, which feels like a letting go.

Fiona: *You were Maker in Residence working with students and staff at the Florence Nightingale Faculty for Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care at King's College, London. Can you tell us more about this experience, particularly with regard to well-making?*

Angela: I should explain how that came into being to start with. The residency was a Crafts Council and Cultural Institute from King's College initiative supported Helen Hamlyn Foundation. I became the Maker in Residence at the faculty and originally it was for six months and then it got extended and I ended up being there for almost three years. The initial idea was to look for parallels in textile making and the education of

nurses and midwifery students. I didn't work in the hospitals, I worked in education away from the clinical setting, although I was often working in the clinical spaces where the students learnt how to do things. So, initially it was like, "Whoa, I'm in this strange place." I come from teaching in art colleges where I was a senior lecturer for several years and then suddenly, I'm working in a very different environment. I wasn't teaching in an art college, but it was clear to me that there were a lot of observation to start with, so, I went to a lot of things that the students went to.

I learnt how to take blood pressure properly, observed how to look after bed sores, went with the midwifery second year students to learn how to do perineal suturing repairs for women in labour. So, I did a lot of things with them and alongside them. The University was very keen on legacy projects, but I was most interested in the conversations that I might have. I developed three projects that in the end satisfied both the University and me. One was called Patching Up. Students and staff were invited to bring things to me, and I would teach them how to repair them. It resulted in some amazing repair projects. One was a teddy bear, a Winnie the Pooh that looked like roadkill! Another was a suitcase full of jumpers that the head of mental health nursing brought in. His mum had knitted them, and she had died only two months before. I ended up repairing most of them for him, but it was a real act of mending. They were in a box that she had given him with all the remaining yarn from every jumper and a little note about what to do with it and washing instructions. So that was a really tender thing to do. A student from Zimbabwe brought me a small plate that her mum had given her when she left and she'd broken it and we repaired that with kintsugi, the Japanese technique of visible mending.

The next project was called Being Intimate but became known as the Midwifery Quilting Bee. Working with a group of first- and second-year midwifery students, the clinical lead for the whole faculty, and a couple of the midwifery lecturers, we made a quilt made from their own worn but washed, unpicked, and reconstituted undergarments, so knickers and pants. There was one male midwifery student involved so we had his boxer shorts in there also. It became a lovely project because it started very quietly with everybody bringing these favoured garments in and explaining why they'd chosen this pair of knickers or that particular pair of pants and talking about the softness of them,

why they wore them, why they'd chosen them, and this was quite emotional for some people, including the staff, to talk about maybe the sort of person they weren't any longer.

We unpicked and talked and met once a week from January until April. The midwifery students came back from their first placements and would talk through experiences that might have been quite traumatic. I became very aware that the process of sitting around in a rectangle-cum-circle, working on a piece of cloth together, piecing, unpiecing, placing, piecing, stitching became a really good site of reflection, away from the immediate situations. All clinical students must do reflection in practice all the time, but often they don't bring themselves to the reflection. So, for us it was quite important that when somebody said, "This awful thing happened at work when I was on the ward," we'd say, "Well what was it?" and we'd just sit and talk. A real flattening of hierarchies happened, everyone contributed on an equal basis. In fact, one week the clinical lead said something and then apologised saying, "I forgot, I'm actually here to work on the quilt. It's quite tricky to leave your work persona behind." So that was a really interesting project and became something that, in the time I was there, carried on.

We used it at International Day of the Midwife when we invited people to join us stitching. Then again when the first-year midwifery students go into the second year, they have a week called transition, which is interesting to me because we also talk of the stage of transition in labour. Time was allocated for them to sit with me and work on the quilt and talk about how the first year had been. Then all the midwifery students undertook a project called arts and humanities and they came to me to talk this through as we stitched. It became a way of, and this is a phrase I've used a lot now, sideways talking. The act, that is, of doing something that is emotionally and physically engaging enough that it kind of occupies you but not totally. It's something I found happening a lot when my children were much younger. They might have been arguing with you or there's some tension and you take them somewhere in the car. They can talk to you because they're not looking at you, and you the same. I felt this is something that happens in making, especially in repetitive making where you can fall into some sort of flow state, and things that seem like they might be difficult become quite comfortable once you've learnt the skill. The quilt making really had that sense of sideways talking.

It was quite funny and very challenging because it was all like, “Oh my God, this is a quilt made out of dirty pants or dirty knickers,” because one of the students said to me, “Don’t cover up the stains of the gusset. That’s how life is.” The male midwifery student didn’t know what a crotch was–you can’t be a midwife and not know these things! So, it was a good way of being … with humour involved too. It’s not always heavy stuff.

The third project was called The Little Tin of Resilience. It came out of an overheard remark, “Oh, he or she isn’t very resilient. They need to get more resilient.” I thought, “What does resilience mean and especially what does resilience mean for students, and how do they get this thing? Where does it come from?” So we talked a lot about what resilience was in terms of wellbeing. It strikes me that what The Little Tin of Resilience does is engage students in thinking and meditation on their own making activities, and how these might support their wellness, contributing to resilience. I’m anxious about resilience in healthcare because I think it’s been hijacked by a neo-liberal, “You just need to be more resilient,” agenda and that’s not what resilience is. I don’t want it ever to be a sticking plaster for poor management and poor resources. But what we really wanted to look at was to understand what students meant by it, and what they felt they did for their own well-making. Each student was given a tin and invited to put in representations of their own well-making strategies. The tin featured the image of a singing nightingale bird to represent the Florence Nightingale faculty; we didn’t want Florence on the front because it’s too gendered.

I did a test pilot distributing tins to around thirty people across the faculty, staff, and students. We reconvened and they talked about the contents of their tin and its meaning for them. We had all sorts in those tins: photographs, recipes, a key, somebody put in their phone, crosses, gym membership cards, sticking plasters, particularly for midwifery students hand cream, tea bags, chocolate bars. The list went on and on. Eventually, the Faculty asked me to stay for another year to set up a research study based on the project and a paper has been accepted for publication in one of the mental health nursing journals so that will be out soon including lovely portraits of the contents of participants’ tins.

Fiona: *Fantastic. I'm looking forward to that.*

Angela: We had a one-day conference called Being Human in Modern Healthcare and I invited students to talk about their own experience of being students in healthcare. A couple of them also spoke from their lived experience of having mental health issues before becoming a mental health nursing student. That was a brilliant day. We had making as part of that, and we had nursing students, nursing staff, lecturers all involved.

Fiona: *Did making bring something distinctive to the event? Is it something that they'd done before?*

Angela: Not all of them had and it was a challenge for a lot of students. Early in the residency I ran a book binding workshop to help students make a reflection diary because I knew they would go on placement. Some of them would be 18 and they'd be out on the wards bathing people, looking after somebody's personal care, helping people to feed, to become ambulant again. So, we did a very simple book binding workshop and lots of them came to that and made a little book that they then took away and kept in their pockets and wrote their reflections in, hopefully. There were lots of stories about, "I haven't done anything like this since I was at school. Isn't this fun?" and talking and hanging around.

I also did a day's workshop with about thirty mental health nursing students in a big room, and we learned to crochet together and made his huge crochet web. I taught one and then that one would teach another, so we had a cascading crochet, and we were chained together. As you came into the chain, you'd tell a story about yourself to the group. It was incredibly moving. I mean no one was required to spill the beans on their lives but some students were very open and shared things. So we had this big web. Then after that, two of the students came up and said, "Can we take away crochet hooks and balls of yarn because we think this might be a good way of teaching somebody, helping somebody to talk who is finding it difficult to share." Then one of the students went and did a placement in Africa and told me that she'd taken crochet hooks with her because she couldn't speak the language, but she could teach people to crochet. I think it's just

about offering choices and offering opportunities. Some of the students were like, “I’m not going anywhere near that,” and then others were really straight in, “What can I do? What can I learn?”

Kings invited me to run the same workshop with staff at an excellence in teaching conference. I worked with teaching staff from dentistry, physics, languages and so on. I talked about having unusual tools in your hands because when you think about an average crochet hook, it’s not that different to one of the tools you might use to get into someone’s mouth. It was interesting to watch the dentist holding this crochet hook and really finding it tricky. I said, “Sometimes it's useful to remind ourselves how hard it is to learn something new and to put ourselves back into not being the professor of dentistry but being the learning to crochet person” and outside one’s comfort zone.

Fiona: *Very good. Right. You describe your practice as reflection in action, writing ‘I cannot work things out without making something [and this] has been particularly important at times of uncertainty and instability.’ Given the effects of the pandemic, do you envisage wider applications for making and healing, including self-healing?*

Angela: That’s so interesting. I can’t imagine not making. I’ve always got projects. When I think about making, drawing is not quite the thing. It has to be something around joining things together. I feel, if we look back at the pandemic and the isolation that happened within that time, and it’s still ongoing for a lot of people, particularly disabled people. I mean, non-disabled people have access to the world again but there’s still lots of people shielding and still on their own. For me there is a real drive to piece things together, so I’m finding myself working on quilts, making quilts from fragments and stitching fragments together. Definitely the idea of reflection in action, but I don’t want to reflect too much. Making feels like an act of taking something new into the world. It feels positive to be making, unpicking, and reconstituting.

It’s no accident to any of us involved in the arts that one of the biggest drivers around connection, particularly in the first lock down, was artists working online to bring people together in community. We’re doing it all the time, particularly in textile making.

There's this real sense of how cloth is universal, how we all wear it. We lie in it. We dress ourselves in it. That's always appealed to me. So that's where I'm at at the moment. I don't know that it's necessarily knitting but definitely making, unmaking, and making. I think about Louise Bourgeois making, undoing, and redoing and the idea that you only work with one idea, over and over again. That feels really pertinent, really important in our practice so yes, reflection in action.

Fiona: *There was a massive surge, wasn't there, of people really wanting to come together to make, albeit often at a distance. There seems to be a huge sea change in numbers of people interested in making, particularly among young people struggling with mental health issues, and with concerns about the planet, and climate change.*

Angela: Because it is so simple. I've got this lovely quote from Roland Barthes and he describes knitting as a manual activity that is minimal, gratuitous without finality but that still represents a beautiful and successful idleness. I just think yes, that's it. You can just be there and it is, on the surface, quite simple. I just think it's something that is quite accessible. You just need some yarn and two sticks. They don't have to be knitting needles. The act of working your way around something, finding out how to do something is so absorbing, but also can be bloody frustrating! It's about doing something useful with your time as well, isn't it? I love down time if it's like a little pocket of it, but it goes on for too long it becomes a bit depressive. So, I made up a project for myself which was called In Kind. I invited people to send me something that needed repairing in return for a story. So, they had to tell me about why the thing was important to them and I would repair it and send it back to them. All those projects are on my Instagram and that was just about keeping busy but also keeping in contact.

Fiona: *That's lovely, a fantastic idea. Mending is so important.*

Angela: Yes. There's a real thing about filling in holes that psychologically and if we think about absence and loss, filling in holes really fits well with that for me. Suring up, strengthening to the point … I mean I taught somebody how to darn and he then said, he

went away and started doing it. Everything was like, “These socks aren’t quite a hole yet but I’m going to darn them.” So it’s another way of fixing things. I can’t fix the world but I can fix my socks.

Fiona: *Yes, absolutely. That’s a great quote.*

Angela: Yes, small victories.

Fiona: *Right, so this is the last question. You refer to debates about knitting as a marginal activity, that is knitting is easily dismissed and overlooked but there is strength at the margins. Can you say more about this?*

Angela: I have always preferred being on the outside kicking the doors than in the middle having to take responsibility for everything. I don’t know that I’m that wild about ever being in something that feels very mainstream because I think knitting and craft practices have been shown to be capable of all sorts of resistance because they feel more global and more accessible. They have a language of the margins as well. The debate around knitting and race on social media is huge now. Michelle Obama has talked about her endeavours in knitting and how a black woman knitting can be a powerful symbol. There’s something about being at the margins of a practice that feels as if you can change something. It feels like a safer place for me, and I like the other folk that are at the margins. That’s where I choose my company to be. I wouldn’t dare to conflate margins of practice with margins of living because I’m not striving to put bread on the table, but I am very aware that as an arts practitioner, textile practice is always going to be there and that’s okay for me. I think that makes it even better. People say, “Is textile still marginalised?” I think, “my God.” Look at all the debates that we’re having around race, misogyny, so many of them have been so fabulously explored in textile practice that I think it’s the universal language now - banners, clothing, practices. We are where it’s at, in my mind.

Fiona: *That’s a very interesting way to end because I think your point about*

language, and the language of material practice, is true. Its changed and it's changing all the time, but there is something about making and textile practice and the values and agencies attached to it, and how we interact through it, that becomes ever more relevant to more people. Making is very, very meaningful and what you have said today really captures some of the deeper reasons why.

Contributor details

Fiona Hackney is Professor of Fashion Cultures at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Her research focuses on sustainability in dress, slow fashion, the wider value of amateur crafts for health and wellbeing, heritage, twentieth century print media, community co-creation, and social design. Recent publications include 'The Power of Quiet: Re-Making Amateur and Professional Textiles Agencies' (2017), 'Stitching a Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing: Quiet activism, affect and community agency' (2020). She has led many Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded projects that employ practiced-based arts research methods to explore the wider application and value of collaborative crafts/making (for example https://cocreatingcare.wordpress.com/the-project; https://craftspace.co.uk/maker-centric-2017/). Most recently she was Co-Investigator for S4S: Designing a Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing Choices, which examines the value of co-creative textiles/dress making and reflection for pro-environmental behaviour change (https://s4sproject-exeter.uk/).

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