In the Spaces of the Archive

By Caroline Bartlett

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Abstract: In this paper, I offer an explanation of my own working art practices as set within the context of the spaces of the archive and presented as a series of questions arrived at through action, illuminated in turn by anthropological theory. Over the last few years I have examined various museum collections, archives and encyclopedias in relation to the way these knowledge systems both represent and promote the formation of individual and collective identities, memories and value systems.

Artifacts located within museological and archival systems can be powerful sensory and social forms in which different meanings and memories are embedded, but their significance can be obscured rather than revealed by the systems which control them. How we experience these objects within the physical, material, social, and political spaces of the archive leads to questions about how these sets of relations interact and what can be understood from this. In this vein then, and in the context of the tactile and sensory orientation of my own textile art practice, I look at four of my site-specific works produced in relation to the spaces of the archive: Overwritings (1999), Storeys of Memory (2001), Bodies of Knowledge (2002) and Conversation Piece (2003), focusing in particular on the latter, and show how investigation into different collections has prompted the making of new aesthetic objects which comment on and attempt to draw out these relations.

Introduction: In the Spaces of the Archive

Writing about art practice carries the danger of presenting doing and thinking as separate, whereas as a practitioner, my experience is of a movement between thought, skill and intuition that occurs in an almost seamless way and which is not easily explicable within a linear trajectory. Finding a means to represent not just the work, but how it comes to fruition is therefore not easy.

I think through fabric. As a material it is fundamental to my practice not only in substance but also for what it can suggest. Fabric has tactility and connectedness temping one to reach out and feel it between eager finger tips. In touching, past bodily experiences are evoked; visceral responses, layered memories, associations and emotions. My investigation of the archive is driven by questions related to this; for example around the tensions between innate,
personal and spontaneous recollection and the conscious, public ways in which we remember, around the potential of materials and objects to activate recollection and association, and around the role played in this by sensory experience.

In formulating such questions, I draw on other disciplines (such as anthropology) to illuminate my thinking and enter into investigations within the context of the spaces (physical, material, political and social) of the archive and of an examination of narratives generated by objects in parallel with sourced or accompanying textual documentation. I come to each collection looking for insights into the way that the archive functions and find that the manner in which I experience the object or collection, (sometimes with privileged access not normally available to the public) becomes the pivot on which to base my interrogations. The insights into institutional and museological practices which are opened up then become reflected in the site-specific work created as a response to this encounter. The work takes material form through an engagement with craft-based processes and a continual adjustment to the demands and inspirations of each work as it unfolds and develops. The processes of production, of moving the work forward in terms of making, are also one of enquiry.

The ‘archive’s considered here are the collection of Sir Richard Burton at Orleans House, the furniture collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the archive at the Wiener Library, the textile collection at the Whitworth Art Gallery.


For this London Arts Board craft development touring exhibition entitled ‘The Artist’s Journey’, I was one of three artists commissioned to produce work in response to the collections of Lord Leighton at Leighton House and Sir Richard Burton at Orleans House. I was presented with two archival boxes housing the carefully preserved fragments of Burton’s life (1821-90), gifted by Lady Burton to the nation. I was permitted (with gloved hands) to unwrap the contents; a splinter of wood, an odd shoe. There was poignancy in these disparate objects, a sense of absence that is a recurring theme in collections like these. Stewart (1984: 139) suggests that a personal memento of individual experience has value to ‘its possessor’ because of its relation to life histories, and that with items such as these, ‘the sensual rules’ with ‘its perception by hand taking precedence over its perception by eye’.

However, the act of releasing the object from its wrapper also brings its own frisson of satisfaction and opens up a space for imagining. Steedman (2001: 79-81) writes about the space of memory and, refers to the ‘topoanalysis’ of Gaston Bachelard (1958) and to the particular resonance he attributes to ‘objects that may be opened’. Steedman relates this to the archive in terms of its ‘psychical phenomenology’. She alludes to the archive as a place:
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‘...to do with longing and appropriation ... a place where a whole world, a social order, may be imagined by the recurrence of a name in a register, through a scrap of paper, or some other little bit of flotsam.’

The very experience of unwrapping and handling the objects in these boxes, gave rise to a very personal sensory response opening up a richness of meaning not necessarily directed purely by their original, literal function - and there was more.

Upon his death, Sir Richard Burton’s wife, Isabel had destroyed many of his papers in an effort to sanitise her husband for Victorian society. Her inventory of Burton’s personal effects, together with the collection’s records demonstrates how stories of human lives get lost or altered in their telling and re-telling. In itemising each object, Isabel had been attentive to its biographical significance, but in the collection’s records these descriptions had transformed into the objective language of the museum, logged with the dry efficiency of another mode of knowledge. Thus ‘The last flowers my darling culled the day before his death in Casa..., Trieste’ had become ‘an envelope containing a few small brown fragments’. ‘A splint of the “Prometheus” struck by lightning 16 October 1861 having my husband on board. Deo Gratias. Isabel’, had become ‘Thin fragment of wood with broken end, shaped as a paper knife and 6.5” long’. The effect was to disengage the objects from their meaning and ability to resonate with the viewer through a more subjective understanding.

‘It is not the physical characteristics of objects that make them biographical, but the meanings imputed to them as significant personal possessions.’ (Hoskins 1998: 195)

She further suggests that objects loaded with biographical meaning are often associated with ‘life transforming events’ and that ‘...such events can attach themselves to ordinary objects and fix them in memory as markers of the extraordinary.’

The result of this research was the production of Overwritings, a paired artwork in which texts taken from both inventories were juxtaposed, standing in opposition to each other. Whilst the textual information which accompanied the objects drew attention to the way meanings could be lost or changed in their representation, the collection also raised issues about how our perspective of historical events may shift in focus as our values change and how this in turn might be manipulated. For instance, artefacts in the collection included a ‘bundle of eight spears of assorted lengths made from wood and metal’ and Sir Richard Burton’s pistol. Were the spears trophies, mementoes or gifts? I juxtaposed images of the spear and pistol within the final work. Presented to us today, in this combination, such artefacts might suggest uneven battles in an age of imperial conquest, whilst to Burton in the Victorian era and in personal terms, they meant something completely different.

The textual information accompanying the collection of Burton’s personal possessions uses the objective language of the museum giving authority to
a certain version of reality which is in contrast to the inventory provided by Isabel which incites the imagination. The objects themselves, so disparate and seemingly insignificant, have a certain poignancy amplified in this instance by my experience of the privileged handling of them, ritualised by the wearing of protective white gloves. As objects, the collection is made significant by their connection to the historic figure of Sir Richard Burton. It is the text of Isabel which animates them and which mirrors her desire to keep an edited view of her husband’s memory alive in the cannon of history.

**Bodies of Knowledge (2002 in ‘In Context’, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.**

‘In Context’ was an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in which members’ of the 62 Group of textile artists were invited to respond to the collections. Principally a museum dedicated to applied arts, the Victoria and Albert Museum was founded with the remit of raising design standards with the intention of educating and improving public taste through the showing of ‘fine examples’. As described by Conforti, (1997: 23-47) this provides the museum with challenges as it is faced by conflicting issues of scholarship, the practice of connoisseurship and those of accessibility. It became a model which other museums followed.

A visit to some of the spaces of the furniture collection left me with a sense of the furniture as abject objects which seemed to be in storage awaiting a better fate, jostling together across geographic and temporal space. Confined within a delineated area, the destiny of these objects was one of being appreciated for their looks rather than as objects to be sat in or contextualised with other artefacts of their time; singled out by their museum environment to be preserved for posterity against the forces of wear and tear and the human touch. What are the implications of such aestheticisation of objects of this kind and how are we to apprehend and relate to such artefacts thus removed from the context of their use or production? The visit prompted questions not only about the challenges facing a museum of applied arts in presenting their collection of objects in a way which meaningfully furthers the understanding and engagement of the audience, but also about the determining factors in how these objects had been selected for collection. How were the cultural values of the institution which housed these objects reflected in the choices which had been made? What forces were at work in determining ‘value’?

The evolution of a ranking of the senses, giving primacy to sight, and the development of a hierarchy of the mind over the body in Western culture, have been much explored (Corbin 1986; Synott 1991; Howes 1991; Stewart 1999; Jütte 2005). The high status given to sight as a primary means of knowledge and understanding has particular implications for forms of artistic production, in which a more complete understanding and appreciation of such objects might be intended to come, not only through sight or reference to tectility, but
through touch itself. Using an object may give us fresh insights. How does it feel? How does it perform in relation to its intended function? Is the weight of the artefact in fact light although it looks heavy? Does it attract or repel? The actual handling of an object may inform us in ways which might be physical, psychological or symbolic. Does it signify something other than what it appears to be? Its meaning and power may lie in areas beyond the act of viewing alone and may be intelligible and meaningful only to the individual or to a particular social group.

When objects are placed in galleries or museums, an act which immediately attaches a particular cultural value or significance to them, they can lose their potential to be experienced and understood except through sight and our appreciation can be diminished as the manner in which we experience them does not necessarily suggest or reveal their full value. In the exhibition 21:21, *The Textile Vision of Reiko Sudo and Nuno* (2005, James Hockey Gallery Farnham, then touring), curator Lesley Miller challenged this effect by introducing handling samples of the fabric on display. Monitors in the exhibition space played forty video interviews in which a diverse range of people each responded to the question ‘What is cloth to me?’ (Becker and Miller, 2005). In addition to supporting textual information, emphasis was placed on using alternative methods of imparting knowledge as a means of understanding and explaining the potential of fabric as social forms not just as physical objects. The form of presentation also acknowledges the importance of the experiential to our appreciation of the objects and addresses differentiation in the ways in which we can learn from encountering an object.

How does something based in the experiential and sensorial realm fare when translated into words? What language do we use to transform the immediate and holistic nature of sensory experience into the linear world of verbal and written description? Fletcher (1989: 37-8) refers to the inadequacies of language to fully describe the nature and meaning of material symbols and behaviour, particularly as ‘non verbal message patterns’ are often unconscious and the specifics of the messages they send out are differently encoded. Words alone cannot fully explain an object and an analysis based on vision also cannot tell the full story.

This ranking of the senses has affected the formation of art hierarchies, dictating the kind of art which is most valued in the West, and resulting in the separation of practices into ‘fine art’ and ‘craft’. With emphasis being placed on the viewer’s distance and on ideas of detached contemplation, the object may become disconnected from the social and cultural functions it had in the past. Rowley (1999: 1-20) discusses the evolution of the art craft divide and argues that comprehending the art object became conceived of as ‘an intellectual, aesthetic act’ whilst objects of symbolic and practical use, close to everyday activity, ‘acquired a patination of use rather than a provenance of value’.
Rowley goes on to refer to the anthropological study of ‘biographical objects’ by Hoskins in which Hoskins concludes with the suggestion that an object can become ‘a way of knowing oneself through things’ (1998: 198). She connects Hoskins’ ideas with:

‘... the perception of many craft makers that objects may validly act as vehicles by which identity and memory may be organised and expressed. From this perspective, objects are imbued with meaning through use and, in turn, they enable personal and cultural experiences to be constituted as meaningful. This does suggest a conceptualisation of creativity different to that of the critical tradition of art, with its’ strong emphasis on representation and reflection. Through objects, identities are forged.’
(Rowley, 1999: 17)

This insight into the symbolic and social function of an object, and the means by which meaning and value might be constructed, has been an important point of departure for me in considering issues at work in the archive. Questions are raised about the way objects perform in the world, and about the relationship between the object, the context of its presentation and the way in which we then experience it both collectively and individually. How do we make sense of this experience and how might this be expressed, in what form and with what intention? How does an artwork or crafted object produced in response to the museum environment then perform in the context which generated its production?

* Bodies of Knowledge* is a series of works (still in progress) in which interventions are made in a set of eight encyclopaedias published in 1934, each volume being treated in the light of a different museum collection. The encyclopaedia is viewed here as a microcosm of the museum system; similarly underpinned by an approach to universalism in the assembling of knowledge, and in that it also reflects the governing ideologies and hierarchies embedded in such bodies of knowledge. (Bartlett, 2002). Such systems are active in determining what we choose to preserve, which stories to tell, how and why we tell them and to whom. Subjected to scrutiny, the very process of collecting (which involves placing objects in order) can reveal the underlying ideologies of the cultural structures of which it is a part and against which changing perceptions in the way we view the world around us can be mapped (Elsner and Cardinal, 1994). Changes in social and cultural conditions are reflected back in changes of meaning and the value attributed to the objects ‘in care’.

* Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste* pulls together the encyclopaedia and the museum in relationship as arbiters of taste. An implied reference is made to the Victoria and Albert Museum, as an ‘encyclopaedia of treasures’. Open at pages on Interior Design, the text of encyclopaedia (Volume V) belies objectivity in the use of prescriptive language about aesthetic choices, advising readers to ‘rip out ugly Victorian fireplaces’. Set into the encyclopaedia are a series of rings printed with images of chairs from the collection.
Fig. 1. 2002. Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste. (1934 encyclopaedia, embroidery hoops, silk crepeline, pins). 34 x 84 x 5cm. Photographer Michael Wickes. Collection Victoria and Albert Museum.

The embroidery rings appear as a framing device around which are printed excerpts taken from the interior design section pertaining to perceptions of quality. The Art Nouveau chairs depicted in the smaller rings on the margins of the work are particular in their reference to the donation of thirty-eight pieces from the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. As described by Wilk, (1997, p. 345-6) this collection was abhorred by the critics and ‘banished’ to the Bethnal Green Museum. He explains how this controversy contributed to the museum’s disaffection from collecting new work on the basis that ‘perspective and distance are required in matters of taste’ and quotes the director, Harcourt Smith (1914), in his acknowledgement that it became the museum’s policy (in place until the 1970s), to show ‘very little which is not at least 50 years old’. Ironically, these very pieces were later recognised and valued as prime examples of their type. An incident such as this highlights issues concerning curatorial and institutional decisions which authenticate and legitimise public memory and culture. How are such decisions to be made and appraised against ever changing cultural values?

This work was first exhibited in 2003 in the Textiles in Context exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 2004 it was acquired by their Department of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion. Inserted back into the museum it began its own journey as a cultural artefact caught up in the complications of museum politics and taxonomies. Prichard (2005: 152-3) refers to this work in raising the question ‘how do we reconcile traditional museology, with its narrow parameters and genre hierarchy, with twenty first century artistic practice?’ Traditionally, objects in cabinets of curiosity:

‘... were arranged according to their material base and these arrangements were replicated in the creation of specific museum collections and departments, (Furniture and Woodwork, Textiles and Dress, Prints, Drawings and Paintings), ...further divided into geographical areas.’
Prichard cites *Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste* as an example of the dilemma posed in categorising such work: ‘as textiles, textile art, art installation, text?’ and asks which collection should acquire it: ‘Furniture, Textiles and Fashion; Word and Image; Sculpture?’ She notes that ideas of tradition are being deliberately challenged in material practice through ‘an unravelling of fixed definitions’, and that much contemporary work no longer sits ‘neatly into established material and technique-based categories’, raising issues for contemporary collecting policy. Museum curators are faced with difficulties around how to ‘rethink and disrupt age-old categories and definitions’ in response to changes in the cultural climate.

*Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste* seeks to highlight the fact that the status awarded to objects as having an aesthetic or even historical value may be subject to slippage. What might be taken as stable and given - the museum quality of the work - is in fact open to and part of, an ongoing process of redefinition and reconfiguration within the context of the collection and its relation to the world outside. The collection is subject to the instability of changing patterns of taste which are both reflected in and determined by the choices made as to what merits collection.

Positioned according to material, and presented in ways which foreground the act of seeing, the object becomes limited in its ability to awaken in the audience suggestions as to how it might be conceptualised by other means. How do we take these aestheticised items (once a part of lived experience) from their protective confinement and make their states of being tangible? How do we keep them alive and relevant?

*In Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste* (figure 2) a red padded chair rises out of the text into the material world and there is a small shoe pinned to the page as though sloughed off by its owner- a shoe which has migrated from another collection and another encyclopaedia. The printed image on one of the stretched surfaces shifts from monochrome to colour and objects are shown placed in the context of a period installation - but there is an ambiguity here. Is that the gloved hand of the curator that we can see or is it just a part of the furniture?

On Holocaust Memorial day 2001, I was invited to attend an event at the Wiener Library, then housed in Devonshire Place in London. This is an archive which documents the history of National Socialism and its aftermath, alongside other incidents of genocide. In the company of writers, journalists and other interested parties, I was introduced to the contents of the cramped basement beneath the pavement of this London townhouse. Within the labyrinthian corridors, former pantries and dead ends, small spaces were tightly packed with periodicals, propaganda pamphlets, a collection of anti-Semitic hate letters, diaries, documents relating to the Holocaust, newspaper cuttings, photographs showing people, places and the burning of books and the Torah. Shelves from floor to ceiling were lined with boxes and files brimming with memory; conduits of the dead and living. The labels themselves engendered a chill; Buchenwald, Auschwitz - and in the context of this collection, captions on filing cabinets - such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, conjured up momentous events; a fragmented chain of evidence of histories, cultures and peoples systematically erased. Eye-witness accounts, in which there is an implicit absence, thus lie side by side with anti-Semitic propaganda bearing testimony to the power of words to unfold or conceal terrible truths, or to rework them with ideological motivation. Individual
objects in the form of files, photographs, cuttings, documents came together with a powerful potency in a compacted underground space. Disturbingly, this collection cites not only the past but continues to grow as it records current and ongoing acts of genocide around the world.

On one of several subsequent visits, I encountered a team of volunteers who met once a week to painstakingly remove staples from propaganda pamphlets and other materials. They then stitch the pages back together with linen thread to preserve the texts for posterity as enduring witnesses to the atrocities of the past and as bulwarks for the future against the tide of forgetting.

The word ‘text’ derives from the Latin *textus* (something woven, a tissue, a style) from *texere/textum* (to weave). The word ‘line’ derives from the Latin *linea* (a linen thread), and from the adjective *lineus* (pertinent to flax). Text can become tangled, distorted and unintelligible, it can persuade and deceive. ‘To weave’ can mean to pursue a devious discourse (Onions, 1966). My response to the archive drew on this etymology.

**Fig. 3.** 2002. Storeys of Memory I. (Linen fabric, bookbinding thread). 33 x 101.5 x 3 cm
Photographer Peter Massingham.

Constructed from fabric, *Storeys of Memory I* (Fig. 3) is book-like in form but there are no pages to be turned. The fabric has been printed and then treated with processes by which the black ground is bleached out or ‘discharged’. Text is implied but is broken and incomplete, surfaces are partially erased, and some are reworked. The centre is folded, backwards and forwards. A cutting of the threads which hold the pleats together suggests a release of the secrets between the folds. Lines are stitched back in with linen bookbinding thread, knotted and bound to anchor them to the cloth. There is an implicit absence, a suggestion of erasure and destruction. The piece attempts a non-descriptive correspondence to the tensions at work in the archive.

This work was commissioned in 2003 by the Whitworth Art Gallery, as a response to the gallery’s textile collection. The project began with the arrival of a book entitled The Whitworth Art Gallery: the first hundred years (1988), outlining its history and collections. An initial site visit and orientation introduced me to the building, to the curators and to the conservator who worked with the collection. I was shown the different storage systems including individually crafted items made to protect and support particular garments or textiles Figures 4a/b), and also the original catalogue card index (in the process of being superseded by a computerised system).

Fig. 4a./4b. supportive, protective covers for items in the textile collection.

Whitworth Art Gallery.

The textile collection houses thousands of articles, drawn from different times and places, diverse in their histories, methods and systems of production, functions, social, economic and political roles and symbolic meanings. This collection epitomises a huge criss-crossing of cultural terrain, in which the object is re-contextualised yet again, passing in and out of diverse systems of valuation over the course of its existence (Appadurai, 1986), and becoming classified here as an example of its kind.
Once they have entered the museum environment and assumed collectible status, these objects are formed into new associations and groupings and become subject to museological systems of categorisation, display and conservation. Scholarly expertise is brought to bear on the objects as attempts are made to piece together missing and objective information. Histories are reconstructed around them and interventions are made to conserve them against damage and the erosion of time. The more personal history of the object may be unknown in terms of its production, ownership and usage and knowledge of it will always be incomplete. As noted in my explorations of the archive pertaining to Sir Richard Burton its history may also be largely suppressed in favour of a different and more ‘official’ version or through the use of a seemingly ‘objective’ valuation system.

Seremetakis (1994: 134-5) states her concerns as being:

‘...with how intrinsic perceptual qualities of objects express their sensory history, and how this salience can motivate and animate their exchange and shared consumption.’

With reference to the work of Thomas (1991) she discusses the under-estimation and devaluing of the emotive in considering how it relates to systems of gifts and exchange and suggests that:

‘The apparently “idiosyncratic” investment in objects and substances may be the tip of a submerged social language of materiality that has
not achieved formal legitimation, but which may have a firmer grasp on the mutable structures of experience in which all things undergo recontextualisation into novel and as yet unnarrated constellations.’

What stories can be understood from these objects in the Whitworth textile collection? What ‘secret lives’ do they have? What is their sensory history? How do they carry meaning and for whom? How is our perceptual understanding of these objects formed? Are new values, social narratives and meanings being created between objects and indeed in the history of the institution itself and is this an ongoing process? What is the space between personal and public enactments of memory?

My first impulse was to explore items marked by wear and tear, damage and repair as evidence of the relationship between the textile use and human experience: faded remnants, holed and threadbare, pieced, patched and darned, steeped in traces of human contact of both user and maker. How could these markings be used to indicate the elusive nature and incompleteness of our systems for remembering?

Fig. 6. section of cotton lawn from the collection with stamped design and embroidery completed in broderie-anglais, produced as piece work, Belfast. Nineteenth Century.

I examined a whole range of diverse objects and began to investigate these ideas through over exposed photographs and through entries in my sketchbook.
Fig. 7. detail of sketchbook, showing an interpretation of a faded textile subjected to 'recall'.

These were made not as a means of direct observation or recording of the objects but to achieve an imprinting of their qualities onto my unconscious in an attempt to get to 'know' them, and to find ways of evoking certain qualities through faded, incomplete interpretations in which the identity of objects becomes blurred (Fig. 6). The notes and the photographs which merely recorded the object were put aside and I attempted to use recall and my senses to guide my creative and subjective representations.

This subjective approach to damaged articles was in deep contrast to the museological systems in which they existed. As my investigations progressed through observation back in the collection (as opposed to within my studio), I became increasingly aware of both the preventative and interventionist hand of the conservator, and the 'objective' recordings of the curator and archivist. What could a closer examination of these practices reveal about the hidden histories of these objects and their relationship with the institutional structures which contained them?
Fig. 8. original catalogue card.

Whitworth Art Gallery.

I returned to my data, the catalogue cards (Fig. 8, Fig. 9) which I had photocopied on my first visit. I elicited a murmur of shocked disbelief from the archivist in response to my request to look at further catalogue cards, randomly selected and totally independently of the textile item itself.
Taking this one step further, I considered what the phrases could suggest, removed from their context:

- **two loom widths**
- **white selvedge stripes**
- **stencil placed 54 times along the length of the sash**

In terms of the institutional histories of the textiles, these cards demonstrated the shifting patterns of archiving, as systems moved from recording and annotating by hand, to the type written, to the digitally stored, with the content continually expanding into additional categories. I wondered if these cataloguing systems could be used to convey the poetry of the object - or did they just represent apparently ‘objective’ ordering systems and institutional power?

Those recorded by hand bore the traces of their author through the individuality of the handwriting, suggesting a correspondence between them and the textiles. Removing them from the context of the objects they described, I started to extract and re- categorise information on the cards, for example, according to types of damage:
small brown stain visible on top edge

signs of foxing

bloom from subsequent wetting edges partly torn

very much folded

damaged by movement

or according to the activities various textiles had been subjected to:

cut and removed with tweezers

snipped with scissors

Then there were the more personalised contributions of individuals which hinted at intimate knowledge:

mounted on net (and washed) by H.W.

stitch identified by A.M.

information from B.K.

The catalogue cards recorded the official history of the artefacts but there were indications of other histories being formed; the private recollections of those who had cared for these textile items, the stories of relationships between individual people and individual objects.

Meanwhile, the conservator was working on stabilising a damaged Coptic tunic ready for display. The holes were highlighted in differently coloured thread, each hole categorised by the colour of the thread in relation to priority of attention (Fig. 10). Observation of conservation practice highlighted its forensic nature; the analysis of detritus embedded in the cloths (seeds, hairs etc.), and the materials, tools and methods involved in treatment. The very act of exposing the article to scrutiny can affect it; textile fibres become brittle; bonds that hold the molecules together can be broken by ultra violet light; colours fade where exposed to light but remain as evidence in the folds; items can get dusted with minute particles from our own bodies.
Fig. 10. conservation in progress of a Coptic tunic.

Fig. 11. one of Japan's ‘Living Treasures’ preparing cloth for dye resist.
Engaged in intensive, detailed labour involving a high level of skill and knowledge, 
the conservator's hands moved in repetitious activity, evoking for me ideas of 
durations and rhythms, mortality and immortality, connecting the past to the 
present, maker with object, through a deepening familiarity. I was reminded of 
my own archive of photographs taken whilst travelling and researching different 
forms of textile production in various parts of the world; the visibility of the hand 
in both a conceptual and literal sense. In Japan I had been able to meet one 
of the country's designated 'Living Treasures' and observe her preparing cloth 
for resist dyeing by a method known as Shibori (Figure 11). She described to 
me the importance of the rhythms of the body in making work of excellence; a 
measurement by touch rather than wholly through sight.

Evident here is an intense relationship between object and maker in which 
the physical engagement with materials is allied with deep body knowledge 
developed and played out over time, through practice and accumulation. I 
know from my own experience, that the act of making something is experiential 
and sensorial; the smell, sound, feel and appearance of materials. Dampness 
and dryness, tightness and looseness, resistance and absorption - these are 
aspects of tactility which as Susan Stewart (1999: 32) states:

‘...given the synaesthetic aspect of all sense impression, these qualities 
often come yoked to others. We apprehend them as part of the phenomenon 
perceived and they are taken up in the relation between aspects of the 
thing and aspects of the body.’

The rhythms of the body, time and the physical sensation of how a material 
works and feels under conditions imposed upon it or embodied within it, 
combine in the repetitious aspects of the making process. This opens up for me 
a space for contemplation, for 'listening' to the object as it comes to fruition and 
for asking speculative questions such as 'what if?' Skill, sensory experience 
and repetitious activity are also carried down into conservation practices and 
perhaps the space which is opened up for the conservator is one for imagining 
and connection.

In relation to objects in museums:

... materials also become precious because they must be conserved 
or maintained with care in order to exist; they store our labour, and our 
maintenance of them is a stay against the erosion of time. Those works of 
art that we cannot touch are repositories of touch and care - the touch and 
care of their makers and conservators. (Stewart 1999: 30)

The collection had become for me, a site where the subjective and objective 
collided whilst these words offered a lens with which to view it.
Conversation Piece (Fig. 12, Fig. 13) as described ‘in conversation’ with the collection’s deputy director and conservator (Harris, 2004), is the work resulting from this research and is comprised of fifty two embroidery hoops presented in ten groupings. Layered in stacks, each hoop is stretched with images printed on silk crepeline (an almost transparent archival fabric). Imagery comes into and out of focus according to viewing angle, half materialised and appearing to be on the verge of dissolution. Dyed using clamp resist, the coloured grounds fade in and out as though affected by light damage, but follow a gradation from pink through to blue in the series of smaller hoops. Reference is also made here to the exacting dyeing and colour matching techniques which are part of the textile conservator’s training. Pulled threads in the base-cloth form a grid, an organising structure; a reference perhaps to institutional systems.

There are many pairs of hands represented here, engaged in rhythmic activity, motion and rest, suggestive of time and care. The repetitious activities involved in making and conserving are recorded in the diaphanous printed and layered images. Images taken from my own photographic archive, of the hands of makers engaged in various forms of resist work, are interleaved with those of the conservator, and suspended over images of their personalised tools and written material from the Whitworth archive.
Fig. 13. 2003. detail of Conversation Piece, based on the personalised tools of the conservator layered over information from the archive. Photographer Michael Pollard; G10.
Collection of the Whitworth Art Gallery.

Fig. 14. 2003. detail of Conversation Piece. Photographer Michael Pollard; G10.
Collection of the Whitworth Art Gallery.
Textual reference printed on the hoops suggests vulnerability and fragility, and refers to the activities of carers of the collection as they have endeavoured to fill gaps in the history and detail of the object, piecing together information across time and space: *stitches identified by A.M. Conservator* is connected to maker in a shared and intimate knowledge of the object.

Alongside my developing relationships with objects and cards, the dialogue with conservators and curators both expanded and re-focused my thinking. It was instrumental in the development of the piece; every time the work went slowly, conversations with these informants would re-direct my thinking in an unexpected way, giving me new ideas to follow up. The title of the piece refers specifically to this process, as well as to the potential relationships between artefacts in the collection.

This dialogue was not altogether without tensions. A change of conservator half way through the project brought with it different perspectives and a reconsideration of certain practical processes, such as the long-term stability of my work. French (Harris 2004: 15) explains that she, like other textile conservationists, chooses materials such as ‘translucent fabrics and the finest of threads’ which look invisible, ‘in order not to distract the attention of the observer from the appearance of the textile’ and ‘overwhelm the original’. In using such fabrics for a creative rather than conservation purpose, she suggested my own artwork would itself have conservation ‘issues’ for the future. Our discussion around the use of conservation methods to slow down such deterioration, and recommendations made, influenced the finished work; for example, the wood of the embroidery hoops was treated with an acrylic varnish and the silk crepeline was scoured in purified water to remove its dressing prior to printing.

The research for this project involved interviews, observation, note-taking and photography. My sketchbook was the site for reflection, where information and ideas were gathered, initially with no clear idea of outcome. It included elements which acquired particular significance and value only in due course. Written notes, photographs, references and quotes were accompanied by diagrams and renderings of thought processes. As the project progressed, material explorations became key and ideas were synthesised and clarified through making and through the application and development of appropriate skills and the making of aesthetic decisions. There is a filtering process which takes place partly through intuition but also through the making of rational judgements. The sketchbook charts the processing of information into visual form; the retracing of steps, testing, selection and refinement of ideas, before moving to the final stage of production; it becomes in itself a form of archive.

As an artist working within the spatial, social and political spaces of the archive, I see my contribution as one of asking questions, drawing out relations and providing material and insights which take a different form of presentation from the written texts of other disciplines. Many of the questions I am asking are shared with anthropological (and archaeological) practice and are indeed influenced by it and by other disciplines. The outcome here, however, is a subjective and
personal commentary; a reflective visual interpretation resulting from research through investigation and the activity of making. The work does not attempt to draw conclusions, but by referencing touch and the hand work involved in the ‘crafting’ of the object and the activity of preservation and conservation, may give insights into the interactions and less visible relationship between maker, conservator, object and institution.

Fig. 15. 2003. Conversation Piece in situ at the Whitworth Art Gallery. (Embroidery hoops, wool, archival tape, silk crepeline). 272 x 74 x 5 cm.

Issues of conservation are applied in this and, yes, the artwork is exhibited on a plinth under a Perspex cover. For anyone who comes to view the work, there is a sample which can be touched, handled and even smelt. However there is evidently a paradox here in the fact that this and other site-specific works produced in the studio in response to the archive, now inhabit the space of the museum. Here they become subject to the very practices they interrogated, fated to be institutionally framed and reconfigured within the ideological systems of collection and presentation- systems which also both sustain arts practice and valorise it.

The deployment of museums and archival systems into objects for inspection has had implications for the direction of my studio practice (as opposed to works conceived as described, with a site-specific dimension which addressed the spaces of particular archives as their starting point). My personal journey through these museological systems, the way in which the work evolved and the questions this raised for me has led me to consider the relationship between the actual activity of making and the production of a created, crafted object and to posit this as an encapsulation of past activities. Old works are being reconfigured to make new - a retracing of experience, a ‘storing’ of activity. These re-workings respond to the original and reinterpret them, and allude to the human gestures embedded in the making of the original object.

The four works explained here were created as a response to experiential encounters with four different collections and sets of artifacts. The distinct nature of the collections, and how the objects were experienced in their environment, raised different but interconnected questions in each instance about the relationships between museological systems, the objects in the collection and the histories and meanings with which these objects were imbued within
a wider cultural framework. The sense made of these experiences and the research incurred is manifested in the works described which attempt to evoke these often hidden relationships. Connections made may be visually obvious or implied and are evident in the progression of the work but are non-linear in their path.

If the spaces and practices of the archive can provide a context against which we can measure ourselves and our responses to the sets of relations in the world around us which we inhabit, create and reconfigure, what means do we use to analyse, structure and explain such an activity? As the narratives generated by objects are incomplete and our ability to comprehend them is variable according to how we experience them and what we bring to this experience as individuals, so also are the ranges of the languages of description and explanation we use; be they visual, experiential, textual or verbal. The story can never be complete. The term “Migratory Practices” suggests movement from one place to another. It conjures up the crossing of permeable borders and relocation, mobility in the field, the establishment of networks of different routes. It suggests fluidity between disciplines which otherwise might be discrete: a dialogue between places, times, media and ideas, the whole and the part. From these migrations we can learn and form new perspectives.

Illustrations

Figure 1: 2002, Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste. (1934 encyclopaedia, embroidery hoops, silk crepeline, pins). 34 x 84 x 5cm. Photographer Michael Wickes. Collection Victoria and Albert Museum.

Figure 2: 2002, detail of ‘Bodies of Knowledge Volume V; Arbiters of Taste’. (1934 encyclopaedia, embroidery hoops, silk crepeline, pins). 34 x 84 x 5cm. Photographer Michael Wickes. Collection Victoria and Albert Museum.

Figure 3: 2002, Storeys of Memory I,. (Linen fabric, bookbinding thread). 33 x 101.5 x 3 cm. Photographer Peter Massingham.

Figures 4a/4b: supportive, protective covers for items in the textile collection, Whitworth Art Gallery.

Figure 5: piece of Coptic textile from the collection, heavily eroded and consequently stabilised on net. Egyptian 800-999.

Figure 6: section of cotton lawn from the collection with stamped design and embroidery completed in broderie anglaise, produced as piece work, Belfast. Nineteenth Century.

Figure 7: detail of sketchbook, showing an interpretation of a faded textile subjected to ‘recall’. 
Figure 8: original catalogue card, Whitworth Art Gallery. Figure 9: original catalogue cards, Whitworth Art Gallery. Figure 10: conservation in progress of a Coptic tunic.

Figure 11: one of Japan’s ‘Living Treasures’ preparing cloth for dye resist. 23

Figure 12: 2003. detail of Conversation Piece in which the hands of makers engaged in repetitious activity are interleaved with those of the conservator. Photographer Michael Pollard. G10. Collection Whitworth Art Gallery.


Figure 15: 2003, Conversation Piece in situ at the Whitworth Art Gallery. (Embroidery hoops, wool, archival tape, silk crepeline). 272 x 74 x 5 cm. Photographer Michael Pollard. G10.

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