

# Themed Section

## Craft • Material • Memory: an editorial introduction

Anne Brennan and Patsy Hely

The call for papers for this issue of *craft + design enquiry* invited articles which addressed the resurgence of interest in connections between craft, material and memory in the context of global change. It is easy to see this interest as a reflection of a similar impetus in the nineteenth century, when the Arts and Crafts movement's framing of handmaking in the context of tradition and continuity provided a comforting antidote to the storm of change and dislocation which modernity brought to Europe.

The recent strong interest in making connections between craft and memory can, however, also be explained by developments in the intellectual landscape of the last three decades. These include the rise of cultural and memory studies, for example, and the shift in the priorities of history away from grand narratives of nationhood to an interest in the 'small' histories of ordinary people. These academic developments have themselves been a response to the historical and cultural changes wrought within our increasingly globalised postcolonial world. Rather than offering a reassuringly unified image of the past, however, they inscribe memory and history as fragmentary, contingent and multi-vocal.

Over the course of the twentieth century, craft has struggled to define itself first in relation to the prescriptive and exclusionary frameworks of the art/craft debate and, more recently, in relation to the overlapping but distinct preoccupations and histories of design. Cultural studies, with its interdisciplinary focus, has provided useful models for rethinking craft's histories and meanings. Rozsika Parker's foundational work, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984), became a touchstone for both women artists and craftspeople interested in retrieving the invisible and domestic histories of women's textile practices. Even now, 30 years after its publication, echoes of its influence can be found in some of the papers in this issue.

*The Subversive Stitch* encouraged practitioners and writers to think about craft's histories and cultural meanings in its own terms rather than those prescribed by the art world. In more recent years, a resurgence of interest in the cultural significance of objects and the discourses of 'thing theory' have opened up a new field for thinking about craft and its artefacts, including the ways in which

objects might become the hosts for both cultural and individual memory. In considering these developments, however, we were also conscious that the linking of the terms 'craft' and 'memory' has also often become a trope in which memory is invoked as an unproblematic conduit to a nostalgic fantasy about the past. In proposing this issue, we were interested to test whether it is possible for these links to suggest a more complex engagement between craft and memory and whether indeed these links are being critiqued or subverted.

The decade of *The Subversive Stitch* saw a shift away from craft's preoccupation with material and, since that time, defining craft through its relationship to materials has come to be seen, almost universally, as retrogressive. A number of threads in recent scholarship, though, suggest new ways of thinking about materials as more active participants in craft and design are currently being developed. For example: current interest in the area of phenomenology, with its focus on experience, tactility and embodiment is creating renewed interest in materiality; practitioners are responding to contemporary ecological imperatives around material use and sustainability, and new material formulations called for by digitally based production methods are generating interest outside traditional craft areas, and reflecting that interest back to practitioners. In the light of this, it is interesting to note that we received very few papers whose primary concerns engaged with materials and materiality. A number of papers, however, addressed these issues tangentially.

In reviewing the submitted papers we were struck by the ways in which they addressed issues that were canvassed in issue 4 of this journal, *Relational Craft and Design*. Relational aesthetics seems to have been a useful tool for addressing connections between craft and memory, with a number of papers exploring projects where a broader community of users become active in the processes of making meaning.

Liz Stops's paper is a case in point. She recounts the activities of Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG), an organisation of politically concerned citizens who use knitting as protest against coal seam gas mining exploration in their local rural area. Their most common artefacts are small knitted versions of the logo of the Lock the Gate Alliance, knitted banners for use at blockades. Another resonant knitted item has been the yellow beanie that is often seen being worn by both activists and politicians at protests. We see this as KNAG's version of the Liberty, or Phrygian, cap. The craft skills invested in the products of the group's knitting are unimportant, rather it is the symbolic resonance of a group of women knitting, and the forms the knitted outcomes take, that have power. Stops draws an analogy between this community and the *tricoteuses* of the French Revolution, describing how knitting — a peaceful, non-combative, but in both contexts, a somewhat unsettling endeavour — is used to bear witness.

Sam Bowker focuses on relationships forged between Cairo's close-knit group of tentmakers and the global community of quilters. He describes how the tentmaker's materials and techniques have changed and outlines the ways in which the form of the tent has evolved in response to the needs of

the local audience on the one hand, and a growing international audience on the other. Bowker finds inspiration in a collaboration between the tentmakers and communities of quilters in Australia, America and other Western centres; a coming together where, he recounts, both sides have agency. The project acknowledges that the tentmakers' long traditions are anchored in the same modern world as the quiltmakers. By placing the traditions of the tentmakers alongside the heritage of Western textile techniques, Bowker argues that a broader historical and critical framework to the benefit of both parties is created.

A different kind of community is invoked by Mae Finlayson and Karen Hall. Using a narrative structure in which the voices of theorist and practitioner alternate, they explore what happens when found, unfinished works are reworked and recontextualised, or, in their words, revived. Their discussion focuses on a cache of materials and unfinished embroidered works found on a market stall, a son's collection of his deceased mother's handiwork. Hall and Finlayson's paper grapples with the 'troubling status of the unfinished object [that] exists both in its incompleteness and its physical persistence'. They set their objects off on a trajectory unimagined by their original author. In this sense, then, repurposed objects might be said to resist finality and are simultaneously both old and new.

The unfinished object is addressed again by Emma Peters, exploring Elisa Markes-Young's relationship with the collection of textiles brought to Australia by her family when they emigrated from Poland to Australia. Peters addresses the way in which Markes-Young incorporates textiles from the collection into new objects in her home. A pillowcase and tablecloth, embroidered by three generations of women in her family and still unfinished, have been inserted by Markes-Young into a set of curtains. Peters discusses Markes-Young's project in terms of the challenge of working towards sustainable design. Specifically she invokes Jonathan Chapman's theory of emotionally durable design, which foregrounds the emotional and mnemonic connections that can be forged between user and object as a way of prolonging its useful life in the world. In this way, she argues, a more lasting and conscious relationship with the value of objects is formed, a relationship that allows users to bypass the economic models of consumption that drive design.

In both these papers, communities of makers in the past are brought into conversation with makers in the present through the material legacy of an archive of unfinished objects. But this conversation is open-ended and contingent: the interventions of Hall, Finlayson and Markes-Young do not complete the works, they simply extend the process of making in ways that do not foreclose on meaning, or indeed on possible new forms the unfinished items might take in the future. In this way, the unfinished object is released from its status as a relic of the past and becomes an active text upon which it is always possible to inscribe new meaning. In this exchange between communities of makers, in which meaning and authorship are constantly being destabilised, it might also be possible to read an analogy for the ways in which time and memory operate to fashion and refashion an ever-shifting, contingent narrative about the past.

Belinda von Mengersen addresses the unstable narratives of memory in her paper, which is also directed at Markes-Young's engagement with her family's collection of textiles. In this case, the paper explores Markes-Young's body of work *The strange quiet of things misplaced*. Von Mengersen describes the way in which Markes-Young, who has no formal training in traditional stitching techniques, reinvents the stitch patterns of the textiles from memory in a mimetic process analogous to drawing. This process, von Mengersen argues, operates as a form of performative encounter with her medium that both explores and comes to represent the elusive and contingent nature of memory itself.

Another type of performative encounter is addressed by Sabine Pagan, who considers new ways in which meaning might be shaped in craft and design. Pagan considers the potential relationships between maker, wearer and viewer in contemporary jewellery, adapting the theoretical work of the architects Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor to explore embodied relationships with forms and materials on the body. In an account of her project *Hand over*, Pagan describes how a series of rings is distributed to friends to be worn for a set period of time. The embodied experience of wearing the rings is fed back to Pagan by the wearers, and this information is subsequently built into the making of a further series of rings. Her project acknowledges and makes visible the ways in which the constant physical association between object and the body creates meaning in a way that is continuous and open-ended.

Dialogue between makers and wearers is at play also in the paper submitted by Martha Glazzard, Sarah Kettley, Tessa Acti and Karen Harrigan. Originally submitted for the Open Section, the ideas it raises are echoed in other papers, prompting us to include it in this themed section. Community is central to their project especially in the way in which responsibility for constructing meaning through making and performing spreads across a network of participants.

Their paper documents a collaboration between a group of interdisciplinary makers and practitioners on one side of the English Channel and a dance company working on the other. The brief was to develop costumes exploring relationships between garments, emotions and specific body parts for a dance performance. Glazzard et al. explain their approach to the project and the flexible methodology they developed through play, locating its genesis in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. They point to 'difference' as being an important consideration in their development of the costumes, difference between participants' experience, conceptualisations, intentions and expectations. The final costumes they describe as mirroring their approach; that is, capable of being inhabited and interpreted in multiple ways by their dance collaborators.

Latour and others conceptualisation of the term 'thing' provided the group with a rich and very relevant theoretical framework and their choice of costume material — a responsive, flexible stretch fabric — could not be more appropriate in providing metaphoric resonance with the project's theoretical dimension. Material here, then, becomes an active participant/actor and the authors acknowledge this role in saying 'the fabric dictated a large part of the method'.

Drawing on Arjun Appadurai and Cornelius Castoriades ideas about globalisation and the social imaginary, Katherine Moline and Jacqueline Clayton call for ‘a richer understanding’ of the potentials offered by interdisciplinarity. In invoking Appadurai’s terms ‘production knowledge’ and ‘consumption knowledge’ as part of their argument, their paper connects with ideas raised in other papers in this issue.

Their paper addresses two contemporary museum interventions, Onkar Kular’s, Noam Toran’s and Keith R. Jones’s *I cling to virtue* (2010) at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum and Gwynn Hanssen Pigott’s *Pleased to meet you* (2012–2013) at the Museum of Anthropology, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

In the latter, Hanssen Pigott’s selection ignored classifications of discipline, genre, material, or time of making, and the viewer was instead invited to seek their own reference points within the tableaux. *I cling to virtue* took the form of an entirely fictional biographical narrative created by an artist, a designer and a poet. The narrative unfolded through a collection of objects, digital works and photographs, followed in 2011 by a photographic catalogue and in 2013 by a statement of practice by the artists. Both exhibitions, they argue, gave the viewer greater responsibility for determining meaning. In the case of *I cling to virtue*, the viewer was required as well to attend to its meanings as they unfolded over time.

## Conclusion

The papers in this issue reflect a variety of approaches to its theme. Some are literal engagements with the concept of memory, exploring work that addresses memory itself, or work that addresses relationships with objects from the past. Others are directed towards and engage with the histories of craft practices and what these might mean in the present. None of the papers in this issue, however, address memory as a way of endorsing a theoretical or historical status quo. Craft is neither represented as a nostalgic historical panacea for the ills of the present, nor is it even presented as a discrete practice, with the maker as central to its forms and meanings. Indeed, in considering relationships between craft, material and memory, the papers in this issue have utilised a plethora of interdisciplinary strategies to reframe the ways in which craft and its practices operate in a contemporary globalised world. The focus of this issue, then, has not been on the object *per se*, but on the notion of craft as an activity that is social and located within a matrix of community relationships. Positioned here, it acts as both an instrument for charting social and cultural change and as an actor within those very changes.

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encompass the ways in which private and public memories are configured in institutions, such as the memorial and the archive. She has undertaken a number of projects in archives and museums.

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