#### The Sleeping Bag Project: Introduction

*The Sleeping Bag Project* occurred in the midst of the economic downturn in the summer 2009, and resolved a need to provide bedding to guests at a homeless shelter in Bradford during the winter months. The acquisition of sleeping bags presented an opportunity for me to engage in this serious activity through contributing my skills as an artist. My initial involvement in *The Sleeping Bag Project* emerged through my discussions with the writer and curator June Hill. After salvaging discarded sleeping bags from Leeds Music Festival we took some home to be washed and dried. Then I embroidered patterns onto the surfaces of wash-care labels that were created with the recipient in mind. These were inserted into the sleeping bags. *The Sleeping Bag Project* extended the gifting principle to other participants, who were prepared to give up their time to launder sleeping bags or sew a pocket into the lining of a sleeping bag. Thus, it placed participants in a creative role when adapting a salvaged sleeping bag for someone who may need it. The writer and artist Kay Lawrence has described this process as follows:

 ..abandoned sleeping-bags were salvaged and laundered by makers, whose textile skills were then used to reconfigure them as private places that offer protection and even a sense of belonging to the homeless people to whom they were given. […] Through small empathetic gestures, the sleeping bag becomes a way of putting oneself in the place of another, as well as providing another with a warm, dry place to sleep. (2015, p.4)

Gifting as a principle is at the centre of several approaches to contributing to *The Sleeping Bag Project* and has been considered by other artists, designers and writers. For example, June Hill’s lecture ‘Sense and sensibility’ (2012) is an analysis of the process of gifting and its emotional significance within a broad range of contexts, including an investigation of Rozanne Hawksley’s and Jeanette Appleton’s textile art practice and Paul Gröning’s film *Into Great Silence* (2006). The recent book publication *Art, Anthropology and the Gift* by Roger Sansi (2015) includes an in-depth discussion of the gift principle in contemporary art. Many projects are open and participatory and maybe without a clear direction, while leading towards voluntary and philanthropic social action. In contrast, Clive Dilnot (1995) explores what he calls ‘the gift-article’, an artefact created by designers and produced with a pragmatic intention for those who want to give, but are not sure what to give, and for those who are uncertain about whether to give. This commercially produced connotation of the gift is counterpointed by Jo Turney’s investigation into the handmade gift. In her article ‘Making love with needles: Knitted objects as signs of love?’ (2012) Turney asserts that a handmade knitted gift becomes emotionally charged during the time of its creation. But it can lead to what Turney has termed as ‘possessiveness and domination’ over the intended recipient (2012, p.303).

*The Sleeping Bag Project* is not necessarily immune from these issues. Unlike the gift impulse in contemporary art, exemplified by *"Untitled" (Placebo)* (1991) by Félix González-Torres involving the giving of sweets or *Free Mending Library* (2006 ongoing) by Michael Swaine involving the giving of skills, *The Sleeping Bag Project* is not open-ended; it has a very clear intention, namely a basic need to keep someone warm. *The Sleeping Bag Project* avoids what Dilnot terms ‘the bad grace of the obligated gift’ (1995, p.145) by endowing an emotional investment in the object that is not intended to be returned by the recipient. It is not intentionally used as a means of control over the recipient in the way that Turney describes because there is ambiguity in how the recipient may respond: the response of the recipient may be minimal or they may be deeply touched by the commitment evident in the sleeping bag.

As co-founder of *The Sleeping Bag Project*, I was inspired to bring my skills as an artist to it. Through working directly with the charity Inn Churches, I became increasingly sympathetic with its cause, while seeing it as an opportunity to build up my understanding of the site-specific and socially engaged characteristics of my creative practice. The research project *Pathways Through Participation* suggests that the key reasons that people participate in social projects is that they will profit personally from them, while feeling confident that they have the relevant skills to benefit others (Brodie et al., 2011, p.70). This principle applied to my motivations to take part; I felt that the subtlety of creative expression within the project related to my work, while its participatory characteristics were similar to former Arts Council England funded public art commissions *You Are the Journey: North Staffordshire* (2009) and *Littlemoor Wishes* (2009) that I had just completed (examples are provided on the *Transition & Influence* textile artists’ web gallery curated by Lesley Millar (2007)).

**References**

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