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Craft Research Editorial

Rowan Bailey and Katherine Townsend

### **Craft and the Handmade: Making the intangible visible**

In November 2014, the Department of Fashion and Textiles at the University of Huddersfield hosted the conference *Transition: Re-thinking Textiles and Surfaces*.<sup>1</sup> The conference sought to scrutinize current and future developments in textile research and its applications within the wider context of the creative industries. With keynote presentations from Professor Becky Earley, Professor Jane Harris, Dr Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu, publisher David Shah and Trend Union forecaster Philip Fimmano, this two day event brought together a myriad of theoretical perspectives and material approaches through four distinct tracks: Science and Technology, Sustainable Futures, Craft and the Handmade and Enterprise/Industry/Business.

This guest edited issue of *Craft Research* focuses on Craft and the Handmade and features articles that were first delivered as papers within this track. At the time it was argued and demonstrated in many of the presentations that craft methodologies are in abundance within the expanded field of textile making. By craft, we seek to address the revival of the ‘hand-made’ as an arguably complex currency within textile practice and contemporary culture. From traditional economies of ‘making-by-hand’ to new technologically-informed modes of making, ‘craft’ is exercising its diverse skills and practices on a global and local scale, for different causes, initiatives and audiences. As part of an expanding landscape of both commercial and public sector platforms, contemporary applications of the handmade can serve to generate new experimental modes of thinking and making which not only challenge our preconceptions of what craft is, but also what it has the potential to evolve into. This is not solely relegated to the historical, material and technical developments of the handmade as a distinct mode of practice-led research. Craft is also established, received and played out in the world, through the channels of collective endeavour and co-creative exchange. How these two positions intermingle is evident in the contents presented for this special issue, which showcases the wider contexts within which hand making may be thought about/through, understood and activated as a social mechanism or channel for new modes of research enquiry that reveal aspects of craft’s often, intangible heritage. There are four distinct pairings that account for these positional interplays.

#### *Practice-led approaches to the handmade through the sharing of knowledge*

Tim Parry-Williams article presents case studies of surviving vernacular ‘cottage’ industries in Japan through analysing their systems of tacit knowledge exchange. This is achieved through his first-hand experience and documentation of ancient, sustained methods of agricultural fibre production which have influenced his own weaving practice. The article focuses upon the technical aspects of organic ‘thread’ making in relation to the design,

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<sup>1</sup> The conference organisers were Professor John Miles, Joanne Harris, Dr Pammi Sinha and Dr Kevin Almond. For further details of the conference themes and submitted papers see <https://www.hud.ac.uk/schools/artdesignandarchitecture/events/transition/#Programme>

development and ‘specific materiality’ of a selection of handmade textile pieces - works which are hybridizations of the specialist skills Parry-William’s has acquired through residencies in ateliers in Japan. In a similar vein, Emma Shercliff explores how the embodied knowledge of craft can be disclosed through the observation of patterns of social and physical interaction. Working with a collective stitching group, Shercliff describes the framework of her own research as a practitioner, who reflects on her own creative process through the shared experiences of stitching with others. This allows for deeper insights to be generated about how craft thinking is not necessarily an isolated encounter, but knowledge that is shared, negotiated and passed on through collective hands and making activities. These two articles draw upon the craft practices of others as a way to scrutinise the nature of craft knowledge, what Eastop refers to as ‘enacted knowledge’ or ‘embodied knowledge in action’ (Eastop 2014: 226) how it is experienced (mentally and physically) and exchanged through participation and analysis of the act of material engagement (Malafouris 2013).

### *Craft communities*

By extension and following a line of enquiry which seeks to address the evolution of craft making through the enterprises of women makers, historically and contemporaneously, Rose Sinclair and Duygu Atalay explore the formation of craft collectives through a feminist lens. Sinclair’s consideration of the textile legacies shaped and formed through the specific framework of Dorcas clubs – a charitable organization of women first established in the nineteenth century – extends to the analysis of the specific iterations of these communities of craft practice over time, with particular reference to the colonial and postcolonial narratives of migration registered in Sinclair’s own curatorial approach to the wealth of archival literature gathered on Dorcas societies. In this instance, the archive serves as an important starting point for exploring the wider ideological, political, geographical and economic contexts that have shaped the trajectory of these groups, not only in terms of their own formations but how we might read and interpret the legacies of these community groups from the position of the present.

Atalay’s text focuses on the Ödemiş Women’s Cooperative, Turkey, first established in 2011. This case study addresses the ways in which women-focused social enterprise initiatives are often channelled through handmade production practices, illustrating the significant role of contemporary crafts to occupy niche markets while promoting social and cultural belonging (Niedderer & Townsend 2014: 3). As a collaborative platform to support local crafts, Atalay provides a rationale for the value of such enterprise, particularly in relation to the educational and financial support they provide women with. This is a real-world practical account of setting up a cooperative and reveals the differentiation between a small holding which seeks to be financially self-sustainable and the wider context of the fashion industry, where mass production and consumption can often disconnect the maker and/or maker communities from the cycle of the production process as a whole. The value of cooperatives such as these lies in their capacity to provide, at a local level, the necessary tools and resources for a sustained and operational craft practice derived from traditional handmade techniques endemic to the region.

### *The presence of craft in digital/spatial design*

Turning to the digital arena within which textiles increasingly operates, Miranda Smitheram explores the handmade qualities of digital design practice through the analysis of speculative experiments which have used motion capture (MOCAP) technology to reimagine the surfaces of future fashion. Smitheram argues that digital materiality is an alternative manifestation of the handmade, which can help to challenge preconceived conventions of the design process itself and offer, through the virtual realm, new aesthetic insights into our experience of surface and shape. The article reinforces themes raised in Professor Jane Harris's keynote on the influence of 'material code' and the resulting 'techno craft' aesthetic being developed by creative practitioners (Braddock Clarke and Harris). The visual and technical analysis provided in the article presents the possibility for a transformable 'dress' interface, which could potentially offer alternative fashion manufacturing and consumption models. The notion of virtual clothing also supports the sustainable philosophy communicated by Professor Becky Earley, who discussed her latest research project funded by the Swedish Government via Mistra, which called for makers to influence consumers to 'reimagine their wardrobes in both physical and digital realms' to reduce the impact of fashion design, production, use and disposal (Earley 2015).

Tom Jefferies and Annie Shaw address the interdisciplinary exchange between textiles and architecture in the design of a new building for the Manchester School of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University. They present three case studies which explore iterations of this relation, through differing conceptions of 'hard softness'. Scale, material language, constructional method and formal representation feature here in the articulation of the production of the formal outcomes of this exchange, through the development of digital approaches to materiality and construction. This, in turn, creates new ways to encounter the dialogue between craft and design. Set against the backdrop of the architect Gottfried Semper's ideas about textiles and architecture, first formulated in the 1851 in *The Four Elements of Architecture*, the roots of both building and textile design are considered as synonymous through the formation of structures. The technical approaches of craft, whether through weave or wickerwork for example, mirror the design approaches taken to produce an architecturally solid structure. Jefferies and Shaw consider these principles and ideas within the space of contemporary design technologies where textiles and architecture are reworked through three different column structures that are in and of themselves, specific interpretations of architectonic textile surfaces.

### *The art of the handmade*

The last pairing within this issue explores the handmade in different spaces and places. This is an example of craft operating in contexts at the periphery of more established frameworks of craft research. These approaches have the potential to extend the notion of the 'handmade' into other spaces of enquiry.

Penny Macbeth and Claire Barber explore the locational and transferral registers of the handmade, as articulated by Mary Schoeser in *Disentangling Textiles: Techniques for the Study of Designed Objects* (2002), through three specific examples of stitch. Firstly, in Bjorne

Linnert's workshop *Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent*, delivered at the University of Huddersfield in 2014. This international art project is a worldwide collaboration to protest against the murder of women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Through organised workshops, participants use stitch as a mechanism for recalling the identities of these women and to consciously enact remembrance through collective action. Secondly, Macbeth and Barber analyse, through archival research conducted at the Foundling Hospital Collection, the historical and symbolic registers of foundling tokens. These items, which date back to the 1800s, are material instances of the personal and intimate experiences of mothers who were forced, through the circumstances of poverty, to give up their children. Macbeth and Barber analyse the unique transferral value these stitched tokens evoke. Thirdly, Macbeth and Barber explore examples of hand stitch in the context of war, through messages on a sheet, produced by internees at the Stanley Internment Camp, Hong Kong, and on a quilt made at the Changi Prisoner of War Camp in Singapore. These cloth works, housed at the Imperial War Museum, are analysed in relation to the use of stitch to not only communicate experiences, but to also derive comfort from the shared activities of stitching together. These instances are concerned with the appearance of the handmade in unexpected places, including the social and political landscapes that underpin them.

Gabi Schillig, Professor for Spatial Design at the Düsseldorf University of Applied Sciences, presents a visual essay of her own artistic practice, showcasing handmade processes alongside the final outcomes of specific works. Entitled 'On Skins, Membranes & Folds', Schillig explores the creation processes within these artistic activities in terms of the potential for textiles to operate as a second skin which can mediate and restructure our relationship and interaction with the world. This is shown through an exploration of different tactile dimensions and spatial situations in open spaces.

A position paper, portrait and exhibition review compliment the articles already summarised in this issue. Angharad Thomas presents an account of the Collection of Knitting & Crochet Guild (KCG), an organisation which hosts a collection of handmade items. Thomas addresses the evolution of the collection and the three key roles it fulfils: as a repository of the handmade; a physical and digital archive and as the embodiment of the skill, time and labour employed by generations of women makers. Thomas points to the future of the KCG collection as a resource that facilitates both direct and virtual engagement by a range of different audiences.

Lucy Renton's portrait of UK-based American artist Danica Maier illustrates the relevance and value of archives to contemporary makers as sites of inspiration, and departure. 'Stitch & Peacock', her most recent exhibition at The Collection and Usher Gallery, Lincoln alludes to 'the craft, imagery and subversive messages' hidden in a series of stitched and drawn artworks, created in response to historic artefacts. Renton describes how Maier selects and translates objects such as 16th and 17th Century samplers to create material dialogues that raise 'critical comparisons and equivalences between the stitch, the pixel and the drawn mark'. Her unique integration and of stich and hidden language, craft and commentary,

speculates on the laborious, repetitive nature of textile making by hand and the pent-up emotions of the women who undertook this work.

Vanessa Brown's review of the Knitting Nottingham exhibition (2014), reiterates many of the challenges associated with our understanding and defining craft, particularly when deemed 'popular'. Curated by Ian McInnes and Cathy Challender for the Bonington Gallery, the exhibition adopted an idiosyncratic approach to previous exhibitions on this theme<sup>i</sup>, by reflecting on the craft and legacy of industrial knitting technology, invented in Nottingham by William Lee in Nottingham in 1589 and its enduring relationship with the School of Art and Design. Brown urges the reader 'not to get comfy' by discussing the significance of the knitwear design industry, away from the domestic realm, which though equally valuable, has traditionally undermined the fashionability and technical complexity of the craft. Ultimately, her account conveys the 'cool beauty' of the knitting hardware and artworks on show, including working Shima Seiki WHOLEGARMENT® technology and pieces by Frances Geeson, Henrik Vibscov, Frances Dupré and John Smedley, as seen through through 'future tech', 'fit and sculpt', 'express and connote', 'conceptual' and 'sustainable' lenses. Brown provides a fitting conclusion to the issue by 'questioning our perceptions as they change over time and across context, and our understanding of the processes of hand, eye and mind involved in all kinds of making.'

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<sup>1</sup> Such as *Unravel: Knitwear in Fashion* (2011), Province of Antwerp Fashion Museum, MoMu, Antwerp and *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* (2007), Museum of Arts and Design, New York.