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Barber, Claire and Swindells, Steve

Beyond Charity

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Barber Swindells: (Claire Barber and Steve Swindells)

Considerations Between Textiles and Society: A Recapitulation

Title: More than Charity – Textiles in Daily Life

Abstract

This paper presents a collage of encounters with people and sleeping bags in West Yorkshire, UK. The encounters begin to highlight broader and deeper phenomena of consumption and disposability of textiles in daily life and its relationship to their social highs and lows.

Barber Swindells observe (both as artists and teachers) the complexities, delights and contradictions of textile use; a recycling unit for unwanted textiles (a concern that 'recycled' textiles are destined for Tanzanian landfill), a music festival where sleeping bags and tents are commonly abandoned or burnt, and a textile art curator and students who volunteer with the Hope Centre, Bradford to recycle sleeping bags to help the homeless during the UK winter months. As artists we record, document and discuss this phenomena; in response we develop ideas in the studio and make work for the biennial. As teachers we integrate these encounters into the University curriculum, involving timetables, workshops and socially related projects. The staff, students and their family members work with the Hope Centre, crafting the sleeping bags in a variety of ways.

Barber Swindells recognize their position is multi-faceted – they are participants and observers of the situation and recognize we are all complicit to the era of disposability. The encounters also highlight complex contradictions and beautiful generosity; the students go to Leeds Music Festival and take part in buying tents, sleeping bags to possibly discard. However, the students also volunteer to recycle the sleeping bags and invest their skill, time and care into making 'crafted' interventions for each sleeping bag. The intention is to insert homeliness and individuality into each bag. We see all of this as giving something more than charity; we are interested in the crafted gift and time spent beginning to form small acts of resistance to the dominant flow of globalised sensibilities.

Considerations Between Textiles and Society: A Recapitulation

The first part of this paper seeks to open a debate on the conference title of 'Considerations Between Textiles and Society: A Recapitulation' and how we begin to position ourselves in relation to these considerations. The second part of the paper reflects upon this position to discuss a series of images, shared experiences, identities, memories and objects, which construct our work as contemporary practitioners and its subsequent outcomes.

Part 1: More than Charity – Textiles in Daily Life

Barber Swindells observe (both as art-craft practitioners and teachers) the complexities, delights and contradictions of textile use in daily life. These observations have led us to reflect upon the following: a recycling unit for unwanted textiles (we note a concern that 'recycled' textiles might be destined for Tanzanian landfill), a music festival where sleeping bags and tents are commonly abandoned or burnt, and a textile art curator and students who volunteer with the Hope Centre, Bradford to recycle sleeping bags to help the homeless during the UK winter months. As artists and teachers we record, document and discuss this phenomena; we perceive a thread running through these different events, which for the purpose of this paper we have entitled 'the project'.

If the role of contemporary practice is to refuse to adhere to the reality principle by insisting upon issues of an aesthetic subjectivity and the presentation of an awkward dialectic, then in such a refusal, contemporary practice also rejects the idea that there can be any simple solution to complex social issues. Brazon Brock writing the introduction to the 2001 Venice biennale catalogue, (*The Plateau of Humankind*)¹ proposes the self-image of the avant-garde still remains pertinent for contemporary practice because its self-assurance comes from an ability to turn certainties into problems. He contests, the history of Western art, since the Renaissance, is the history of

¹ Brazon Brock, *The Plateau of Humankind*, Venice biennale catalogue, 2001.

problems that cannot be solved, and the role of the avant-garde is to uncover them in the social field. It is in this context, of working in contemporary practice, that we (Barber Swindells) note the project and ask the question of what is our relationship to it, as art-craft practitioners, as teachers and as 'global citizens'? Though global citizen is not a term we use or are familiar with in our practice it too raises a question of what is the definition of 'our-work' and who is it for?

The notion of being a constituent, of belonging to an aspect of society is based on living with others, of shared identities, memories, objects and a sense of place, which constructs collective emotions that holds value and purpose in life. Within the project we perceive our textile-craft students as key members of the creative practice constituency; in their formative years it is they who are perhaps most receptive to the now and will take this experience to occupy the future. As teachers we capitulate our students into the world and note how they take their responsibilities seriously, with confidence, purpose and vigour.

As Barber Swindells, 'our-situation' to the notion of being a constituent is potentially one of multiplicity – it is a reference to the ideals of inclusivity, which in itself becomes a key component of our teaching textile-crafts. Perhaps the definition of textile-crafts and its relationship to the notion of 'high' art is difficult to fully articulate, a definition of some plurality in the lexicons of creative disciplines that, in some institutional quarters, might even find itself excluded from belonging to the humanities. However, it is this plurality, which provides the license and freedom to roam through creative practices that can be so positively applied to the world – that textile-crafts can activate society in inclusive and participatory ways in a manner that is perhaps unavailable to high-art. It is in this context that we consider our students as social activists and as creative practice constituents we observe their naturalness, ease and confidence to operate in this manner; a sensibility that does not profess to have answers other than a desire to get involved.

Our approach to the project, as students and teachers, became a creative attempt to pick a way through the morass of problems and concepts that relates arts and textile-crafts to the practices of everyday life. Our-situation in the project becomes a kind of cultural-montage, which accounts for recognizing different voices within an arts and craft collaborative practice – a voice that seemingly looks to the margins of creative disciplines, and simultaneously to the notion of function. It is a poetic verbal flash, where a humble artifact equally occupies an aestheticised position, a subjective voice and a utility. Our practice (our-situation) in the project, therefore, aspires to interconnectedness between students and teachers, between arts and crafts and between different elements of contemporary life: artistic, cultural, social and political within a specific situation.

In writing this paper we feel it necessary to rescue the term of our-situations from sounding self-indulgent. We perceive our-situations framing social highs and lows, it teases upon the nub of textile-crafts in daily life – its crux lies in the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’, and where does the I reside within the we or the gathering of the we to support the beleaguered I. Thus, I and we (students, teachers, creative practitioners, global citizens) remain in tension and in question to each other, where our conscience is taken to task or disowned. In the spirit of the Woody Guthrie – *this question is your question, this question is Barber Swindells question, this question belongs to you and us²*, and like all great folk roots we are attempting to make work that draws experience from the street. We could argue that the I within the we is surely an image nourished by emancipation, an image which traces the utopian ideals of modernity itself, but equally an image of our own inept universality and missing togetherness.

² "This Land Is Your Land" was written by Woody Guthrie in 1940 and recorded in 1944. Guthrie varied the lyrics over time, sometimes including more overtly political verses than appear in recordings or publications. The italic text in this paper is appropriated from Guthrie's verse, 'this land is your land, this land is my land, this land belongs to you and me'.

Therefore our-situations accounts for the tension between the individual and the group, between art-craft and textile-craft practitioners integrating into complex societies. Michel Foucault proposed, 'One must care for oneself, if one subsequently wants to care for others'. And, 'one must, throughout one's entire life, be one's own project'. He argued, the 'cultivation of the self' is a response to the 'stylistics of existence'.³ Foucault writing in *Technologies of the Self* (1988) sought to locate the self as a site for the production of change and transformation. This transformation generates a fluctuating boundary where personal identity engages with society. We reflect upon the nurturing of self-identities within the project, identities that can be productive towards personal change and transformation through self-knowledge.

Foucault writes:

*My objective for more than twenty-five years has been to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves: economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology. The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyse these so-called sciences as very specific 'truth games' related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.*⁴

Consequently, looking at abstract concepts such as 'emancipation' and 'functionality' within our-situations refers neither to ideas nor to practices but to sets of complex exchanges between the two. The project (Leeds Music Festival, recycling sleeping bags for people without home, a textile recycling unit, our work and a student textile-craft project) represented an opportunity to question contemporary life and to what kind of constituency we, and our students as arts-crafts practitioners belong.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 3, 'The Care of the Self'*, [1984], Robert Harley, (1986) New York: Pantheon. The 'cultivation of the self' is a response to the 'stylistics of existence'.

⁴ L. Martin, L. Gutan and P. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: a seminar with Michael Foucault*, in, London, Tavistock, 1988, pp.17-18;

Leeds Festival was the starting point for the project; festival participants, which included our students were requested to consider donating their tents and sleeping bags to a youth organization called 'Anything is Possible' in the hope that the recycled equipment could be put to good use. Many festival participants buy tents and sleeping bags specifically for the festival and throw them away or destroy them afterwards – with many being set on fire. It seems a sad waste particularly at a time when many people in the world are struggling to find a basic shelter. Through contact with a regional textile curator and Anything is Possible a student project emerged to adorn and personalise the recycled sleeping bags with an individually crafted element – in this project the sleeping bags would be given to people without a home during the UK winter months.

Being a festival participant, artist-craftsperson or global citizen is one of many identities an individual may feel, but is distinguished by the ability to exercise moral consciousness and well-being on equal terms. This interest is a result of the demand for 'natural', comprehensible relations between the arts-crafts person and her/his surroundings. The unpredictable layers and contrasts of contemporary society is no longer a passive receptor but an active ingredient of the art-craftwork. Following on from the Leeds Festival and student project our approach to sleeping bags evolved into researching and designing a sleeping bag liner made from recycled cotton sheets, and through looking for a supply of cotton sheets is what brings us into contact with a textile recycling unit.

In conclusion, as creative practitioners we are interested in contemporary life and how art and craft may be activated as social exchange. We note how our situation and our project adopts a 'peculiar' status as both art, teaching and functional object, whilst also hovering on a critical discourse that aims to be succinct and comprehensive in the demonstration of an independent voice – a voice that oscillates 'outside' and 'inside' social highs and lows of contemporary life. We see no alternative other than to conduct our practice from this paradoxical position.

Part 2: More than Charity – Textiles in Daily Life

The following section describes a kaleidoscope of images, reflections, experiences and work that emerge from the project; we observe (both as teachers, students and creative practitioners) the complexities, delights and contradictions of textile use in daily life.

Our first reflection is of a lecturers (busy) desk that contains a photograph propped on a small shelf. The photograph is taken at the Leeds Music Festival; underneath the photograph is a student thesis that discusses their work in the sleeping bag project and its subsequent exhibition at North Light Gallery, Huddersfield. The photograph is taken by a student who is both working on the project and who also attends the music festival. We note the circular nature of textiles and people coming together in continuous revolutions, where festival, a humanitarian gesture and art and craft coincide. The reflection represents different stages of the project and we wonder if the story of our project will have an end? For some of the students and festival participants the story ended at Leeds Festival, whereas for the students and lecturers engaged in our-situations we hope the story will have no ending.

Our second reflection is an image of two festival participants who are asleep outdoors in their sleeping bags, around them lie the debris of camping and of the previous nights festivities. It is a contrasting image from those which might be seen on the festival website. We note a contextual parallel between festival participants asleep outdoors amongst the festival debris and those who sleep outdoors because they have no home. It is an image that draws contrasting relations between those who sleep outdoors through choice and those who have no choice other than to sleep outdoors.

We also reflect upon images of tents and sleeping bags being burned at the end of the festival. Our awareness and understanding of what takes place at the festival feeds into the project; from this perspective the burning of the sleeping bags is enveloped in the 'work' – even though we try to work without judgment we feel this action is wasteful and indulgent, and may be an act of

hedonism and recklessness. On viewing recycled sleeping bags at the warehouse of 'Everything is Possible' the sleeping bags and tents appear new and fresh in the September sunshine. Despite the sunny outlook we ponder whether the students would probably reject the second-hand nature of the camping equipment, noting that once something is used at a festival, however briefly, their consumerist sensibility may no longer consider this equipment of personal worth or value.

We reflect upon images of large white bags containing reclaimed sleeping bags ready for washing. The reclaimed sleeping bags are taken into the homes of the students and teacher; they enter cars, bedrooms, washing machines and hang upon home washing lines. The project enters personal spaces and cascades through the family, through neighbours and domestic networks, it becomes a collective process and with great delight the sleeping bags pass through many contributing hands. We note the effort required to dry the sleeping bags once they are washed, to invest time and care into washing and preparing the sleeping bags is recognized as an important part of the project and may itself become an aspect of how we define craft.

Once the sleeping bags are dried they are ready for the students to adorn with traditional notions of textile-craft, in the form of embroidered washing tags and pockets being hand sown onto each sleeping bag. The embroidery and hand stitching helps to personalise the sleeping bags for the recipient, giving them some individuality, whilst the student is also developing an understanding of their work. As teachers and contemporary practitioners we ask ourselves what can we do that is useful without losing anything of the meaning and aesthetic quality of the artefact? In this context the project is twofold; it anticipates creative practice developing and maturing as much as investing something back into the community. We regard this dual function as something more than just a charitable act, it is an attempt to respond to a social need as well as trying to understand the work conceptually, materially and aesthetically – we perceive the project becoming a site for art, as well as a site for community.

On reflection we recognize the hands-on nature of the project and its engagement with complex social issues, in this context we are able to pool from our histories and past aspirations that affords us to live with subjectivity and contradiction. As contemporary practitioners we are in a position to question and open new horizons, to literally turn material and concepts inside out and back to front – we propose a wash tag can be both practical in its instruction as well as an interventional artefact. The purposeful nature of the wash tag is to provide instruction and care towards maintaining the fabric. However, the students work highlights how the language of the wash tag probably has more words, codes of conduct and facilitating descriptors than the amount of words available to describe the complexities and care of homelessness. In this context we note how such a small piece of fabric can become a signifier for complex social highs and lows, where the relationship between the micro and macro reveals inequalities and different social hierarchies.

As creative practitioners Barber Swindells contribution to the project resulted in a prototype design for a sleeping bag cotton liner – we proposed the liner could provide additional warmth and would be easier to wash than the sleeping bag. The cotton liner was folded and ironed in a unique sculptural way to fit into a silk pouch; we became interested in how we could develop greater levels of production to recycle cotton sheets in this manner so they would create a special crafted 'gift' whilst also serving a growing community. For the pouch we embroidered the word *folk art*, (sometimes referred to as peoples art, or working class art) and reversed and overlaid it upon itself; the embroidery was produced on the amaya machine. The mirroring of *folk art* and the image of the ancient earth-work of the 'Long Man of Wilmington' captured our thinking; it intimates the body in a secure frame, possibly at rest and hopefully in peace. We perceive textile-crafts as a flexible contemporary practice, which is open to new possibilities that can positively enter someone's life in a direct way.

In conclusion our-situations and our thinking within the project now feeds back into the course curriculum, into our teaching and into how we use the

resources of the university. We are interested in the interrelationship and integration between the student's and teacher's creative work, so there is a community of creative practitioners; an academy where the teachers are openly working in the course on their 'work' as much as the students. In this respect Barber Swindells encourages a collective effort, to be involved in the world as contemporary practitioners; we pensively reflect upon these grand claims but register there is a genuine desire to work together and hopefully make a difference and contribution to the recapitulation of textile-crafts towards social good.