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**CLOTH IN ACTION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE  
POWER OF CLOTH IN COMMUNITIES**

**CLAIRE BARBER**

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

31 December 2015

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# Abstract

The work submitted for the PhD by Publication is evidence of my investigation into the significance of textiles as an aesthetic experience within a socially engaged form of material practice, some of which involves other people.

Social engagement has been an active and deliberate agent in the aesthetic transformation of functional material objects in two of my publications called *The Sleeping Bag Project* and *You Are the Journey*. A third publication is a co-edited book called *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live*. A range of essays by artists, curators and writers discloses previously unwritten commentaries on community initiatives that probe a range of empathetic modes of investigation that explore meaningful spaces for participation. I have come to recognise that a proactive attitude towards collaboration is evident in all three publications. It is exemplified by my approach to co-orchestrating the *Outside* book and by an eagerness to work with others to advance the concept of the transformative power of cloth within the live arena for socially engaged textile practices today.

The relations between an aesthetic transformation and socially engaged practice was implicit in Rozsika Parker's seminal text *The Subversive Stitch* first published in 1984 providing an analysis of textiles within social history. At the beginning of work on this PhD my relationship with the book was complex and full of tensions. My perceptions of Parker's work changed as I discovered at the very end of my thesis connections between her work and mine that enable a deeper understanding of the need in my socially engaged textile practice today for the kind of aesthetics she describes historically as arising from social constraint. Consequently *The Subversive Stitch* has now re-appeared with value as a touchstone for my work in a contemporary context.

The thesis then discusses examples of the outcomes of practices by other artists and considers the attention given to visual aesthetics within socially engaged practices. Ideas are developed to suggest how the aesthetic dimension of textiles may enhance principles of communal giving as an innovative strategy stretching beyond the coalition government's Big Society agenda presented in 2010. Examples from investigations of textiles in museum archives including embroideries created by internees within Second World War prisoner-of-war camps in the Far East are also examined. The aesthetic dimension of the embroideries carries significance through the vulnerable context in which they were created, as a potent series of statements involving cloth in action.

In contemporary Britain, I have shown how such everyday objects as sleeping bags and travel tickets can capture the imagination by creating a connection with participants, when they may not have been consciously seeking an insight separate from the functionality of these objects. Nevertheless, an aesthetic gesture is surreptitiously tucked away. This has created a hybrid form of social engagement that can move fluidly between private and public spaces. The social engagement also involves processes of interaction and exchange with the object in the presentation of an active relationship with the object that is both seen and unseen.

# Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures</b>	6
<b>Introduction</b>	9
<b>Chapter 1: The Sleeping Bag Project</b>	14
Introduction	14
The function of <i>The Sleeping Bag Project</i> when it enters the gallery	16
Innovative ways of giving	22
<b>Chapter 2: You Are the Journey</b>	28
Introduction	28
Textile legacies	30
Presentations of <i>You Are the Journey</i> (an embroidered intervention)	33
The development of socially engaged textiles	38
<b>Chapter 3: Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live</b>	45
Introduction	45
Communal making as research	46
<i>The Subversive Stitch Revisited</i>	49
<b>Conclusion</b>	52
<b>Appendix</b>	60
Art Plus Award Scheme for Art in Public Places 2006-7	60
<b>References</b>	62
<b>Bibliography</b>	76

# **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Collecting discarded sleeping bags following the Leeds Music Festival	14
Figure 2. The Sleeping Bag Project [PowerPoint]	19
Figures 3 and 4. Hidden Voices: The Sleeping Bag Project	20,21
Figure 5. Sleeping bags in use at St John's Church, Bradford	26
Figure 6. Hythe to Southampton ferry and pier train commute	28
Figures 7 and 8. Tickets being used in You Are the Journey	30
Figure 9. Hythe Ferry ten-journey ticket	32
Figure 10. You Are the Journey No. 08421	33
Figure 11. You Are the Journey No. 06386	33
Figures 12-14. You Are the Journey (an embroidered intervention)	34-36
Figure 15. Repetition Variation	36
Figure 16. Insomnia	37
Figure 17. Magna Carta (An Embroidery)	39
Figure 18. Girl Guide quilt	41
Figure 19. Embroidered tablecloth centre	42

Figure 20. Salvaged sleeping bags hung out to dry	45
Figure 21. I saw an orange insect stepping lightly	54
Figure 22. Three Groups of Shelterers	58
Figure 23. Women Winding Wool	59



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# Introduction

The titles of the publications submitted for my PhD by publication are: *The Sleeping Bag Project* (2009-2013), *You Are the Journey* (2006-8/2015) and *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* (2014).

Together, these three publications represent my experience of the transforming power of cloth within people's lives. They show textiles within a specific way of thinking or imagining as well as being a material involving discipline and skill in the process of its production. This introduction presents the constituent aspects of the publications and their significance within the field of contemporary textiles practice. The subsequent three chapters are structured around the publications.

The first publication is called *The Sleeping Bag Project* and was started in 2009 in consultation with the writer and curator June Hill. The project brought new significance to discarded sleeping bags remaining after a music festival in Leeds, West Yorkshire. A range of volunteers, students and practitioners adapted the salvaged sleeping bags in order to withstand their reuse in a homeless shelter, as well as bringing an aesthetic quality and cultural value to the recovered items.

*The Sleeping Bag Project* was not originally intended to be publicly exhibited. It has nonetheless contributed to three regional and national exhibitions, namely *Community* at North Light Gallery, Huddersfield (2011); *Knitting and Stitching Show* at Harrogate International Centre (2012) and *Art in Your Heart* at Forsters Bistro and Deli, Bradford (2015). One of my sequels to *The Sleeping Bag Project* called *The Hunt* (2011), was presented at Japan House Gallery, Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, London (2011),

Gallery Gallery, Shijo-Kawaramachi-Sagaru Shimogyo-Ku, Kyoto (2012) and Nagoya University of the Arts, Tokyo (2012).

International conference presentations at Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico (Barber & Swindells, 2011); Plymouth College of Art, England (Barber & Swindells, 2011); Utah Valley University, USA (2015) and University of Huddersfield (Barber & Macbeth, 2015) introduced the project in an academic environment. An invitation by The Textile Society to present the project at the Wellcome Trust in London (2015) was motivated by their interest in current textile research that addresses political issues.

In November 2013, I co-presented *The Sleeping Bag Project* at *The Subversive Stitch Revisited* symposium at the Victorian and Albert Museum (V&A). The presentation was developed in collaboration with Rowan Bailey and consisted of a series of interviews and reflections from volunteers involved in the project. It was supported by a five-minute film created by Josie Capel using footage and images from my personal archive (2013). The symposium presentation is recorded as a podcast for the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths, University of London (Barber & Bailey, 2013). A further invitation to present a paper called 'Vanishing textile industries' at *The Guild* symposium at the University of Leeds (2015) presented an investigation into the sleeping bag within wider historical and cultural contexts as a framework for discussing industrial themes within my practice grounded in the materiality and meaning of textiles.

I also co-wrote an article called 'The Sleeping Bag Landscape' in 2015 in collaboration with Rowan Bailey examining my involvement in *The Sleeping Bag Project* within the development of sleeping bag production. The article is published in the scholarly peer-reviewed journal *Craft + Design Enquiry* in a special issue called 'Landscape, Place and Identity' edited by Kay Lawrence and published by Australian National University Press

(Barber & Bailey, 2015, pp.49-69). My research was extended through the discovery of a theoretical proposition for *The Sleeping Bag Project* as a 'travelling concept' (Bal, 2002). Lawrence summarises this in her editorial, as follows:

In their essay, they [Barber & Bailey] conceptualise the sleeping-bag as a 'travelling concept' that moves across landscapes to finally become a material landscape itself, full of imaginative possibilities. They position the sleeping-bag as a place holder for different kinds of identity; as it moves from its material resonance and use in the landscape as diverse as Mongolia and Antarctica, it becomes a way of crafting an identity of place for the displaced in urban Bradford. (2015, p.4)

My second publication, *You Are the Journey*, began as a collaborative project with the artist R.A.Webb that proposed the use of the Hythe Ferry ten-journey ticket as a medium for interactive public art. The project was supported by the Art Plus awards scheme for art in public places set up jointly by Arts Council England, South East and the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA). The award was presented in two stages. Initially, in 2006, the Art Plus Development Award fostered our (Barber & Webb) collaboration which developed professional relationships with the Directors of White Horse Ferries, their staff and crew. At the culmination of this stage we were interviewed by ten experts including artists and representatives from Arts Council England, South East and SEEDA (see appendix). The experts supported our proposal to use the front of the Hythe Ferry ten-journey ferry tickets the following year as a platform for public art. Subsequently, through being successful recipients of the Art Plus Final Award in 2007, we received further funding which contributed to the production costs of *You Are the Journey*. Additionally we were granted support in working with the media in promoting *You Are the Journey* from the Art Plus team to help develop our skills in professional practice during the second stage of the

award. A personal critical analysis of *You Are the Journey* has been presented in my essay 'You Are the Journey: Public art in your pocket' in the *Winchester School of Art Research Anthology* published by the Winchester Gallery Press (2009, pp.66-67). A further text-based outcome called 'Weaving technologies in the construction of a ferry ticket' contributed to the fourth edition of *Radar* (Review of Art, Design and Architecture Research) published by University of Huddersfield Press (2014, pp.36-37).

Six years later, the original used *You Are the Journey* tickets involved actual textiles as a further medium for communal engagement. This reconfiguration of *You Are the Journey* has been exhibited independently from the artwork's original maritime location. Firstly, the open-call international exhibition curated by Polly Binns and Linda Brassington called *Pinpoint i* at One Church Street Gallery, Great Missenden featured *You Are the Journey No. 06386* and *You Are the Journey No. 08421* (2013). Two years later, a larger scale installation called *You Are the Journey* (an embroidered intervention) was presented in 2015 at *Pinpoint ii* at One Church Street Gallery, curated by the gallery directors Lindsey Keeling and Joanna Bryant. Finally, the work was exhibited alongside international artists Bridget Riley, Tony Cragg and the late Louise Bourgeois at *Repetition Variation* curated by Julian Page and Joanna Bryant at Frameless Gallery, London (2015).

*You Are the Journey* and *The Sleeping Bag Project* share the intention of combining textiles with the social involvement inherent in the functioning artefacts of transport tickets and sleeping bags. Additionally there is also a continuing and questioning debate about visual aesthetics and the part they play in these two publications. This is relevant in the light of Rozsika Parker's seminal book *The Subversive Stitch* first published in 1984 and her exploration of the aesthetic expectation of embroidery and its social and political implications.

The investigation of wider cultural traditions and vocabularies for contemporary socially engaged textiles has been a fundamental component of the third publication, called *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* (Barber & Macbeth, 2014). The book introduces a new kind of vision for textiles as a catalyst for community cohesion examined through a collection of new writings by June Hill, Lesley Millar, Alice Kettle & Jane Webb, Philippa Lawrence, Robert Clarke, Penny Macbeth, Betsy Greer and Claire Barber. I co-edited the book and co-convened an international conference that gave rise to it, while co-writing its introductory essay with Macbeth. My chapter, 'Outside Intervention' interweaves personal reflections on my social practice with serendipitous interventions concerning things found. The originality of this book depends upon the currently overlooked transformative potential of textiles as a socially engaged form of practice in facing contemporary social concerns. Jessica Hemmings in her review of the book states that:

The contributors to *Outside* – artists, curators, academics and volunteers – all capture a growing responsibility in textile practice to not turn a blind eye to the world we live in. Instead we are shown the real seriousness of textiles in daily life – their ability to intervene, contribute and build much needed definitions of value and community. (Hemmings cited in Barber & Macbeth [outside back cover], 2014)

# Chapter 1: The Sleeping Bag Project



Figure 1. Collecting discarded sleeping bags following the Leeds Music Festival (Barber, 2011).

## ***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 (figure 1). 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.

### ***The function of The Sleeping Bag Project when it enters the gallery***

It is not uncommon for artists to create work with communities and then to exhibit their practice within a gallery context. For example *Refuge Wear* (1992-95) and *Body Architecture* (1994-98) are functional pieces produced by Lucy Orta that can be worn by homeless people, raising awareness of human vulnerability in the same way as *The Sleeping Bag Project*. Orta displayed pieces that serve a humanitarian or environmental role in the Lucy + Jorge Orta solo exhibition at the Longside Gallery (2013) in the Yorkshire Sculpture

Park. This exhibition provided me with the opportunity to compare the aesthetic and utilitarian intention of Lucy + Jorge Orta's practice when presented in a contemporary art venue with my understanding of the purpose of *The Sleeping Bag Project* when it entered the gallery.

On viewing Lucy + Jorge Orta's work one appreciates that the sculptures, which are systematically presented on the wall and the floor, imply new and inventive ideas at work attentively designed to include the latest materials such as bright neoprene printed fabric and glossily engineered and crafted resin surfaces. In an interview with the writer and curator Nicholas Bourriaud, Lucy Orta described how she considered the urban environment as a backdrop to her social interventions. She observed, in reference to *Refuge Wear* that: 'I utilized the street in an investigative manner, questioning the individual's right to occupy public space rather than becoming subsumed by architecture' (Bourriard, 2005, pp. 479). More recently Lucy + Jorge Orta recognised that their pieces translated in a different way within the gallery commenting that: 'We were aware of the separation between living experience and its frozen institutionalism, but felt that the museum public would be able to reconstruct the original context' (Casbon & Carey, 2011, p.164). Aware of the shift in emphasis in Orta's practice which translates the live public event to the static exhibition in the gallery one raises the question: How do you make a work about an event and then exhibit it while retaining its relevance in the public arena as well as within the context of a contemporary gallery? This is of concern in *The Sleeping Bag Project* and its function within the contemporary gallery spaces it has come to occupy.

I present two responses. One year prior to Orta's exhibition the gallery walls of the Longside Gallery presented *Footstones* (1979) by Richard Long, consisting of five black and white photographs recording a 126-mile walk across England from the Irish Sea to the North Sea.

The accompanying text was suggestive of the topography Long had traversed and helped to sustain a live element of the event within the gallery. Secondly, in 2004, Jeremy Deller presented a wall drawing called *The History of the World* at the Tate Britain. The drawing required the audience to circumnavigate a dynamic conceptual journey through an oversized mind-map of interconnected hand-scribbled words and phrases. What is revealed is Deller's thought processes underpinning the musical performance he coordinated called *Acid Brass* (1997). Rather than documenting the performance as a video or photograph Deller provoked the sensation of entering into the intimate mind space of the artist, akin to something that a sketchbook may provide. Obstacles to audience engagement within the original context are overcome by Deller's and Long's range of exhibition presentations that offer access to the live quality of the work through photography and text-based installations.

*The Sleeping Bag Project* grew from the particular circumstances of my family home-life that familiarised me with the washing and drying of sleeping bags and the creation of small embroideries onto wash-care labels. I recognised that my laundering and needlework should not necessarily be recorded in a photograph, as it is debatable whether a photograph could capture an intimate involvement with the project that only I could experience. I did however take a few photographs, as then I was not sure of the destination of the work that I was creating, and I thought I could find an answer in still images. My photographs did not evoke the circumstances of homelessness as seen in the photographs by Martha Rosler (1974-75) and Anthony Hernandez (1989-95). Rather the images inspired me to sympathise with the conditions of homelessness as an abandoned sleeping bag became an object of value.

I included the photographs within a PowerPoint presentation in order to investigate the project as it was presented to homeless shelters, galleries and university premises. The

PowerPoint presentation (one of my publications) formed part of an exhibition I co-curated with June Hill and Charlotte Cullen called *Hidden Voices: The Sleeping Bag Project* presented at the *Knitting and Stitching Show* at the Harrogate International Centre, West Yorkshire (2012) (figure 2). Camping chairs, salvaged from Leeds Music Festival, placed in front of the computer screen determined what the viewer would be sitting on, while the smell of washing powder infiltrated the space as an influential element involved in the understanding of the work. In this case, as in the presentations by Deller and Long, the translation of an original idea to the gallery creates a different work. This is precisely the circumstance that Orta does not describe. In the re-staging of objects from the urban environment into the space of the gallery the Orta's sculptures operated through a refined visual aesthetic, so cancelling out the functional elements of the work.



Figure 2. *The Sleeping Bag Project* [PowerPoint] (Barber, 2012).



Figure 3. *Hidden Voices: The Sleeping Bag Project* (Barber, Cullen & Hill, 2012).

The exhibition venue was very different from the site of Orta's work at the Longside Gallery, where the naturally lit gallery benefitted from sweeping views over a rural landscape.

*Hidden Voices: The Sleeping Bag Project* was set up in an expansive concrete space illuminated by fluorescent lights (figures 3 and 4). On entering the space, the sound and smell of cloth being machine-washed confronted the audience. During the course of the exhibition, sleeping bags that originally reeked of the traces of sweat, urine, foodstuffs and the smoke at Leeds music festival site started to smell freshly of washing powder. Visitors became aware of piles of textiles on tables at craft zones dotted around the space where hands-on textile craft-making was taking place. The post-music festival debris sprawled across one side of the gallery, waves of sleeping bags drying on the other and sleeping bags



rolled up and stored on wooden shelves after washing: all could imbue the audience with contrasting emotions including repulsion or attraction. It is difficult to assess fully the effectiveness of this exhibition. Visitors were inclined to view the installations with a lingering eye, listen to buskers, sit on camping seats to view the PowerPoints or join in crafting interventions involving sleeping bags. Some stayed to discuss the circumstances of the project and wanted to find out how they could develop it in their own communities. Others returned later before transporting the cleaned and crafted sleeping bags through the streets of Harrogate to the local homeless shelter.



Figure 4. *Hidden Voices: The Sleeping Bag Project* (Barber, Cullen & Hill, 2012).

It is worth noting that the *Knitting and Stitching Show* is a well-known annual emporium of textile art and craft attended by over twenty thousand people each year. The displays of

21

rolls of cloth ready to be cut and spools of yarn on show are prominent features in the vast exhibition halls encouraging hobbyist and professional involvement alike. Angela Maddock gave a recent lecture on Giovanni Battista Moroni's *II Tagliapanni* (1565-70) depicting a tailor about to calmly cut into a length of cloth. She suggests that the painting is: 'a perfectly poised erotic moment that confirms the central and crucial role of cloth in our sensual lives' (Maddock, 2015). The materiality of cloth at the *Knitting and Stitching Show* is undoubtedly a carrier of seductive and idealised aesthetic form reminiscent of Moroni's painting with the prospect of bringing stimulating adornments to self and home. In its setting, the material qualities of *The Sleeping Bag Project* may have attained what could be deemed as a low aesthetic value relative to the other textiles on exhibition. The visitors, some of whom responded with anger, shouting in frustration and irritation, did not necessarily favour this. We did not intend to create a work that was intentionally controversial but *The Sleeping Bag Project* may have transgressed the audiences' expectation of the status and role of textiles that its venue suggested.

### ***Innovative ways of giving***

During the development of *The Sleeping Bag Project* there have been a number of arts projects created with and for vulnerable and homeless people in Britain. The Homeless Links charity, for example, emphasises the benefits of participation in art for homeless people when challenging the prejudices often associated with issues of homelessness (Home Links, 2013. p. 9). Speaking at the meeting of Support to Recovery (S2R) Sarah Holland (2015) explained the positive impact to people's health and wellbeing of creative projects that S2R has been involved in at the Packhorse Gallery in Huddersfield: 'it is a very open, public venue – communicating with the local community, a place to have conversations. It is a public interface.' *The Sleeping Bag Project* is a comparatively private and discrete venture that brings the skills of the textile practitioner to a homeless situation. Unlike the

community-derived projects cited by Homeless Links, it does not develop workshops, exhibitions or events directly associated with homeless people, or attempt to provide formal skills or courses for the vulnerable through the provisions offered by local charities such as S2R. Although *The Sleeping Bag Project* may draw on the Arts Council's strategic framework *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* (2010) in order to engage more people in the arts and to encourage vulnerable and homeless people to participate in the arts as exemplified by Home Links and S2R it is a more subtle, less direct form of creative expression. It is often undertaken in the privacy of a home environment as an empathetic response with the homeless individual in mind.

During the development and production of *The Sleeping Bag Project*, various charities and a range of non-profitmaking organisations were providing original ways of giving. These included the *Innovation in Giving Fund* set up by Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society in 2011, *Give What You're Good At*, a platform to share and impart skills and expertise to charities and organisations through the volunteer processes and *Hope 08* an initiative to engage people in performing a million acts of kindness on social action projects. It is worth noting that *Pathways Through Participation* funded by the Big Lottery Fund and led by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, was a two-and-a half years qualitative research project starting in April 2009 and finishing in November 2011 which explored how and why people give their time and expertise to social or civic participation activities. Although *The Sleeping Bag Project* was not supported by any comparable initiatives, it evolved within a growing national consciousness in the UK recognising the contributions that people can give to society through their collective efforts and skills. The idea of encouraging more activity in local communities was central to the Coalition government's Big Society agenda:



The Big Society is about a huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. [...] It's about liberation – the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street. (Cameron, 2010)

*The Sleeping Bag Project* could be considered as integral to this government's initiative, both of which engage volunteers, students and artists in contributing to their local communities. This aligns with the Government's *Giving* White Paper, which focuses on innovative ways of encouraging communities to give time to social causes (HM Government, 2012). *The Sleeping Bag Project* is involved with giving through a series of modest material interventions into discarded sleeping bags, introducing an aesthetic purpose to socially engaged practice not confronted by the government.

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)).

While I was developing *The Sleeping Bag Project* in West Yorkshire, another project also called *The Sleeping Bag Project*, of which I was unaware, was being created in the United States. In this case simple emergency sleeping bags from recycled fabrics were distributed directly to homeless people on the streets. The motivation is to help the plight of the homeless in a practical way. There are two significant similarities between these two projects namely both ventures engage in providing warmth to the homeless, and both successfully encourage a broad range of people to join in the process. A participant within the USA project states in respect to homelessness: 'It is better to do something, than nothing to help the homeless' ("The Sleeping Bag Project," n.d.). What appears to be a priority is to produce sleeping bags quickly developing a construction process that is kept as simple as possible, while supported by clear step-by-step instructions presented on the project's website. The name given to every handmade sleeping bag is *Ugly Quilt*, implying that the object is consciously drained of aesthetic value that might add an art dimension to it with negligible monetary value relevant to the urban context within which it is distributed.

Comparing the two projects, the *Ugly Quilt* is purely functional using free and cheap materials to construct a sleeping bag that provides comfort. By contrast, the UK version had been manufactured before being rescued for the purpose of the project. My contribution involved the personal appreciation of the sleeping bag as a highly interactive model where new meaning was ascribed to it through the ways that different people chose to embellish the salvaged object so giving the article a new significance. It allowed for different levels of involvement in the giving process. These included driving a car to pick up the bags and

washing and drying them. Through these activities an intimate connection with the materiality of *The Sleeping Bag Project* was created. I sewed my embroidery stitches over small wash-care labels. The inclusion of text and graphics on the label, while bringing threads together into a dense pattern of stitches in a contrasting palette of colours, became a way to connect with the recipient. These embroidered care labels were then inserted discretely inside the sleeping bag for the recipient who may not even discover it (figure 5).



Figure 5. Sleeping bag in use at St John's Church, Bradford (Barber, 2011).

*The Sleeping Bag Project* seems to involve models of site-specificity that Miwon Kwon presents in her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* anticipating communal and social engagement, that Kwon terms 'particularities of place' (2004, p.159). It is, however, only when comparing my approach here to an artwork that I created in collaboration with the artist R.A.Webb called *You Are the Journey* (2006-8) that

my individual approach to site-specific textiles can become more comprehensively understood.

## Chapter 2: You Are the Journey



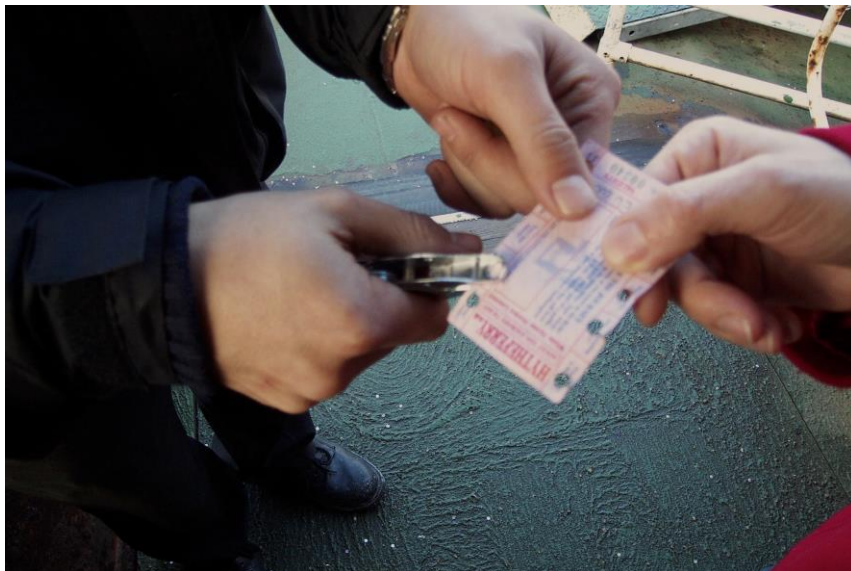
Figure 6. Hythe to Southampton ferry and pier train commute (Barber, 2006).

### ***Introduction***

Both R.A.Webb and I were involved in the Hythe to Southampton ferry commute (figure 6) for a number of years. I have been amongst the commuters, travelling with my Hythe ferry ten-journey ticket grasped in my hand ready to have it clipped by a ferry mate when I disembarked at Southampton. When commuters traverse Southampton Water, they use a small family-run transport service, which is at once familiar, transient and ever-changing, according to the weather.

In 2006 R.A. Webb and I developed *You Are the Journey* after recognising that the Hythe Ferry ten-journey ticket had not been designed professionally and that the social interactions involved in using the ticket might present a potential site for art. In an article called 'Lasting but a day: Printed ephemera as material culture' Linda King explores the visual language of transport ticket design, which conveys a complexity of information using what she terms 'a visual system of compartmentalisation' (2003, p. 35). Working within the boundaries of transport ticket design that King had observed, our subsequent development of colour, proportion, pattern and space relationships in the design of the ticket endowed a new structural harmony and aesthetic value to the Hythe Ferry ten-journey ticket.

*You Are the Journey* generated a stream of commuters' texts that helped suggest a series of contemporary social portraits of their community. After we posed questions on the front of the Hythe ferry tickets, commuters responded with hand-written comments on the front of their ticket. On subsequent batches of tickets, the commuters' responses were then positioned in the spaces where the punched holes are made. Removal of a small part of the ticket each journey gave the written phrases an element of temporality. Once the ten journeys had been undertaken a new ticket was purchased. This cycle was an on-going process, combining print and writing onto the surface of the transport ticket: a social engagement that literally interacted on the ticket's front (figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8. Tickets being used in *You Are the Journey* (Barber & Webb, 2006).

### ***Textile legacies***

The experience of working with a functional ticket during the production of *You Are the Journey* led me to examine a broader history of objects that have presented evidence of the interrelationship between textiles, their use and art. 'Adventures of the Black Square:

Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015' was a group exhibition curated by Iwona Blazwick and Magnus of Petersen and presented at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2015 that explored the creative legacy of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) over the last hundred years. Confronting his work, I was aware of paint on canvas as a material quality in its own right. A woven hanging by Anni Albers (1926), a needlepoint by Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1928), carpeted furniture installations by Andrea Zittel (2014) and the serapes of Adrian Esparza (2014) were also included in the exhibition. What set textiles apart in this exhibition was their associations with daily life, with some early examples taken from the weaving school at the Bauhaus whose vision was to consciously embed art into a utilitarian form of textile. In this way textiles was incorporated into the everyday - as Blazwick and Magnus of Petersen have declared: 'One concrete way of making art have a place in everyday life is to bring it closer to craft, design or architecture - in short to make it useful' (2015, p.167).

In the year 2013, I encountered a group exhibition presented in the huge space previously occupied by spinning mills at Salts Mill in West Yorkshire. Called 'Cloth and Memory 2' it consisted of a series of large-scale textile interventions, which specifically drew emphasis and inspiration from the past and the legacy of textile production at Salts Mill (Millar, 2013, pp. 11-17). As autonomous artworks, however, they were one-step removed from cloth's actual utilitarian function. In contrast, the curators of 'Adventures of the Black Square' had set up an argument for utilitarian aspects of textiles to be active in the present. *You Are the Journey* involves both these contexts, with textiles embodied into a way of thinking, as much as a way of intervening into utilitarian artefacts, proposing to reconfigure the delimitations of textile artworks as self-contained objects.

I was approaching the ferry ticket from the perspective of textiles and saw it as a vehicle for understanding textile creation regardless of whether I was actually going to alter the ticket's



surface or not. The process could be compared with the Jacquard loom, as diverse commuter patterns are created through the punched holes in a card, indicating the number of journeys that have been made over Southampton Water. Both Jacquard weaving and ticket production employ mechanical processes based on the punching of a card, with the facility to create multiple combinations and many different patterns. The commuters determine the production of *You Are the Journey* even if the artwork goes unnoticed. Further, when commuters write on the tickets, they anticipate a re-patterning of phrases onto subsequent tickets. This process creates an imaginary warp to produce countless patterns which are of significance to this specific commuter community.

Since *You Are the Journey*'s completion the directors of the ferry company have continued to use our template on the fronts of the tickets, reflecting the impact of art in public places as an influential activity (figure 9). Later, I revisited *You Are the Journey* by using needle and thread to embellish the tickets' surfaces (figures 10-15).



Figure 9. Hythe Ferry ten-journey ticket (White Horse Ferries, 2008 ongoing).

***Presentations of You Are the Journey (an embroidered intervention)***

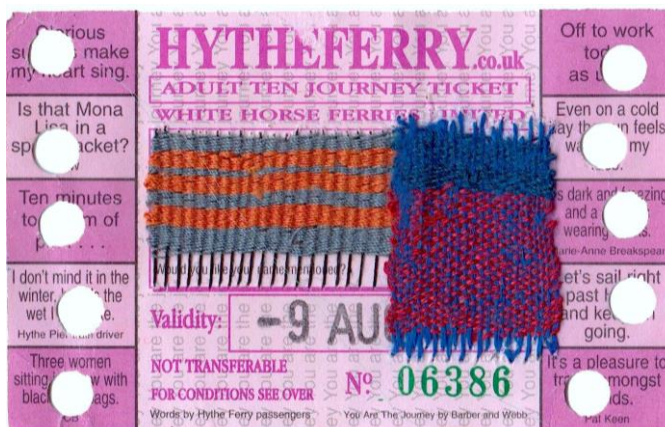


Figure 10. You Are the Journey No. 08421 (Barber, 2013).

Figure 11. You Are the Journey No. 06386 (Barber, 2013).

*You Are the Journey* No. 08421 and *You Are the Journey* No. 06386 (2013) were presented at the open-call exhibition 'Pinpoint i' (selected by Polly Binns and Linda Brassington) at One Church Street Gallery, Great Missenden in 2013 introducing small-scale works in order to: 'express a sustained conversation with materials, whether with, through or about textiles' (Brassington, 2013). My contribution involved re-working two of my used *You Are the*

*Journey* tickets (figures 10 and 11). I stitched small needle weavings over the surface of each ticket, the construction of which could be likened to a type of woven fabric created for a practical purpose.

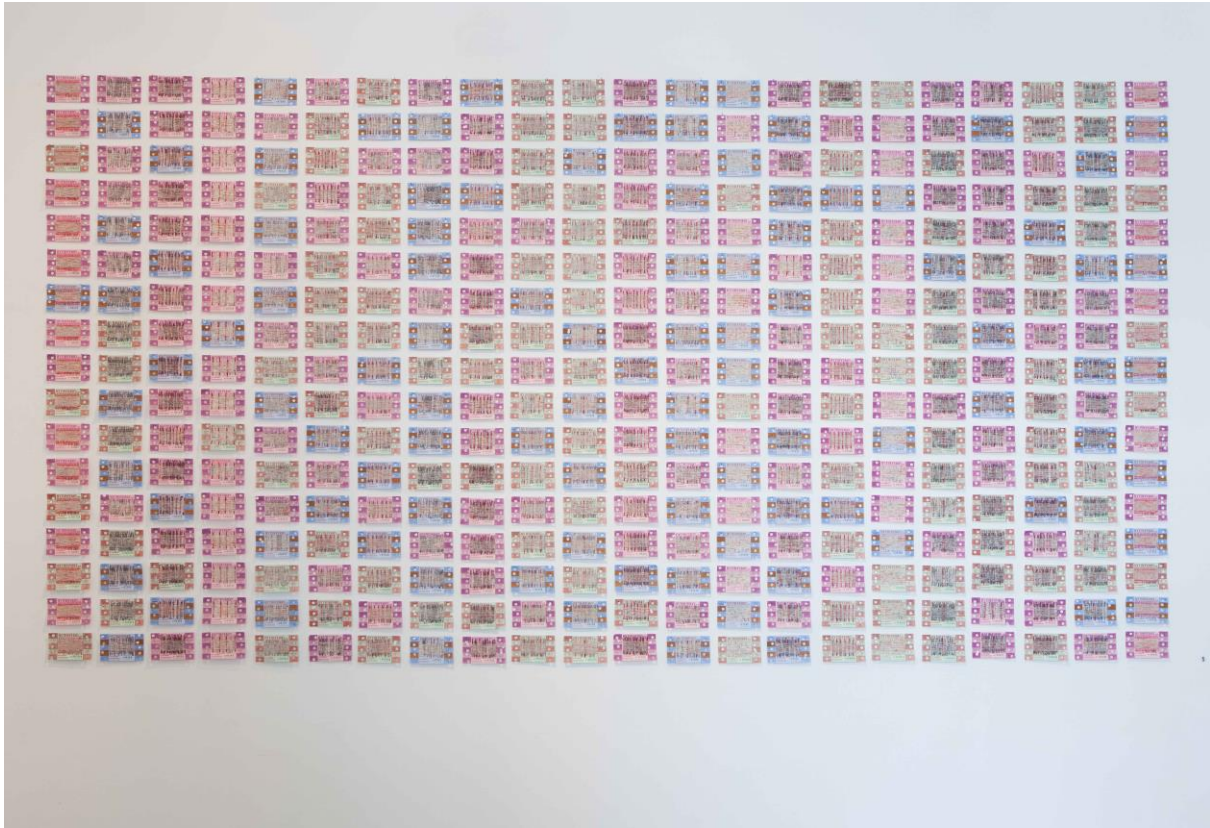


Figure 12. *You Are the Journey* (an embroidered intervention) (Barber, 2015).

Photographer: David Owen.

The following year, One Church Street Gallery directors Joanna Bryant and Lyndsey Keeling invited me to submit a proposal for an installation in response to a wall space within One Church Street Gallery that was to form part of an exhibition *Pinpoint ii* (2015). The development of my work over this period enabled me to intervene into *You Are the Journey* in the production of a much larger batch of embroidered tickets (figure 12). This time I used the threads unpicked from the lining of the red coat pocket that had held my ticket each day

on the Hythe to Southampton ferry commute. Brassington (2015) has provided her personal reflections of my piece, stating that: 'The work is presented in a gallery context for the first time, open to new meaning and reinterpretation. Here it becomes an expression of repetitive production and recurring memory.' It appeared that I had created a new kind of artwork, which had more to do with *You Are the Journey* in the past than in the present. The initial structure of the artwork reflected the rhythms of the seasons and ebb and flow of commuters crossing Southampton Water each day. Multiple elements (ferry tickets) captured the experiences of individual travellers, and now they captured my experiences using a sequence of intimate darning's over each ticket (figure 13).



Figure 13. *You Are the Journey* (an embroidered intervention) (Barber, 2015)

A further progression of my work was presented by the curators Julian Page and Joanna Bryant who invited me to exhibit *You Are the Journey* (an embroidered intervention) within an exhibition called 'Repetition Variation' at Frameless Gallery, London (2015) (figures 14 and 15). This provided a fortuitous opportunity to make a new assessment of my work, influenced by the gallery location, the themes implied by the title 'Repetition Variation' and the way in which my practice connected with the other exhibiting artists' works.



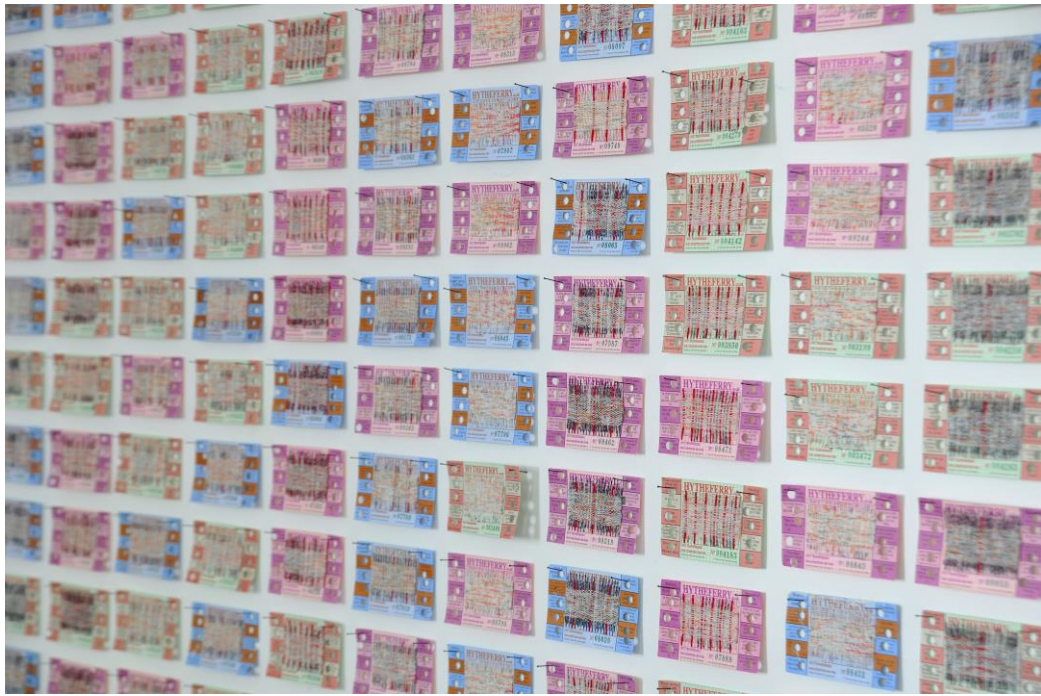


Figure 14. *You Are the Journey* (an embroidered intervention) (Barber, 2015).

Figures 15. *Repetition Variation* (Bryant & Page, 2015). Photographer: David Owen.



Figure 16. *Insomnia* (Bourgeois, 1994). Photographer: David Owen.

In the exhibition a lithographic print by Louise Bourgeois (1994) (figure 16) was positioned in close proximity to *You Are the Journey* (an embroidered intervention). In Bourgeois' work, a shaky red line seemed to loop repeatedly into an intertwined crochet-like structure, which appeared as if it could be easily unravelled. I am reminded of the contrasting process of gently unpicking red yarn from my coat, to tease out the threads so that they did not break in response to the strain of the overlapping warp, before they were carefully needle-woven over the ticket's surface. Bourgeois would have known this process well and the

diverse meanings that hand-sewn stitches and woven textiles can convey. According to the accounts of her history, Bourgeois' family had a business selling and restoring 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Gobelin tapestries and from the age of ten Bourgeois learned to repair the Gobelin tapestries (Hemmings, 2012, p.88; Helfenstein, 2000, p.19).

In *The Subversive Stitch* (2010) Rozsika Parker considers how Bourgeois returned to her textile roots in the later stages of her life and writes that: 'We can speculate on the unconscious processes that may have led Louise Bourgeois to turn to stitching in her old age' (p.302). Parker continues:

The child sees in the mother's face a reflection of him or herself, mediated by the mother's feelings of love and acceptance. The embroiderer sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and, importantly, in the reception of the work by others (2010, p.302).

This idea of embroidery bringing self-esteem to the embroiderer may be compared with the development of socially engaged practices that engage positively with others through needlework.

### ***The development of socially engaged textiles***

'I like it when people cannot embroider very well' states the artist Cornelia Parker (2015). She made this statement during her collaborative artwork *Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* (2015) involving the recreation of the Wikipedia description of the Magna Carta into hand embroidery (figure 17). At thirteen meters long, this enormous task was shared amongst over two hundred individuals, some of whom Parker had chosen to embroider specific words from the Magna Carta relating to their role, position or employment in society. The majority of the embroidery was completed by prisoners under the supervision of Fine Cell Work, a



social enterprise that trains prisoners in remunerative, skilled and creative needlework, undertaken in their cells. Rozskia Parker has described the 'mirroring function of embroidery, with the associative capacity for thought and self-esteem' (2010, p. 303). This is played out in the prisoners' sewing and Cornelia Parker has spoken of the benefits to their wellbeing of the time spent in creating the embroidery:

I've had letters from some prisoners saying they've got all this time to kill and actually it's great to be contributing to an artwork as historical as the Magna Carta. It's also about being part of a bigger communal thing. It makes them feel they're somehow connected to the outside world. (2015)

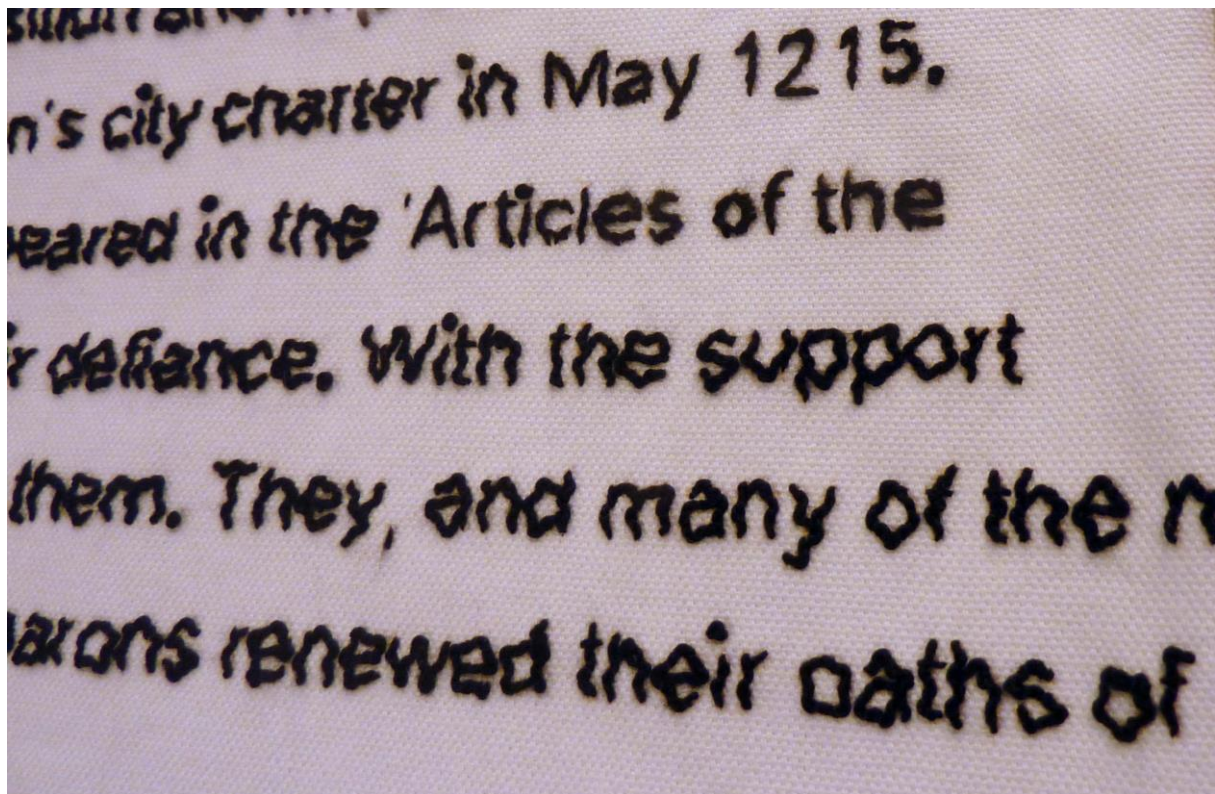


Figure 17. *Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* (Parker, 2015).



Textiles had been a socially engaged form of expression for generations before it was adopted by contemporary artists or displayed as an art form in galleries and museums. For example, in 1841 The British Reformation of Female Prisoners (founded by prison reformer Elizabeth Fry) donated kits of sewing needles and textiles to the women convicts who were to board the HMS *Rajah*, which set sail from Woolwich for Van Diemen's Land. The textile kits provided the women with materials to use in the creation of a collectively made quilt that has subsequently been known as the *Rajah Quilt* (1841). Jacqui Hyman (2014) speaking at the *Textiles, Communication and Politics* conference at the Wellcome Trust in London elucidates this philanthropic endeavour. She made us aware that the act of making the *Rajah Quilt* provided a key distraction for the women during the long hours on board the ship that was to become as important, if not more so, than the finished quilt itself. Hand embroidery was also a contributing factor to 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals of 'spiritual reformation' (Hyman, 2014). This is exemplified in the twenty-first century social enterprise Fine Cell Work, where the aim is for the embroidery to connect prisoners to society so that they may leave prison with the confidence to stop offending. Both *Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* (2015) and *Rajah Quilt* (1841), although created at different times, suggest that hands-on engagement with embroidery has the potential to bring positive attributes of emotional well-being, dignity, self-respect and discipline to the needleworker during periods of confinement.

The *Quilts 1700-2010* exhibition (V&A, 2010) presented a comprehensive portrayal of British quilt making. At the exhibition I was moved by the *Girl Guide quilt, Changi* (1943) created in secret by a group of girls incarcerated in the Changi prisoner-of-war camp as a surprise birthday present for their Guide leader, Elizabeth Ennis (figure 18). It is a moving example of a donation to an individual. Carefully placed hexagonal pieces were resourcefully stitched together with threads pulled from the seams of the children's clothing. The work

speaks of the emotional benefits of hand embroidery in the most abject of circumstances, namely in a Second World War Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.



Figure 18. Girl Guide quilt, Changi, Far East, Civilian Internee (1943). Imperial War Museum EPH 9206. Photographer: Penny Macbeth.

Further research with my colleague Penny Macbeth at the Imperial War Museum archives in London has revealed other embroideries created by women interned in the Far East. An item created by an internee called Daisy Sage (later known as Day Joyce) depicts multitudinous names and coded words embroidered in secret onto a bed sheet at Stanley Internment camp in Hong Kong during the Second World War. The circumstances of this embroidery have been provided in the article 'Craft in unexpected places' for the peer-reviewed journal *Craft Research* (Barber & Macbeth, 2015, pp.275-285), summed up by the

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editorial team as 'the use of stitch to not only communicate experiences, but to also derive comfort from the shared activities of stitching together' (Bailey & Townsend, 2015, p.161).

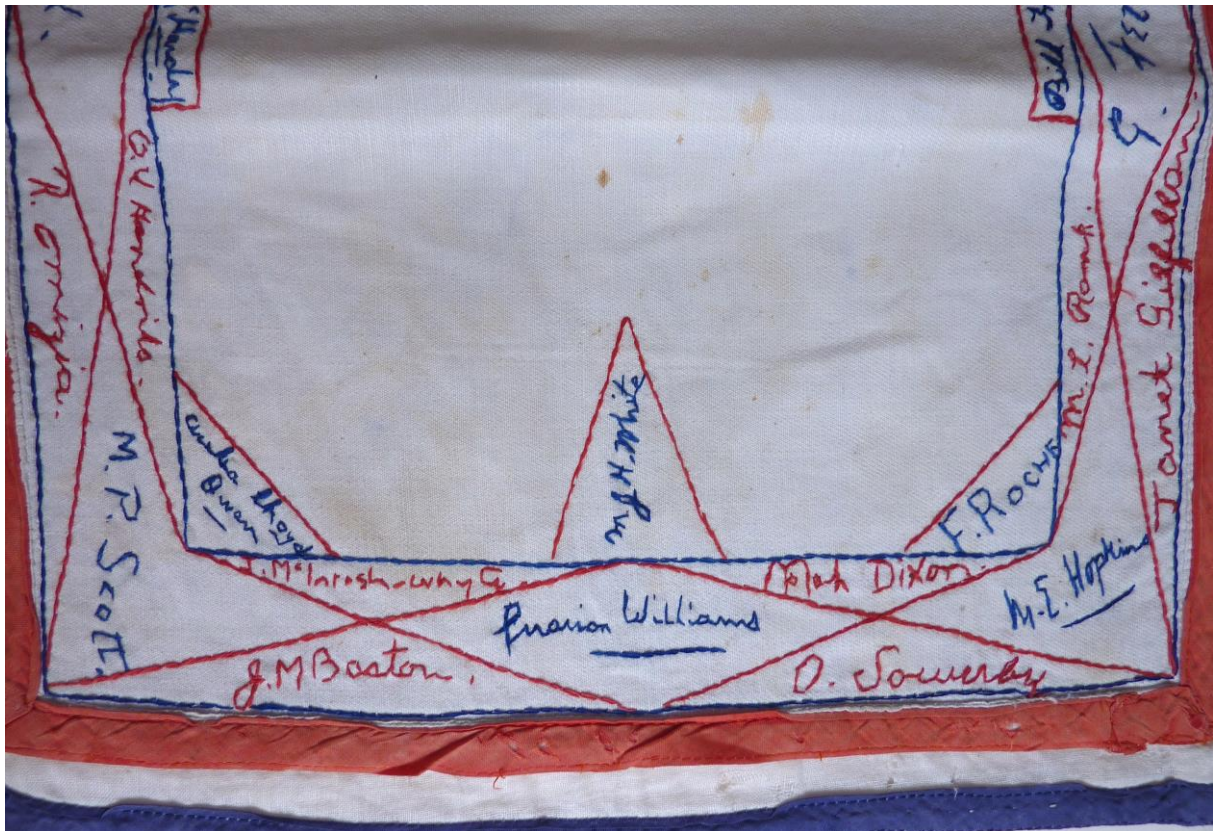


Figure 19. Embroidered tablecloth centre (Stubbs, circa 1942-1945). IWM EPH 9974.

Macbeth and I have considered the different languages with which textiles can be explored as an everyday strategy of action, activism and identity (personal communications, November 2014 – July 2015). Our article 'Craft in unexpected places' has interrogated the resurgence of textiles during the last fifteen years during the growth of the World Wide Web, which has helped to enhance the collaborative movement within contemporary art and craft culture which often employs an arbitrary ad hoc aesthetic (Barber & Macbeth, 2015). This is the case with the artist Jennifer Marsh who has coordinated a global collaborative project in the development of her *Dream Rocket Project* (2009 ongoing). Marsh deliberately relinquishes control over what is produced by her participants in terms of style, colour, materials, skill and composition. How this aesthetic has been developed by Marsh is provided in the chapter 'Patchwork of dreams' in the *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* book (Macbeth, 2014, pp.99-115).

The intentionally accessible forms of textiles co-creation are leading to an increasingly recognizable aesthetic that signals activist modes of making. The artist Cat Mazza, during an interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson in 2007 which was recorded in the article 'The politics of craft' in *Modern Painters* magazine (Bryan-Wilson, 2008, pp.78-83) described how a collaborative knit production was presented as a petition for fair labour policies for Nike garment workers in *Nike Blanket Petition* (2003-8). Mazza explained some insightful aesthetic issues that arose when the piece was initially accepted into the *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2007) because of its content. It was then rejected three days prior to the opening due to its aesthetics and through appearing 'too funky' amongst the other artworks. Mazza questioned what the museum meant by 'too funky' stating that: 'The banner is made from iridescent orange yarn – acrylic, synthetic material – and the squares are made by hobbyists, so they are a bit amateur looking' (Bryan-Wilson, 2008, pp.81, quoted Mazza 2007). Thus, *Nike Blanket*

*Petition* did not fit in with the measured aesthetic associated with studio-based artists working with craft in the creation of discrete objects. For Mazza, however, this did not conform with her intention. In contrast with Mazza, artists who explore political and social issues through stitch, exemplified by the art works by Maxine Bristow (2005), Susan Collis (2004), Paddy Hartley (2007), Tilleke Schwartz (2006), Anne Wilson (2014) and Michael Brennand Wood (2012), present a return to handmade processes of individual expression in contemporary art providing a technically skilful, aesthetically controlled and individual mode of production.

My participation in *You Are the Journey* and *The Sleeping Bag Project* seemed to incorporate both approaches to making. They involved a personal, solitary and creative endeavour developed through my understanding of traditional embroidery skills where every intervention mattered as it was inserted into the found object namely the sleeping bag or travel ticket. I was also instrumental in orchestrating a meaningful and supportive environment for collective participation, often bringing disparate people together using textile ideas and techniques. June Hill has described this as:

The warp is the static element in weaving and can be interpreted as the parallel lines of distinct communities, while the weft forms the intervening threads of a social interaction. (Hill, personal communication, 27 November 2014)



## Chapter 3: Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live



Figure 20. Salvaged sleeping bags hung out to dry (Barber, 2011).

### ***Introduction***

The *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* conference (University of Huddersfield, 2012) was developed in collaboration with Penny Macbeth and built on community-led models of collaboration, social engagement, crafting and volunteering within the realms of education and creative practice which we had both experienced first-hand.

The opportunity to coordinate the *Outside* conference seemed desirable as it helped

contextualise *The Sleeping Bag Project* as it was happening (figure 20). I was closely involved with the project, while Macbeth and I hoped to highlight other creative ventures that were consistent with addressing cloth's value, relevance and impact on societies. The conference brought together artists, volunteers and academics from the UK and USA in order to explore the transformative power of cloth in communities. Subsequently the conference formed a key resource in the development of the structure and direction of the co-edited book entitled *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* (Barber & Macbeth, 2014).

### ***Communal making as research***

During the process of coordinating the *Outside* conference, the idea that textiles could be created outside the studio to connect with others through textile's social and political associations was beginning to be encountered inside institutions. For example, a growing predilection for collaborative and hands-on creation prompted the commissioning of the UK DIY: Craft Research Report (Fort, 2007) while *Craftivism* presented by the Arnolfini Centre for Contemporary Arts in Bristol (2009-10) included on-line and interactive art exhibitions relating to craft-based and socially engaged traditions. This is also demonstrated in the development of Ele Carpenter's socially engaged project called *Open source embroidery* that is accessed on-line as well as at museums and galleries in the UK, Sweden and the USA (2007 ongoing). In addition, Jerwood Visual Arts hosted the *Jerwood Contemporary Makers* exhibition (2009) with impact as its theme. It brought together artists and craftspeople who were beginning to question ideas of social interaction in their practices. In the same year the exhibition *Textiles: Art and the Social Fabric* presented by the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA, 2009-10) saw the display of socially engaged works from diverse textile-related practices and periods in textile history showcasing works by artists who, in the majority of cases, had consciously avoided placing their work within art

galleries (Mitchell, 2010, pp.231-238). Subsequently the *Connected Communities: Connecting Craft and Communities* (Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), 2011) research project demonstrated how forms of social interaction traditionally encountered *outside* government-mediated frameworks were leading research trends. This was exemplified in the *Co-Creating CARE* (2013) research project which aimed to create a methodology around communal and intergenerational textile craft workshops involving diverse partnerships between academic institutions and hobby groups (Hackney, 2013). During 2013-2014 Lesley Millar coordinated *Transparent Boundaries*, an intergenerational European project that examined the creative use of cloth for bringing people together.

The organisation of the *Outside* conference was the culmination of Macbeth's and my own experiences of working with community-led models of collaboration and social engagement in textiles practice. This involved the creation of a double-blind peer review panel who were empathetic to our vision including Jessica Hemmings, Lesley Millar, Catherine Harper, Joanne Stead and Robert Clarke, all active in the applied arts, crafts and material culture sectors. We invited keynote speakers whom we considered were leaders in the instigation of textile projects in local and global contexts including Jennifer Marsh, June Hill, Lesley Millar and Betsy Greer. An open call for original papers brought unexpected contributions providing a new perspective for *Outside* in the creation of an open agenda for conversation and debate. They utilised textile-based skills to give structure to disparate and scattered ideas from various fields of art, textiles, curatorship, volunteering, teaching and writing.

Through the reflections presented in the *Outside* book by textile artists Alice Kettle and Philippa Lawrence it can be inferred that cloth is capable of embodying a site-specific quality that can be appreciated as an autonomous artwork while transforming people's appreciation of the site in which the work is placed. Millar and Macbeth examined the roles of artists who



negotiate their creative journeys through ethical and social modes of textile production, while Hill explored humanitarian perspectives for textiles from her own experience as a curator and local volunteer. A Further paper 'Craft in unexpected places' was co-written with Macbeth and presented within the conference *Transitions-Rethinking Textiles and Surfaces* (University of Huddersfield, 2014) to provide a re-examination of our book *Outside*. In a review of the conference Nicola Perren writes:

Their [Macbeth and Barber] paper encouraged us to rethink about the nature of cloth, to the ways in which its symbolic and social meaning is underpinned by its particular mode and context of production. Examples provided us with evocative landscapes and aided my transition from a lecture theatre to Mexican borders fought over by drug barons to Scottish Isles that enable reflection. Like the work that was being discussed, the presentation created an intimate, thought-provoking atmosphere. (2015, p.141)

Perren observes that the conference attracted participants mostly drawn from education, and she continues: 'How wonderful would it be to see seeds of ideas and projects actually emerge as a result of us truly engaging with merging boundaries and blurring institutions?' (2015, p.143)

The V&A appears to do just that. It is the first place that many would go to in order to see a wide range of art and design displays from across the world attracting the specialist, student and academic as well as the casual passer-by. Therefore on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2013 when I received an email from the writer and curator Pennina Barnett, inviting me to participate in a round-table workshop to help inform the direction and content of a forthcoming symposium at the V&A called *The Subversive Stitch Revisited: The Politics of Cloth* (2013) it represented a significant opportunity. From the outset, it was clear that I would be in a

privileged position in helping to contribute to something that would continue to sustain the legacy of Rozsika Parker's key text *The Subversive Stitch* (1984). I learnt that the project was being convened by Jennifer Harris, Deputy Director of the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Althea Greenan, Special Collections Curator at the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths, University of London and the writer and curator Pennina Barnett. Additionally there were a number of artists, curators and writers including Jessica Hemmings, Margareta Kern, Claire Pajackowska, Ele Carpenter and Grant Watson. I accepted the invitation.

### ***The Subversive Stitch Revisited***

*The Subversive Stitch*, first published in 1984, occurred in a political climate of feminism that reappraised art made by women. It has been frequently cited, influencing a wide range of artists and writers across the cultural spectrum of art, design, craft and feminist theory demonstrated in the tribute article for *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* following Parker's death in November 2010 (Barnett, 2011, pp. 201-211). The ideas for *The Subversive Stitch* were in place in 1972, when Parker became one of the original members of Spare Rib, the most significant feminist magazine during the 1970s-1980s. In 1973, Parker met Griselda Pollock, and together they formed The Feminist Art History Collective, which led to their collaboration on the book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art & Ideology* (1981) from which arose the motivation for *The Subversive Stitch* inspired by Parker's desire to restore women's work in embroidery from neglect. Parker mapped out the history of embroidery in western society from the Middle Ages until the late twentieth century and in doing so discussed the opportunities available to women at different periods of history. Most notably, Parker's text provided the inspiration for the landmark *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions at the Whitworth Art Gallery and Corner House Gallery in Manchester (1988) organised by Jennifer Harris, Bev Bytheway and Pennina Barnett.

During our attendance at *The Subversive Stitch Revisited* round-table workshop in the autumn of 2013 we discussed how key ideas had changed since the 1970's and 80's and what might constitute a politics of cloth for the twenty-first century. Harris and Barnett have written about the significance of these discussions:

These sessions were invaluable in shaping the form and content of the symposium, which was now broadened to include work by both women and men that addressed ethical, social and global issues, and that focused on cloth as a subversive strategy – with an emphasis on radical and interventionist projects that challenged structures of power. (2014)

A call for papers was then circulated attracting over 180 abstracts worldwide (Barnett & Harris, 2014). I co-wrote a proposal for a collaborative presentation with Rowan Bailey exploring *The Sleeping Bag Project* from the perspectives of volunteers who had been involved. We were selected as one of twenty-four presentations (the symposium's content is on a website on the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths, University of London (The Women's Art Library, 2015)).

Many papers and workshops at *The Subversive Stitch Revisited* symposium considered political, economic and social initiatives involving textiles. It included a participatory workshop by the artist Lise Bjørne Linnert called *Desconocida:Unknown* (2006 ongoing) inviting others at the symposium to use hand-stitch as a method of reacting to the repeated murdering of women in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexican-American Border. The participatory engagement within the project built a spirit of collective concentration that provided a similar form of social engagement to that of *The Sleeping Bag Project*. *The Sleeping Bag Project* however, presented an aspect of social engagement that is intrinsic, being a

personal involvement with a sleeping bag concerning the aesthetic dimension of handmade stitch interventions.

## Conclusion

I began this thesis by stating my ambivalent relationship with the textile histories presented in Rozsika Parker's groundbreaking book *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) and this conclusion involves a reappraisal of its meaning and importance. This is not in its original, historical context as part of a politics of feminism in textiles but rather in terms of contemporary forms of relations between textiles and social engagement. *The Subversive Stitch*, has helped me to draw connections with the evolving aesthetic dimension of textiles as a way of exploring the transformative power of cloth as performed in my publications and as discovered in the communities involved in my research.

When I initially encountered *The Subversive Stitch*, my understanding of the book was meagre and I instinctively withdrew from the textile history that Parker had brought so acutely into view. Parker pays attention to the history of embroidery from the period of Victorian medievalism through to the late twentieth-century, contextualised within the evolving roles women had in society throughout this period. The significance of *The Subversive Stitch* was lost on me when I first encountered the book in 1994 as a second year postgraduate tapestry student at the Royal College of Art (RCA). Maybe I was guilty of feeling uncomfortable with the conventionality of an established textile field from which to derive my work. This was a period when we were investigating tapestry as a woven form of material expression. Through consciously turning the medium inside out and staking out our disciplinary boundaries further from the Tapestry Department we proposed that any material should be legitimate. Within this context I relished my freedom from the culture and expectations involving textiles that Parker wrote about and, like many of my contemporaries, my practice did not evolve from my training in textiles alone.

Two years later (1996) the tapestry course at the RCA closed down. This anticipated a move towards more generic art and design disciplinary infrastructures within British institutions. The writer and curator Sarat Maharaj appeared to understand the thrust of why this happened, and in many ways promoted the amalgamation of disciplines, but has also spoken of the value of textile art as a specific discipline of creative enquiry, stating, in the year 2000, that:

Though we speak of a vast, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary field, in which things are coming together, crossing over and so on, there are points of contact, points of anchorage...not in a deep-rooted sense, perhaps more points of take-off. 'Art Textiles', at that level of observation, is signalling a particular springboard from which a journey is begun, a border is crossed and a new kind of translation begins. (p.10).

The following year (2001), I finally purchased *The Subversive Stitch*. In a sense, my reengagement with the book was an obligation. As a newly appointed lecturer on the renowned Textile Art course founded by Shelly Goldsmith at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton *The Subversive Stitch* was a seminal text built into the academic curriculum. Nevertheless, I still did not connect with it. *The Subversive Stitch* represented an insular, constrained and confined view of textile art of which I was wary.

In 2015, I reread the book. On that occasion I was unexpectedly surprised to find how *The Subversive Stitch* seemed to resonate with my work and to make sense of what I had already been doing. I thought through what Parker had written about the embroiderers: 'how they [the embroiderers] were able to make meaning of their own while overtly living up to the oppressive stereotype' (1996, p.13) and discovered a connection with my own practice. Parker's observation then revealed to me how the textile artist finds an

empowering voice through the specifics of the discipline, which is also a quality found in social engagement. A common theme that emerged in the light of my new understanding, and one that I want to revisit further in the context of my practice, is the restriction circumscribed by the boundaries of a site in which thinking and making is taking place.



Figure 21. I saw an orange insect stepping lightly (Barber, 2003).

For example if I introduce another work called *I saw an orange insect stepping lightly* (2003), although not one of my submissions, I will demonstrate how I have been able to come back to a new understanding of *The Subversive Stitch* through involving small objects such as a ferry ticket and a wash-care label on a domestic scale. *I saw an orange insect stepping lightly* (figure 21) was created on the stone steps leading to the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine in Kyoto. There, I inserted a delicate carpet of pins into the moss at the edge of each step to provide small dashes of colour hovering above the moss. The creation of the work gave me the opportunity to accept a kind of restraint within my textile practice that is cultural in Japan, but not in the UK. This realisation recalled the form of restraint that

Rozsika Parker was also considering in the development of embroideries in *The Subversive Stitch*. I am aware that my intervention into a location with *I saw an orange insect stepping lightly* was culturally specific to Japan, but the acceptance of restraint has subsequently been carried over into the two projects *The Sleeping Bag Project* and *You Are the Journey*.

Reflecting on *The Sleeping Bag Project* in light of the intervention I created in Kyoto I realise that it enabled me to discover how the colour relationships of my threads could take me on an intuitive journey around the small perimeter of a wash-care label. In creating my embroideries I highlighted letters and words, and overlaid additional patterns onto the label. These became newly charged within the label, which by comparison with, *I saw an orange insect stepping lightly* was also the site. The smallness of the label, however meant that I did not have to pre-plan the work unlike larger site-specific installations. Rather, the action of embroidery within a site that was small became a catalyst for a much more intimate relationship with the work. I could move around the label with my hand and eye as I stitched through the cloth, eliciting a very sensuous and tactile experience with the back and front of the label through the sublime simplicity and uncluttered direct action of my stitches. Now I was getting closer to understanding why, historically, women may have pursued this craft. Working within the restriction of the language available to me, in my case ready-made text on a wash-care label, it became a place for constructing my thoughts in a tight framework using my limited resources. Thus, it linked me to the history of embroidered samplers which Parker wrote about. Furthermore, I hoped that the recipient of my work may receive, in addition to the comfort the sleeping bag provided at a homeless shelter, a sense of the intensity, concentration and sincerity of the embroidered intervention that *is* the transformative potential of creative work in textiles.



This experience of embroidering on a wash-care label gave me the confidence to revisit *You Are the Journey* which is a collaborative artwork that had a more public function than my intervention into *The Sleeping Bag Project*. This time I started to stitch onto the faces of used *You Are the Journey* tickets thus engaging in actual textile creation rather than the textile metaphor of the Jacquard loom evident in the first rendition. The individual and collaborative forms of social engagement in the first version of *You are the Journey* were transformed as I needle-wove vertical and horizontal threads onto the faces of the used tickets. The transformation can be viewed in the context of the history of *You Are the Journey* with the small needle-woven cloth over the tickets helping to emphasise the original social function and engagement implied beneath.

The fact that my interventions into wash-care labels and travel tickets were small, yet repeated, revealed an important serendipity. These objects were easily transportable in my rucksack, so that I could revert from a mother at a ballpark and at home, to lecturing at university and working in the office. Now my work seemed to have affinity with Elaine Showalter's essay 'Piecing and writing' (2012, pp.157-170). In comparing the development of the short narrative tradition in American women's literature with the piece quilting tradition, Showalter has shown how the structural constructions of both art forms are consistent with the availability of women's time (2012, p.161). This is exemplified by my resourceful use of multiple processes involving continual picking up and putting down.

Parker's book *The Subversive Stitch* presented an analysis of a predominantly British textile history. Rather than designing their own work, the embroiderers would often make use of images available to them, faithfully copying patterns corresponding with masculine society's ideals of femininity at different periods of history. When I first read *The Subversive Stitch* it appeared to me to be predominantly a political text, arising out of the feminist challenge in

the 1980's to modernist aesthetics. Today I recognise the aesthetic dimension of the textiles Parker wrote about. What Parker saw as the gendered restriction of embroidery, I am now recognising can become a resource for me in contemporary socially engaged practice. As I wrote earlier in this text socially engaged practice associated with the political idea of the Big Society is largely devoid of aesthetics. I think, therefore, there is a need to engage in a broader contemporary appreciation of Parker's text to recognise the value of the aesthetic within social engagement today. Recently the textile artist Francis Dupré sagely wrote: 'I have been troubled by predominant thinking that privileges dialogues, communication and intersubjective connections over haptic and aesthetic experience' (2015, p.179). While in the same year the art historian and anthropologist Roger Sensi explained the current climate of social engagement as conceptually rather than visually motivated (2015, p.7). I hope I have demonstrated that my practice, through intervening with traditional materials, has reclaimed the aesthetic dimension of textiles and its transformative power within a socially engaged context.

While developing *The Sleeping Bag Project*, I started to examine the work of other artists and curators, many of whom worked on socially engaged projects. These projects involved investigations of social issues, such as women's humanitarian rights during wars, the separation of the elderly in modern society, and the dissolution of community values in post-industrial Britain. They led towards the *Outside* book publication that included a range of essays by artists, curators and other writers who presented case studies defining textiles as 'cloth in action' while demonstrating socially engaged practices as they were happening. These perspectives all drew on the transformative role of textiles in contemporary life.

As I have shown, my perception of *The Subversive Stitch* has shifted over the last two decades as I have come to recognise the importance of a history that is particular to textiles

and to my work. I now view familiar objects, images, pieces in collections and even my own artworks with more insight. This became apparent when I recently went to the British Museum to see a collection of drawings by sculptor Henry Moore of women sheltering in the London Underground during the Second World War (1940-41). The small scale of the actual drawings evoked the transience of their creation; I imagined them being rapidly drawn in a small workbook, held in the palm of Moore's hand, while he represented groups of women, in dangerous and dismal circumstances, engaged in textile activity (figure 22).

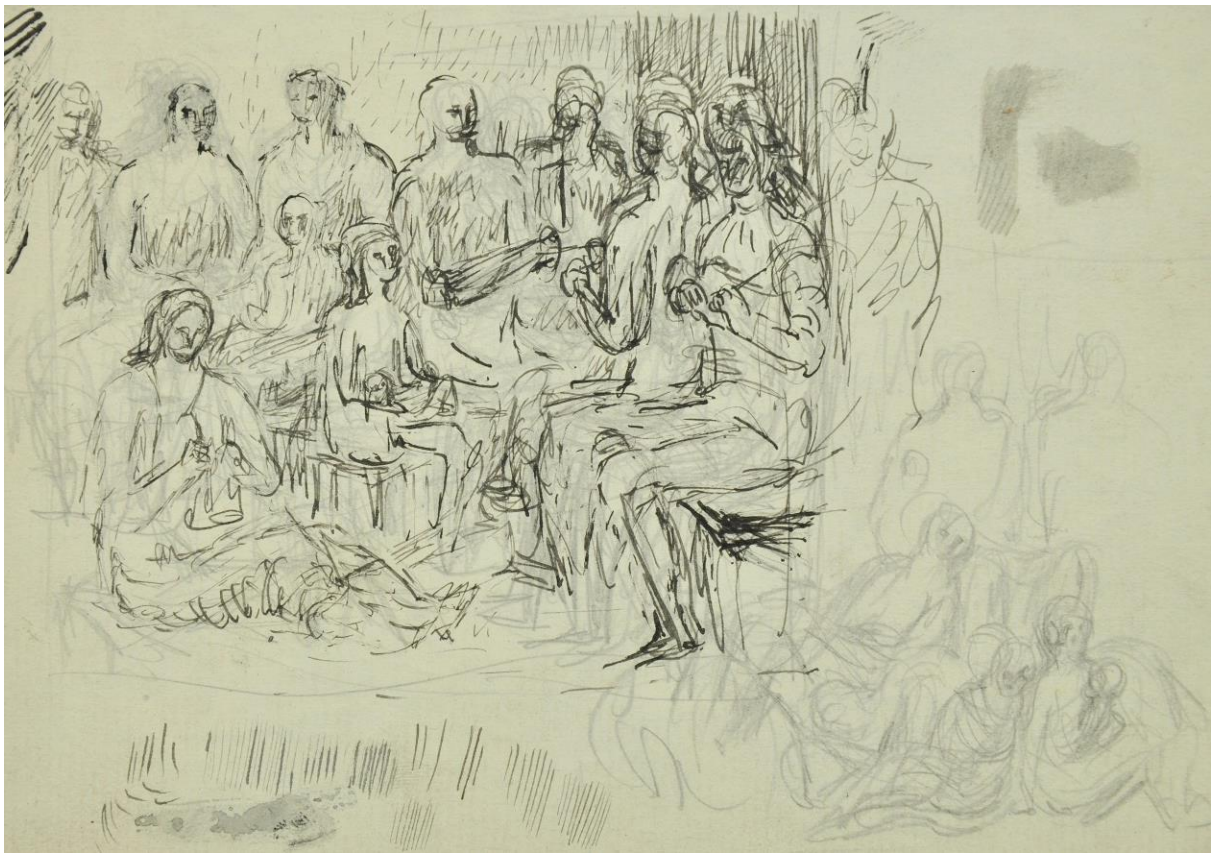


Figure 22. *Three Groups of Shelterers* (Moore, 1940-41). British Museum 1977-4-2-13 (31).

Another drawing by Moore called *Women Winding Wool* (1948) exhibited at the Underground Gallery at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2015) conveys a delicate strength in

the creation of an image of two women absorbed in the process of hand-winding yarn (figure 23). I envisage that, through their intimacy, the apparent unpleasantness of their circumstance is controlled and transformed to one that carries a mood of tender engagement; even Moore's colour palate seems to adopt soft pink and sepia tones. This image speaks powerfully about the resilience of individuals when seeking solace and enjoyment from textile creation, an unexpected image of social engagement in textiles with which to end this study.



Figure 23. *Women Winding Wool* (Moore, 1948). Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © The Henry Moore Foundation.

# Appendix

## ***Art Plus Award Scheme for Art in Public Places 2006-7***

The Art Plus Awards Scheme for Art in Public Places was set up jointly by Arts Council England, South East and the South East England Development Agency.

The selection panel for the Art Plus Awards included:

Stephanie Fuller: Visual Arts Officer, Public Art and Architecture with Arts Council . England, South East and the team leader for Art Plus.

Tim Gale: Landscape architect, Whitelaw Turkinton and member of the South East Regional Design Panel and CABI Space steering committee.

David Kay: Independent arts consultant specialising in the visual and applied arts and arts consultant on the Art Plus team.

Steve Geliot: Artist making site-specific work concerned with landscape.

Stevie Rice: Director of Dada-South, the south east disability arts development agency.

Magdalene Odundo: Professor of Ceramics and an artist of international renown.

Samantha Wilkinson: Visual arts consultant specialising in commissioning in the public realm.

Miranda Pearce: Urban Renaissance Manager, South East England Development Agency (SEEDA).

Esther Rolinson: Visual Artist working in the public realm and member of the South East Regional Design Panel.

Chris Marsh: Chartered Surveyor and Chartered Town Planner and has been involved in research and consultancy projects for many years.

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