

Conference: How Can I Make It OK? the art of repair.

University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. 2 March 2016

A Symposium to accompany the exhibition 'What do I need to do to make it ok?' showing at the Crafts Study Centre UCA Farnham.

The keynote speakers for the symposium are the ceramic artist Bouke de Vries and the textile artist Freddie Robbins. Speakers were: Stella Adams; Charlotte Bilby; Colette Dobson; Marie Lefebvre; Marlene Little; Victoria Mitchell; Celia Pym and Claire Wellesley-Smith. Their subjects covered themes such as: anatomy; sustainability; prisoner quilts; photography; health and community.

Abstracts:

Keynote

Bouke de Vries

My sculpture finds its origins in my work as a ceramics conservator. Feeling a need to express myself, I naturally used my practice as a conservator as a starting point. In a world where perfection seems to be an attainable goal I have been faced with issues of perfection on a daily basis. Where even an almost-invisible hairline crack, a tiny rim chip or a broken finger render a once-valuable object practically worthless, literally not worth the cost of restoring. There's something incongruous about the fact that such an object, although still imbued with all the skills it took to make it, is regarded as worthless. With my pieces I try to look at these damaged objects and try to give them a new narrative, to instil new virtues, new values, and to move their stories forward, using my skills and techniques, developed over the years as conservator and applied in a new way. With some works the viewer may be confused as to where the original makers of the piece stop and where I begin. I see myself as a teller of stories through these damaged objects. The works are often based in art/history but also addresses current issues often referenced through comparable historic situations. I believe that beauty is gaining a renewed currency, as is the artist as maker/craftsman.

Keynote

Freddie Robbins

What do I need to do to make it OK?

I learnt that knitting could make it OK when I was a child. I subconsciously received this information from an animated character called Nelly, who was the co-star of the children's TV series *Noah and Nelly*. *Noah and Nelly* was the 1976 creation of Grange Calveley. His five-minute cartoons depicted a world very loosely based around Noah's Ark, each episode ended in some sort of disaster with the day being saved by Noah's wife Nelly, who used her knitting skills to make objects which solved the problem in some way or other. Nelly was an ambitious knitter, knitting everything from drilling rigs to crash helmets.

I have knitted since I was a teenager, studying knitted textiles at both undergraduate and masters level. Knitting has been a key part of my life for nearly forty years. However I was not conscious of how far it had permeated me until after my daughter was born. I suffered from post-natal depression, feeling completely alienated in my new role. In desperation I turned to my knitting. Whilst working from a commercial pattern for a pair of baby's pram-trousers I felt OK, deriving a huge amount of reassurance from the movements my hands made as the work grew. This was something from the time before motherhood that could be my companion during the early, difficult days of motherhood. The familiar, to counterbalance the unfamiliar.

"In the end, everything will be ok. If it's not ok, it's not yet the end". (Fernando Sabino)

Stella Adams Schofield

Mushrooms, Ladder Hooks and Sunday Afternoons: Memories of Mending, Mending Baskets, and the Material Culture of Mending.

What are the memories of mending and the mending basket that are held by the declining number of women who are of the generation that still remember a time when repairing textiles was fundamental?

Throughout human history the resources, time and energy required to grow and process the materials used to make textile artefacts has made them an expensive commodity (Gordon 2011 ch 4). This expense combined with the necessity of textiles to

support comfortable human existence, has resulted in the essential activity of textile mending. However, within living memory the mending of textiles appears to have become generally perceived as unnecessary, as the effects of industrialisation, the growth of the agro-chemical industry, the development of synthetic materials and the use of sweat shop labour from the developing world has resulted in what Geismar (2014) calls the 'widespread acceptance of product 'disposability''. Whilst there have been a core of people who continue to mend their personal textiles, contemporary artistic, aesthetic and environmental movements and human rights activists have begun to encourage us all to think again about the true cost of textiles and the value of mending. It, therefore, becomes ever more important that the memories of those who remember the skills and necessity of mending are recorded. This paper will explore the memories associated with textile mending in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as both academic presentation, and as time based art work in the format of edited recorded oral history with linked moving and still images.

Charlotte Bilby, Reader in Criminology, Northumbria University, UK.

What becomes of the soul? We cannot be mere patchworks!': Making and reading identity in prisoner quilts

Creative activities are taking place in criminal justice systems. While the number of art classes is reduced, social enterprises support creative work in prisons and probation, and Fine Cell Work (FCW) teaches prisoners how to stitch – embroidery, tapestry, hand and machine patchwork piecing. Men from the FCW group at HMP Bullingdon made a to-scale art quilt representing a birds-eye view of a two-man cell. In Spring 2015, the quilt was part of the 'Voices from the Inside' exhibition at the Quilt Museum and Gallery, attracting attention and praise.

The Bullingdon Cell quilt can be read as a collaborative work expressing makers' identities and their suppression in prison regimes. It might also be considered 'affective memory work and pragmatic advocacy' (Adamson, 2013: 227) for prison reformers, who have appropriated the creative voices of the stitchers. These elements are embodied in a medium culturally associated with traditional notions femininity: the politics of craft are complex, especially if they contain 'a message of anger, activism, or social commentary' (Chalmers, 2014:59).

This paper will question whether prison quilts are redemptive identity pieces, or political artefacts that cannot be divorced from the context in which they are made. In doing this, it will use a criminological aesthetic approach: this considers both the objects and spectators' relationships to them, helping us to explore whether prison quilts can ever simply 'help customers have a better understanding of the reality of prison life' (Fine Cell Work).

Quote from **Attwood, M. (1996/2009) *Alias Grace Virago: London***

Colette Dobson – on behalf of **ComMA** (Communication Medicine and Arts) four textile practitioners and a leading psychotherapist

Repairing Emotional and Sexual Damage caused by Cancer

ComMA uses Textile Practise to challenge the communication skills of health professionals, to support them in caring and repairing patient's emotional and sexual damage caused by cancer and its treatments. Evidence shows patients with sexual cancers have considerable difficulties with sexuality, body image and sexual expression that are not looked after in their care. The Christie Hospital also found 46% of their nurses felt embarrassed and deskilled when working with patients, leading to poor assessment and treatment.

Methodology: In response **ComMA** work as a design activist, creating visual works that are formed from issues raised by patient groups, around these difficult emotional issues, and their inability to discuss this with their health professionals. **ComMA** presents the work at International Conferences on Sexuality and Cancer – the recent being Prostate Cancer- where critical interaction talks place with the Textile Artists and health professionals. Experiential workshops at the event, challenge the possibility of different ways of communicating and understanding the patients needs, to listen, to engage and help heal and repair.

Evidence : Health professionals feedback after being confronted with textile pieces made in relation to their clinical practice, which at first they did not understand, but through discussion and debate, recognise they could find different ways of communicating and helping patients repair their emotional and sexual health.

The research has been funded by The Christie NHS Foundation Trust. Prostate Cancer UK. The Royal Marsden NHS Trust. The International Society for Sexuality and Cancer. Cheshire Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation

Marie Lefebvre, Debra Lilley, Vicky Lofthouse

Repair through Design for Sustainable Behaviour

Abstract: The continuous replacement of durable consumer goods and disposal of functioning or repairable products into UK landfills or, increasingly, to developing countries, has resulted in global environmental and social consequences. Small appliances, which are easily disposed of in household waste, typically end up in UK landfills, are shipped to developing countries. Very few are recycled or repaired, yet many are still functioning when disposed of. To deal with electrical waste, Repair is the most logical step and environmentally beneficial solution. Yet, consumers' willingness and attempts to repair remains hampered by a range of complex factors. Furthermore, design for repair remains an under-researched area which hinders innovation to make repair more accessible to users. A design field that made some attempts in developing strategies for repair is Design for Sustainable Behaviour (DfSB). DfSB aims to reduce the environmental and social impacts of products by moderating users' interaction with them. The paper explores research carried out on DfSB strategies for overcoming barriers to repair small electrical household appliances. Through an analysis of past research, the paper discusses the potential efficacy of DfSB strategies on encouraging individuals to adopt repair practices and the potential impact of DfSB in design practices. The paper discusses gaps in knowledge, provides indication for further research and considers the implication of repair practices beyond design.

Key words: Design for sustainable behaviour, repair, consumer behaviour

Marlene Little

Connect and disconnect: cloth and the morphing of memory.

'Cloth, more than any other human-made goods, abolishes apparent dividing lines between art and life, both past and present.'
Constantine & Reuter, 1997

With a significant rise in diagnosed cases of dementia, there is an increasing awareness of personal stories, experiences and social consequences contained within a dementia diagnosis. From 'Remind Me Who I Am, Again' (Grant, 1998) to 'Who will I be when I die?' (Bryden, 1998) complex relationships between memory and identity are explored, revealed and shared with frankness and sensitivity through the medium of the written word. But how is visual materiality being used to explore and consider this significant personal and social issue?

Using a case study approach focusing on thread and cloth as a fundamental means of enquiry and expression 'The Dementia Darnings' series by Jenni Dutton and the 'Mem-or-y' series by Marlene Little make personal visual and material links with fabric and the wearing or abrading of memory. In Dutton's work the utilitarian 'darn' is transformed into an expressive medium of stitched portraits simultaneously 'recording and describing' her mother's decline into dementia and creating a positive testament to her mother's life. Marlene Little's 'Mem...or...y' series reflects on and responds to the fading of memory and the disjunction of thought patterns finding parallels with the unravelling of the intersecting fibres of cloth and of transposed visual memories.

Cloth and memory contain cyclical elements of construction and reconstruction, damage and repair but one can't always assume that it's possible to 'make it OK'.

Victoria Mitchell

Judith Scott: holding, healing and the agency of the photograph

This paper will consider photographs of Judith Scott taken by Leon A. Borensztein. These include the widely published images of the artist embracing one of her sculptures. Scott, who was profoundly deaf, as well as having Down syndrome, appears to cradle the work she has made. The photographer, Leon A. Borensztein, is himself the father of a blind and severely disabled child, Sharon. An image of Borensztein showing the photograph to Scott for the first time will provide additional reference.

With reference to Brian Massumi's (1995) consideration of the primacy of the affective in image reception, the paper will consider the haptics and embodied emotion encountered through the complex of performative gestures represented in Borensztein's staged photographs. The skin as an agency of affect will serve as focus in this instance, represented by both the bodily embrace of the textile (and its embrace-like wrapping and layering of thread) and the membrane of the eyes' contact with the 'skin' of the photograph's surface. Massumi's suggestion that 'brain and skin form a resonating vessel' may be considered in this context to provoke strands of potential healing in the viewer. Through consideration of Didier Anzieu's notions of 'holding' and 'skin ego' (1989) I will further argue that the photographs work on the perceiving mind to suggest that Scott's embrace may reference an intimate but absent body, perhaps the twin sister from whom she was parted for thirty years. Is it possible that the 'secondary' evidence of the photographs communicates psychic affect as a form of healing more effectively than the 'primary' evidence of the work itself?

Celia Pym

Unusual Territory:

In this paper I will describe and discuss the 2014 Parallel Practices residency and partnership project: **Mending and Anatomy**, which Richard Wingate, head of anatomy at King's College London and I collaborated on. The project placed darning and mending into the

heart of the colleges' Dissection Room. 'The Dissecting Room is far from an impersonal or soulless place: at the core of its purpose is the gift by an individual of their material remains. Far from a quirky paradox, notions of mending and repair seem part and parcel of this intimate and unusual territory. Alongside the teaching of anatomy through dissection, are elements of learning and teaching that go beyond the acquisition of knowledge. Students must negotiate de-sensitising feelings and de-personalising actions and come face-to-face with the emotional challenges of a career of fixing broken bodies. This part of the meaning of the dissecting room

is easily neglected and, to me, this residency will serve as a reminder of these challenges and a reflection on their significance. 'Celia's work embodies notions of care that are an important part of what may seem superficially a destructive process. It also reinforces the

motives behind the gift of a body and the aims of a biomedical education.' (Wingate 2014)¹

I will discuss the impact of the residency on my work and thinking, about care, tenderness, affection and mending as a way to notice damage and gifts, and the experience of working in a Dissecting Room.

¹ Wingate, R 2014 *Parallel Practices Blog* Available from:
<http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/articles/craft-and-healthcare/>

Claire Wellesley-Smith

Local Colour: Community, Craft and Resilience in Post-Industrial Bradford.

I am an artist who works with communities as part of my practice. I would like to present a paper about an area of Bradford, the city where I live and work, and the textile projects that I co-ordinated there between 2012-2015. This area was once the site of the largest piece-dyeing works in the world but is now largely lacking tangible trace of either the industry or of the industrial model village built to house the workers. It sits in the top 1% of the most deprived communities in the UK.

Community-based projects employing a methodology developed through the use of slow, localised craft practices were used to investigate narratives around heritage, arrival, belonging, wellbeing and repair. This was achieved using community growing projects that created dye plant gardens: local colour was grown and used in collaborative dyeing and textile making projects. Bare soil to vibrant colour, processes developed in 'real time' and strongly connected to the heritage of the place.

Craft as a socially engaged practice has been used in contemporary projects exploring wellbeing and sustainability (Ferraro and Reid, 2013), but less frequently to engage with heritage and place in post-industrial communities. Yet by enabling people to share experiences through practice, craft can form a powerful bridge between past and present, distant and local. Photography, textiles and text from interviews with participants record the making processes of these projects. They demonstrate the beginnings of new narratives of resilience in this community.