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Iterations of Applied Materials in Design Pedagogy

This article aims to interpret how the role of making and the process of such engagement, with particular emphasis on contemporary textile applied materials; shapes design methodologies in art and design institutions. While the core fundamental for applied material disciplines is not a new emerging methodology, it nevertheless seems to be under threat. Therefore, it seems a timely juncture to understand such engagements in experiential knowledge created, not solely in the realm of the micro individual practice but also how such knowledge building can have impact on a macro level for the institute and that of the well being of the societal economy.

This article aims to interpret how the role of making and the process of such engagement, with particular emphasis on contemporary textile applied materials; shapes design methodologies in art and design institutions. While the core fundamental for applied material disciplines is not a new emerging methodology, it nevertheless seems to be under threat. Therefore, it seems a timely juncture to understand such engagements in experiential knowledge created, not solely in the realm of the micro individual practice but also how such knowledge building can have impact on a macro level for the institute and that of the well being of the societal economy.

Understanding 'craft' or even that of 'applied materials' is based on notions of the made artefact; a passive object that reflects trends and aesthetic values. Makers are now questioning the material substance and/or the skills in the making process, as ways of thinking. This affinity with materials and/or the adaptive nature of processes is not a mere pragmatic means to arrive at an outcome, but rather one that defines the identity of the maker. Emphasising these affinities may be seen as 'artist speak' of something of individual expression, yet this intuitive and (latent) articulation within academia is finding a voice that has much to say in and of design.

In a contradictory era of individualism, alongside the pervasiveness of globalization and mass production, the self made/crafted-by-hand is seen as an antidote. The problem is this antidote is often laced in sentimentalizing the tradition as opposed to what de Waal proclaims 'craft is central, absolutely central' (2014). It would be a

mistake to define all making as craft, equally it would be a mistake to see craft as the last bastion of skills. To some degree this has an element of truth, not all makers locate their practices in craft, yet this does not make them less of a maker, as making is 'absolutely central' to them. (Waal 2014)

My own practice is based on the belief that making is a state of being, a way to intellectualize and to reason. Starling talks of 'thinking through craft', but I am more inclined to relate to what Adamson says as, 'thinking' through process with 'no assumptions about the pre-conditions of the results of the endeavour' (2007, p167). The making/thinking is often an intuitive relationship with a specific material or process or both; the holistic materiality with process becomes conceptual or philosophical, whereby process can have more importance than the outcome. Sullivan talks of 'thinking in a medium, thinking in a language and thinking in a context' (2005). This affinity with materials is proactive whereas Carter talks of 'material thinking' as 'not passive' in the 'creative process'. This active role 'can reveal understanding the influences of a physical material on the maker's formation of thought during the creative process' (2004).

'Craft' by Definition

For some, the term 'craft' is loaded with contention and is seen as traditional, isolated skill acquisition or as passive without provoking change. Craft outcomes are often categorised by material and techniques rather than by application or the makers' intention. If we think of craft as an activity with aspirations of craft-ship as opposed to a pigeon-holed sector, it is easier to

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comprehend. As Edwards puts it, *'art as thoughtful workmanship'* (Harrod, 1997, p349).

A number of years ago there was a *'Department of Craft'* in the National College of Art & Design, which included ceramics, glass and metals but this was thought to be an inadequate name. It was to be replaced by a much less imaginative and more wieldy title of the *'Department of Ceramics, Glass and Metals and Jewellery'*; which illustrates rigid delineations and creates silos as opposed to finding common thinking and approaches. This department has once again been reconfigured to one that is called *'Applied Materials'* which included Textile Art & Artefact and Glass & Ceramics. Adamson talks of *'craft is indeed always applied, always in motion towards some objective'* (2007, p11). More expansively, *'Applied Materials'* questions what could happen in a space where materiality and process-led thinking are central.

The Crafts Council of Ireland has been *'rebranded'* to now be the *'Design & Crafts Council Ireland'*. This has come about for many reasons but it does affirm that craft disciplines were the bedrock of design practices in Ireland (see Design in Ireland; Report of the Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland). Therefore, design in third level educational institutes has evolved from the craft maker disciplines. It is true, makers are strongly rooted in a discipline not in a *'sector'* or for that matter in a college faculty, yet this evolution lineage is better understood if we think in terms of what Adamson refers to *'craft as an idea, active throughout modern practice'* (2007). Fluid realigning is an active and constant activity for craft (disciplines), design and art debate. Carl Andre's seminal works *'Bricks'* explores this idea when he says, *'you still can't get away from the idea that the artist has to make things themselves and it has to have the hand of the artist and the mark of the artist'* (2016). The recognisable object of the brick did not demonstrate the hand of the maker as he did not make them, nor did he form them into something. It is this aspect of the lack of evidence of the hand of the maker that seems to have made this *'work'* so controversial and so difficult to view as craft / design or even as art.

Edwards states the strong *'dialogue between maker and object; an interdependency between process and intention which is linked by skill'*, demonstrates the unique

imperatives and characteristics of the maker (Harrod 1997, p351). Making/thinking arguably fuses as one reflexive activity and engages the maker to find methods for articulation and communication that brings the introspective personal knowledge to the fore, welcoming the unexpected, unprescribed experience but crucially knows what to pursue and what is pertinent to the intention. Cohn says: *'Thinking will often need to be undone as a way to discover different approaches'* (2012, p37). Applying these conditions suggests a more organic and osmotic relationship with materials/processes and intention. Sherdiff talks of *'makers of experiences and process as opposed to makers of things'* (2015). It is in the application that the intention should be understood. Or in other words, through process and progress of making there is a continuous open dialogue that forms knowledge. Nimkulat talks of the *'hands-on intellect; through handling materials in practice a form of tacit knowledge arises providing a particular way of understanding...., that is grounded in the hands-on practice itself'* (2012, vol. 6, no 3).

As by example, I will reference my own case to illustrate the process and progress of a making practice. My practice has radically shifted from that of large scale 2D machine embroidered outcomes, with a recognisable *'style'*. Yet I wanted to break away from *'decorative'* connotations that pigeon holed my work by the materials and techniques I used as opposed to themes or context of the made artefacts. Primarily, I wanted to become more masterful as a maker where the outcomes would engage the viewer in a different *'read'*, demanding more than a passive interpretation of a pictorial rendering. The knowledge of the practice identified the shift in making to that of 3D hand embroidered shoe derived forms that continue to be the vehicle to narrate, fusing a *'simpatico'* pairing of media and outcome.

Sullivan takes the position that *"the ever-expanding practices used by artists advance our understanding of who we are, what we do and what we know"* (2005, p19). Makers now take ownership and authorship of their practice and field, as opposed to relying on others to interpret and tell what it is we do. This finding a voice and articulation informs and feeds the making practice. While very different and not in equal measure, the reflecting on making and the making made

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manifest by articulation demonstrates a reciprocal partnership. Adamson identifies a particular articulation that makers understand in *'our evaluation of the craft objects centres on matters of touch, which we sometimes loosely describe as a form of reading'* (2007, p101).

'I am a maker', I was before research, then I utilised making in order to answer critical inquiry that could not be answered any other way, resulting in a changed practice. Once the research was answered I still had a need to make, a need to think by making, to manifest physical outcomes and to exercise the making practice. It has taken many years to split what was a conducive 3-way relationship of practitioner/researcher and educator to now separate educator from the maker's practice which needs to be active for its own sake and not solely to exist as a mere side activity to illustrate research.

There was a pervasive feeling for makers who believed that the made outcome was in itself justified and self explanatory because the made now existed. But Sullivan states *'it is no longer plausible ...to claim that the visual (object) is merely a way to saying what cannot effectively be said in words'* (2005). I understand as a result of engaging in a critical research process, that the making is a method that needs articulation for meaning to be understood. It was only through the rigour of the process that I could arrive at conclusions that were not prescribed but shifted from what I previously held as universal truths. Adamson says, *'innovation ...is often not a*

matter of creating a work, rather, it is a matter of inventing a whole way of working', which with personal critiquing can be identified in one's own practice (2013, p33).

What is emerging with significance is the connection between the making methodologies and that of research building. Schon says: *'The exploration of knowledge partly through making artefacts has brought a new dimension to ... research as the practitioner informs the nature of the researcher'.....* (2011, p1). This knowledge requires a distinction from that of the subjective private knowing to that of the objective externalised knowing for dissemination. The private knowing as Caudy points out *'is not relevant if it can not be shared'* (2006, p5).

It is in this role of being innovative, pushing the *'easy'* discipline that places the making methodology in the central role, a hub if you like, with other domains. Sullivan notes as *'emancipatory'...that can 'enact artistic, social, political, educational or cultural change'* (2005). Disciplines need to enact change. Often the perception is that craft disciplines do not reflect these changes, instead perceive craft as some kind of Noah's ark or zoo for the survival of skills. The role of the art/design institute is not only to be a place to uphold certain skills. Makers can fear loss of identity that may result in an introspective stagnation of their discipline. Practice based inquiries increasingly need *'the ability to communicate and get into dialogue with... other knowledge producers, in ones own, as*

“There is an intimacy that textiles harbour and hold emotions and memories that few other materials and objects can do”

well as other disciplines and fields' (Dunin-Woyseth / Nilsson, 2012 pg).

Continuing to reference my own work, my practice is rooted in the discipline of embroidery, using these skills in making shoe derived forms for installation and gallery context. The shoe motif becomes artefact, visual communicator, narrator and protagonist. The research necessitates crossing into Material Culture, Venetian Art History, Culture Studies of Venice and Gender Studies. There was a need to understand the notion of artefacts collected, hoarded, displayed, as social codifier, metaphor, fetish and gender signifier. The making of artefacts contextualised the research in the applied arts, design principles, craft debates and narrative for sculpture/ installation and audience engagement. As a result inter/ cross disciplinary knowledge of shoe making aligned with embroidery techniques creating a conducive partnership that shared similar sensory responses with the hand held scale and the intimacy of one's lap as a workstation.

It could be argued that the applied arts/ applied materials by definition are interdisciplinary. The 'inter' play can only happen when the discipline(s) are recognised in the first place. Nevertheless, interdisciplinary is non conformist; neither linear nor singular, variables are endless as boundaries are pushed, thus creating foci that reflect macro outward facing socialite location. The active engagement allows for the 'inter' discursive. This is evidential when textile processes are explored as the methods by which it is used to inform or in conjunction with collaborative dialogues. Textile processes have been the vanguard in public engagement and participation, a means for social commentary and political debate that by default still are seen to many as 'outside art'. The 55th Venice Biennale emphasised 'making', especially with the materiality of the made. Yet, Yentob's BBC4 programme (2013) viewed much of this making as 'outsider art', a term implying an 'out' and 'in', accepted/ rejected hierarchy. However, this biennale demonstrated the need to create, to making that transcended any set of hierarchal categorisation of whether this making was 'art', 'design' or 'craft'. It is exactly because of this that Alice Maher's speaks of, 'on the edge' as a deliberate positive to her practice. "I am scraping at the edges of fine art and craft and decoration as it were, and of course decoration

was always considered a 'bad' thing in art school. If it was very decorative it wasn't meaningful! But then it plays right into my interest in margins" (Nickell, p410).

Textiles engagement in communal contexts still perpetuates the view of 'outside' formal art/design. Historically predominant female participation, it is as popular as ever, (is this another condition of being 'outside art', if 'popular / populist' therefore, is it without 'value?'). These primarily female affiliated textile groups function by a seemingly democratic collective making, each enabled to contribute, essentially decision making aims to reflect a collective view and each is part of the overall whole. The attractiveness in such participation for some is in, as Dallinga notes 'to keep the sisterhood that is experienced' (2016). Interestingly, some textile practitioners talk of competition as something that is threatening and shun critical evaluation and selection. Yet, textile objects and processes are more successful when involved in the discursive and socially engaged. Not only does the discursive forge personal practices but also enables new sites and foci of critical research. Group making is particularly 'successful' in such artefacts as peace quilts, often community initiatives, such as the 'Day of the Dead – embroidery for peace' project, Mexico, and Lycia Trouton's 'Linen Memorial' 2005. While there are strong collective overtones, these engagements belie contrary frictions in terms of 'authorship' where the designer may not participate in the making, and where makers are not cited either by name, invested time or whether employed or not. For example, Joana Vasconelos employs highly skilled knitters (crochet) and expert glass makers for her installations and while employees are nameless, they are paid. The same also can be said of Ali WeiWei's very controversial ceramic sunflower seed production. It was controversial in that it employed so many anonymous workers making something for 'art'. Yet the largest Irish trade union SIPTU ironically did not pay the skilled embroideries for their time in making the '1913- Lock-out' panels, instead commissioning the much publicised Irish artist, Robert Ballagh, as the designer.

Not all textile disciplines are pigeon-holed in the same way. Knitting, no longer gender bias, has become a socially engaged medium for activism; popularised by groups such as 'Pussy Riot', 'Guerrilla Knitting', 'Yarn Bombing'

and *'Urban Knitting for the Street'*. The collective activity of making, the emphasis of the individual's contribution suggests the participatory nature is valued more than the artefact outcome, such as *'The Derry Quilt'* produced during Year of Culture, 2013.

Betsy Greer who first coined the term *'Craftivism'* in 2002, explains *'the creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy because it reminds us we have power'* (2014, p8). Kim Werker demystifies the need for good execution in what is made; subversion is understood by those who incorporate skills and knowledge from design disciplines that challenge the canons by locating such making in discursive debates. In contrast to other forms of activism, *'Craftivism'* speaks through the making and made objects in conversations by democratic dialogues that aim to change from within to that of making better our society.

There is an intimacy that textiles harbour and hold emotions and memories that few other materials and objects can do. Making by repeat process, like weave or stitch is often used as a metaphor to express notions of suppression and oppression, such as articulated with Bristow's work. Mary Kazoun talks of: *'My repetitive process is anxious, focused, tense, determined'*. She pushes the visceral aspects of making, speaking of the physical pain and body wrenched as she makes, or more acutely as she performs making. *'I am in physical pain because of the labour of (their) making and I embrace it'* (2005, p17).

McGuinness *'found the most effective work and... effective tools for communicating... to various audiences were still all rooted in cloth' because of 'how it can speak to people. cloth can operate in society, to navigate and open up different spaces' that engage with the community and involve people as 'collaborators' rather than 'participants', 'donors' rather than 'consumers'* (Nickell, p56). He used textiles to engage and communicate the difficult and sensitive theme of male suicide in Ireland. McGuinness applied his textile practice with clinical scientist Kevin Malone in their socially engaged visual arts PhD in a project called *'21 grams'* that references the weight of a ghost.

The Irish designer/artist/facilitator Dee Harte, has brought her making experiences

together within participatory practices to express and articulate through textiles, particularly knitting, emotions of repressed loss, bereavement, identity and self image. These contexts have allowed women ways to communicate where they could not find other means to do so, in such projects as *'Locked in / Locked out', 'Never Washed', 'The Mother / Daughter Dyed'* and the *'The Local Wisdom'* project (Harte, 2016).

Makers can often speak of the state of wellbeing through making, the therapeutic, the need to retreat, to recoup. There has been a resurgence of textiles activities in the relationship between the need to make being integral in recovery. This relationship has often been an unrecorded, unarticulated private experience and is actively finding a voice to define and understand it. . Rebecca Early talks of her making and the need to make as repair and mend that accompanied her recovery from illness (2015). There is profound *'value'* when engaging in making, to have an affinity with materials and or process for our wellbeing. Cheney noted of his recuperation and recovery *'I found my way back through sewing'*. With a profound realisation, *'It was a turning point in my practice, it grew entirely from a desire to make; of comfort of having a needle and thread in my hand; of reassurance of stitch. Making revived me'* (Cheney, 2016).

Jamie Chalmers's charity *'Fine Cell Work'* sees that the process of cross stitch can give structure, calmness, and purpose that *'provides an escape from the darkness'* (Greer, 2014, p37) to prisoners lives, but also sees this as a successful visual media for political and social commentary.

The mending and repairing, modification and adapting have in various guises always been part of the textile narrative. Scarcity and poverty has often been at the root of making in the home or in the community. Instead of wanting to forget these frugal times, we should actively embrace the vernacular and understand repair/ reconditioned, remade readapted making is an evolution of inner well-being.

Better well-being can have significance outside of the individual to outward social engagements with applied practices for education/health as well as interfacing with participatory practices that enrich the social economy. Sarah Corbett, another

cross stitch maker, founded the 'Craftivist Collective' noting the aim 'to expose the scandal of global poverty and human rights injustices through the power of craft and public art' (2013, p6). Social engagement with making communities can come about by other routes. For example, Seliena Coyle states the importance of a 'tangible legacy that will increase skill, (provide) sector awareness, collaboration and inclusion' (2013). By exploring diverse makers she stresses the importance of embedding craft and making activities into education, into community engagement and ownership over creating conditions whereby these practices are sustainable as micro professions and as macro cultural legacy. Otto Von Busch explores how design and craft can be 'reverse-engineered, hacked, and shared' as a form of 'civic engagement, building community capabilities through collaborative craft and social activism' (Greer, 2014, p81).

The disciplinary is not only about interplay of existing disciplines but to actively forge new notions of the crafted. The emergence of makers who are embracing new technologies and striving for new application with traditional disciplines is growing expedientially, significantly influencing and changing the expanded fields. One such example is Nigel Cheney's prodigious making practice where he applies digital processes of print and multi headed embroidery along with hand generated imagery and hand stitch surfaces. The fusing of new and old and hand and machine for many makers are 'dialects' within the one language. The outcomes are no less made, crafted and evidential of invested labour and time.

Making had been always central to the art/design pedagogy and methodological approaches. This author never considered that making would not be an imperative and a prerequisite in art and design pedagogy. At best, for some disciplines there is the feeling of merely existing on the edge, at its worst, other maker disciplines are barely surviving, while understandably (if a defensive view) that to stay 'pure' and singular will uphold the discipline. On the contrary, the sustainability of the practices can only be had by actively adapting knowledge and context is demonstrative of being creatively alive. The meshing of the inter play of practices of maker, researcher and educator continually sees change. Irwin talks of, 'living (our) artworks, representing

(our) understanding and performing (our) pedagogical positions as (we) integrate knowing, doing and making through aesthetic experiences' (Lim, 2006, p8).

Conclusion

2015 saw Ireland as 'ID2015 - A Year of Design', that gave a positive opportunity to reflect and acknowledge the vibrancy that design now has, not only nationally but more importantly in a European and world stage. Design in Ireland is relatively 'young', but rightfully recognises the hugely influential 'Design in Ireland; Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland'. Its findings encouraged and enabled the establishment of the state funded Kilkenny Design Workshops, the precursors of the Crafts Council. Yet it is by this aligning with the indigenous craft disciplines that we find a lasting legacy and relevance in shaping contemporary design and its expanded application.

What is clear at this junction is the need for adapting to all contexts of society and reflecting this in design education and the need to take stock and to reevaluate the 'function' of craft making disciplines in art and design institutes. Taking stock not only in terms of content and outcome, but also to critically value and evaluate how the making methodology should be fundamental to delivery and to the expanded field. 'Design' in the institute has morphed out of the making disciplines yet it no longer only resides in the art college as a defined field of art study, yet without grounded craft making principles and philosophy, design (with a small 'd') could quickly evaporate without substance, having no true location. The 'Makers Future Conference' (2015), reinforced and reiterated the direct relationship and need of the maker's knowledge to inform and influence design thinking that in turn shapes the wider discourses. Succinctly put, Edmund de Waal says 'it's about being embedded in material, embedded in encounters with people and about being embedded in time' (2014).