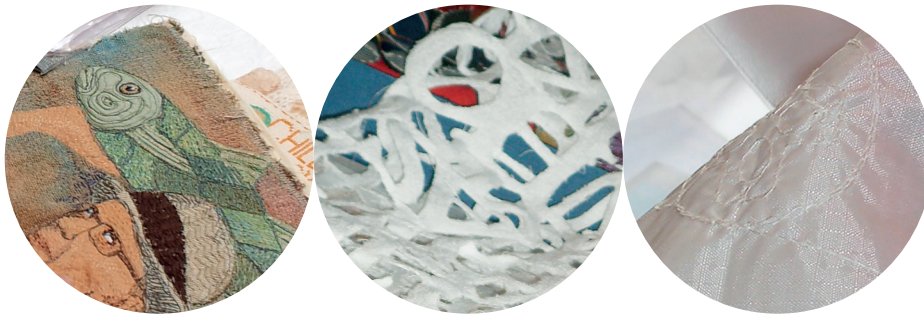


JILL RODGERS AND GRAINNE SWANN
NORWICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

TAKING TEXTILES OUT OF THE BOX: SHORT PAPER AND HANDLING WORKSHOP

TEXTILES | HANDLING | EDUCATIONAL | REFLECTIVE | EXPERIENTIAL



ABSTRACT

'WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE' WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE TEMPEST

BA (Hons) Textile Design staff from Norwich University of the Arts (NUA) have developed a handling collection of contemporary textile samples, which have been donated by national and international textile artists and designers, as examples of work in progress. These samples allow for the close examination of materials, technique and process as well as imagery and composition (figure 2).

One of the unique characteristics of the collection is that it is designed to be portable. Staff wanted the collection to be used at various locations and accessible to a range of audiences, not only students studying textiles within the University. As the collection is tactile, audiences can include the sight impaired and elderly, and other groups for whom gallery visits are rare, difficult, or may cause them to feel marginalised. Our aim is to stimulate dialogue with participants and new audiences, who have an interest in contemporary textile work.



1



2

We will discuss how, through taught sessions and carefully designed tasks, participants can be encouraged to handle and interact with the samples using them as potential starting points, that can open up a new understanding of contemporary textile practice. The paper and workshop, delivered to *Futurescan 3: Intersecting Identities* conference delegates, will describe how tutors at NUA are using the collection to stimulate debate with vastly different audiences with diverse expectations, and how perceptions of the collection can vary enormously. The conference workshop demonstrates the nature of the handling collection for discussion with delegates.

THE CONTEMPORARY TEXTILE RESOURCE AT NORWICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

This paper will discuss how we are developing an educational handling collection of contemporary textile samples and will describe how the collection is being used to enhance and enrich the learning of NUA students and audiences within the local community.

All those involved in the study and production of textiles recognise the tactile qualities of textiles. We instinctively reach out to feel cloth; it is the inherent seductive nature of the medium. Staff at NUA recognised the need for students to feel and

handle cloth to better develop their understanding of the materials, processes and techniques used to create textiles. This is where the idea to establish a resource of textiles samples that could be touched and handled originated.

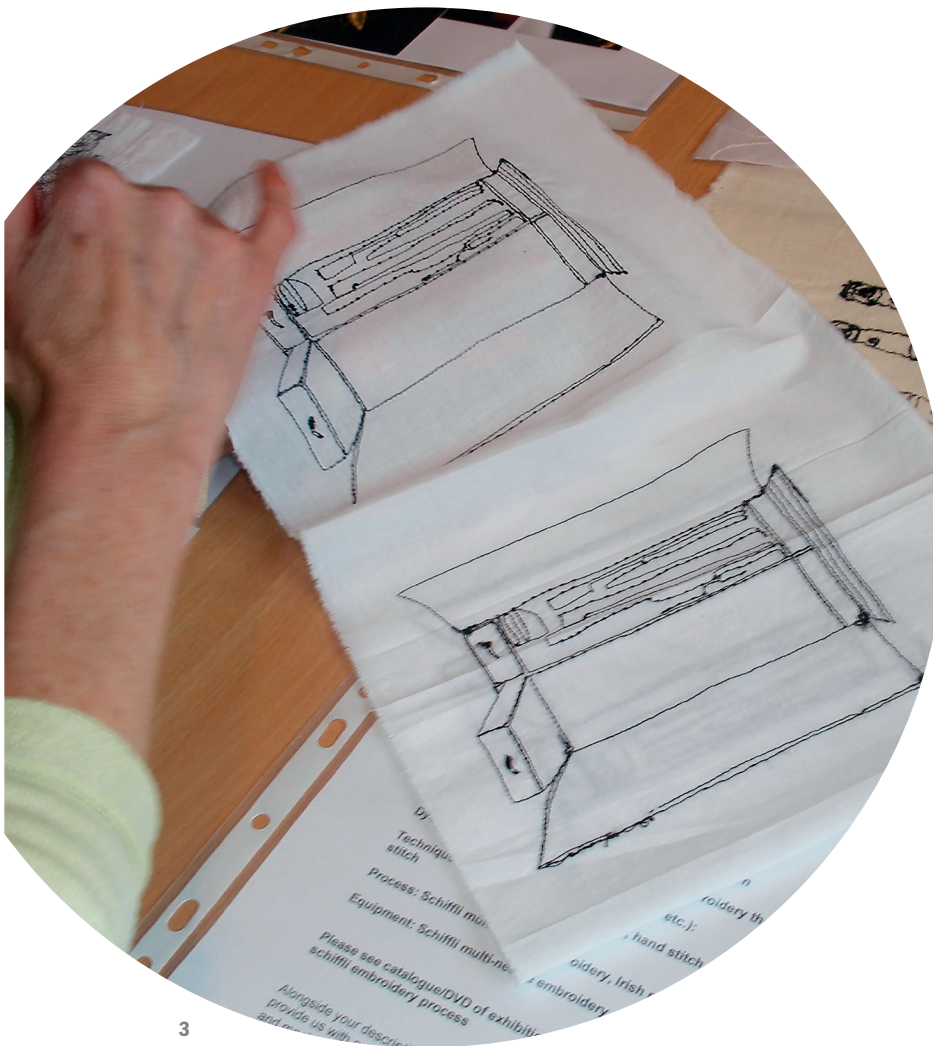
As committed educators in Textiles, with considerable experience of teaching in higher education, the team recognised the value of sensory contact with cloth and materials for students working in the discipline. The weight, drape, texture and construction of cloth are important qualities for students to experience through touch. This intimate involvement is not gained through digital representation. The

THE WEIGHT, DRAPE, TEXTURE AND CONSTRUCTION OF CLOTH ARE IMPORTANT QUALITIES FOR STUDENTS TO EXPERIENCE THROUGH TOUCH. THIS INTIMATE INVOLVEMENT IS NOT GAINED THROUGH DIGITAL REPRESENTATION.

importance of this experience has been recognised by curators who have on occasions included handling samples within their exhibitions for students and the public to feel, touch and handle. The opportunity to interact with the work helps to extend understanding and gain a better appreciation of the tangible quality of the cloth, and the quality of the sample. As Dinah Casson (2002: unknown) observes, 'My view is that most forms of interactivity can really help people to 'see'. Touching is a simple one, but maybe one of the stronger ones: we do not know how strong, and I would like to know'.

We have been working to create a record of contemporary textile practice in the form of volumes of textile samples. Each sample has an accompanying core record which describes in detail the materials, techniques and processes used to make the work. The samples reflect a breadth of textile practice including knit, weave and stitch, print and digital practices, and are not finished works but rather work in progress or developmental samples or experiments (figure 3).

One very important feature of the resource is that it is portable. Individuals and other institutions including schools and community groups can easily borrow volumes containing the work. *The Contemporary Textile Resource* is stored within a BA (Hons) Textile Design course space, offering immediate access for all students, within and beyond NUA, including graduates, research scholars, schools, community groups and the public. As the idea has become more established new





4



5

audiences, most notably the blind and partially sighted, are coming forward to experience the resource.

The resource offers the opportunity to examine, and respond through drawing and making, in direct response to actual examples of textiles. We believe this is of pivotal importance to the education of students.

The resource contains samples of work from alumni and visiting tutors, as well as contributions from organisations including the '62 Group' and practitioners such as Freddie Robbins, Lynn Settrington, Alison Willoughby and Kate Egan (figure 4). The resource also includes contributions from international artists from Estonia and Latvia. The opportunity to share the resource is a key factor and we are currently looking for partners with similar interests to support the development of the collection.

STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Workshops have involved students from across different disciplines within NUA, including fashion, fine art and illustration, as well as textiles. The samples in the resource can be curated differently according to the nature of the group involved in the workshop.

In addition, the project offers opportunities for collaboration with a range of organisations outside NUA. Workshops have been developed to address different audiences. One workshop was designed to instruct teachers about how to use the resource independently. This enabled them to borrow samples from the resource for use in their schools (figure 5) and encouraged them to bring groups of students into the University to use the resource. This was welcomed and supported a variety of programmes where the samples were used to

stimulate student's imagination for creative writing and poetry.

Workshops are tailored to enhance the learning experience; they encourage students to become aware of their learning, promote independent learning, facilitate engagement in reflective and critical thinking, address perceptions and expectations surrounding textile work. Written and visual critique of the work without the maker present, offers students a freedom to express their opinions without fear of offending the maker.

Handling the work can give a sense of being in touch with the maker and encourages students to consider the provenance of the work, the narrative behind the making, as well as the materials used. This can promote meaningful discussion and stimulate debate around the communication of ideas as well as the meaning and language of materials.



6

Here is another idea then: that what you touch is what HE has touched and that, by sharing this touch, something will move from HIM,/ HER through the object, to you.

(Casson 2002: unknown)

WORKSHOP EXAMPLE WITH NUA STUDENTS

Outlined below is an example of a workshop used with the resource for the BA (Hons) Textiles and Textile Design students at NUA. This activity has been devised by NUA staff referencing Pat Francis' (2009) book *Inspiring writing in art & design: Taking a line for a write*. Francis (2009) is interested in using visual prompts to stimulate students to write creatively.

Samples from the resource are laid out onto tables, with a label saying 'Do Not Touch'. The core record is included but hidden under each sample. Students are instructed to approach the samples in complete silence to ensure full concentration and a focused engagement with the workshop. They are invited to view the collection before selecting a sample they find most inspiring and interesting. They are not allowed to touch the sample. This engages the student in a focused visual investigation and interrogation of the sample and also challenges their preconceived ideas about the nature and properties of the work.

The students are asked to respond to a number of questions through writing and drawing.

Examples of the questions are:

- a. Why have you chosen this particular sample, and why do you think it is interesting?
Write and make a drawing.

- b. How do you think it feels to handle and what do you think the back of the work looks like?
Write and make a drawing.
- c. What sound might it make when it is handled?
Write and make a drawing.
- d. Does the work remind you of anything or anyone? Give the work a title.
Write and make a drawing.

Students are then invited to handle the work and reference the core record to give them further information about the sample. Reactions are always interesting with many surprises as they engage in discussion, dialogue and debate about their chosen sample. There is always an element of playfulness about the workshop and audiences have told us that the resource is alive, engaging and actively using it is fun.

ANALYSIS OF THE NUA WORKSHOP

The activity offers students the opportunity to:

- Take an active role in developing learning;
- Focus, look and see;
- Reflect on their expectations of the samples and reflect on their changing perceptions following the activity;
- Develop critical and evaluative skills;
- Consider concept;
- Consider context;
- Engage in critical evaluation using writing and visual skills;
- Handle work, which enables analysis and investigation of materials, processes and techniques, engaging them in unpicking/learning through handling touch and feel;

- Develop curiosity through questioning, observation and the use of imagination and enquiry;
- Reflect upon the implications of what they have learned for their own practice.

Student engagement with this activity gives them a strategy to help them understand the value of reflection and analysis for their own work.

WORKSHOP EXAMPLES WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

Workshops have also been undertaken with a group of blind students and their teaching assistants, where the tactile characteristics of the samples needed to be explored from the outset. Students were helped by the workshop facilitator to select a sample. They were then encouraged to thoroughly investigate the work through touch, feel and smell, and describe their observations (figure 6). Following this task, their teaching assistants took time to describe the visual qualities of the chosen sample. It was interesting to see participants place samples against a cheek or a nose as well as being touched, evidencing the sensory qualities of the resource.

A further workshop was carried out with a 'Knit and Natter' women's group in Norwich (figure 7). This group of women had highly developed textile skills. At this event there was the opportunity to examine samples very closely and it was process, materiality and technique, which was mostly discussed, compared to the more conceptual concerns of the NUA students.

HANDLING THE WORK CAN GIVE A SENSE OF BEING IN TOUCH WITH THE MAKER AND ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO CONSIDER THE PROVENANCE OF THE WORK, THE NARRATIVE BEHIND THE MAKING, AS WELL AS THE MATERIALS USED.



PARTICIPANTS CAN BE ENCOURAGED TO HANDLE AND INTERACT WITH THE SAMPLES USING THEM AS POTENTIAL STARTING POINTS, THAT CAN OPEN UP A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEMPORARY TEXTILE PRACTICE.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

As we continue to work with the wider community we increasingly realise the importance and potential of the resource as a teaching and learning tool to stimulate debate, exchange knowledge, and share and increase understanding across a range of different disciplines and communities.

The material content of the resource continues to be developed with contributions from textile artists, designers, NUA graduates, visiting tutors, placement providers and alumni. We are keen to find new ways to continue to extend the content and use of the resource, and find collaborators who could introduce new influences and ideas to the collection.

Within each University, textile courses have different influences and traditions. We are interested in setting up a system that would enable us to

exchange samples of student work that could bring a greater range of influences together in interesting ways. This would help us move towards initiating new collections and extending existing collections, to increase diversity of approaches to materials, textile technology and processes.

Imagine a place... where people discuss the objects on display with friends and strangers, sharing diverse stories and interpretations. A place where people are invited on an ongoing basis to contribute, to collaborate, to co-create, and to co-opt the experiences... A place where communities and staff members measure impact together. A place that gets better the more people use it.

(Simon 2010: unknown)

REFERENCES

- Casson, D. (2002) *The Need to Touch*. [Internet] <http://www.cassonmann.co.uk/publications/the-need-to-touch-2> [Accessed 01/07/15].
- Francis, P. (2009) *Inspiring writing in art & design: Taking a line for a write* Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Simon, N. (2010) *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0. [Internet] [Internet] <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/> [Accessed 01/07/15].

FIGURE CAPTIONS

- Figure 1: Photograph of NUA students in a handling workshop.
- Figure 2: Photograph of handling workshop.
- Figure 3: Photograph of a textile sample, Jane McKeeting.
- Figure 4: Photograph of a textile sample, Kate Egan.
- Figure 5: Photograph of handling workshop.
- Figure 6: Photograph showing The Norfolk and Norwich Association for The Blind (NNAB) using the handling collection.
- Figure 7: Photograph showing Knit and Natter woman's group using the handling collection.