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APPROPRIATION, EPHEMERA AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF WASTE

APPROPRIATION | MATERIALS | WASTE | UPCYCLING | DESIGN



ABSTRACT

THE BASIS OF THIS PAPER IS TO EXAMINE THE OUTCOMES OF A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD AND OXFAM.

Students worked with Oxfam, Huddersfield in developing new works created using the items that Oxfam were unable to sell. Initially this was observed pedagogically as second year students on the Textiles with Surface Design course engaged with these materials. The 8-week project was the first assessment to examine what designers in the early stages of their career can produce utilising damaged donations, often destined for landfill, and in this case manipulating the materials using the facilities at the University.

Although Oxfam already has frameworks in place for the upcycling of its unsalable donations, these creations are often reconstructed products such as altered garments or interior furnishings. This research hoped to observe the development of samples, new materials, concepts, ideas and artworks that could be used to generate discussion on the appropriation of images and objects for transformative purposes. The artefacts created may not have intrinsic value as saleable shop items but they could initiate dialogue between the makers and the wider community about the value of the unwanted object and the perception of charity shops on high streets.

WITHIN AN UPCYCLING PROJECT STUDENTS HAVE TO CHANGE THE DESIGN PROCESS THEY HAVE BEEN TAUGHT TO USE, STARTING WITH THE WASTE MATERIALS RATHER THAN A DESIGN CONCEPT. THIS ENCOURAGES QUESTIONING OF EXISTING METHODS AND PRACTICES.

The experience of the students, and the retail management staff at Oxfam Huddersfield, were observed to determine the perceived value of the project. Potential for future research into appropriation, ephemera and the transformation of waste is discussed and concluded, weighed against our initial expectations of the project.

INTRODUCTION

Students at the University of Huddersfield studying Textiles with Surface Design are well tutored in developing contemporary textiles from raw materials. During their first year on the course, students learn a broad range of skills; through workshop rotations they are introduced to knitting, weaving, printing and embroidery, which they study alongside a module that introduces them to various types of professional practice. These types are categorised as commercial designer, designer maker and contemporary practitioner. Concurrently, theory classes help to contextualise the skills and concepts students are learning through the workshops and professional practice module.

The benefit of this broad foundation in Textile Practice is that upon entering the second year of their study students have a better idea of the type of practitioner they expect to become. They understand that as a commercial designer they will most likely be responding to trends, working to tight deadlines and need to be able to make informed choices regarding

the most cost effective production methods. Designer makers are seen as being more independent and free thinking, setting trends rather than simply responding to them, and they may become independent producers, freelance designers or bespoke makers. Contemporary practitioners often have more esoteric concerns, work may be suitable for galleries, be concept driven or be guided by practice-based research methods.

During the second year, all students are given the opportunity to work on live briefs or sponsored projects. Previous projects have included briefs for companies such as *Standfast & Barracks*, *Ege Carpets*, *Tektura*, *Interpane Glass*, *Abraham Moon* and *Rowan Yarn*. The common thread that links these briefs is that students create new materials, whether this be through construction or by adding to a surface. We want to see original ideas, designs, materials and products, and although design inspiration is necessary, we are hoping to see something new. The project with *Oxfam* was different; now the onus was on the student to create work from existing objects, items at the end of their useful life, objects with their own design history, and as staff we had little control over the material choices that the students would make.

SUSTAINABILITY IN EDUCATION

It is important that issues of sustainability are integrated into Higher Education (HE) as there is an

increasing expectation that students will graduate with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to respond to sustainability challenges (Cotton et al. 2015). Educators working within HE institutions have both an opportunity and a responsibility to design a curriculum that nurtures a knowledge of, and interest in, environmental sustainability. This opportunity is particularly pertinent within design education as designers are in a position to promote social change (Fletcher 2008) through their practice.

Problem-based learning, such as live projects with external companies, allow students to apply their knowledge to real world situations (Gordon & Brayshaw 2008). This approach to learning can further the students understanding of how issues of environmental sustainability apply to their practice. For example, within an upcycling project students have to change the design process they have been taught to use, starting with the waste materials rather than a design concept. This encourages questioning of existing methods and practices.

DESIGN AND APPROPRIATION

Amongst the many challenges that face those who teach creative disciplines, the appropriation of ideas and imagery is increasingly difficult to manage. Simultaneously, the promotion of sustainable practices may direct design practice towards the re-use and upcycling of materials, presenting a fine balance between the original and the new crafted creation.

The transformation of waste materials has a long history in Art and Design but fears around plagiarism and fair use can hamper attempts to remodel a found object.

The Textiles course at Huddersfield has run small projects focused on upcycling in the past but it was noted that students had difficulty finding waste materials worthy of transformation that were ethically sourced and cost neutral. For a project like this to work well, an abundance of material is required, ideally free to the maker, from which to build anew. So when a retail manager from *Oxfam* Huddersfield agreed to provide unsellable goods for this theoretical and non-profit driven project a number of sticking points seemed to have been resolved. Related to the issue of appropriation, the use of secondary sources in the creation of artwork has previously proved contentious and litigious for a number of well-known artists. Through the opportunity to work with *Oxfam* donations we were interested to see if such concerns would prove problematic in a design project.

UPCYCLING

The definition of upcycling is to re-use materials in a way that adds value (Oxford University Press 2015). The concept of valuing waste materials is not new, but was brought into the contemporary debate on sustainable materials use in the book *Cradle to Cradle*, which promoted the circular economy in which waste becomes

‘food’ (McDonough & Braungart 2002). Upcycling can prevent materials from being wasted in landfill, which has a positive impact on the environment, providing that the impacts of the processes used to upcycle are low.

Upcycling has been adopted by many industries including electronics, nanotechnology, transport, textiles, art, etc., but has been particularly embraced by the amateur hobby craft maker. This has been detrimental to the aesthetic associated with upcycling, which has been represented as patch-worked and unrefined. Upcycling is an approach to design and therefore should not be associated with one particular aesthetic. Many contemporary artists, designers and companies such as *Fracli Craftwear*, *B.Earley* by Professor Rebecca Earley, *Demano*, *U-Clife* and *Elina Priha* are working to challenge this aesthetic.

OXFAM

Oxfam represents ‘...a global movement of people who share the belief that, in a world rich in resources, poverty isn’t inevitable. It’s an injustice, which can, and must, be overcome.’ (Oxfam 2014: unknown). Having launched the first shop in Oxford in 1943, *Oxfam* is now a global presence with a global income of £389.1 million (Oxfam 2013/14). Donated goods account for 21% of this annual income (Oxfam 2013/14) but as unsalable items vastly outnumber sellable donations an alternative solution is required to generate income from the surplus. *Oxfam* has a historic

association with the arts; live music, comedy and visual art have been used to promote the charity. In 2008, *Salisbury Oxfam Art Gallery* was set up to showcase the work of local artists and to sell work on commission, suggesting that *Oxfam* understands the value in working with emerging artists as a means to promote their activities. We were intrigued, could we expand upon this tradition whilst reflecting on teaching and learning?

It is estimated that around 600 million tonnes of products and materials enter the UK economy each year, of which, only around 115 million tonnes gets recycled (WRAP 2015). One route for recycling is resale through charity stores such as *Oxfam*. As many as 90% of the items donated to *Oxfam* Huddersfield are unsellable; unsold textiles items may be exported to be sold overseas, and low grade or damaged items may be sold to recycling merchants for downgrading into shoddy: poor quality yarn or fabric made from waste cloth or clippings (N Caygill, personal communication January 21, 2015). The realisation that such a high percentage of donated goods are deemed unsellable provided students at the University of Huddersfield with the incentive to take up the challenge of transforming *Oxfam*’s unsold items and gave us an opportunity to see if the appropriation of images and objects for transformative purposes would provide discursive possibilities within the context of a design project.



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THE PROJECT BRIEF

Second year BA (Hons) Textiles with Surface Design students were set an 8-week project, which challenged them to use *Oxfam* Huddersfield's un-sellable stock as their materials. This cohort of students had previously examined sustainability in textiles through a theoretical module, and this was their first opportunity to work with sustainability in practice. The brief was very open, and did not specify what the outcome of the project should be in terms of sampling; this subscribes with the ethos of the course generally, which encourages creative divergence within the cohort. The

brief was written in collaboration with *Oxfam* Huddersfield who were happy to keep the brief open, and see where the student's creativity could take the project, the intention being to help the students avoid creating prescriptive upcycled outcomes. The project was introduced by an *Oxfam* retail manager, who explained the challenges of stock management in this sector, followed by a visit to an *Oxfam* stock warehouse (figure 1). Students also independently arranged visits to sort and collect materials from the warehouse. It was agreed with *Oxfam* that students would be able to take any unsalable items to use in the project free of charge.

ANALYSING OUTCOMES

The project was assessed within the module 'Advanced Professional Practice'. Briefs under this particular module require students to submit a research journal (figure 2). These journals have been useful in analysing the results of the project as thoughts and opinions of the students can be gleaned without direct questioning. Qualitative analysis was used to uncover themes, which are discussed in the results section. Throughout the project the teaching staff at the university kept close contact with the *Oxfam* team through email exchange, meetings and phone calls. This

correspondence has been analysed to draw out the voice of *Oxfam* within the results. Feedback was also obtained from visitors to an external exhibition of the student work.

RESULTS MATERIALS

A wide range of materials were reused within the student projects including textiles, leathers, plastics, papers, metals, wood, etc. (figure 3). *Oxfam* had assumed that because the students studied textiles they would just be interested in using garments, but they discovered during the warehouse visit that they were interested in utilising many different objects. The students are used to having access to materials such as fabrics and yarn within their practical workshop areas, and in many cases strive to bring something new or unusual to their work through material use. The materials available from *Oxfam* were used and unsalable, but in most cases not physically worn out. This project offered the students access to materials that in many cases would not be accessible or affordable to them; understandably they embraced this opportunity.

Post-consumer waste materials from *Oxfam* were incorporated with new materials from the studio. The students did not feel it was important to only use waste materials, and therefore mixed them freely, providing an opportunity for creative innovation for the students and a challenge to the workshop pedagogy (figure 4). No materials were out of bounds and no ideas too outlandish.

RESEARCH AND DESIGN PROCESS

The research journals indicated which practitioners the students examined whilst developing their ideas. Many researched contemporary trends and designers or makers within their practice (i.e. knit, weave, print,

embroidery) rather than looking at practitioners who reuse materials. This provided both positive and negative results; students were not led by pre-conceptions of the aesthetics and methods of previous material reuse projects leading to more original creativity, but conversely, they were not particularly critical of the sustainability context within their work. For example, the use of trend research in an upcycling project could be seen as contradictory as upcycling is intended to extend the life of waste materials, and a change in trend often results in the end of a products life. Students used their journals to reflect on how their design processes changed during this project; one student adopted a slow philosophy influenced by traditional Japanese Boro embroidery to carefully consider her design and making process.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

There was great diversity in the project outcomes which included textile samples for fashion, surface samples for interiors, an advertising campaign, fashion products, installations, workshops and art pieces (figures 5-7).

Despite *Oxfam*'s willingness to proceed with an open brief they were surprised by the diversity of the results. The upcycled items that *Oxfam* have retained in the past are product-orientated items such as garments or furniture that have been updated, but have largely remained within the same product category. Their main concern about the outcomes was that they were unsure how they would price items such as textiles samples or installation pieces. Their lack of knowledge of the textile art sector limited their understanding of the work,



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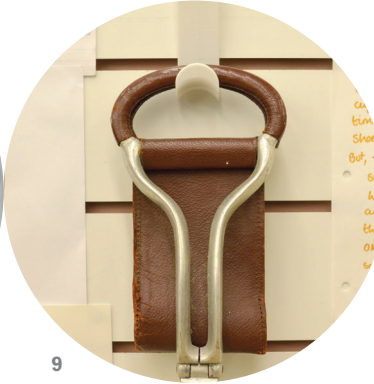
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and furthermore how they thought their customers would interpret the work.

The student work was not commercially ready, but with development could generate larger profits than existing upcycled products. Upcycling, as opposed to recycling, is focused on adding value; in this respect the outcomes of the project show great potential. Currently, *Oxfam* retail in high-street stores, and though their website. The price bracket is low and the market level is high street. In order to profit from the student projects new markets and customers may have to be sought. For example, textile samples could be taken to industry trade fairs such as *Première Vision* or *The Surface Design Show*. Artworks could be sold through galleries, and garments could be sold through high-end boutiques, news stories could be generated. This is not about upscaling the production, rather finding the right markets for niche outcomes.

WIDER IMPACT

Many of the students noticeably gained confidence during this project, and enjoyed working with an external charity. The project has led to other outcomes including an external exhibition and successful Enterprise Placement Year applications. Visitors to the pop-up exhibition (figure 8) observed the diversity of approaches: 'My overall impression was that the exhibition presented a diverse body of work around the theme of re-using materials ranging from pieces with a conceptual emphasis to more decorative and commercial pieces.' (Exhibition Visitor 2015) Visitor feedback also substantiated the feelings of the teaching team; the students had managed to push the boundaries of what materials reuse could mean creatively: 'With the exhibition being linked with *Oxfam*, it was natural to make connections in my mind with the re-made garments available in larger *Oxfam* stores. However, the work that

the students produced pushed the idea of recycling much further, which was exciting to see.' (Exhibition Visitor 2015) Student work from this project has been recognised as outstanding; one student had work selected as a finalist for the prestigious *Hand & Lock Prize* based on the embroidery she undertook during this project, which incorporated broken jewellery with gold work.

IMPORTANCE OF FINDINGS

As an upcycling design brief the project focused on transformation, many students appeared concerned with the surface created or the narrative invoked, but the potential was also there to consider notions of authenticity and ownership. Students were encouraged to use any object they deemed suitable which, dependent on the objects selected, and the success of the engagement, could have the potential to infringe on copyright, although through transformation its meaning may lie not in its origin, but in its destination (Levine 1982).

To enable a feeling of freedom in the selection process the term 'appropriation' was discussed to propose an artistic precedent for the working methods suggested. Appropriation is a process by which an artist incorporates a pre-existing work, in part or whole, into a new work of expression (Carlin 1988). Since Duchamp asserted his sterilizing influence (Evans 2009) inter-textualised practices have legitimized the sublimation of both the fragmentary and wholesale use of secondary source material for use in the creation of new works. Appropriation in Art often seeks

to critique notions of authenticity, creativity, originality, (McClean et al. 2002) power, gender, ownership, materialism and value, whereas in design it assumes the function of a non-critical commodity that drives commercial innovation. Design students are aware of the practices often employed by the fashion industry where recycling the designs of others through careful alterations, changes and reinterpretation is commonplace, but for them, the reuse of secondary source materials is taboo due to the stringent denouncements awarded to plagiarists. This project offered the opportunity to create a body of work that freed them from concerns that the work may not have entirely been made by them.

When the work was finally submitted for assessment these concerns were in truth not entirely apparent although one student kept original labels on her waistband hinting at former use, not trying to look 'new' or claiming them to be her own handiwork. Another student kept much of the original branding visible while highlighting the process through the addition of her own original branded embellishments, and a further student did not change her objects at all, but changed the context in which they were viewed through participatory writing workshops to develop personal narratives (figure 9). In truth our assumption that dialogues around appropriation in design never materialised and therefore one interesting outcome from this project was to realise that student projects would not necessarily follow a predicted path especially if you do not provide a map.

FUTURE POTENTIAL AND CONCLUSIONS

The final outcomes produced by the students for the project may not have been seen as saleable for *Oxfam*, but could ultimately progress the sector creatively and economically if viewed in a different context. If the project increased its ambitions and ensured news worthy outcomes the collaboration could be mutually beneficial, generating press for *Oxfam* and the students, while helping student expenses through access to unsellable materials.

As an upcycling design brief the project focused on transformation, but the potential was also there to consider notions of authenticity and ownership. Students were encouraged to work with and manipulate any object they deemed suitable which, dependent on the selection, and the success of the engagement, could have the potential to infringe on copyright, although on this occasion this did not happen.

Perhaps one notable outcome from the project has been to recognise that when observing student projects through the prism of your own research, the results witnessed may not be those you expected and if you are open to the promotion of individual design identities, will be largely beyond your control. One final outcome (figure 10) bore the motto 'Are we there yet?' and the answer is no, as in concluding this first assessment we realized that we had only seen the potential rather than seized it.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Oxfam warehouse where the students sourced their materials.

Figure 2: An example of a student research journal (Hampton-Bowes 2015).

Figure 3: An example of some of the materials used (Hampton-Bowes 2015).

Figure 4: The Textiles with Surface Design workshops, University of Huddersfield (Taylor 2014).

Figure 5: A range of outcomes: textiles samples for fashion knitwear (Anderson 2015).

Figure 6: An advertising campaign (Green 2015).

Figure 7: A range of outcomes: samples for upcycled fashion embellishment (Yasin 2015).

Figure 8: Detail from exhibition *Modern Upcycling*, Packhorse Centre, Huddersfield (Taylor & Whitson-Smith 2015) showing student work and feedback note (Longstaff 2015).

Figure 9: Detail from exhibition *Modern Upcycling*, Packhorse Centre, Huddersfield (Taylor & Whitson-Smith 2015) showing 'The objects remained un-changed' (Smith 2015).

Figure 10: Detail from exhibition *Modern Upcycling*, Packhorse Centre, Huddersfield (Taylor & Whitson-Smith 2015) showing 'Are we there yet?' (Rowe 2015).