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'SMOCKING IS EVIL?' UNPICKING AND REBINDING

SMOCKING | FOLDING | CLASSIFICATION | ARCHIVES | PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

SMOCKING IS EVIL? WAS CREATED AND EMPLOYED AS A FRAMEWORK AND CREATIVE THINKING SPACE TO ENABLE REFLECTION ON THE CONCEPT OF FOLDED SPACE WITHIN OBJECTS HELD IN THREE ARCHIVES.

The project's focus was to explore practically and theoretically how the physical engagement with objects can both inform and reinforce a relationship to the territory of bookmaking, whilst enlightening and extending an art practice to include a range of traditional textile skills. Working in partnership with The Museum of East Anglian Life, Suffolk; Costume and Textile Study Centre, Norwich; Suffolk County Council Archives with support from Arts Council England and Norwich University of the Arts (NUA).

The project was initiated from observing a painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Vittore Carpaccio and culminated with a body of work exhibited in three archives alongside objects from the collections that had informed the making of new pieces. Topics covered in this paper document the journey of the project including:

- Entry points for researching archives,
- Identifying a research path to follow,
- The idea of taxonomy as a tool for understanding,
- How the physical properties of material can be theorised to support the creation of meaningful work.

Conclusions acknowledge moments of revelation on my own practice revealing how textual theory, physical handling and practical making can inform each other and the implications of the lessons learnt for a teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

The act of archiving introduces meaning, order, boundaries, coherence and reason into what is disparate and confused, contingent and without contours (van Alphen 2008: 102).

This paper will examine the creative process behind an arts research project from the initial idea developed from observing a painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Vittore Carpaccio to new work exhibited in three archives alongside objects from the collections.

The project's title 'smocking is evil?' was used as a tool to develop a body of work. It became a framework that supported the development of a paradigm, a world within which a maker can inhabit; to think and make. This space becomes a place of sanctuary, a refuge where ideas are projected and envisaged. But its liminal walls offer a permeable playground for the imagination where ideas can be developed and tested within their own parameters but informed by the research undertaken in the field; a place where tentative thoughts are translated into questions. The idea of creating a virtual space to inhabit has its parallels in the use of a mnemonic device, a learning technique that aids information retention as outlined in 'The Art of Memory':

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The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type. The clearest description of the process is that given by Quintilian. In order to form a series of places in memory, he says, a building is to be remembered, as spacious and varied a one as possible, the forecourt, the living room, bedrooms, and parlours, not omitting statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated. Quintilian says one may consider the ideas within the speech to be remembered anchored in imagination on the places which have been memorised in the building. This done, as soon as the memory of the facts requires to be revived, these places are visited in turn and the various deposits demanded of their custodians revealed. We have to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building whilst he is making his speech, drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them.

(Yates 1966: 3)

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IDENTIFYING A RESEARCH PATH

The question is smocking evil? was developed from an encounter in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice with the painting 'The Ambassadors Return to the English Court', depicted in figure 1. This 'history painting' by the Italian Renaissance artist Vittore Carpaccio, portrays the ambassadors of Brittany being received in an open pavilion. The initial point of research came from studying a figure in the foreground of the painting that was facing the Ambassador thus displaying his back to the viewer. He wears a garment heavily folded and is holding a note behind his back, hidden from the Ambassadors from Brittany.

A connection was surmised between the possible character trait of the individual and the wearing of a cloth that is structured. This initial idea of associating garment and cloth construction with character traits was supported by a rush of known connections. Deleuzeian thought on the idea of 'the hidden' and of revelation through the process of creating folds informs us that to pleat is to reduce, to diminish, and to withdraw. Unfolding is to increase, to grow, to gain volume. A dialogue is set up between the inside and outside, dark and light, the negative and the positive but nothing is fixed. The work appears to be in a constant flow from the outside to the inside and back again (Deleuze 1993).

Textiles have functioned within the Venn diagram of artistic, economic and political activity. The idea of researching the busy hands that created the smocking on the smock resonated, was this subjugation through craft?

Fry (1946) defines the traditional textile technique of smocking as an embroidery technique undertaken by gathering and fixing cloth in regularly spaced tucks which provides flexibility and form within a garment. The word smock, derived from a farmer's work shirt is a modern spelling of an Old English verb 'smocc' meaning to gather fabric into un-pressed pleats by sewing in a honeycomb pattern (Fry 1946). Eventually the word was used to refer to the sewing technique and the garments it produced.

The conflation of these thoughts presented possible developments and new perspectives on what appeared to be well rehearsed topics.

When attempting to establish our understanding of the smock and its narrative, it became important to understand the potential of the smock as a symbol. A Smock from The Museum of East Anglian Life shown in figure 2, was donated to the museum by a local amateur dramatics society after use as a costume prop within their productions. Smocks were used as a visual shortcut or cipher to signal and label an individual who was deemed to be rural; therefore foolish. This was supported by the textual narrative that came with the object and the physical evidence of theatrical 'make up' around the collar.

On the 13th June 1851 the London Times reported on the visit to the Great Exhibition by over 800 agricultural labourers and country folk wearing their smartest smock-frocks as shown in figure 3.

The tone of the commentary implied that country folk were seen as 'other' and unlike anything that could have been produced from any part of England, although they behaved themselves to the satisfaction of the organisers who had expected vandalism from these strangers. This report demonstrates the separation of town and country with the wearing of smocks, a marker of that difference (Marshall 1980).

The demise of the smock as a marker corresponds with and is an indicator of the Industrial Revolution. The loose garment became impractical and dangerous to wear in the newly mechanised fields, cluttered with machinery and their moving parts. The wearing of the smock was abandoned as it brought with it a fear of ridicule for the wearers as individuals moved from rural to urban locations.

This practical garment for agricultural labourers later became a symbol of earthiness worn by bohemian crafts people of the Aesthetic movement. Adopted by the friends of Oscar Wilde and William Morris who promoted the smock as a protest against the man-made of the machine age (figure 4). Morris was taken to the Great Exhibition by his mother but refused to enter on the grounds that he would find nothing but 'meretricious rubbish' (Marshall 1980).

ENTRY POINTS FOR RESEARCHING ARCHIVES

The intention of the research project was to explore the fold within objects in three collections and this would inform the making of a body of new work. This work was in turn to be exhibited and the practical aspects, the making, the development of skills were to be disseminated through a number of workshops and illustrated


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talks. But an entry point was needed to begin to access the collections.

head gear – hats and scarves¬ – overalls – lots of pockets – trousers – construction of clothes – over clothes – garments that protect the clothes – boots – with connecting/ joining elements – packets – paper/ plastic – folded or constructed that contained things (seeds) (food), images (photographs) of farmers – rural workers /amateur dramatics – bellows – accordions – leather work – saddles – objects that fold out (get larger) (telescopic) – objects that are fixed in an obvious way (patched and folded)¬ – printed matter – books – manuals – catalogues – swatches – display packs (with folded structures) (fold outs – additions – binding) (use of unusual materials).

This chaotic initial list of initial interests sent to The Museum of East Anglian Life is reminiscent of the taxonomical list used by The Argentinean author Jose Luis Borges when illustrating the problematic nature of scientific classification when he described
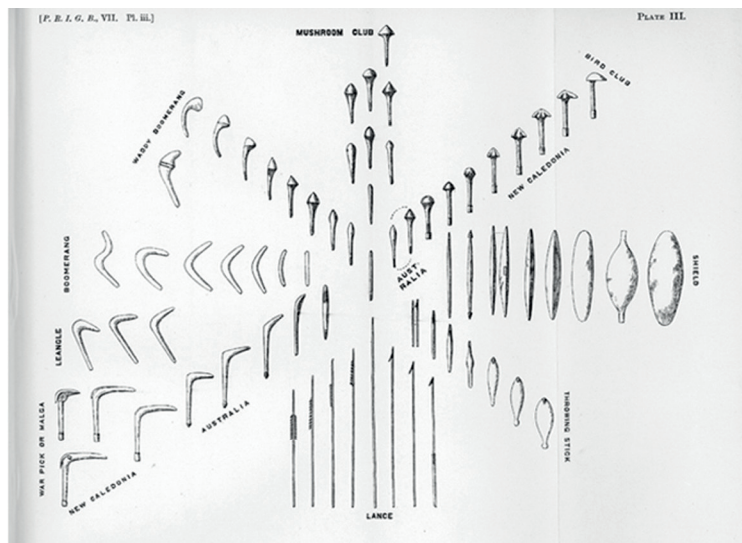
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a classification system in a 1942 essay The Analytical Language of John Wilkins from an ancient Chinese Encyclopaedia, the 'Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge'.

Animals are divided into: those that belong to the Emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, suckling pigs, stray dogs, those that tremble as if they were mad, those that are included in this classification, Mermaids, those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, innumerable ones, fabulous ones, others, those that have just broken the flower vase and those that at a distance resemble flies.

(Borges 1942: 231)

In the early stages of a project every thought has the potential to be a starting point for a thread of research. To retain an open dialogue the thread would not be Ariadne's (Hernu 2013) due to its all-encompassing deductive methodology. Ariadne's thread directed Theseus unequivocally, my journey would be more one of chance and indiscriminate in its nature. The

timescale of the project alongside the sheer scope and numbers of objects held within the collections and archives meant that trial-and-error would provide a more efficient strategy to determine the choices needed when deciding what to view. A heuristic process was adopted. It was this intuitive process which led the focus of the project from smocking to encompass layering and pleating

TAXONOMY AS A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING

The project included a search for appropriate taxonomy to classify the work. The taxonomy, created through 'reflection in' and 'reflection on action' (Schon 1983) enabled understanding and development of the work. The numerous strands of research developed connections that led through the collections and created a range of categories including smocking, folding, joining, fixing and fixings. An idea subconsciously informed by considering Serra's verb list of 1967 (Friedman 2013). Eventually I recognised that the objects I was drawn to inhabited

a similar set of factors. They each contained an element of layering that meant part of the object was hidden, thus they required manipulation to reveal the whole.

The process of categorization in which ideas and objects are recognised, differentiated, and understood, is a tool to lead and direct research activity, enabling connections to be uncovered that are not initially obvious to either the seasoned archive user or the novice. Categorization implies that objects are grouped into categories with a collective purpose. This perceived purpose is not always shared by the searcher of the collection and the developer of the criteria who formed the categories. Ideally, a category illuminates a particular relationship between subjects or objects of knowledge. Artists often follow a course of lateral thinking, connecting seemingly unconnected aspects of objects or subjects to create artworks, the viewing and theorising of which presents new perspectives or in some instances a paradigm shift (Duchamp et al 1989).

There are many categorization theories and techniques that can be used to support investigation. The potential rules of engagement can provide pathways or boundaries for developing decisions about choice and provide direction around investigative structures.

When does a bend become a fold? The practical aspects of categorisation have their own inherent flaws when considering the individual narratives of each object. How can the description on the label attached to the object encompass the context of each viewing? To be able to truly distinguish one object from another and acknowledge their inherent differences, each object would require a unique set of labels or tags to be

able to distinguish it from any other object. Eventually there would be so many categories and sub-divisions of categories that there would be in effect, an extensive textural copy of the object, creating an immense pre-Linnaean world of polynomial phrases. The acknowledgment that objects are accessed through textual descriptions sometimes delivers a lack of trust in the objects themselves. This is reminiscent of the short story 'On Exactitude in Science' by Borges.

In that empire, the craft of cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single province covered the space of an entire city and the map of the empire itself an entire province. In the course of time, these extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a map of the empire that was of the same scale as the empire and that coincided with it point for point. The following generations, less attentive to the study of cartography, came to judge a map of such magnitude cumbersome and quite useless and it was abandoned to the rigours of sun and rain. In the western deserts, tattered fragments of the map are still to be found sheltering an occasional beast or beggar; in all the land, no other relic is left of the discipline of geography.

(Borges 1975: 131)

Typology in its oldest set of meanings derives from a critical explanation or interpretation of the Biblical, where a person, event, or thing in the Old Testament is seen to prefigure a type of person, event, or thing in the New Testament. This sense of the old providing a clue to the forms of new things is a way to consider Pitt-Rivers thoughts on typology. Pitt-Rivers popularized a concept that

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had become central to the work of natural sciences (Pitt-Rivers 1875). His interest in Evolution and connection to Darwin is evident. The idea of the evolution of objects as portrayed in figure 5 illustrates a process of visual connectedness that identifies potential next steps. The process of deduction is primarily visual and therefore provides a readymade and familiar way of proceeding for the visual artist.

METHODS USED FOR RESEARCHING ARCHIVES

Rethinking categorisation can be used as an alternative way of accessing collections and archives, making one's own links between objects as a methodology to redirect or relocate a projects research reference points into unfamiliar territory. Instead of considering items thematically, we might perhaps catalogue them according to the frequency with which they were used. For example, McNally suggests the appointment diary an artist kept in a jacket pocket would belong to one series, while the official award certificate at which they barely looked, would belong to another (McNally in Vaknin 2013). In a conventional archive catalogue, both these items would be categorised under the heading 'personal items'.

Every object has an infinite number of stories attached to it and each personal truth illustrates multiple connections. The accumulation of knowledge maps our relationship to what and how we value the objects around us. How we catalogue the items within collections has its own history. The move from science based hierarchical thinking around the construction and reading of collections towards a more individual contextual understanding appears to have coincided with the breaking down of social barriers and the rise of valuing the individual in society (Heavenly Blues, The Wild Angels 1966).

The reference point for engaging with an object has the potential to change with the intention behind each individual viewing. Every object in each collection has many narratives; each one delivers the viewer new contexts and presents new possible functions. It could be argued that an object's functionality is something that is constructed in the mind through collective use and understanding. If the functionality of an object can change in the mind each action or activity, changes our perception of and relationship to the object, as shown in figure 6. Does this in some way physically change the object? Is it possible to actually alter an object

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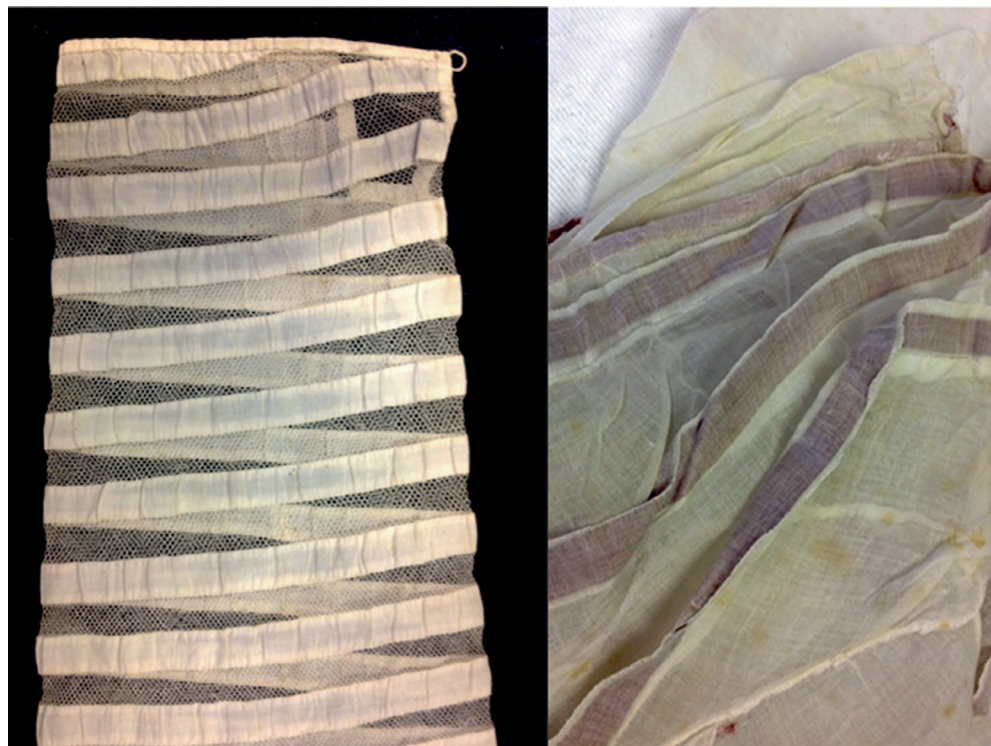
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by rethinking it? This connects to ideas around transubstantiation; the perceived transformation that takes place during the sacrament of Holy Communion that involves the act of partaking in consuming the body and blood of Christ through eating a wafer and drinking wine. The idea of belief as a transformative process has its parallels in the art world, specifically An Oak Tree, a work by Michael Craig-Martin.

I considered that in An Oak Tree I had deconstructed the work of art in such a way as to reveal its single basic and essential element, belief that is the confident faith of the artist in his capacity to speak and the willing faith of the viewer in accepting what he has to say. In other words belief underlies our whole experience of art: it accounts for why some people are

artists and others are not, why some people dismiss works of art others highly praise, and why something we know to be great does not always move us.

(Craig-Martin, 2001: 19)

THEORISING PHYSICAL PROPERTIES OF MATERIAL TO SUPPORT MEANINGFUL WORK

When physically spending time in the presence of objects in the collections, meaningful links flow and reflection through interaction becomes a form of meditated conversation. I am in sympathy with the statement 'I love things, I love stuff, I love the stories that we tell through material culture' (Dion 2011: unknown). But the seemingly never ending testimony of names, places, and dates detailing a

tranche of human activity challenges this position. Sitting in Suffolk Record Office, subsumed within the legal world of deeds and the documentation of exchanges between people of property and finance, one becomes overwhelmed by the weight of responsibility to the material. The evidence of human mortality envelopes you.

Through the editing processes of sieving and focusing, locating the narrative of the project is challenging as there is so much individual activity in the form of long forgotten names that there is little space to find one's own story. So much 'stuff'; an almost endless tide of human presence that the previous owners of the belongings I hold are ever-present. The objects' surfaces are embellished and burnished by repeated handling. Their

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making touch imposes itself on my soul, their presence embedded within the objects.

The objects I have handled have a palimpsest quality.; The record of their history reappears on the surface like the traces of old texts to be read. Like cumulative palimpsests, they retain a memory of use. I am reminded of 'Alpi Marittime – Continuerà a Crescere Tranne Che in Quel Punto (Maritime Alps – It will continue to grow except at this point)' by Giuseppe Penone (1968). In his work, depicted in figure 7, Penone created a steel cast of a hand gripping the stem of a sapling so that the sculpture slowly became absorbed as the tree grew (Whitechapel, 2012). Sensory perception is the driving force that informs his practice, evidence, memory and history revealed by traces are central to his process, making invisible forces and energies visible. The objects I have handled leave their own mark on me much like the impressions left by the memories located within the imagined houses of Roman orators.

MATERIAL CONNECTIONS

The seemingly unlimited decision making process that is making art can be supported by rules. These enable one to focus present options and support creative decision making. Within this project, links to the idea of 'the hidden' within the fold supported decisions about material choice. Political and aesthetic factors are embedded within this selection. There are also issues of quality and value around working materials that in turn connect to the perceived position of the smock in society. Working with materials is a hands-on dialogue.

In turn the thinking behind my making has been informed by the use of utility papers and materials that are usually found within garments providing a functional, hidden use. Examples exist within the lining of clothes, as backing within bookbinding or used within the conservation or storage of objects. Had I fallen into the 'trap' of becoming 'fascinated with what might seem to the outsider to be the esoteric props of the archivist's trade: the white cotton gloves, the cushion…?' (Vaknin et al 2013: 89).

The tracing, glassine and baking papers have a physical quality that hides or knocks back anything that is behind it, creating a sense of the hidden but when unfolded reveals and celebrates the function of the fold by showing the layers of the material used. In a revelatory moment, the

decision to work with these materials came from handling an example of shadow ribbon at the Costume and Textile collection in Norwich within a fabric manipulation handling box, as shown in figure 8.

I worked with lining fabric using a combination of traditional book binding techniques and gathering stitches taken from smocking. Next, I used a heat press to transfer sublimation dye onto the fabric whilst it was still bound. The piece was unpicked to reveal the folds and the trace of what once was. When looking at the final piece the process is revealed and rebuilt in the mind, it is unpicked, its history unfolds. The pieces are a hybrid of sculpture and process, neither one nor the other but a middle point alluding to both (figure 9).

CONCLUSIONS

I recognise that my work and practice has concepts of order and control at its core. Extensive use of the book as a vehicle of expression is an indicator of this. The inherent qualities of materials one works with are apparent, understood and embedded within every decision. Within this project the use of fabric has forced me to release a degree of control in the working process.

Paper and card 'move' less than fabric. At times the fabric felt alien under the hand and too open to possibilities.

Is there a connection between the lines in the ploughed field and the detail in the smocking on the smocks worn by the people ploughing the field (figure 10). Many questions were raised as a result of this line of enquiry. What is the effect of the environment on creativity? Did they consciously recreate the world they inhabited within the clothes they wore? Is it inevitable that humans create patterns or seek to find pattern and so order? Which was arrived at first? I am reminded of a moment of realisation, after relocating from an urban to a rural area. Within the sculptural books I was creating I was constructing visual references, macro and micro to the landscape around me; ploughed fields, horizon lines and the gills of mushrooms. Was this subconscious or did I as a maker become aware of the motif and it's meaning because I was searching for it? Inevitably the exploration of a research path presents numerous strands and the constraints of time leave many questions awaiting examination.

To collect a sequence of objects is, for a moment at least, to have imposed some sense of order on a universe that doesn't have any... an attempt to defy the threat of mortality... Objects are the way in which we measure out the passing of our lives. They are what we use to define ourselves, to signal who we are, and who we are not.

(Sudjic, 2008: 21)

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Vittore Carpaccio, The Ambassadors Return to the English Court.

Figure 2: Smock from The Museum of East Anglian Life (STMEA: 20137).

Figure 3: The London Times, 13th June 1851.

Figure 4: William Morris (Marshall 1980).

Figure 5: Plate III, Drawings of clubs, boomerangs, shields and spears moving from simple forms to complex in a radiating pattern (Pitt Rivers 1875).

Figure 6: Filing at the Museum of East Anglian Life.

Figure 7: Blacksmith's workbook at Suffolk Archives and Alpi Marittime – Continuerà a Crescere Tranne Che in Quel Punto, Giuseppe Penone, 1968.

Figure 8: Shadow ribbon at The Costume and Textile collection, Norwich, 2014.

Figure 9: Image of my work; a hybrid of sculpture and process, 2014.

Figure 10: Smock from The Costume and Textile collection, Norwich and Ploughing The Field, Museum of East Anglian Life, 2014.