

# Articulating Stitch:

skilful hand-stitching as personal, social  
and cultural experience

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Volume One

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Royal College of Art for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2014

The Royal College of Art

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# Abstract

This practice-led PhD research explores the nature of embodied knowledge acquired and practised through the rhythms and patterns of hand-stitching processes, such as embroidery, plain sewing and patchwork quilting, undertaken by individuals alone and in dedicated groups as recreational craft, artistic expression and social life. The scale and pace of hand-stitching match those of the body, grounding cognitive and emotional experience in a tangible process. The hand-eye-mind coordination required cultivates a distinctive form of attention to the self, which has renewed importance in the context of the anti-haptic experiences of screen technologies that infiltrate our daily routines in the home and the workplace. Working with the premise that skilled hand-stitching concerns more than technical ability, I examine how these activities articulate dimensions of subjective experience. In turn, I explore ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group is constructed through their crafting skills.

My previous experiences of textile crafting as a social activity drew me to this question, and my interest as a practitioner and teacher in the contemporary and future relevance of skilful work motivates me to better understand what it is that I, and many other stitch practitioners, do. With the tacit knowledge of a practitioner I **know how** to stitch, and from my investigations into the history and theory of textile art, craft and material culture I **know about** stitch. However, my view is that when absorbed in the process of making other more immediate and personal sensations take over. An exploration of haptic sensations relative to these processes underpins the investigation, and I focus instead on the dynamic relationship between practical skill, the body and its proximity to tools, materials and other people during actual experiences of making – the repeated gestures, coordinated hand movements and the skilled precision of tool use and fingertip manipulation – to provide a new context for the study of embodied knowledge known in and through hand-stitching.

In order to explore this I have used a combination of ethnographic, auto-ethnographic and creative research methods including interviews, observation, video recording of a patchwork quilting group, participation in practical stitching sessions with a village embroidery group, undertaking workshops with students, and my own reflective stitching practice.

It has emerged from the research that patterns of hand-stitching processes share characteristics with certain modes of social interaction sought by participants in order to experience sensations of participation, belonging or interdependence. Similarly to other oral traditions, an embodied knowledge of the practice includes patterns of interaction and particular attitudes and behaviours that are inseparable from the practical skills.

However, people also stitch on their own; as a private, contemplative activity, hand-stitching allows a person to carve out time and space for introspective reflection. Whilst this could be thought of as a different kind of experience altogether, I suggest that mastery of these skills enables control over when and how to use them, which, I have found, allows a practitioner to adjust the type of experience sought: participation in a shared conversation or activity can be exchanged for isolated contemplation and a sense of self-reliance.

I conclude that hand-stitching surpasses its technical or artistic attributes when considered as a material practice that offers particular metaphors for other processes of joining, collaboration, integrity – or even separation and isolation. Practising these skills is possibly the only way to acquire this embodied knowledge, which needs to be understood as a mode of interaction if it is not merely trivialised as quaint, as domestic labour or archived as ethnographic curiosity or as art object.

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*Feeling A Way 1*: video, running time 4 minutes 17 seconds, (no soundtrack). Anna folding and pinning quilt edging; extract from video documentation of quilters shot by author on location in south London, October 2007. Reference made in Chapter One, p. 56.

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*Part of a Piece*: video, running time 8 minutes 51 seconds, (no soundtrack). Extract from video documentation of the author hand-stitching patchwork hexagons. Directed by the author, shot by Robin Shercliff on location in Wiltshire, October 2007.

Reference made in Chapter Two, p. 102.

*Monologue*: sound recording, running time 47 minutes 53 seconds, (no image). Edited recording of the author voicing aloud her reflections on hand-stitching whilst making the *Monologue* embroidery; a process documented by the author April – May 2008. See also the edited text version in Appendix V. Reference made in Chapter Two, p. 100, and Chapter Three, pp. 122, 125 & 126.

## Reading and viewing instructions

The thesis is intended to be read as a double page spread so that images can be read in direct relation to the text.

Quotes taken from transcripts of interviews and journal writings used in the thesis text remain verbatim. In instances where English is not the participant's first language, but the meaning of their words is clear, the quotes have not been corrected.

References to the video and sound documentation are made in the thesis indicated by \* followed by the title of the video or sound piece. View named video or sound piece on DVD at these points.

# Acknowledgements

My special thanks to:

My supervisors Freddie Robins, Dr Prue Bramwell-Davis and Dr Claire Pajaczkowska for their expert guidance and advice, generosity and consistent support throughout this project.

All the participants with whom I have worked; the group members who generously accepted me amongst them, especially Robina Orchard, and the volunteers whose comments and openness of mind made for thoughtful sessions of making and talking. In respect of research ethics, and to ensure anonymity, all participants' names have been changed, but this in no way diminishes my gratitude to you all. Without you and your valuable experiences I could not have done this research.

Clare Johnston and Hilary Laurence for departmental support and encouragement throughout my time at the Royal College of Art.

Cathy Johns for proof reading, and for her enthusiasm for textiles research.

All who have helped me with their technical expertise: Debbie Stack for embroidery, Gill Dibben for video editing, Richard Power for computing, Simon Taylor for audiovisual equipment and installations, Hayley Bailey for typing up transcripts of my interviews, and Neil Leonard for the design and layout of the thesis.

Marcia Bennett-Male for her patience in teaching me to carve stone.

My colleagues at the Arts University Bournemouth, firstly for so generously funding part of this project, and especially for their confidence in my abilities.

My friends and peers for insight, intellectual curiosity, shared experiences of euphoria and desperation in equal measures, and most of all for a supportive community without which embarking on research would be unthinkable.

My family: Robin and Judy, Mark, Simon and Emma, Alex and Freya Shercliff, for their consistent support and timely distractions, keeping me healthy and reminding me of what really matters.

Val Wells-King, who taught me to sew.



## Author's declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Emma Shercliff

21 November 2014

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introducing the research

To stitch means to work with needle and thread; to fasten together or join pieces of fabric with stitches, and to decorate with stitches, to embroider (OED). For functional plain sewing, like seams, stitching joins separate components together, binding them with a common thread. In these instances, the stitching performs an essential task but usually remains invisible. Hand embroidery, on the other hand, is used to decorate surfaces, visibly marking out patterns or motifs. This research concerns hand-stitching as plain sewing and embroidery: it addresses both its functional and symbolic dimensions.

As a creative activity hand-stitching falls somewhere between a design practice, a leisure activity and an artistic medium. The stitching practices investigated here are variously defined as unpaid labour, duty of care, creative outlet, and recreational craft undertaken by individuals alone or in dedicated groups, as social life and as art practice. Although I recognize that the contexts within which these stitching activities take place are distinctly different, as a practitioner of stitch I overlap and move between them. My own experiences of using my stitching skills include bespoke tailoring, embroidered textile design, the making of contemporary art installations, community artworks and personal gifts. Throughout this practice-led research I have drawn on my varied experiences of stitching; it has shaped my inquiry, focused my attention on details that matter to practitioners and has been used to interrogate itself as part of a process of knowledge creation.

### Background to the project

It is important I outline here the development of my stitching practice. Through my accumulated experiences of hand-stitching I believe I have gained more than technical accomplishment in the craft. I know how to sew, but I also know how to organize sequences of tasks, arrange and prepare tools and materials, and how to perform in the different contexts mentioned above.

I have stitched since I was a girl. I find handling fabrics and thread intriguing in the way it absorbs my attention. I instinctively privilege encounters with fabric, thread and yarn; I enjoy the multi-sensory experience of manipulating materials, listening to

the way they move, coercing them into shape with touch and pressure using my fingertips and palms. I am stimulated by the anticipation of work: preparing materials, selecting colours and textures, clearing space and cutting out fabrics. I enjoy the visual arrangements of pattern and colour, trying initial combinations then deciding to alter the pattern in favour of a new combination. I find the exacting precision of hand-stitching and the sense of order it evokes satisfying; the slow rhythm allows me time to think. These are sensations I feel, intuitions I react to spontaneously and recognize in other people I work with. Through this research I have sought to articulate what it is that I know.

My knowledge of the craft grew from an intuitive experimentation encouraged by friends and family, to technical rigour, when on leaving school I began an apprenticeship with a bespoke tailor, perfecting the precision of my stitching and professionalizing my skills. However, I missed the tactile variety and the spectacle of colour, pattern and personal style I had previously enjoyed but had sacrificed for a particular kind of high-performing functionality. Through a series of adult education courses I found a way to study textiles and fashion benefiting from the creative development and experimentation offered by a formal art school education. From there, I went to work in Paris, designing textiles and making prototype fabric sculptures. I have relied on my sewing skills to stretch across cultural or disciplinary boundaries, from contemporary fine art practice to professionalized functional sewing, from textile design sampling, to personal development workshops, social activism and domestic leisure crafts. In this I identify in a quite literal way with Martina Margetts's notion of the role of making as "a sequence of actions that sets in motion a curiosity to go beyond what is already known, in a non-verbal language that extends our abilities to communicate with each other across cultures, time and space" (Margetts, 2011: 43). My stitching practice has enabled, and continues to enable me, to meet and create works with people from a wide variety of social and cultural contexts. The works may have varying intentions; they might be intended for exhibition, to commemorate an event or celebrate a particular community, but each time they also simultaneously materialize the social, cultural and intellectual connections made.

I became involved in state-funded community arts initiatives initiating and facilitating creative textile craft projects. I worked mainly with groups of women on large-scale hand-made collective artworks that used textile techniques like embroidery, rug-hooking and patchwork to give voice to and explore – through material processes – aspects of participants' shared experiences: for example, of the changing status of a particular neighbourhood, of unemployment, of motherhood, of immigration and re-shaped identities. The shared making processes built a stronger sense of belonging within these particular

communities and localized, informal support networks that grew to be symbolized by the artefact but that were in fact valued more. The draw of social encounter and exchange is as satisfying as the making of the work; it nurtures friendship and conversation, a chance to exchange tips and learn new skills, and emotional support in times of loss, sickness, unemployment or estrangement from family. My aim each time was to produce an artwork particular to the place and people involved. Alongside my role as facilitator and coordinator of projects, I also made the work with the participants (figs 1 – 6). The finished artworks were usually displayed and viewed in exhibitions, but the contents of the lengthy process of making the works, and the shared experiences embodied by it, grew to hold greater importance both for myself and the participants involved.



Figs 1 – 6. *Roll Out The Red Carpet* (2005-06): community arts project in Paris XI involving a core group of local women participants and additional participants from the various external events and venues where workshops were held.

Thus defined – as artwork, domestic craft, community initiative, leisure activity, social support system – the stitching of this study has permeable and shifting borders; in the way that Sarat Maharaj describes textile, it is “something that seems to belong to one genre, but overshoots its borders and seems no less at home in another” (Maharaj, 2001: 7). Design history, crafts history, art history, anthropology, and sociology of housework, have thoroughly analysed the different contextual parameters of stitching. Reviewing the literature published in these fields provided one of the starting points for this research, from which I have continued my enquiry into the meaning of an activity that is never entirely reducible to these contexts. I have found there is a tension between theorizing the context of stitching and experiencing the practice. Articulating between these two forms of knowledge – one explicit in language and text, and the other implicit in actions and sensations felt – has been one of the challenges of this research. My view is that when absorbed in the process of making, its specific social or cultural context slips out of focus and other more immediate and personal priorities and sensations take over, which are felt more keenly by those making as enjoyable, satisfying, urgent or frustrating emotions. I therefore focus instead on examining the subjectivity of the characteristics of hand-stitching skills experienced in the repeated hand gestures, coordinated hand movements and the skilled precision of tool use and fingertip manipulation as they are felt and valued by practitioners.

In so doing, I find a new context for exploring the nature of the tacit and embodied knowledge acquired and practised through the rhythms and patterns of hand-stitching processes. This primarily concerns the dynamic relationship between practical skill, the body and its proximity to tools, materials and other people during actual experiences of making. This research explores the nature of embodied knowledge known in and through skilful hand-stitching. This knowledge is demonstrated in practice as a process and is manifested through certain characteristics of hand-stitching processes.

In exploring his concept of ‘material thinking’ Paul Carter seeks “to demonstrate the great role works of art can play in the ethical project of becoming (collectively and individually) oneself in a particular place” (Carter, 2004: XII). He goes on to say this is “essential knowledge if societies are to sustain themselves” (ibid: XII). It has emerged from my research that patterns of hand-stitching processes share characteristics with certain modes of social interaction (or separation, even isolation) between people that create conditions for a way of ‘becoming oneself in a particular place’. These are sought by participants in order to experience sensations of participation, belonging or interdependence suggesting that possessing a practical skill is itself a mode of interaction.

However, people also stitch alone. Whilst this could be thought of as a different kind of experience altogether, I argue that these experiences are related. For instance, acquiring and practising the skill leads the body to tacitly recognise stitching patterns and gestures by their rhythms and by the physical pressures and tensions felt in working with the materials. Mastery of these skills enables manipulation and control over when and how to use them, which, I have found, allows a practitioner to adjust the type of experience sought: participation in a shared conversation or activity can be exchanged for isolated contemplation and a sense of self-reliance.

The research takes direction from the principle that knowledge of the material world and the relationships we make in it and with it is understood foremost through manipulation and active engagement; that this kind of knowledge is not handed down through texts but emerges from experience, and that theoretical understanding follows (Gray & Burnett, 2007). In line with this approach I worked directly on a series of hand-stitching projects and activities both on my own and with others in groups, notably as a participant observer with an embroidery group. I also set up and took part in stitch workshops, as well as interviewing and observing others stitchers at work.

## Aims of the research

The aims of this research are to:

- explore ways in which these activities articulate dimensions of subjective, personal experience.
- reveal ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group is constructed through their crafting skills.
- propose an additional perspective from which to appreciate hand-stitching processes, and extend existing approaches to the study of textile craft practices.

The thesis, structured in five chapters, articulates the research findings through words, images, video and artefacts. To begin with I introduce the context, questions and methodology (Chapter One). Next I define skilful hand-stitching and the knowledge systems concerned (Chapter Two). I then elaborate on subjective experiences of the sensations and characteristics of hand-stitching (Chapter Three) before going on to explore the characteristics of stitching as a mode of interaction (Chapter Four), and finally concluding the research (Chapter Five).

## 1.2 Introducing the context

The proliferation of interest in textile crafts in contemporary Western post-industrial and post-digital cultures is indisputable. The time-consuming commitment to learning and practising hand skills may at first glance seem at odds with a world already too full of redundant objects (Harrod, 2001; Veiteberg, 2005). The phenomenon itself invites research as with the growth of screen-mediated virtual cultures the particular qualities of hand-making take on new meanings.

Since craft in the UK was conceived as distinct from both fine art and artisanal labour in the mid-nineteenth century (Harrod, 1999; Cardoso, 2010; Frayling, 2011), there have been a number of craft revivals. Each resurgence of a cultural or popular recognition of craft seems to coincide with periods when craft skills are perceived to be almost in danger of being lost, or in transition to become something else through the introduction of new technologies, economics or politics (Frayling & Snowdon, 1982a; Harrod, 1999; Adamson, 2007). Craft is retrieved and reclaimed enthusiastically but each time has different historical contexts and altered values and meanings. It is possible to speculate on the influences of this most recent revival, and in this section I outline salient examples pertinent to this research project. I suggest that there are some traces of a neo-Romantic ideology inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement within certain aspects of this new craft revival, but agree that this has different emphases in postmodern, post-industrial and post-digital cultures (Johnson, 1997b; Harrod, 2004; Sennett, 2008; Crawford, 2009; Clayton, 2010; Frayling, 2011).

It is common, according to Raymond Williams (1985), for waning traditions to become idealized as especially meaningful or valuable. Reflecting this, hand-stitching tends to have an ambiguous status; it is both revered by some and ridiculed by others. Stitching has presence across a range of practices from contemporary art, political activism, remedial therapy and domestic leisure craft which influence, critique and inspire each other. I examine the visibility of hand-stitching in some of these diverse contexts and highlight popular and avant-garde examples from across a spectrum of activities that indicate qualities of experience particular to this new craft revival and suggest new uses, interpretations and appreciations for the craft. I note the divergence of stitching from a reflective art practice to a social practice, referring to June Freeman's (1997) positioning of work that cherishes people not objects, and consider the significance of re-directing attention to the making processes within these



practices. This I believe is one of the legacies of the 1970s and '80s second-wave feminist retrieval of the craft which raises questions again today relating to the social and cultural significance of being engaged in a making process that foregrounds subjective, embodied experience. This in turn draws upon traditions of female domestic endeavour, such as a fragmented use of time, cooperative making and the pooling of resources in the form of materials, skills, knowledge and experience. I argue that this approach to crafting cultivates a distinctive form of attention to the individual within a wider social network that has roots in the sense of care and touch that was associated with home-making (Lippard, 1995), but that has renewed significance for women and men in the context of the anti-haptic experiences of keyboard and screen interactions that now infiltrate daily routines in the home and the workplace. The illusion of social and cultural experience is mediated so frequently via screen technologies that it causes the materiality, temporality and spatiality of real experiences – like hand-making – to stand out as novel or precious. The current new craft revival encouragingly supports the timeliness of research that investigates innate qualities of hand-making experiences that could contribute to social, political, and educational contexts as well as studio and gallery contexts. I end with discussion of research in progress that signals a growth of critical dialogue in this field.

## The visibility of hand-stitching

The labour intensive and precise craft of hand-stitching currently attracts both popular and avant-garde interest as part of this wider craft revival evident in a recent growth in clubs, activities, television shows, exhibitions and publications.<sup>1</sup> Hand-

<sup>1</sup> These exhibitions include: 'Quilts 1700-2010', Victoria & Albert museum, London, 2010; 'Beware of Embroidery', Pitzhanger Manor House Gallery, Ealing, 2010; 'Power of Making', Victoria & Albert museum, London, 2011. In the same year the BBC launched *Handmade in Britain*, a season of programmes broadcast on BBC Four exploring histories of British decorative arts such as ceramics, metalwork and textiles. This followed the huge success of *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, jointly conceived by the British Museum and the BBC in 2010 and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. The format of reality TV programmes has been applied to the crafts: most recently the *Great British Sewing Bee*, broadcast on BBC Two in 2013, challenges candidates to a series of dressmaking projects, and in 2012 *Paul Martin's Handmade Revolution*, also broadcast on BBC Two, toured the UK in a contest to seek a champion 'amateur maker'. An earlier BBC Two series, *Mastercrafts*, in 2010, followed volunteer candidates as they learnt the traditional hand-crafts of weaving, thatching, blacksmithing, stone masonry, stained glass and green woodworking. These types of traditional hand-crafts are also attracting attention through the support of the Heritage Crafts Association ([www.heritagecrafts.org.uk](http://www.heritagecrafts.org.uk)), active since 2009. Lucrative business ventures capitalizing on cleverly marketed trends for nostalgic 'home-made' ideals include Kirstie Allsopp's 2011 TV series for Channel 4 *Kirstie's Handmade Britain* and its accompanying books and DVDs, and Jane Brocket's series of books *The Gentle Art of Stitching* (2012), *The Gentle Art of Quilt-Making* (2010) and *The Gentle Art of Knitting* (2011). Others have combined conventional retail shops selling haberdashery and tools with studio facilities and craft classes. Examples include Ray-Stitch ([www.raystitch.co.uk](http://www.raystitch.co.uk)) and Fabrications ([www.fabrications1.co.uk](http://www.fabrications1.co.uk)) in London, with similar enterprises across the UK. Weekend newspapers have regularly included supplements with specialist craft project instructions (e.g. Cath Kidston 'Make and Sew' pamphlets for the *Daily Telegraph* (2012), and the *Guardian* 'Guides to Craft' (2007)). Pubs and cafes throughout the UK have taken to hosting regular local craft club meetings (e.g. Notting Hill Arts Club Craft Night (Ahluwalia, 2007), Drink Shop Do ([www.drinkshopdo.com](http://www.drinkshopdo.com)), East London Guerrilla Craft Nights).

stitching is visible in contemporary art and craft practices,<sup>2</sup> and overlaps into spheres where stitch-crafts are also enjoyed as a leisure pursuit. Market hall events such as the Festival of Quilts and the Knitting and Stitching Show,<sup>3</sup> are increasingly popular amongst stitching enthusiasts and professionals from various backgrounds. Internet websites, blogs and forums dedicated to the exchange of news, suppliers, techniques and tips allow like-minded individuals to connect and share their craft passions across geographical, cultural and social distances inspiring their enthusiasm to produce and consume hand-made artefacts.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the Internet offers free access to high quality instruction in specific craft techniques through YouTube tutorials for example, which significantly increases the scope, range and speed of learning the basic principles of a craft. Fields not usually associated with hand-crafts, such as public health and citizenship, are also turning their attention to the potential added value crafting and craftsmanship bring to society.<sup>5</sup>

Despite sharing the techniques of stitch, these different types of creative activity are sometimes viewed as distinct cultural categories: for example, the professional artist or craftsperson (Monem, 2008; Johnson, 2000; Millar, 2004, 2007), the technically proficient hobbyist (Turney, 2004), the politically motivated craftivist (Robertson, 2011a) or the DIY enthusiast

2 For example: the Stroud International Textile Festival ([www.sitselect.org](http://www.sitselect.org)) has expanded from a series of local textile craft exhibitions and demonstrations by craft professionals to a full programme of multi-site exhibitions, seminars and workshops over the nine years since its first event in 2004. Contemporary art examples include 'The Fabric of Myth', Compton Verney Art Gallery, Warwickshire, 2008; 'Contemporary Eye: Crossovers', Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2010; 'Pricked: Extreme Embroidery', Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2007-08, which provided a platform for an international selection of artists currently working with needle and thread. The publication of *Contemporary Textiles: The Fabric of Fine Art* (Monem, 2008) surveys the work of leading artists in the field from the whole spectrum of textile practices, many of whom use stitch, and *Extra/Ordinary Craft: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Buszek, 2011) offers accounts of the contemporary influences of crafting, which includes textiles in large proportion, on the visual and performing arts. Louise Bourgeois' 2010 exhibition 'The Fabric Works' opened the new Hauser and Wirth contemporary art gallery in London and was accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue of her textile artworks (Celant, 2010). The following year Tracey Emin's pieced and embroidered art works were shown in London at her Hayward Gallery retrospective 'Love Is What You Want'.

3 Twisted Thread ([www.twistedthread.com](http://www.twistedthread.com)), now owned by Upper Street Events Ltd, organizes five of these textile events across the UK every year, which in total attract over 168,000 visitors per year from over 50 countries. According to their website "The shows are all open to the public and they each provide a unique visitor experience with great shopping, special features, galleries from professional artists, competitions, workshops, lectures and much more! It's a great day out so join us at Stitch & Craft (London), the Festival of Quilts (NEC Birmingham) and the Knitting and Stitching Shows (London, Dublin and Harrogate)" (Twisted Thread, 2012).

4 There are hundreds of crafter websites, too many to list here. Some popular examples in the UK include: Mr X Stitch ([www.mrxstitch.com](http://www.mrxstitch.com)), Hand Embroidery Network ([www.handembroidery.ning.com](http://www.handembroidery.ning.com)), Etsy ([www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com)) and Not On The High Street ([www.notonthestreet.com](http://www.notonthestreet.com)).

5 For example: the AHRC cross-Council nationwide research project 'Connected Communities' had an offshoot, 'Connecting Craft & Communities', which set out "to examine the changing cultures, politics, practices and skills of craft in the 21st century" (Connecting Craft & Communities, 2012). 'Use Your Hands For Happiness', a research project jointly conducted by arts and health practitioners, examines how craft practice can enhance health and wellbeing (Arts For Health Cornwall, 2012). Richard Sennett's planned trilogy of books explores the centrality of craftsmanship to citizenship as "an enduring, basic impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake" (Sennett, 2008: 9). He draws on examples from a wide variety of activities to explore the processes and applications of acquiring, maintaining and using a skill: computer software engineers, construction workers, chefs, musicians, nursing and parenting.

(Carpenter, 2010). It is not my intention for all types and variants of stitch-crafts to be included within a wider definition of contemporary art practice. Not all who stitch are making works of art, but all who stitch are practising a craft. For this reason I refer to hand-stitching as a craft.

## A new craft revival: ideologies and economies

The meaning of hand-making has been transformed by successive waves of economic and political changes in the UK. The industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw large-scale mechanization of factory production lines reduce skilled workers to performing machine-like tasks in miserable conditions. Social reformer William Morris's idealization of the crafts emerged in the 1880s as a movement which captured the imagination, not only of the English bourgeoisie at the time, but generations of mass audience consumers since (Frayling & Snowdon, 1982d; Harrod, 1999; Mabb, 2009). He believed that craft could present an alternative to the oppression of "the great intangible machine of commercial tyranny" (Morris, 1888a) that would liberate workers and offer the fulfilling rewards he believed could be found in the pride of good workmanship and the pleasure in handling fine materials.

A nostalgic idealization of lost hand-craft practices and rural ways of life in the wake of changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution fed the enthusiasm for the Arts and Crafts styles of the late nineteenth century. Other later groups of artist-craftspeople following those of the Arts and Crafts Movement, such as the Guild of Handicraft, the Bloomsbury Omega workshops, the artist communities at Ditchling and in the Cotswolds, with their hand-loomed fabrics and block-printed linens, also have traces of this Romantic idealization in their rebellion against the contemporary celebration of the machine age in the early twentieth century. A similar Romanticism can be detected in the re-introduction of wholecloth quilting clubs during the Depression of the 1920s by the Rural Industries Bureau to stimulate employment in the north east of England and south Wales, and in later revivals of popular crafts led by Enid Marx and Margaret Lambert (Jones, 1951; Lambert & Marx, 1989; Harrod, 1999; Osler, 2000).

However, critics of the Arts and Crafts movement point out the contradictions of these Romantic and unrealistic visions. The products so beautifully made were costly, and out of reach for those craftsmen and women who made them (Frayling &

Snowdon, 1982d; Attfield, 2000) and the skills taught to the craftspeople who produced the works were in effect de-skilling them for manufacturing work elsewhere (Frayling, 2011: 103).

The counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and '70s embraced hand-crafts once again in association with ideals of self-sufficient rural living (Seymour, 1978) and ecological awareness, this time as a reaction to the political and cultural orthodoxy of metropolitan lifestyles, (Schumacher, 1974; Needleman, 1979). The renewed popular enthusiasm today echoes to some extent Morris's belief in craft as a physically and mentally stimulating activity able to renew links with past heritages, enrich lives and local economies (Brown & Mitchell, 2004; Bakkeslett, 2013; Sutherland, 2013). But as then, time and space are scarce for many and materials, tools and training are expensive.<sup>6</sup> Textile hand-crafting continues to be reserved for those who have the time and financial means to purchase the necessary materials, equipment and products. However, alternative approaches consider sharing and re-using resources within a group, sometimes motivated by countercultural desires to challenge orthodox modes of production and consumption (Howes, 2010), sometimes inspired to learn a new skill (Fabrications, 2013).

## Critical craft

Postmodernism of the 1980s and '90s turned attention to crafts as a marginal culture that celebrated the eccentric and unique qualities of handmade objects liberated from their useful functions to compete with artworks (Adamson & Pavitt, 2011). This new, marginal field of critical craft was competing for attention across the fields of art, design and craft.<sup>7</sup> Craft practitioners and designers – mainly graduates from art schools – inspired to experiment outside the traditional craft preoccupations with function, materials and techniques, suggested “changed priorities, in which conceptual ideas flourish alongside, sometimes instead of, considerations of use” (Margetts, 1996: 10-11). These openings, made possible in part by the feminist art

<sup>6</sup> The retail sale of materials, tools and patterns for embroideries and patchwork quilts generates considerable income. For example, *The Art of Quilting* magazine, recently launched to attract new consumers inspired by the craft revival as presented by Kirstie Allsopp and Jane Brocket, was selling a patchwork pattern, instructions and materials to beginners for a total of £354 spread over two years' subscription fees (Daily Mail, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The distinctions between art, design and craft have generated an extensive literature (Frayling & Snowdon 1982b; Dormer, 1997a; Margetts, 1996, 1998; Greenhalgh, 2002; Veiteberg, 2005; Fariello & Owen, 2005; Follett & Valentine, 2006; Verhoeven, 2007; Clark, 2010; Adamson, 2010b). It is still felt by some to be significant, and many makers, including textile artists, for whom it is important to be recognized as artists not craftspeople, continue to exhibit and/or sell their works in galleries. For an extensive and thorough review, see Lees-Maffei and Sandino's (2004) article 'Dangerous Liaisons: Relationships between Design, Craft and Art' in a dedicated special edition of the *Journal of Design History*.

movements of the 1970s and '80s in the UK and the USA, and in part by the conceptual lead taken in art schools, nurtured a period of critical growth in the development of textiles as a visual arts practice (Jefferies, 2000: 191).<sup>8</sup> Hand-stitching, as well as other textile craft techniques, is used as a means of developing narratives around subjective experiences that question the status, function and decoration of textile objects. These works also deal confidently with social and political issues, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a mastery of materials, processes and techniques, "with all the commensurate skill and understanding which that implies" (Millar, 2002). A distinct critical practice emerged, operating somewhere between fine art and textile craft, combining accomplished craft skills with a sense of the conceptual possibilities of materials and form (Harris, 1999).<sup>9</sup>

The presence of hand-stitching in textile art practices has some success in the search for due recognition of its cultural and artistic value, but can lead to familiar problematic divisions and hierarchies of value that limit the appreciation of textile crafting outside these studio practices.<sup>10</sup> The critical or subversive use of stitch is always ambivalent. As Barnett (1988) points out, it represents on the one hand a radical rejection of its domestic and functional associations, but also intimates respect for those traditions, and in so doing pays tribute to a heritage of overlooked 'women's work'.

Stitch-crafts have an enduring heritage; it is timely to re-evaluate some of the uses, purposes and pleasures of hand-stitching now, and examine in what ways a gender-sensitive position in relation to hand-stitched textiles and domestic production is of relevance today. It is 30 years since the first publication of Roszika Parker's seminal book *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), and

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that textile materials and processes have had a visible presence in contemporary fine art through the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond, as exemplified in works by Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois, Ghada Amer, Elaine Reichek and Jessica Rankin, but the organisational strategies of galleries and museums surrounding these artists, their work and the market is different, determining it as a different cultural commodity from its origins as domestic craft (Duffey, 1996; Auther, 2008, 2010; Robertson, 2011a). The raiding of textile crafts and others by fine artists is the subject of another discussion; see Johnson (1996) and Adamson (2008, 2010b) for some commentaries.

<sup>9</sup> A number of exhibitions mark this growth of a specific textile art, and the catalogue texts chart the development of the surrounding critical discourse: 'The Subversive Stitch: Women and Textiles Today' (Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester, 1988), 'Out of the Frame' (Crafts Council, London, 1992), 'Art of the Stitch' (bi-annual event organized by The Embroiderers' Guild launched for the first time in 1995), 'Revelation: Textile Artists Addressing Issues' (Maidstone Library Gallery, Maidstone, Kent, 1996), 'Under Construction: Exploring Process In Contemporary Textiles' (Crafts Council, London, 1996), 'arttextiles 1, 2 and 3' (Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, 1996, 2000 and 2004 respectively), 'Textures of Memory: the Poetics of Cloth' (Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, 1999), 'Through the Surface' (University of the Creative Arts, Farnham, 2004), 'Revealed' (the contemporary textile collection of Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, 2005), 'Cloth & Culture Now' (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, 2008), 'Beware of Embroidery' (Pitzhanger Manor House Gallery, London, 2010). See also Harris (1999), Maharaj (2001) and Koumis (2006).

<sup>10</sup> See also Pollock & Parker (1987), Lippard (1995), Auther (2010), Robertson (2011a) and Freeman (1997) for further discussion about the traditional institutional divisions and hierarchies concerning art and craft, and especially textile craft.

a new generation is exploring its influence on and relevance to new stitch practices and traditional stitch practices in new contexts.<sup>11</sup>

## Stitch-crafts, gender and home-making

In writing about an expanded field of textile art practices of the 1980s and '90s Jennifer Harris (1999: 8) states that "Textiles have their own aesthetic concerns and a long, rich history on which to draw, although this history has sometimes failed to receive due recognition because of textiles' close association with domesticity and with the history of women". Many others agree (Parker & Pollock, 1981, 1987; Barnett, 1982; Parker, 1984; Barber, 1995; Jefferies, 1995, 2000; Lippard, 1995; Shreeve, 1998; Goggin & Tobin, 2009). But this 'close association with domesticity and with the history of women' is however often still present in stitched textile works; sometimes as the subject, as the place of production (e.g. home-based work spaces), or the means by which the skills have been learnt, which is the case for many of the participants in this research. Harris seems to suggest that to receive 'due recognition' these associations must be removed, but I argue in this thesis that the continued appeal of crafting stitched textiles could be understood differently by paying closer attention to them.

Home-making has historically and traditionally been cast as women's work,<sup>12</sup> and by extension, so have craft activities associated with home-making. To begin with, the repetitive tasks of crafting, cooking, repairing and cleaning are essentially menial tasks normally concerned with the care and maintenance of ephemeral material and bodily comforts. Typically, a cyclical rhythm is established, whereby the work is done, undone and re-done, and little trace of the effort expended is left behind

<sup>11</sup> A two-day seminar on this subject took place at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in November 2013 convened by Pennina Barnett and Jennifer Harris, curators of the original 1988 exhibition (borrowing Parker's title) 'The Subversive Stitch: Women and Textiles Today' held in two parts at the Whitworth Art Gallery and the Cornerhouse in Manchester.

<sup>12</sup> According to anthropologist Judith Brown (1970) and archaeologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber (1995), this division of labour has roots in whether or not a community relies upon women for a particular type of work and whether this is compatible or not with child-watching (Barber, 1995: 29). The division of labour that saw women's roles constraining them to home-making has to do with whether they can be wholly relied upon to hunt or fish or grow food, not their ability to excel at these tasks. Where highly specialized tasks, sometimes dangerous or requiring long absences from home, such as deep-sea fishing, are necessary, and schools and/or child care facilities are unavailable, "Repetitive, interruptible, non-dangerous tasks that do not require extensive excursions are more appropriate for women when the exigencies of child care are taken into account" (Brown, 1970: 1077). Stitch-crafts meet these criteria as they are non-threatening, and can be easily interrupted, put down and picked up again.

(Oakley, 1974).<sup>13</sup> Textile crafting has often been perceived in similar ways, as Jefferies (1995: 164) explains: “Textile work is perceived as labour-intensive, slow and painstaking and yet, in a double twist, rendered and devalued as invisible women’s work, non-work or non-productive labour”. Secondly, textiles are perishable. On the whole textiles in the home are functional; they are used repetitively, and wear out. Apart from a few notable exceptions, the combination of invisible, interminable domestic routine and little physical, historical evidence has veiled the lasting cultural or historical significance of the practice of making domestic textile crafts (Oakley, 1974; Schneider & Weiner, 1989; Beaudry, 2006).

One such example is the 2010 exhibition ‘Quilts 1700-2010: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories’ held at the Victoria and Albert museum in London (Prichard, 2010). As evidence of domestic craft practices, even the patchwork quilts containing stories of political and social significance beyond the personal and family memories of the makers embody patterns that reflect an approach to the use of time, materials and effort typical of female domestic endeavour. They are detailed and decorative, composed of repetitive patterns, and made of materials that decay over time: ‘painstaking’, ‘pretty’ work sometimes described as “manually dextrous, decorative and intellectually undemanding” (Parker & Pollock, 1981: 58). Feminist writer and critic Lucy Lippard (1995) attributes the ‘fussiness’ and ‘over-decoration’ characteristic of traditional women’s crafts to a “creative restlessness ... the home maker’s sense of care and touch focuses on sewing, cooking, interior decoration, as often through conditioning as through necessity” (Lippard, 1995: 132). The ‘creative restlessness’ and the careful attention to detail described by Lippard are still important characteristics of stitching practices, providing a foundation to their work patterns. In new contexts of individuals – both women and men – distanced from tangible social and cultural experiences through the anti-haptic experiences of keyboard and screen new understandings of this ‘sense of care and touch’ merit exploration.

The quilts in the collection were mostly hand-made by women in homes,<sup>14</sup> and some remain anonymous. They have therefore been designed and made outside the more systematized modes of workshop manufacture habitually encountered through objects at the museum. They rarely carried monetary value, but traditionally speak of use and exchange value, invested with

<sup>13</sup> The domestic labour debate of the 1960s and ‘70s, developed by Marxist feminists, aimed to theorize the status of unpaid housework and child-rearing, usually done by women. See Lise Vogel (2008) for a review of its key developments, contradictions and the resultant oppositions to it.

<sup>14</sup> Quilts made by men were deliberately included to help redress some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding patchwork quilting as an exclusively feminine artform. Five of the quilts on display are known to be made by men: one by a soldier occupied with patchwork making during a period of inactive service, two by professional tailors who entered their works into competitions, one by prison inmates involved in the Fine Cell Work programme at HMP Wandsworth ([www.finecellwork.co.uk](http://www.finecellwork.co.uk)), and one by artist Grayson Perry. See exhibition catalogue (Prichard, 2010) for more about these quilts.

personal significance and emotional ties through their design and the choice of materials used (Gordon & Horton, 2009). These quilts largely reflect the separation of domestic and public spaces as unpaid and salaried workplaces that occurred during the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Pollock, 1988). Vestiges of this division reverberate amongst the quilters and embroiderers I have been working with for this research. Most stitch at home or in their local community meeting places, associate their stitching and quilting with their domestic lives and duties – even if they are selling their work or teaching others – or define it as socially or personally rewarding in ways not experienced in their paid work.

Sociologist Marybeth C. Stalp (2007) argues that the cultural contribution of non-paid work still remains largely overlooked. Her research has focused on the cultural significance of women choosing to pursue domestic craft activities at home that she describes as “a meaning-laden form of non-economic gendered cultural production” (Stalp, 2007: 138). According to Stalp, patchwork and quilting are as highly valued by women who sew as their less tangible care-work for their families, or their employment. Choosing to stitch implies that practitioners have to find time and space to do it because there are otherwise demands made on both. Stalp writes: “Women incorporate quilting into everyday activities, they steal time away to quilt” (ibid: 99). The majority of stitchers who participated in my study are similarly juggling different demands made of them such as part-time work, volunteering duties and caring for other family members. In some instances, the same time slot every week is allocated for sewing to ensure it is set aside. For others, time is not scheduled regularly but taken when possible between tasks. These other demands on their time will normally take priority. Like Stalp, I have found that they “make quilting fit into the rest of their lives” (ibid: 98).

I believe it is important not to overlook these associations with women’s history of domestic work patterns. The rhythms of time use and management of workspaces provide a practical framework for this research: firstly because I, like most of the participants, do not work in a dedicated studio, and especially as I work with female participants, some of whom work in embroidery or quilting groups, some of whom work alone at home.

## Subversion and paradox

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Parker (1984) comprehensively traces the emergence and development of embroidery production



by women within the home, and draws attention to “the role played by embroidery in the maintenance and creation of the feminine ideal” (Parker, 1984: 11). She demonstrates how the craft of embroidery, representations of embroidery and embroiderers, and the content of embroidered works have been a constant reflection of these changing ideals since the Middle Ages. Revealing its subtly influential role in defining the status of women who embroidered, she fully exposes the close links between the history of embroidery and the social and economic history of women, in both the public and the private spheres. Although she states that “embroidery and a stereotype of femininity have become collapsed into one another” (ibid: 6), interestingly she also highlights the central paradox of the craft:

“Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness. The presence and practice of embroidery promotes particular states of mind and self-experience. Because of its history and associations embroidery evokes and inculcates femininity in the embroiderer. But it can also lead women to an awareness of the extraordinary constraints of femininity, providing at times a means of negotiating them, and at other times provoking the desire to escape the constraints.” (ibid: 11).

This central paradox, experienced and known to embroiderers only when engaged in the activity of hand-stitching, continues to compel and features as an important component of a renewed attention to subjective experiences of crafting. Although embroidery came to represent the domestic restrictions of a woman’s world and her outlook, as a form of pleasurable creative expression it also permitted resistance and revolt, and grew to be representative of particularly influential subversive statements.

### The feminist retrieval of stitch-crafts: materializing subjective experience

There was, I believe, a revival of specifically gendered crafts, like embroidery and patchwork quilting, that emerged with second-wave feminism of the 1970s and ’80s in the USA and the UK, which notably brought together the political and artistic values of the ‘personal’ – of subjective experience – and drew attention to the political, social and cultural significance of these domestic craft practices. Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch* was first published in 1984, at the height of second-wave

feminist activism in the UK.<sup>15</sup> She was writing from an overtly feminist perspective at a time when feminist strategies embraced the valorization of women's art and craft (Parker & Pollock, 1981, 1987; Barnett, 1982; Elinor et al, 1987; Jefferies, 1995, 2000). Feminist art movements encouraged the retrieval of domestic textile crafts such as embroidery, knitting, crochet and patchwork quilting (collectively and individually made) as widely accessible and powerful means of artistic and personal expression in the struggle not only to accord greater recognition to women artists, but also to challenge the firmly entrenched hierarchies of the art world that ranked crafts in general – “forms once thought of as ideologically bereft and politically benign” (Jefferies, 2000: 191) – with a lower status than the fine arts (Parker & Pollock, 1981, 1987; Lippard, 1995; Auther, 2010).<sup>16</sup>

## Fragmented time and multi-use of space

The change in women's status brought about through the feminist movements of the 1970s and '80s also influenced a change in status of domestic textile crafts. Women artists of the time deliberately brought into the foreground a sense of continuity with female traditions of the past by working with these crafts. For example, Miriam Schapiro's *Femmages* have strong roots in traditional domestic craft practices; her detailed tableaux composed of small pieces of cut fabrics and magazine cuttings “could close the gap between pure studio and the everyday reality of her home” (Jefferies, 2000: 189). These abstract compositions made of cut pieces deliberately reference the craft of patchwork through the materials used, and reflect the interrupted processes of an habitually fragmented use of time as making art is slotted in around other demands made on both time and space (Showalter, 1986). The material and visual form of the artwork reflects the processes by which it has been made; a characteristic I find typical of these textile crafts and examine further in Chapter Three.

<sup>15</sup> Whereas first-wave feminist strategies in the early decades of the twentieth century sought suffrage, legal and administrative equalities for women, second-wave feminism from the 1960s through to the 1980s targeted a broader range of issues. Amongst its goals were social and economic equalities for women, which included recognition of women's production and consumption of cultural activities.

<sup>16</sup> The focus given to subjective experience, which translated relationships constructed (and deconstructed) with families, communities and places, shared experiences, or forms of political protest into material form continues to resonate in certain stitch-craft practices today. Hand-crafted textile artefacts are used to articulate powerful and subversive demonstrations of resistance and collective protest by male and female artists across the world. The association of craft with political activism is termed 'craftivism' and was coined by Betsy Greer in 2003 in the spirit of a thirdwave feminist embrace of knitting, stitching, and crochet (Greer, 2011). The term is new, but the application of craft skills in pursuit of political goals isn't. The Women's Suffrage Movement produced embroidered banners for use during their political rallies and marches in the early twentieth century (Tickner, 1988). In the 1980s women at the Greenham Common camp exploited hand-crafts, especially knitting, as a particularly effective tool of resistance (Robertson, 2011a). As with the earlier feminist art movements, craftivism in the UK is largely influenced by radical craftivist practices initiated in the USA by artists and activists, including Sabrina Geschwandtner, Liz Collins, Cat Mazza, Knitta and Anthea Black, and disseminated effectively across the Internet. The Craftivist Collective ([www.craftivist-collective.com](http://www.craftivist-collective.com)), run by Sarah Corbett, is one such example. For a more detailed survey of the political force attached to radical DIY craft in the USA see Auther (2010), Buszek (2011) and Adamson (2010a). For further discussion on feminist textile art practices see Parker & Pollock (1981, 1987), Pollock (1988), Deepwell (1995), Lippard (1995), Carson & Pajaczkowska (2000) and Auther (2010).

## Cooperative, collective making processes

It is not only the craft techniques that reference female traditions, but also the process of bringing together groups of women to work collectively. In 1971 Schapiro and Judy Chicago initiated the landmark *Womanhouse* cooperative project at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. Artists contributing to the collective performance/exhibition used traditional textile crafts, amongst other media, to subversively turn the personal experience of women's everyday lives into a politicized event foregrounding women's experiences in ways that hadn't been done before. Four years later, Chicago embarked on her monumental work *The Dinner Party* (1979), which took five years to complete with the aid of four hundred contributors. In their subversion of the traditions and ideals of stereotyped femininity, needlework and domesticity, the social ideologies of cooperative labour associated with these crafts were simultaneously reclaimed in a "feminist coup de grace" (Jefferies, 2000: 191) just as they were on the point of dismissal.

## Widely accessible

The postal event *Feministo* (begun 1974) is considered one of the major feminist collective projects in the UK of this time (Parker & Pollock, 1987). Artists Kate Walker and Sally Gollop initiated a postal exchange of small art works. Made from household objects and materials at hand in the home, often using domestic textile craft skills, these pieces functioned as communicative links between women, not all of whom self-consciously described themselves as artists. The project grew into a "feminist critique of conventional definitions of art and artist" (Parker & Pollock, 1987: 23), revealing the contradictions affecting women wishing to make art whilst trying to reconcile this with the demands made of them by motherhood and home-making. Moreover, as with *Womanhouse*, it also demonstrated a distinctive type of attention given to cooperative making and the pooling of experiences as part of a process of consciousness-raising. By 1976, the numbers of participants had expanded across the country, and the project culminated in 1977 with the exhibition *Portrait of the Artist as Housewife* at the ICA in London.

Whilst textile craft making continues to be used to champion feminist causes,<sup>17</sup> this has not been the driving force behind my research into the craft of stitching. However, there are three key aspects of the feminist legacy that I believe continue to exert influence and share certain characteristics with stitching practices that have renewed relevance today:

1. As Parker (1984) highlights, the benign craft of hand-stitching hides a sense of emancipation and defiance in the ability to subtly control, manipulate or negotiate one's circumstances. I have found that participants value their stitching as a way to exercise independence by setting their own challenges through extending their skills, and by carving out time and space for personal reflection sheltered from otherwise invasive demands. These characteristics are examined further in Chapter Three.

2. The feminist emphasis on raising consciousness<sup>18</sup> to work collectively towards change places importance on the encounters made, learning and self-definition that occurs in the process.<sup>19</sup> The product of these meetings is typically "a new way of thinking, relating, naming or acting" (Reinharz, 1992: 221). This approach to thinking about connections and networks opens up possibilities of exploring the kinds of values embodied by processes of making over the made artefact. Of relevance to this research is the format of small gatherings of individuals meeting over an extended period of time to discuss personal experiences. My own interest in making processes leads me not to try to interpret or categorize finished works as a particular type of cultural artefact, but rather to focus on the activities and practices: "to consider actions of the maker not as autonomous, but temporally and spatially situated within a dispersed network of people, artefacts and environments" (Jackson, 2011). Perhaps a 'post-critical craft' can make way for 'critical processes'.

3. The combination of crafting with social gatherings has a long history (Freeman, 1983). Feminist strategies of mobilizing networks of people to craft things, as with the *Feministo* project and at the Greenham Common protest camp for example, in turn took inspiration from this heritage of social traditions of textile making. Revisiting these traditions as they are now performed revives a critical discussion about the relationship of practical, silent skill to social encounters and exchange.

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<sup>17</sup> For example the *Desconocida* project, a global collaboration of stitchers protesting against the continued murders of women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, initiated and coordinated by artist Lise Bjørne Linnert, begun in 2006 and on-going (Linnert, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> 'Consciousness raising' is a translation of the Portuguese term 'conscientizacao', first used by Paulo Freire with reference to critical pedagogy, the empowerment of the dispossessed through education, in his seminal book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970).

<sup>19</sup> Originally organized with educational goals in mind, feminist groups used these networks to develop group solidarity and ultimately political activism (Reinharz, 1992).

## Contemporary re-evaluations of crafting as a social practice

### “Person-oriented approaches”

The transformative values of “person-oriented” (Freeman, 1997) craft activities that privilege social processes of encounter and exchange again figure prominently in contemporary re-evaluations of crafting. According to craft historian Paul Greenhalgh, the mass commercialization of visual and material culture of recent decades has given rise to a general sense of dissatisfaction and disjuncture. He proposes that crafting might have more political or social impact if redefined as an “everyday attitude or approach” (Greenhalgh, 2011) embedded into people’s everyday routines.

Projects exist, or have taken place, that embrace some of the features of previous craft revivals in their attempts to retrieve lost practices, but also address other ‘person-oriented’ issues, such as the social and personal concerns affecting individuals alienated because of separation from family or unemployment, which can be articulated empathetically through the mutual sharing of such experiences. Hand-stitching is an obvious candidate; embroidery projects and patchwork quilting have addressed political and social purposes of this nature in the past, as discussed above (Freeman, 1983; Parker & Pollock, 1987; Prichard, 2010; Jefferies, 1995, 2000; Gordon, 2011), and continue to represent ideas of community and identity, both personal and collective.

Bridging Arts,<sup>20</sup> and Stitches In Time,<sup>21</sup> two London-based charities, use the social format of sewing groups to bring together women who might otherwise find social activities and educational opportunities hard to access because of cultural, age and/or language barriers. The ubiquity of sewing and embroidery across cultures makes it a convenient platform for addressing various aspects of self-development and social inclusion, and means many individuals can participate creating new social connections between individuals and their communities. The relative familiarity of stitch-crafts means these sorts of projects do not necessarily require participants to have specialist expertise in order to join in and opportunities to learn are offered on site. The flexibility of method, material and process is attractive to individuals and organisations as the work can be slotted in around other tasks or events. Turning “technical competence into sociable experience” (Sennett, 2012: 63), these opportunities

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<sup>20</sup> [www.bridging-arts.com](http://www.bridging-arts.com)

<sup>21</sup> [www.stitchesintime.org.uk](http://www.stitchesintime.org.uk)

for building confidence, meeting others, and learning new skills are presented to the women participants as they join in the making projects. Stitches In Time combines regular informal meetings in the safe environments of semi-public places such as community centres and churches with an educational programme of Maths, English and technical skills. As a 'person-oriented approach', the heritage of traditional embroidery groups is acknowledged, and the feminist retrieval of widely accessible domestic crafts is embraced, but adapted to make it relevant for new groups and new contexts. Since 1993, Stitches In Time has brought together culturally diverse groups of mixed ages, including women's groups, elderly residents, schoolchildren and their parents to work on these ambitious embroidery projects (Stitches In Time, 2012b) (figs 7 & 8). The collective experience of stitching together creates new shared experiences that help to re-build fragile communities.



Fig 7. Stitches In Time. Drop-in workshop, making the *Trade Asia* piece as part of the Cultural Olympiad Legacy Project, east London, 2012. Sashiko-style embroidered squares.



Fig 8. Stitches In Time. Detail of *The Friendship Ribbon* embroidered by participants during 2012 as part of the Cultural Olympiad Legacy Project, east London.

In her explorations of the possible role of art in human societies, Dissanayake's (1995a) words resonate with Greenhalgh's (2011). She considers art<sup>22</sup> to be "a way of doing things" (ibid: 34), and determines ways in which art-making has communal relevance as a behavioural activity (ibid: 61). She argues we have a biological imperative for art-making, emphasizing that "humans are inherently artistic animals" (Dissanayake, 1995b: 42) and that "the arts ... have been physically, sensuously, and emotionally satisfying and pleasurable to humans" (Dissanayake, 1995a: 59). Inspired by this emphasis on 'joie de faire',<sup>23</sup> artist Françoise Dupré has specialized in what she describes as "a collaborative-participatory and community based trans-national textile practice that explores the art of making in the everyday and celebrates invisible creative skills" (Dupré, 2008). Again, influenced by earlier feminist art initiatives, Dupré specifically chooses to work with traditional women's domestic crafts precisely because they are easily accessible and highly social activities.

They can be used in many different contexts, and are usually common to many diaspora cultures, enabling connections to be made between strangers. She also makes use of the restorative and therapeutic benefits of textile crafting. Because progress can be slow, the time-consuming activity encourages a long-term commitment from participants, resulting in a greater sense of self worth and pride in the work produced. She explains:

"For me a meaningful and ethical collaborative-participatory practice is one that engages with participants' identity, taps into their experience and history and provides a context for participants to become active social subjects. Integral to the process is the production of some kind of tangible object where individuals and community can, through the making and experiencing of the object's physicality and materiality, translate emotions, desires and experiences, create new meanings and shape their identity." (Dupré, 2008).

These collective sewing projects help participants to 'make' sense of their experiences, a need "satisfied in communally valued and validated activities" (Dissanayake, 1995a: 61), whereby 'making' combines a practical process of working towards a physical goal e.g. the embroidered works, a social process of working with different and unique experiences brought by individuals to piece together a greater whole, and a psychological process of working through personal concerns. The work of the hand here

<sup>22</sup> The art Dissanayake refers to embraces crafts and performance arts as well as the fine arts of painting and sculpture. She does not distinguish between the categories, but describes them all as 'art-making'.

<sup>23</sup> 'Joie de faire' translates as the joy or pleasure of making. It is a term used by Dissanayake (1995b), and Dupré adopted it as the title of an artist's residency project with Paintings in Hospitals undertaken in the Feto-Maternal Medicine Department at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, in 2006 (Dupré, 2007).

embodies a function of care and attention to individuals' experiences within their larger social networks, which, although once associated with home-making, is now also sought outside in the rapidly evolving cultures of urban environments. Developing from my earlier works in Paris, the studies in this research explore the contents of these manual and social processes further in order to unpick their particular relation to hand-stitching practices and rhythms.

## Making and sharing

Craft guilds, like the Quilters' Guild of the British Isles,<sup>24</sup> and informally organised local groups of enthusiasts have long recognized the value of regular social gatherings to consolidate friendships, exchange news and learn skills whilst working together as a group either on collective or individual making projects (Freeman, 1997). Artist and curator David Littler (2008) drew inspiration from this kind of social approach to making of local south London sewing groups and combined this with what he understands to be a shared culture of sampling motifs between hand embroiderers and DJs (Littler, 2008). *Sampler Culture Clash*<sup>25</sup> began in 2007 and continues as an open conversation between different groups of makers, musicians and poets across the UK exploring the creative potential of mixing visual and aural motifs. Over a period of six years the project has "engendered social interaction and conviviality" (Carnac, 2008) between diverse participants, inspiring "new ideas, readjustments of positions and further collaborations" (ibid). Hand embroiderers have used their stitches to create new sounds, and poetry has been performed to motifs. The outcomes value the new relationships created between the participants as much as between the works.

It is important to note that the analogue world of hand-making and the digital world are not antithetical, but in certain ways and circumstances combine the seemingly opposite cultures and draw attention to their shared characteristics. This might be an approach to using motifs, as with *Sampler Culture Clash*, or a desire to connect with like-minded people, tapping into a network that is dependent on sharing – be that digital files, information, or experiences – and using the activity to make new senses out of them. In *Making Is Connecting* David Gauntlett (2011) outlines the unusual complementarities between a revived interest in crafting and the rise of Web 2.0 and social media. According to his analysis both hands-on making activities and the

<sup>24</sup> [www.quiltersguild.org.uk](http://www.quiltersguild.org.uk)

<sup>25</sup> [www.samplercultureclash.org.uk](http://www.samplercultureclash.org.uk)



virtual cultures of Facebook and YouTube engineer satisfactions and new discoveries for users/makers by offering “a framework for participation, but which is open to a very wide range of uses and contributions” (Gauntlett, 2011: 95). He argues that people

“want to feel alive in the world, as participants rather than viewers ... to connect and communicate with others, and – especially online – to be an active participant in dialogues and communities.” (ibid: 222).

The *Embroidered Digital Commons* project (2009-13),<sup>26</sup> facilitated by curator Ele Carpenter, recognizes this potential. Social networking media has provided the means and content for the project. Groups of diverse and enthusiastic contributors work a sense of belonging to a community through participation in small embroidery tasks, sometimes collectively at a physical location, sometimes alone via online communities. The inspiration for the project draws on some of the common characteristics of hand-embroidery and open-source computer programming – “gendered obsessive attention to detail; shared social process of development; and a transparency of process and product” (Carpenter, 2010) – to offer practical ways of exploring issues of creative freedom, modification of content and distribution relevant to both fields.

### “Virtues of attentiveness”

Because there are computer-aided machines to execute tedious, repetitive tasks like stitching at speed and with accuracy, the particular instances and qualities of voluntarily using our hands in time-consuming craft activities merit re-examination. The hegemony of digital production methods has transformed the human experience of working by hand; these new technologies redefine the body and the hand now, as mechanization redefined manual labour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The body and the sense of touch are not relied upon as they once were in manually skilled manufacturing processes, but there is evidence that the human scale of the body and its inner biological rhythms are used to measure different sorts of performances.

Ewan Clayton, a calligrapher but also a part time consultant at the Palo Alto Research Centre of the Xerox Corporation (PARC), interested in human-computer interaction, points out some of the potential social problems identified with the speed of action made possible by digital technologies amidst rapidly moving ideas and information. He explains that “one experiences a

<sup>26</sup> [www.open-source-embroidery.org.uk](http://www.open-source-embroidery.org.uk)

certain dislocation in time and space" (Clayton, 2010), which has given rise to attention difficulties and in some instances can be addictive, disassociating people from their bodies, and causing emotional distress. Digital technology developers concerned to offer solutions to a problem they are in part responsible for having caused, have turned to hand-skilled crafts for inspiration in their research

"because if we are about anything, what we are about is embodied engagement with material things, the cultivation of focused attention, the ability to be present now in this place, at this time, responding to these conditions, coming through to us in all our senses" (ibid).

Craft activities that depend upon the rhythms, imprints and traces of the body for their making processes provide ideal examples of the benefits and attractions of haptic experiences in contrast to the abstraction of screen and keyboard interactions. Anna Konig, explaining her own re-engagement with patchwork quilting, writes:

"In the face of a culture that increasingly emphasizes image over material substance, re-engagement with the raw materials from which our lives are shaped is a potent reminder of the difference between what is real and what is illusory in life." (Konig, 2010).

The scale and pace of hand-work match those of the body. The precise coordination of hand, eye and mind in the making of stitches requires careful concentration. Minute adjustments are made with each repeated gesture. Importantly, it's almost the same each time: so similar that the body repeats it without having to learn a new movement, but each time the eye verifies the positioning of the needle and this slight adjustment requires the mind's attention. The rhythms of these gestures mark time, and the physical proximity of material, tools and body situates a person in space. The painstaking attention to detail that grew from a sense of care and touch once dismissively associated with home-making (Lippard, 1995) can be re-evaluated in a digital world where the relatively slow pace of repeated hand gestures are prized for recalibrating the mind with the body, not necessarily cultivating creativity or innovation, "but the less glamorous virtue of attentiveness" (Crawford, 2009: 82).

Richard Sennett (2008) also addresses the advantages of cultivating this kind of focused attention and explains how the repeated, rhythmic hand movements of fine motor skills so fundamental to hand-crafts nurture a capacity to concentrate. Anticipation of what can be achieved – and crucially that can be seen, held and touched – encourages repeated practise, which

in turn refines a person's skill. Compared to switch-controlled machines the process is lengthy and frustrating, but ultimately rewards the practitioner with a true understanding of his or her abilities and greater mental and emotional engagement (Sennett, 2008: 177). These rewards echoed throughout my conversations with participants: my examination of learning and practising the rhythms and patterns of skilled hand-stitching is elaborated further in Chapters Two and Three.

## Re-joining shattered pieces of the self

The quiet, meditative rhythm of the slow process of crafting stitches can offer solace in times of distress; it does not often provide instantly gratifying results but it does offer moments of calm for introspective reflection. Here hand-stitching metaphorically helps to mend and piece together fragmented selves possibly dealing with illness or damaged by the multiple demands made in the course of daily routine.<sup>27</sup> Taken as a metaphor, the act of stitching is a clearly delineated physical experience that grounds a conceptual understanding of a mental or emotional experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003: 59). As Louise Bourgeois describes, with reference to her stitched fabric works: "the sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole" (quoted in Love, 2010).

For some, the 'building-block' nature of visibly recording their forward progression through time contributes positively to a healing process (Meadow & Beyerle-Rutherford, 1999; Turney, 2007). Watching the work grow is a tangible marker of one's journey towards recovery. Crucially, Turney (2007) explains, the experience of doing it, sustaining a state of stillness and calm, and focusing on the accumulation of stitches is central to its effectiveness. The steady build-up of stitches on a canvas or the piecing together of scraps of discarded fabrics into a new patchwork whole can help to restore a sense of physical and emotional well-being (Konig, 2010; Reynolds, 2004).

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<sup>27</sup> I refer to the therapeutic qualities of stitchcrafts practiced as an everyday activity, not as a remedial prescription for sufferers of severe mental illnesses. Examples of extraordinarily detailed embroidered works produced by individuals institutionalized because of their mental illnesses can be seen: the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Germany, holds some (Hayward Gallery, 1996); works by Brazilian artist Arthur Bispo do Rosario have been displayed at 'The Fabric of Myth' exhibition at Compton Verney Art Gallery, Warwickshire (Compton Verney, 2008) and the Victoria & Albert museum, London, (2012); and works shown at a recent exhibition 'Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan' held at the Wellcome Foundation, London, (2013) included hand embroideries alongside drawings, paintings and various forms of modeling. However, stitching as remedial therapy or as an obsessive and compulsive search for mental equilibrium is not a context I have explored for this research.

Hand-stitching can also provide a focused activity of manageable proportions at times of insecurity or uncontrollable events. In support of this, an inmate involved in the Fine Cell Work programme describes:

“Being able to stitch was a great way to take my mind off what was going on inside my head. In times of great stress I would pick up my tapestry and immerse myself into it, which helped every single time.” (Fine Cell Work, 2012).

The charity Fine Cell Work,<sup>28</sup> founded in the 1960s, “trains prisoners in paid, skilled, creative needlework undertaken in the long hours spent in their cells to foster hope, discipline and self esteem” (Fine Cell Work, 2006). This follows a nineteenth-century initiative of Elizabeth Fry, social reformer and Quaker philanthropist, who, motivated to improve conditions for prisoners both materially and spiritually, instructed female convicts in sewing skills as a means of constructively occupying their time in prisons and on the long ship voyages to Australia, thereby enabling them to arrive with skills appropriate for seeking work and rising out of poverty-driven crime (Prichard, 2010b). Fine Cell Work inmates – men and women – apply their skills to gainful employment executing commissions for clients and producing collections of needlepoint tapestry cushions and bed quilts. The sale of their work enables them to build up savings to draw on once their sentence is finished.<sup>29</sup> The sense of autonomy and control that comes with the completion of works that are then sold are valuable components of this restorative process. Subversively embedded within this pragmatic goal are the psychological benefits associated with practising the contemplative craft of hand-stitching, helping to repair and restore lost dignity, providing the means to negotiate the constraints of imprisonment: calmness, care and pleasure are rare sensations – even taboo – in deprived prison environments, where trauma, aggression and boredom dominate (Emck, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> [www.finecellwork.co.uk](http://www.finecellwork.co.uk)

There are other examples of similar charitable organisations but I choose to mention Fine Cell Work here because it is a particularly dynamic and successful example of long-term investment in the learning and development of skills that also considers the psychological welfare of the prisoners, as well as the quality of the products made and sold.

<sup>29</sup> Current laws governing the tracing of inmates after their release from prison means that Fine Cell Work does not have information on whether or not inmates participating in the scheme continue to use their skills outside prison, or find employment in this field (Emck, 2013). In this administrative barrier, the scheme differs from Fry’s original.

## Current UK research

The growth of a critical craft practice termed 'textile art', and the visibility of stitch-crafts in contemporary practices elsewhere, have generated possibilities for an appreciation of textiles that might not prioritize functional purpose, but may convey a multitude of ideas, narratives, associations and meanings. However, I have argued that emphasis placed on the artistic value of a static object on display might overlook other ways of understanding and appreciating textile crafts. These concern the shared experiences of making as a social practice and the types of attention paid to these processes, which I believe are inherited from second-wave feminism, contemporary examples of which I have outlined above.

Current research into textile craft practices takes up these themes and is developing its own voice within the wider discourses of creative and critical practice.<sup>30</sup> The examples described below all use textile hand-crafts, as I do, as their central research method to explore the rich potential of textile hand-crafts as a mode of interaction. Textile making is the subject of enquiry, the means of investigation, and is used to communicate the research. We have each come to our subjects of research independently through our prior experiences as textile practitioners,<sup>31</sup> but share an emphasis on the symbolic or metaphorical personal, social and cultural functions of making textiles over and above the mechanical skills of production.

Solveigh Goett's PhD research, completed in 2010, explored narratives of personal memories through everyday textile crafting as document, archive and practice to reveal connections between lived experiences and abstract thought.<sup>32</sup> Dawn Mason's research explores the intuitive, emotional work of hand-stitching as a bridge between an inner personal world and an external

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<sup>30</sup> Recent conferences dedicated to textile research include *TRIP – Textile Research In Process*, held at Loughborough University in November 2011, with proceedings due to be published in 2015; *The Subversive Stitch Revisited*, held at the Victoria and Albert museum in October 2013; *Transition: Re-thinking Textiles and Surfaces*, to be held at the University of Huddersfield in November 2014. The *Making Futures III* conference, held in Plymouth in September 2013, dedicated a workshop strand to 'Transformative Practices in/through Textiles'. The last decade has seen the introduction of two dedicated academic journals: *Textile: the Journal of Cloth and Culture*, and the *Journal of Textile Design Research and Practice* – both published by Bloomsbury in London.

<sup>31</sup> I have knowledge of these projects and/or contact with the researchers from attending conferences and symposia where we have heard each other present our research. At the time of writing this, we have not worked together or directly influenced each other, but are aware of this expanding interest in our specialist fields of textile crafting.

<sup>32</sup> Goett's PhD research *Linking threads of experience and lines of thought: everyday textiles in the narration of the self* was undertaken at the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London and completed in 2010. Her cabinet of curiosities, *Mirabilia Domestica* the practical component of her doctoral research, has since been exhibited at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA) in London in 2010, followed by other works, *Touch and Tell*, at the Freud Museum, London in 2011.

material world.<sup>33</sup> However, neither of these projects yet extend to shared social experiences of hand-stitching.

Amy Twigger Holroyd's PhD research, completed in 2013, does draw on the social credentials of textile hand-crafts. Her investigation of hand-knitting as an instrument of individual empowerment in the context of re-fashioned clothing as a strategy for sustainable fashion is explored through workshops with a group of amateur knitting enthusiasts.<sup>34</sup> Anchored in a social science and design research context, Twigger Holroyd takes a broader view of making, examining the relationship between the making process and the wearing of homemade items, whereas I focus on the 'micro context' of the making process itself and the characteristics of hand-stitching skills as they are felt and valued by practitioners. However, we use similar methods, in particular working with groups of non-professional makers in workshop activities. A shared interest in community and collaboration form the basis of Susan Noble's (2011) current research,<sup>35</sup> which aims to untangle the relationship between individual contribution to and communal ownership of collectively made textile craft works.

From various perspectives ordered around our personal experiences of the hand-crafts we practise, our research offers insights into the current attention paid to textile making processes. This approach to crafting I describe as relational because it both facilitates the building of relationships with and highlights connections between people, between people and events and between people, places and things. In this world overwhelmed by the convenient speed and spontaneity of visual information, where image and concept hold supremacy over sensory experience (Veiteberg, 2005), the processes involved in making things by hand remind us that we are physically grounded by our bodies in a material world. As philosopher Matthew Crawford proposes,

"Thinking about manual engagement seems to require nothing less than that we consider what a human being is. That is, we are led to consider how the specifically human manner of being is lit up, as it were, by man's interaction with his world through his hands." (Crawford, 2009: 63).

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<sup>33</sup> Mason's research has grown from her involvement in the Stitch and Think research group at the University of the West of England. The group, set up by studio lecturers Dawn Mason and Janet Haigh, aims to create opportunities for practitioners to "reflect on their own making processes" (Haigh & Mason, 2009) through shared making workshops.

<sup>34</sup> Twigger Holroyd's PhD research *Folk Fashion: amateur re-knitting as a strategy for sustainability* (2013) was undertaken at Birmingham City University.

<sup>35</sup> Noble's research has developed out of a collaborative project undertaken with students at the University of Portsmouth, where she teaches, and local residents on a close-by housing estate to cultivate the inter-generational transmission of hand-knitting skills. At the time of writing this thesis, the research formed the foundations of her PhD study at the University of the Arts London.

This research intends to explore some of the cognitive and emotional qualities particular to hand-stitching processes in order to be able to respond to Crawford's proposition and demonstrate that the practice of stitching, as a craft which activates the articulation of hand, eye, mind, memory and material, is a process which needs to be understood as a mode of interaction if it is not merely trivialised as quaint, as domestic labour or archived as ethnographic curiosity or as art object.

## 1.3 Introducing the methodology

This research is practice-led. As mentioned here on p. 19, it has grown from my experiences as a creative practitioner working on community arts initiatives. Robson (1993: 446) describes a practitioner-researcher as “someone who holds down a job in some particular area and ... carries out systematic enquiry which is of relevance to the job.” This research is integrated into a continuity of my practice; I bring my prior knowledge and experience to the research, which informs the ontological position and influences the design of the research. However, aware that ‘insider’ knowledge can carry preconceptions, I have endeavoured to explore the stitching practices subject of this research from a variety of perspectives to ensure a means of necessary triangulation. Given that there are as yet few methodological models in this field I use a hybrid combination of qualitative methods (Gray & Malins, 2004: 21). These comprise creative and practical stitching activities undertaken alone and in groups alongside ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods such as participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and conversations, and autobiographical narratives of personal experiences. This section will first outline my research approach explaining my decision to focus on experiences of process and use of metaphor. I will then define the research questions before elaborating on the methods used to conduct the enquiry.

At this point I will re-state the aims of the research:

- to explore ways in which hand-stitching activities articulate dimensions of subjective experience.
- to reveal ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group is constructed through their crafting skills.
- to propose an additional perspective from which to appreciate hand-stitching processes, and extend existing approaches to the study of textile craft practices.



## Motivation: object or process?

My first set of studies for this research was a series of hand-stitched personal diary pages made in order to explore the possible functions of, and my motivations for, personal stitching, that might in turn prepare me to better understand something of others' motivations. Working on my own I used decorative free-hand embroidery to record my thoughts visually over a period of ten months. The pages consist of collections of marks and motifs that attempt to represent my thoughts and feelings through considered choices of thread, colour, motif and technique. I chose plain calico pages to imitate the pages of a notebook. Notes made alongside the embroideries record the time and place made, and my mood regarding the events concerning me at the time (figs 9-14 on pp. 51-52. See Appendix II for full set).

At the time of making these I was new to living in London and had just begun the research project in an environment of postgraduate arts education. To some extent I was trying to find a way to fit in: to forge my identity in a new community. To this end some of these diary pages were exhibited (figs 15 & 16). By presenting the embroideries as pages in a book format I had hoped to indicate their function as a journal. As with written diaries, they are a repository of thoughts, impressions, and reflections on events and experiences as they occur. However, transferring attention to the finished object exhibited in a gallery context proved to be only partly satisfactory. To me the embroideries were more than visual representations of my thoughts. I realized that some elements from the making process carried personal value for me, but were not explicitly conveyed in the static presentation. For example, reliance on the familiarity of my sewing kit, and the smallness and convenience of these materials and tools such that I could carry them around with me, had given me some continuity during a period of upheaval. I had found making work that I knew how to do reassuring in a strange place as a way of privately rehearsing my sense of self. The process of making the embroideries had greater significance for me than the result. However, as an exhibited piece, this was embedded within the works and known to me, but invisible to viewers without additional written or verbal explanation.

Material culture studies have revealed the sorts of value objects as discrete entities hold for people (Attfield, 2000; Miller, 2008, 2010), the social agency and power of objects (Kopytoff, 1986; Daniels, 2009) or their consumption and display (Turney, 2004). However, the sorts of motivations people might have for making things because they value the process sometimes

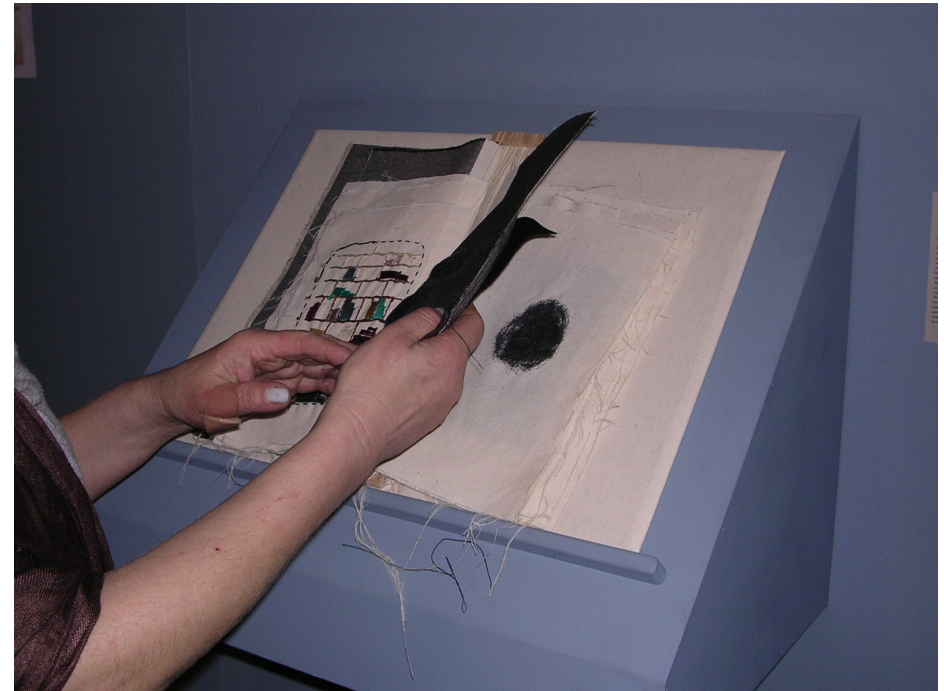
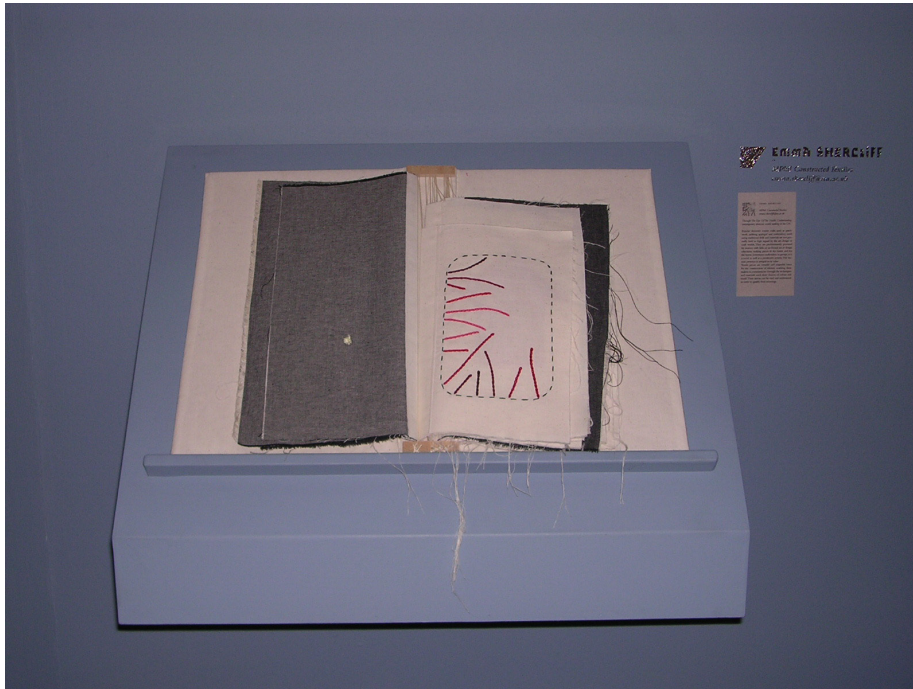


Fig 15 & 16. One of the stitched diaries displayed for the 'Work In Progress' exhibition, Royal College of Art, 2007.

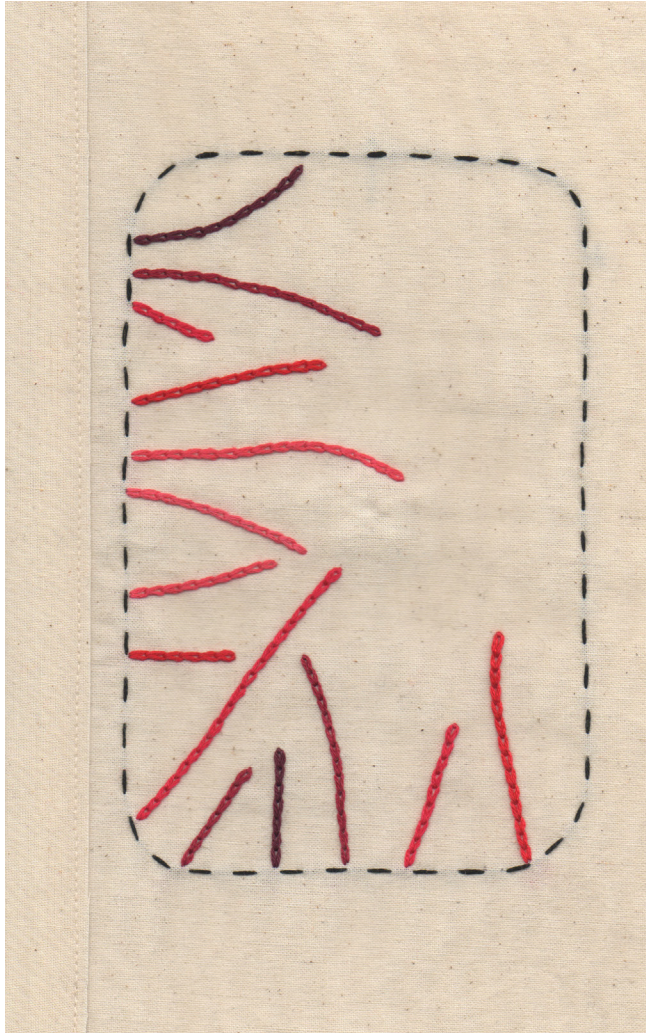


Fig 9.

3 November 2006. Cotton thread on calico.

*I am beginning to make inroads into the project. I keep stopping and starting, down different pathways, following up different ideas. Going forwards. Still fragile - like the chain stitch, one pull and it could all come undone.*



Fig 10.

2 February 2007. Cotton threads on calico.

*A dark, scratchy cloud is hanging over me. It can't remain.*

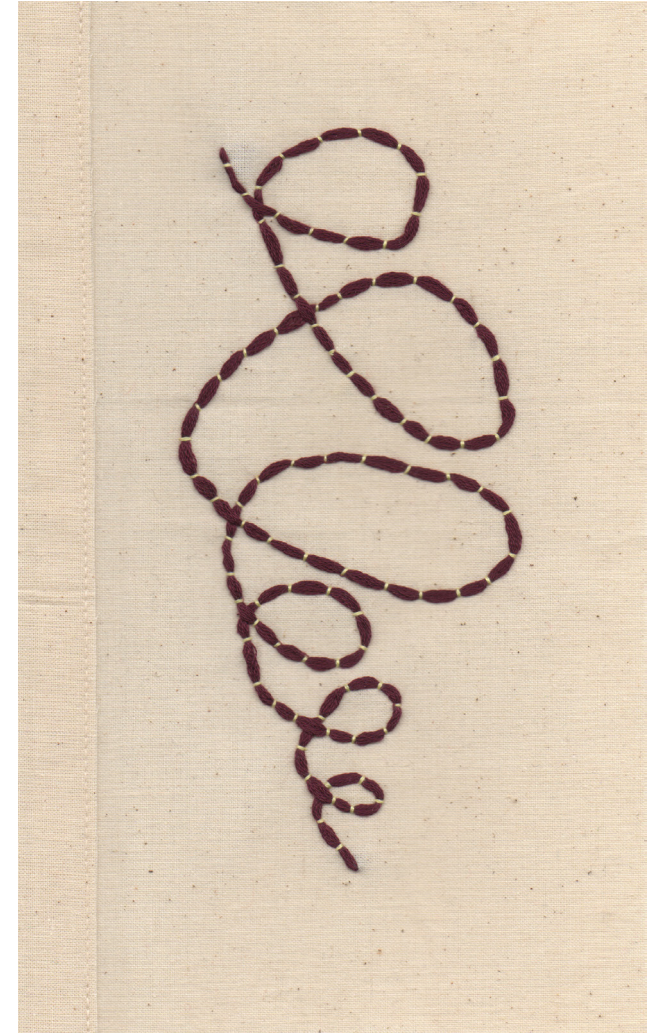


Fig 11.

21 March 2007. Cotton threads on calico.

*Ways of doing this work me round a theme, then back to where I started, and then off again in another direction. A wandering path and I keep crossing myself, coming back to key points.*

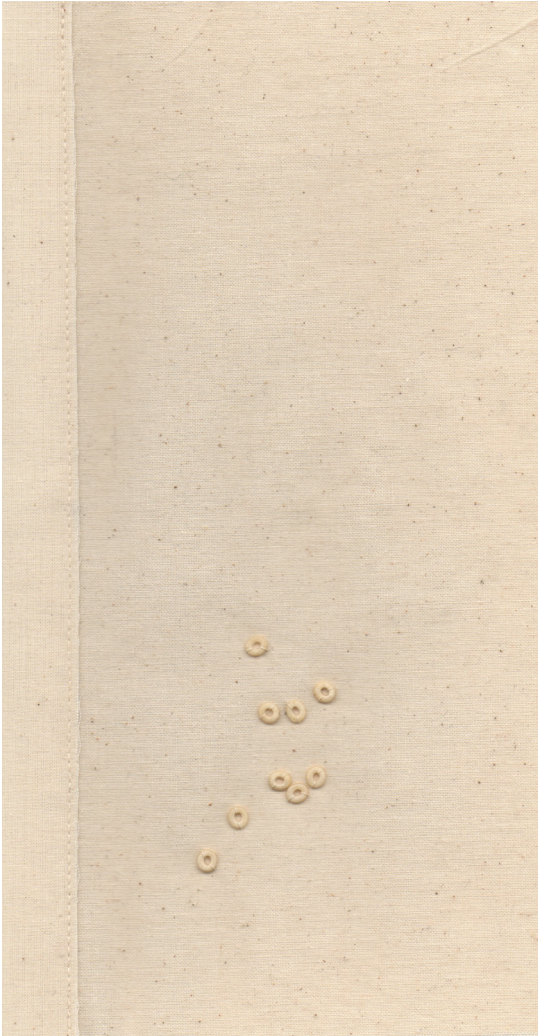


Fig 12.

7 February 2007. Beads on calico.

*Sowing seeds. New thoughts. New ideas. Don't sow them too densely, allow them to grow.*



Fig 13.

4 February 2007. Various threads on calico.

*Thoughts are easily tangled up, here couched down to avoid losing control, getting caught up, or even lost.*

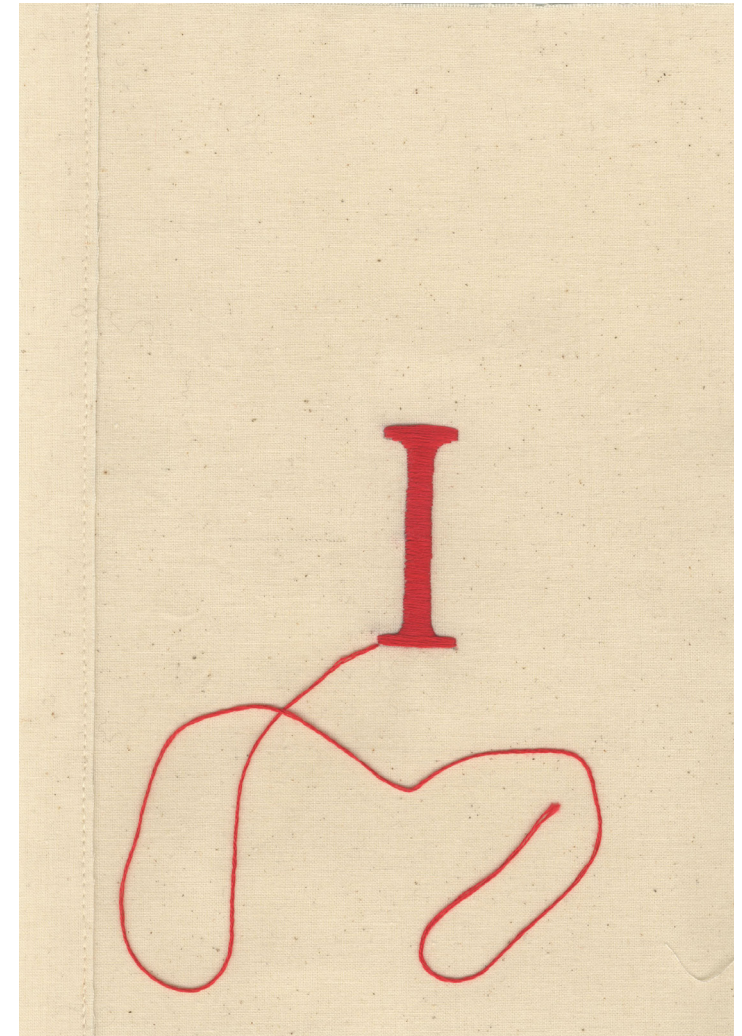


Fig 14.

12 February 2007. Satin stitch in cotton thread on calico.

*The autobiographical 'I', 'I' the subject, the eye for looking, the eye of the needle. My way of looking at the subject is to note. I am looking through a lens. And what I see also reflects back something of me. I didn't intend for it to be about me.*

more so than possessing or displaying the objects is acknowledged to be understudied.<sup>36</sup> Although in the early stages of the research process I tried displaying the works I had made to be considered as representative objects, I learnt that the knowledge gained through the process of making textiles is differently meaningful to individuals than the knowledge deliberated about finished textile artefacts in use or on display, whether on display in a gallery, home, community centre or church. To use the example of my embroideries, their value for me as the maker changed from being an influential component in a process of self-discovery having aided my integration into a new environment, to being visual artefacts attempting to represent a specific experience in a specific place at a specific time. As archived documents of this experience, their display as artworks provoked distracting questions relating to the categorization and display of textile artefacts.

Freeman (1997) was useful in determining a view on hand-stitching as a relational activity rather than a category of object. Her analysis of work made by non-professional craft practitioners “sensitive to the emotional and social needs making can fulfil at a personal level” (Freeman, 1997: 271) implies that the process of making is a type of work that attends to the social and psychological well-being of the person making and suggests that for some practitioners the doing is more important than the thing done. Referring to the precision of hand-stitching, Mitchell (2006: 29) writes of “the skills of this meticulous and intimate engineering without which all manner of stuff (material and social) would fall apart”. Exploring the ‘meticulous and intimate engineering’ of skilful hand-stitching leads me to infer that the ‘object’ I set out to study is not an object, but was and is a ‘process’.

Adamson (2007: 4) writes that “Craft only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people”. For me it is exactly that, ‘a way of doing things’. I make various types of work and I work in various locations. I neither describe myself as an artist, nor as a hobbyist. I don’t have a dedicated studio and usually transport my tools and materials to the people I am working with, or fit making in around other demands on my time. I use my skills as a textile maker to set up different sorts of encounters with people, places and things, usually to learn more about these relations and explore ways of transforming the learning and connections made into material, tangible experiences. From this perspective, craft is “an active, relational concept rather than a fixed category” (Adamson, 2007: 4), and I use this approach in this research

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<sup>36</sup> The *Journal of Material Culture* dedicated an issue (2009, vol.14, no.4) to the anthropology of techniques, which “considers the embodied and cognitive engagement of human beings in their lived material world” and explores ways in which new theories of embodiment, cognition and performance offer opportunities to consider the role of the senses, perception, emotions and materiality in knowledge formation, and acknowledge this field of anthropology as understudied (Douny & Naji, 2009: 411). See also Marchand (2001, 2009a) for research into the cultural value of knowledge in practice and manual skills learning.

to focus on exploring the knowledge that emerges from immersion in the processes of making. I use verbs in the present continuous (crafting, making, stitching, articulating) to emphasize my interest in these processes as a continually evolving set of experiences integrated into a broader range of actions and decisions rather than a discrete category of object.

## Metaphor

'Crafting', defined as making skilfully (OED), implies the possession and use of practical knowledge. When used metaphorically, as in the sense 'crafting relationships' it also suggests other types of knowledge above and beyond technical ability that I believe are similarly embodied through practising certain kinds of processes. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that:

"Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003: 3).

Accordingly, experiences can be understood through the structures of learnt and practised body movements and gestures as well as language; actions, like words, can carry a symbolic transfer of meaning. Hand-stitching gestures that attach together and/or inscribe surfaces can be explored as metaphors for joining, connection, attachment, articulation and integrity. For example, the rhythms of over-sewing pieces of cloth together into patchwork choreograph a concept of relation, of attachment and of articulation. The piercing of cloth with needle and thread, moving from front to back and back to front, from seeing the needle to feeling it, can also be explored as a metaphor; a metaphor for integrating domains of human experience from the observed to the sensed. The thread moves between the two surfaces uniting and articulating the different knowledge systems: the explicit and the tacit. In light of this, as a process, hand-stitching can be considered, metaphorically, as an elemental form of articulation for individuals and between people which simultaneously creates and describes these relations.

## Exploring and encountering: in search of knowledge

Making things therefore involves different kinds of processes that draw from different knowledge systems "emerging from

a progressive and continual adjustment of practitioners' perception and body movements in relation to their environment" (Douny & Naji, 2009: 413). Making requires us to use our emotions and all our senses to explore, act on and with our world in an evolving relationship with materials that we discover through our actions; through doing. Artefacts are produced out of this stimulating process of encounter, exploration and interpretation between eye, hand, mind, materials and method as by-products of material investigations that lead to new discoveries, acquaintances and conversations with the world. Hands reach out inquisitively, to touch, take, and eventually manipulate the materials to transform them, always in anticipation of discovery, without knowing quite how it might turn out. It is through these types of encounter, exchange and eventual familiarity that knowledge of the thing being made begins to emerge. As the poet Joseph Brodsky explains, these exploratory actions are possibly more emotionally and cognitively stimulating in a maker's consciousness than the product: "[T]he first, the second, and the last reality for him is the work itself, the very process of working. The process takes precedence over its result" (Brodsky, quoted in Pallasmaa, 2009: 80).

An encounter suggests an unfamiliar or unforeseen 'coming-up-against'.<sup>37</sup> 'Coming-up-against' is critical here as it implies being 'in-contact-with'. There is, therefore, a physical and active dimension to an encounter. All senses are alert to the event. The sensory boundary between the self and the thing encountered is permeable and an impression is made. Through touch, smell, sound and vision elements of the thing encountered seep into and enmesh with the self, thereby transforming one's knowledge of the surrounding material world. As Ingold (2010: 8) puts it, "it is in the opposite of capture and containment, namely discharge and leakage, that we discover the life of things". Michel Serres, writing about the sense of touch in his 'philosophy of mingled bodies' proposes a similar view, that the body meets the world through the skin in a mutual touching where things mingle: "I mingle with the world which mingles itself in me. The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling" (quoted in Connor, 2005: 322). This idea of 'mingling with the world' suggests "a conception of the human being not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships" (Ingold, 2000: 4).

Our knowledge of our selves and the world is embodied through a 'continually unfolding field of relationships', the 'mingled bodies' of which are simultaneously intra- and inter-subjective experiences. Skilful hand-stitching is in my view a demonstration

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<sup>37</sup> 'Encounter' derives from the Latin *contra*, which means 'against'.

of inquisitive and knowledgeable hands exploring and interacting with their world in this way. To understand such a making process as a 'continually unfolding field of relationships' associates making processes with forms of interaction and suggests that knowledge of making could be used to understand embodied knowledge of social interactions. This approach forms the foundations of this research.

## Defining a critical perspective

The challenge for me in moving from a practitioner to a practitioner-researcher was to identify which aspects of hand-stitching processes I was able to study both from the inside, bringing to bear my prior knowledge and skills to the subject, and from the outside as a critical observer.

My questions arose whilst filming quilters stitching during a group workshop. I found that paradoxically, although using video to document what participants were doing was an appropriate method "through which I could experience something similar to what my research participants were both describing and experiencing themselves" (Pink, 2008: 138), the device of the camera also separates the person observing from the subject of observation. Framing my subject using the precision of the viewfinder enabled me to see clearly and objectively what as an intuitive maker I might not separate out from an otherwise holistic making experience. I found this distance a useful way of defining a critical perspective on my subject. I realized I was focusing my attention on the dexterity of the quilters' hand movements: their hands and fingers appeared to move and respond to the materials on their own account – picking up pins, stroking and stretching the fabric until it lies flat and straight – as if making their own decisions about when to fold the fabric, or how far to push a pin through the folds, sensing exactly the right amount of pressure needed, adjusting the angle, and then repeating the same process. (See \* *Feeling A Way 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5*). My attention was drawn to movements and sensations I recognized from my own knowledge of hand-stitching and using the video camera enabled me to focus on these particular aspects of the process: the hands' knowledge-in-action.



## Research questions

In examining the rhythms and patterns particular to hand movements performed and observed in hand-stitching processes, I investigate here relationships between the skilful crafting of stitches and the sorts of satisfactions it brings, and examine the relationship of these satisfactions to forms of tacitly acquired embodied knowledge. Underpinning this is an exploration of particular haptic qualities and sensations relative to hand-stitching processes. I ask in what ways might this skilled activity articulate these dimensions of subjective experience? In turn, this leads me to question ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group might be articulated through their crafting skills.

## Methods: researching experience

In order to explore the questions, the methodological model I use is characterized by a multi-method approach in line with the diverse approaches used in practice-led research, drawn in part from more established fields in the social sciences and humanities and combined with textile making. Gray and Malins (2004) describe practice-led models of research as “responsive, driven by the requirements of practice and its creative dynamic ... essentially qualitative and naturalistic” (Gray & Malins, 2004: 21). My research concerns the dynamic relationship between practical skill, the body and its proximity to tools, materials and other people during actual experiences of hand-stitching; it is an investigation into the nature of knowledge known **in** and **through** hand-stitching as an active making process. As a practice-led research project the design of the research process has been led by my responses to the practical activities; as a naturalistic enquiry the various stitching activities I have facilitated or participated in have been undertaken in their natural settings (Robson, 1993: 60). The diagram included in Appendix I shows how the various activities interconnect through, and respond to, key questions or themes of enquiry.

The stitching activities consist of: joining a group of embroiderers who meet weekly in their village church hall to work on a communal project (fig 17), organizing workshops in art school studios to discuss and share with student participants ideas about stitching practices and habits (fig 18), participating in and facilitating drop-in stitching workshops with members of the public at various venues (fig 19), as well as working independently at home on artefacts. Most of the examples featured here



Fig 17. Joining the Wiltshire embroidery group, 2008.



Fig 18. Taking a Thread For a Walk: running a hand-stitching workshop with student volunteers at the Arts University Bournemouth, June 2011.



Fig 19. Running a hand embroidery workshop for Craftspace at the Clothes Show Live, December 2011.

are either decorative or experimental samples made by myself and participants taking part in this research. A few examples, such as bed quilts, carry vestiges of their traditional functionality; some are artworks intended for exhibition.

As a practitioner, I share skills, knowledge and personal experience with the other participants in my study. I am, therefore, through my practice, intimately connected to my particular ethnography (Aull Davies, 1999: 15), and my own experiences of hand-stitching influence my understanding of others' experiences. I am aware that as my experience leads the project, it is limited and cannot reflect a generalized view (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998), but my aim has been to build, as far as is possible, a richly layered picture of the hand-craft I practice. It is because of my broad approach to the practice of hand-stitching that I am able to move between a variety of experiences, different contexts and locations to participate, apply and adapt my stitching skills.

I have played, and continue to play, different roles throughout the research: as an observer, a participant, a maker, a workshop leader, and a visitor or contributor to events. I have worked with practitioners who have dedicated years of skilled practice to their stitching projects, as well as with new recruits learning basic skills. This has allowed me to compare and evaluate experiences across different levels of commitment to the craft. To this end the variety of stitching and making activities – as a solo activity, as workshops and as a group activity – has enabled me to gather audio, visual, practical and emotional information from these different perspectives. Discussion with other stitch practitioners, and the reciprocal gesture of showing participants my own stitching work in order to share my observations with them has helped to guard against a singular point of view and an overly subjective account.<sup>38</sup>

## Documenting process

To document the making processes and related events I used a combination of reflective journal writing, video, photography and audio recordings. The documentation aims to capture what the stitching experience or activity looks like, and what it feels like to be engaged in it.

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<sup>38</sup> I brought examples of my own patchwork quilts to my first meeting with the group of patchwork enthusiasts as a way to confirm our shared interests. I also use my personal practice to reflect on what was seen and heard. For example, confronted with a different culture of stitching practices in the quilting group, I used my stitching skills to articulate links between the quilters and being a student at the Royal College of Art by reflecting on my own use of time in order to better understand their practices. Some of the quilters spoke of how they sought time for their sewing activities, fitting it in around their other commitments. Over a period of nine days I recorded, through individual pieces of embroidery, the time I managed to find opportunities to stitch and for how long, discovering that I too was quickly interrupted and found myself trying to fit my stitching in around other demands made on my time. (See Appendix III for full set).

Video and photography enable “records of real-world, real-time actions and events” (Loizos, 2000: 93). I have used these methods to visually document materials used, artefacts made and the environments in which these things are made. Additionally, the photos record how I and the participants handle materials and tools, and the time-based media of video and audio recordings document the pace and rhythms of these making processes – including interruptions and distractions – as well as voiced commentary on, or reflective thoughts about the activity as it is happening.

Reflective journal writing enabled me to begin putting into words physical and emotional experiences of making later allowing me to make connections and highlight differences between stitching practices. As a store of information used systematically as I progressed through the research (Gray & Malins, 2004: 59), it has documented my thought processes whilst working, my relations to others in the group or the space I am working in, and the decisions I make.

As an extension of the written journal, audio recordings of my thoughts spoken aloud as they arise whilst stitching attempt to record physical sensations, emotions, memories, anecdotal associations as close as is possible to the moments of making. Denzin (1997: 87) writes: “Ethnographers will continue to work outwards from their own biographies to the worlds of experience that surround them.” Although personal to me and therefore intensely subjective accounts, with these processes of “active documentation” (de Freitas, 2002) I aim to give a sense of the richness of the experience of making that I believe resonates with others’ experiences. I balance my voiced commentaries with accounts collected from interviews with other practitioners. In keeping with my emphasis on process over artefact, the thesis privileges the use of documentary images and quotes, however where it has been possible images of works made and whole texts are contained in the Appendices.

## Criteria for selecting stitching groups

The participants in this research and I choose to stitch for a variety of reasons. We might be excluded from a narrow definition of ‘professional’ stitchers if restricted to those “engaged in a specified activity as one’s main paid occupation” (OED) as we are not, or are no longer, working in a commercial context. Most are non-professional practitioners with varied levels of expertise and experience, from those with decades of dedicated practice, to novices. However, several participants are trained professionally; some exhibit and sell work; others teach, as do I; and some are professionals-in-training. I rapidly found the

rigidity of the terms 'professional' or 'amateur' as classifications unhelpful; a sliding scale of categories across different fields of practice might be a more appropriate approach to classifying the work.<sup>39</sup> We have chosen to stitch because we enjoy practising the craft, learning the skills, and contributing to the related social exchanges. The fact that we choose to stitch has allowed me to focus on the sorts of stimuli we are responding to when working with cloth and crafting stitches that encourages us to continue wanting to do it for its own sake aside from any financial gain or recognition of status. Voluntarily making the effort to find or make time to stitch suggests that we find it worthwhile to maintain our activity. It brings rewards recognized externally by others such as admiration for the effort invested, but I believe we might also be intuitively feeling a way towards internally recognized sensory or psychological rewards: for instance, the return of a sense of control measured by its slow rhythms, or the comfort of familiar sensations of touch.<sup>40</sup>

In the early stages of the research I did not want the responsibility of designing and managing a project to skew my experience of 'joining in' as a participant observer. Forming my own group to initiate a project of my invention, or introducing a new project to an existing group, I felt would set up conditions that might shift the emphasis of the enquiry to my criteria for selection, my responsibilities as facilitator rather than maker, and possibly give participants artificial motivations to stitch. As a form of naturalistic enquiry I wanted to study what stitchers typically do (Snape & Spencer, 2003). It was important that participants made work independently from my interest in their activity and it felt inappropriate to request tasks from participants that they might not otherwise engage in of their own volition. As my interest was in the group's collective activity and the social context of stitching I felt it was also important that the group members already knew each other and were familiar with the concept of working together. This wasn't intended to be a study of ways in which artists facilitate community projects, but rather I wanted to use my shared skills and interests to join a group and reflect on the usefulness of my skill as a stitcher rather than as a facilitator. Having considered these alternative approaches to collective making, I opted to find and work with self-formed quilting and embroidery groups that already existed.

My experiences as a practitioner, and later as a teacher, lead me to believe that women comprise the majority of people involved with stitch-crafts today. Reflecting this, the studies for this research have been undertaken with all-female groups.

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<sup>39</sup> As I mention here in Chapter One, p. 22, hand-stitching practices have permeable and shifting borders. An attempt to map and contextualize the nuances and overlaps of hand-stitching practices today would form the basis of a separate study.

<sup>40</sup> These satisfactions, and others, are further explored in Chapter Three.

Men have not been deliberately excluded, although I know of, and have met, men who stitch.<sup>41</sup> In my examples, the stitching activity, and especially the regular social meetings associated with it, seem to appeal more to women than to men.

Through personal contacts, a visit to the Knitting and Stitching show<sup>42</sup> and a quilting exhibition I made contact with three informal stitching groups (a patchwork-quilting group based in south London, and two rural embroidery groups, one in Somerset and one in Wiltshire) whose members agreed to participate in the research. I observed the patchwork-quilting group over a period of eleven months, documenting their work and interviewing members;<sup>43</sup> I joined the Wiltshire embroidery group as a participant observer with the aim of understanding and consequently interpreting their experiences through my own experience of participating in their stitching and related social activities (Robson, 1993: 194-195). The group was local to where my family live, which meant that on a practical note I was broadly familiar with the locality and it was relatively straightforward for me to meet regularly.<sup>44</sup> I subsequently worked with them on their embroidery project for two years. Information about the participants and details regarding our meetings can be found in Appendices VIII and IX.

## Interviewing participants

Having been invited to meet the group of patchwork enthusiasts in south London I arranged to interview some of them individually in their homes intending to learn more about their individual motivations for stitching. I considered developing questionnaires, adopted from social science methods, however because of my own closeness to and involvement with the subject these interviews were more likely to be what Kvale (1996: 14) describes as an “inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest”. I used questions only as a starting point for in-depth interviews semi-

41 For example, artist Ray Materson; Tony Casdagli, whose own stitched samplers were shown alongside his father’s in the ‘Power of Making’ exhibition at the Victoria & Albert museum, London (2011); artist and curator David Littler; Gavin Fry; and Matthew Harris. Kaffe Fassett and Jamie Chalmers, aka Mr X-Stitch, divided by a generation, both have their own creative careers as well as spearheading successful commercial ventures appealing to wide cross-section of stitch-craft enthusiasts. Stitched work by men was the subject of the exhibition ‘Boys Who Sew’, curated by Janis Jefferies and held at the Crafts Council, London, in 2003 (Leonard, 2003). One of the sewing groups I met during the course of the research included a male participant; I was informed that he stitched prolifically, producing many more cushions than his fellow female stitchers, but chose not to join the group at their regular meetings which suggests he did not ‘opt in’ for the rewards of the social performance of group stitching practices. This is further discussed in relation to gender roles in Chapter Four.

42 See Chapter One, p. 26 for more information about the Knitting and Stitching show.

43 See Chapter Three, pp. 106-109 for further information about the group. See also Appendix VIII.

44 See Chapter Four, pp. 130-133 for further information about the group. See also Appendix IX.

structured by a topic guide that allowed participants “to talk at length, in their own terms” (Gaskell, 2000: 45) and recorded them using a digital audio recorder.<sup>45</sup> These recorded conversations also captured discussion prompted by finding and pulling out pieces of work or fabrics that revealed insights into their practices, which are not easily deciphered in photographs, although I took photographs as a visual reminder of the work discussed.

Given the nature of our shared interests in and experience of stitching, these interviews naturally grew into conversational exchanges between myself and the participants. Valued as “construction sites of knowledge” (Kvale, 1996: 14) I further adopted this strategy of capturing both audio and visual records of group discussions with both the patchwork quilting group and the embroidery group whilst they worked using a combination of still photography and video recordings. The use of audio and video recordings provides documentation that can be revisited after the event and often reveals details that had been missed whilst working and talking during the sessions. A critical example of this was my realisation of the attention I was in fact paying to the quilters’ hand movements, when I believed I was documenting the group working as a whole.<sup>46</sup>

It is important to acknowledge here that I, and the quilting group participants are, as Maynard and Purvis (1994: 6) explain, differently positioned in relation to both the production of knowledge and the kinds of knowledge we already possess. By showing the patchwork-quilting group extracts from the videos I had made of their hands working during one of their group workshop sessions and explaining to them what I was wanting to investigate in my research I discovered that although we had shared interests in stitching, we did not want to know it in the same way. It became clear to me that our motivations to stitch together collectively were incompatible; the participants were passionate about making patchwork quilts but less comfortable experimenting with their skills in pursuit of exploring what they know about making quilts. For this I turned to my own skills, and devised other types of collective making experiences with other groups of participants.

## Workshops

At a later stage in the research, in order to return to and explore in greater depth specific questions concerning what the

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<sup>45</sup> See Appendix VIII for question guide, participant information, ethics forms and transcripts of the interviews.

<sup>46</sup> See p. 56 for this discussion.

tacit knowledge of hand-stitching might feel like and how we might find words to describe it, I designed workshop tasks that I hoped might generate group discussions prompted by spontaneous responses to stitching tasks. This required participants who were comfortable reflecting on and evaluating experiences of creative tasks in group discussion and I turned to two groups of students – the first comprising fellow research students<sup>47</sup> and the second comprising undergraduate students<sup>48</sup> – who between them I felt would be able to express a diverse set of experiences and opinions.<sup>49</sup>

The variety of stitching activities that form the basis of this research have allowed for different sorts of information to be observed, listened to and felt. Interviews capture personal anecdotes, recollections and descriptions from the participants providing a context for their individual stitching practices and motivations. Informal conversations emerging in direct response to the practical stitching activities draw out intuitive and spontaneous comments that could not be recreated for interviews held after the event. Video goes a step further to capture visual connections between doing and thinking simultaneously – ‘in the moment’ – that allow for the knowledge held in knowing hands to be observed in action; information that can’t be detected in photographs of finished works. This combination of qualitative research methods built around the creative activities of participants

“offers a positive challenge to the taken-for-granted idea that you can explore the social world just by asking people questions, in language ... it is an enabling methodology – it assumes that people have something interesting to communicate, and that they can do so creatively.” (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006: 83).

Alongside this, I complement my knowledge of stitching practices by participating in associated events such as visits to exhibitions, trade fairs, talks, lectures, social occasions and workshops. I have also taken advantage of opportunities, such as residencies or commissions, that arose in the course of the project and even if they were not initially mapped out in the proposal stages were incorporated into the research where appropriate. For example the Sknitch drop-in workshop event

<sup>47</sup> These were fellow research students in the Textiles and Fashion research group at the Royal College of Art.

<sup>48</sup> These were students from the BA (Hons) Textiles course at the Arts University Bournemouth where I teach.

<sup>49</sup> Information about the workshop participants, the tasks, works made and transcripts of the resultant group discussions can be found in Appendices VI and VII.



organised by Craftspace<sup>50</sup> took place at the Clothes Show Live,<sup>51</sup> Birmingham NEC, in December 2011, in order to encourage young people to try hand embroidery (amongst other techniques) as a way of creatively customizing or 'upcycling' clothes instead of buying new ones (Craftspace Collective, 2011). Participants had little or no experience of stitching and I was commissioned to facilitate their mini making projects. Having worked mostly with people who knew how to sew, this presented an excellent opportunity to study the frustrations and physical awkwardness of learning a new hand skill, which I explore in Chapter Two.

As an experienced stitcher myself I found it difficult to imagine what it feels like to learn a new hand skill. In order to investigate how it might feel to discover the sensations of, and learn how to use, new tools, materials and processes I joined a stone-carving evening class, as a beginner, with the intention of examining my acquisition of basic skills through first-hand experience.<sup>52</sup> I discuss this experience in Chapter Two. I chose stone-carving as I wanted to try a craft that shared some characteristics with hand-stitching so I could compare the qualities of the experiences directly. As such, stone-carving similarly involves repetitive gestures and progress towards the completion of a piece of work is slow. But it differs in other ways, which meant my body, hands and thoughts were kept aware of the particular discomforts of learning a new skill. Whereas needlework is lightweight and easily transportable, stone is hard and heavy requiring physical strength; it can't be easily transported, picked up and tidied away in the manner of home stitching projects. I usually sit to stitch and manipulate the work in hand to suit my posture (fig 20), but working in stone requires the maker to stand, and the body moves around the work (fig 21).

Hand-stitching is quiet, which permits conversation and discussion, whereas carving stone is noisy preventing easy social interaction.

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<sup>50</sup> The Birmingham based organisation Craftspace describes itself as "developing people, ideas and opportunities through contemporary craft" (Craftspace, 2008). It specialises in pioneering approaches to engaging a diverse public with contemporary craft, recruiting practitioners to work with a wide range of communities and organisations producing ambitious new works (Figueiredo, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> The Clothes Show Live, held at the Birmingham NEC, is a fashion event aimed at informing young people about the UK fashion industry, offering opportunities to learn how to get involved in the various fields of design, marketing, promotion. There is a strong emphasis on audience participation through workshops and competitions; information on education and training programmes is available from colleges and universities; and there is a large retail fair.

<sup>52</sup> I enrolled for one term of ten weekly evening class sessions, each lasting two and a half hours, between April and July 2011. This was followed up by several more sporadic sessions undertaken to complete my carving project comprising three seven-hour Saturday workshops and four more evening sessions until June 2012. The classes were held at Arts Express studios, Kennington, south London, taught by Marcia Bennett Male, architectural stone carver and letter cutter. A maximum of nine students were taught in a studio workshop environment. Each student came with a project in mind, and through discussion with the tutor, a manageable project was agreed that took into account the student's level of prior experience. Teaching was delivered one-to-one by demonstration; students learning by watching the tutor, trying for themselves, discovering their abilities and practising, using their chosen project as the vehicle for learning. I discuss my experience of beginning to learn these skills in Chapter Two, pp. 95-99.

I also draw upon my experiences of stitching alone on my own personal projects. I have used my stitching as a means to reflect on and to explore details of themes or questions arising from conversations and group making sessions. Although stitching collectively and stitching alone could be studied as two distinctly different practices, I have learned from my conversations with participants that many people who stitch in groups also stitch alone – as do I. I was therefore able to turn to my own stitching practice in order to explore stitching as a private activity.



Fig 20. Sitting down to work on my embroidery, I pull the cloth in around my posture.



Fig 21. Standing to carve stone, I move my body around the work.

## Why different types of stitching activities?

Other approaches to collective creative work exist. That there is an increasing interest in the therapeutic qualities of these types of familiar craft processes is evident in the use of social stitching activities (amongst other crafts) to provide remediation as part of occupational therapy programmes (Howell & Pierce, 2000; Reynolds, 2004; Arts For Health Cornwall, 2012).

Efficient production of large-scale works can motivate some artists to rely on group commitment and large numbers of public participants and in the process facilitate encounters and conversations between people that might not otherwise take place. Many museum and artist initiatives exploit these aspects of participatory art<sup>53</sup> and craft,<sup>54</sup> often with the added benefits of reaching out to wide audiences, inviting visitors and spectators to collaborate in and learn from the processes of making.

Moreover, the scale of work coupled with the numbers of people involved ensures a high level of visual, social and/or political impact, if that is the intention. One such example is the ongoing – now global – ‘NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt’ begun in 1987 (Becker, 1997: 40), and more recently the ‘Craftivist Jigsaw #imapiece’ campaign, consisting of more than 600 embroidered cloth jigsaw pieces made to raise awareness of child malnutrition initiated in the UK in 2012 by the Craftivist Collective (Craftivist Collective, 2013). Participant involvement also forms the basis of ‘co-design’ methods, which echo their industrial and marketing origins in their focus on new ‘product’ or ‘outcome’, and extend user-centred design approaches to include participants as partners in the design process – as co-designers – often of experience based products (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

However, as an ordinary, everyday activity stitching also acts as a congenial binder for groups of people in local neighbourhoods wanting to create a specific commemorative project or to make social opportunities available for individuals from mixed social classes and ages with a shared interest in the craft. Having a project ‘on-the-go’ is a source of pleasure, comfort or distraction for individuals interested in stitching; for some it is a means of challenging themselves to learn new skills or stretch their cultural boundaries. The satisfactions sought by these makers might include the mutual benefits of creating shared experiences and social ties within their communities or company and conversation that via crafting skills builds

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<sup>53</sup> Now seen as a discrete sub-discipline of artistic practices. See mention of artist Françoise Dupré on pp. 39-40, and Bishop (2012) for more on this subject.

<sup>54</sup> For example Craftspace (Figueiredo, 2014). See also Hackney (2013).

confidence. This type of work might share the motivation of social cohesion with the politically oriented craftivism, the means to learn and be challenged through participatory experiences, decision-making strategies with co-design, and offer occasion to relax from otherwise busy schedules, but in my experience it does not wholly or uniquely fit into any of the above categories.

Dissanayake's (1995a) ideas on the subject of art-making proved useful to me from an early stage. Her explanation for the purpose of art-making privileges the behavioural characteristics of making art in preference to outcomes that result from it, and refrains from categorizing practices. Adopting the term 'making special', she defines 'special' as denoting:

"a positive factor of care and concern ... It thus suggests that the special object or activity appeals to emotional as well as perceptual and cognitive factors – that is, to all aspects of our mental functioning. Even though all three are inseparable ... the usual aesthetic nomenclature ... tends to emphasize calm or abstract intellectual satisfactions at the expense of sensory/emotional/physical/pleasurable ones ... that we make something special because doing so gives us a way of expressing its positive emotional valence for us, and the ways in which we accomplish this specialness not only reflect but give unusual or special gratification and pleasure." (Dissanayake, 1995a: 53-54).

Making things can therefore be thought of as a way of translating a meaningful subjective experience, such as, in my case, moving to live and work in a new environment, into tangible form. Or, as with my earlier rug-making project in Paris, the friendship and support of the group is reflected in the 'specialness' of the rug. For Dissanayake, ways of making these experiences 'special' might broadly comprise the possibility of original, avant-garde creations and common, or traditional reproductions made by experienced makers with years of specialized training alongside those with basic skills (Dissanayake, 1995a: 58). This approach resonated with mine and her concept of 'making special' offered what I felt was a more appropriately open framework for studying different types of stitching activities in different contexts, from a modest habitual private occupation to extraordinary community initiatives and avant-garde artworks, but with a focus on the dynamic but sometimes silent relationships between practical skill, the body and other people.

An examination of the social and psychological impacts on the well-being of people choosing to hand-stitch could have been undertaken in order to explore the quality of encounter experienced by participants. However, the focus in these sorts of

studies would be the knowledge gained from observing the effects on people, as in the example of Reynolds's (2004) work on textile crafts as therapeutic activities. In my view the quality of encounter is crucially embedded within the gestures of making and the knowledge of handling tools and materials. As a textile practice this sometimes silent making activity is the medium and context of the encounter and is therefore the subject of this research, which, beyond observing others stitching, is about experiencing the interactions through making and using making to identify what is pertinent about the experience. I have come to understand that elements from the different categories and contexts of stitching overlap in practice. Although I draw insights from positive psychology – in particular Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory of 'Flow' – in order to shed light on some of the satisfactions experienced through hand-stitching, I remain focused on examining the material and gestural characteristics of hand-stitching skills as they are felt and valued by practitioners in order to explore the contents of the cultural practice and processes of hand-stitching as a relational activity for an individual both working alone on personal projects and working on collective projects as part of a group.

## Researching practice

Contributions to academic research in the crafts have historically been led by historians, critics and curators. It has been argued in the past that the voices, opinions and experiences of crafts practitioners concerning the value of what they do have often been absent from these debates because the stuff of what they do is to make things, not to discuss their making. Dormer explains a possible reason for this writing that "this knowledge is expanded and its values demonstrated and tested, not through language but through practice" (Dormer, 1997c: 219). However, academic discussions can and do include practitioners speaking about and writing about the things that matter to them. Some have explored the diverse social, psychological and

cognitive aspects of crafting as a human activity,<sup>55</sup> others propose theories of making grown from practical experience. Pye's (1995) analysis of the workmanship of wood-carving, first published in 1968, is one such example. His detailed exploration of the nuances and specificities of handling tools in his particular craft practice introduced the now well-cited concept of 'the workmanship of risk', a term used widely to describe the recognizable difference between the processes involved in crafted and mass-produced products.

In this practice-led research I draw from, and build on, studies of craft knowledge (Pye, 1995; Dormer, 1997c; Marchand, 2001, 2009a, 2009b; Polanyi, 2009; Sennett, 2008, 2012) using hand-stitching skills as a reflective mode of enquiry. I do not use hand-stitching with the intention of subverting established ideas about the craft; neither have I created a narrative description of events. This collection of encounters, reflections and testimonies intend to make new sense of personal, social and cultural experiences of skilful hand-stitching.

The works made in the course of the research exist both as records and interpretations of these experiences. Ethnographies exist using photographic and drawn imagery (Pink, 2001), plural voices, poetry, role-playing and fiction writing (Denzin, 1997) as formats through which to present accounts and analysis of fieldwork. Mine also includes creative practice as "part of a panoply of possible modes of delivering thought" (MacLeod & Holdridge, 2005: 144). It is used to reflect upon these findings and make sense of the experiences in the manner explained by Gray and Burnett (2007):

"The notion of 'making sense' can not only be taken as making (in craft practices) through sensory exploration, but also as 'sense making' – creating critical understandings about that practice both through action and reflection on it (Schön, 1983)". (Gray & Burnett, 2007: 22).

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55 The Crafts Council seminar *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory*, convened at the University of East Anglia in 1998, intended to address "the perceived tension between contemporary craft practice and current critical theory" (Johnson, 1998a: 10). 60% of the speakers at the seminar were practitioners keen to voice their ideas about, and experiences of, craft knowledge, which contrasted with the earlier *Obscure Objects of Desire* conference, convened in 1997, where most of the speakers were non-practitioners (Harrod, 1997). The 1998 seminar asserted the significant cultural role of making as a practical activity that involves multi-sensory experiences and cognitive attributes as well as intellectual explanations. In her introduction to the proceedings Pamela Johnson explains that "craft is grounded in materials, processes, technique; a way of working and thinking which involves the whole person: body and mind. A bodily intelligence" (Johnson, 1998b: 17) and suggests pertinent questions for the expanding field of research in this domain: "why has it been made? What does it mean to want to make? Who is the 'I', or subject, who makes? How does the made object relate to the circumstances in which it is produced?" (ibid: 17). Conferences since, in the UK, that continue to expand the discussions include: *The Body Politic: the Role of the Body and Contemporary Craft*, convened at the University of Northumbria in 1999; *Challenging Craft*, convened at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen in 2004; *New Craft – Future Voices*, convened at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, University of Dundee, 2007; the bi-annual *Assemble* series convened by the Crafts Council in 2010 and 2012; *Making Futures I, II & III*, convened by Plymouth College of Art in 2009, 2011 and 2013 respectively; the bi-annual international conferences of the Design Research Society Special Interest Group on Experiential Knowledge in 2007, 2009, 2011& 2013.

Sense, as in 'making sense', connotes both physical feelings and the mental capacity of common sense: using the mind and the senses to improvise an understanding guided by a precision grown from lived experience. Instead of **looking at** the making, it makes sense to **feel through** the making towards answers. As Polanyi (2009: 18) writes, "it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning". For the researcher, making practical work sets up different conditions and priorities from an observational study or a study of literature. Making focuses the mind, through the body, on gestures, movements, sensations and emotional responses, and draws upon this 'feeling through' to explore the questions. Bolt (2007) refers to Carter's term "material thinking" (Carter, 2004) to define "a logic of practice" (Bolt, 2007: 30). This is explained with reference to Heidegger's concept of handling – that we come to know the world first through physically interacting with and manipulating materials and things, and our theoretical understanding of it comes afterwards. In her words, "material thinking, as a mode of thought, involves a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice" (Bolt, 2007: 30). My acquired knowledge of working with cloth serves me both professionally and personally, informing decisions I make on a daily basis, which profoundly influences the way I think about things, people and experiences. I see and feel the world through criteria I relate to my textile-dominant knowledge base. I acknowledge that this creates a bias in my thinking, but on the other hand it equips me well to 'dwell' in the making activities and reflect areas of interest and significance to stitching from within the practice.

## Key findings

My close examination of what this embodied knowledge feels like, looks like and sounds like offers evidence of four key interrelated characteristics of skilful hand-stitching:

- That skilful stitching engenders sensations of satisfaction created and expressed simultaneously through the gestures of making; that this is a form of embodied knowledge that can inform an ability to interact with others and the material world, and contribute to a sense of "becoming (collectively and individually) oneself in a particular place" (Carter, 2004: XII).
- That this ability to interact socially – or even to isolate oneself – is implicit in the rhythms and patterns of stitching gestures which in turn are reflected in the rhythms and patterns of speech in collective work.

- That as with the types of conversation held in group work of this nature, this type of collective stitching practice serves to support and maintain the group's collective goals both as a social entity and as embroiderers.
- That there is a link between stitching alone and in a group based on skill. The skill acquired enables these makers to tacitly manipulate their level of interaction (or separation) through the type of stitching task undertaken and control the personal benefits and satisfactions sought.

These characteristics support the notion that, as a craft which activates the articulation of hand, eye, mind, memory and material, hand-stitching is a process that can structure an implicit understanding of modes of interaction, and that this is materialized through the rhythms and patterns experienced by the repeated gestures of hand-stitching.

Undertaking this research has allowed me to define a context for my stitching practice as a "person-oriented approach" (Freeman, 1997) that prioritizes processes of making as sites of knowledge generation. The impact of this approach to using creative practice in research has, for me, opened possibilities to use the practice of hand-stitching as a reflective method of enquiry, particularly in group settings, as a way to access thoughts, expressions, opinions and memories of experiences that perhaps remain invisible or difficult to articulate through more conventional methods.

## Articulating the research: thesis synopsis

This thesis emerges from analysis of, and reflection on, the making experiences and their documentation, supported and informed by theoretical insights drawn from several disciplinary perspectives. However, the matter of my research is the practice of hand-stitching and my contribution is to the field of textiles practice. I am not a student of anthropology, philosophy or psychology, and I am aware that my knowledge of these disciplines is shallow in comparison to my knowledge of textiles. Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 5) defend multiple perspectives in qualitative research approaches as "an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question". They cite the examples of the bricoleur and the quiltmaker who, by using tools and methods to hand piece together a "set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation", making choices as they progress that were not necessarily planned in advance (ibid: 4). I have undertaken the research as a



bricoleur, adapting my practical investigations as opportunities arose to explore new questions or questions from a different perspective, employing appropriate methods and texts as the research has progressed, and I use insights from other knowledge fields to inform and help articulate my thinking. However, I would argue that by contrast a quiltmaker would usually employ techniques and strategies planned in advance. Designing the pattern for a patchwork quilt is a process of trial and adjustment, re-balancing proportions before the piecing together begins. I have used my skills as a patchwork quilter in an interpretive manner; my crafting of the thesis has entailed designing and re-designing the structure, the trial and trimming of writing, the re-distribution of works thematically (figs 22 & 23), which has culminated in the piecing together of the experiences and my understandings of them in order to articulate new patterns and new associations.

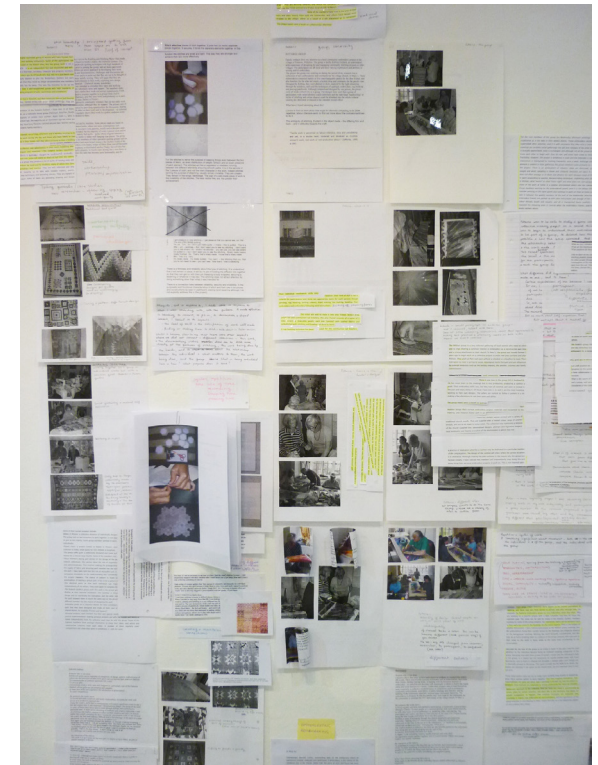


Fig 22 & 23. Piecing together the documentation of practical studies and writing towards structuring the thesis.

My concept of 'articulating stitch' is based on a literal and metaphorical interpretation of the verb 'to articulate'. As my principle method, I use the practice of hand-stitching to articulate embodied knowledge in material form as well as attempting to convey it in language.

To 'articulate' means to express an idea fluently and coherently, to give words to (OED). I use the term 'articulating' in the title literally, as with this thesis I aim to effectively express my findings and, although heeding Dormer's warning that "almost nothing that is important about a craft can be put into words and propositions" (Dormer, 1997c: 219), I try to give words to familiar experiences of stitching that more usually inhabit an inarticulate world of materials, gestures, emotions and sensations. In a similar manner to physical and emotional experiences of caring and being cared for, touching and being touched, the simultaneity of the actions, sensations and emotions makes it impossible to know objectively and scientifically what one is doing because one is immersed in it (Polanyi, 2009). I have tried to get as close as I can to it and in order to understand the nuances of such an embodied experience I use a pragmatic and poetic combination of words, images and videos providing forms of interpretation that aim to bring the experiences closer to words in the presentation of my findings. The writing recounts the research process and describes the practical experiences, but is also part of the interpretive process aiding the development of themes and concepts (Richardson, 2000) around which I structure the thesis. The 'articulating' of the title also refers to my joining of ideas to propose a new position from which to appreciate hand-stitching activities. It reflects the interdependency in this practice-led research between making and writing, watching and making, making and talking, watching and talking, reading and making, watching and writing.

The research is presented around three foundational studies and supporting observations organized into three themes:

### Skilful stitching: defining the subject

Skill, according to David Pye (1995: 20), is "a word to start an argument", as definitions differ broadly between craft disciplines and ideals of originality and beauty. Defining what I understand to be skilful stitching has been crucial to this research and forms the basis of Chapter Two. An argument about skill inevitably leads to a discussion about the types of knowledge involved. I use Julia Kristeva's (1986) concept of the Semiotic to begin articulating this relationship between skilful stitching and embodied knowledge, between the explicit and implicit domains of experience.

## Satisfactions: finding words

The entanglements and uneventful repetition inherent to hand-stitching processes can easily slip by unnoticed and unmentioned. However, the rewards of these small creative patterns and rituals must be, or be believed to be, fulfilling in ways that attract practitioners to continue to invest time and effort in such processes. Chapter Three examines some of the personal pleasures afforded by skilful stitching worth pursuing for their own sake. These include the handling of fabrics, a fascination for pattern, and the self-indulgence of introspective calm. William Morris's (1883) tenacious idea of pleasure in hand-crafting still has relevance but the new contexts of contemporary cultures questions to what end the resultant artefacts are made if they are not used, sold or displayed. I argue that this articulates a sense of care for the self and control over time and space that can be managed by the skill of the stitcher.

## Articulating participation: joining in

A second definition of 'articulate', derived from anatomy, is to unite by forming a joint or joints (OED). This definition brings to mind an image of vertebrae, where each individual component connects together to unite the whole but sufficiently loosely to allow for movement between the parts. In Chapter Four I use 'articulating' in this sense as a metaphor through which to explore the relational work of hand-stitching processes. As with other recreational activities like sports, gardening or singing, stitching offers a means of articulating relationships. I use 'articulating' to explore this idea of mutually interdependent parts that operate best with 'give', or inbuilt flexibility, in the context of how relationships between participating individuals in an embroidery group are articulated through their stitching practices.

# Chapter Two:

## Defining skilful hand-stitching

Defining what I understand to be skilful stitching is crucial to this research and forms the basis of this chapter. I use 'self-consciousness' here in a way that aims to replace its colloquial meaning as a synonym for embarrassment or shyness with a more philosophical usage such as by Sennett (2008: 50) to denote a form of subjectivity generated in tacit knowledge. This use of the concept of self-consciousness refers also to the 'self-reflexivity', which articulates intrasubjective selves and intersubjective reality. The stitching process analysed through ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods in this chapter can be used, by practitioners, in a number of ways from a behaviour of adaption to a form of authentic subjective 'becoming', or assumption of agency. This implies that a person stitching can control the kind of work he/she makes, and that he/she possesses a kind of knowledge that enables him/her to work knowingly with the materials such that he/she knows how to manipulate fabric, needle and thread apparently independently of verbal instruction or visual aid. An investigation of making raises theoretical issues relating to different types of knowledge, and therefore to methodological questions concerning which methods can be best used to gather data on this. The epistemological question raised here is that of the tacit quality of embodied skill, and the paradox of how tacit, silent, knowledge can be articulated through words. The methodological question of comparing ethnographic studies with auto-ethnography as a participant observer, are further developed in the case studies that follow.

I first offer a definition of what I believe skilful stitching might look and feel like from the perspective of the person making the work in order to begin thinking about ways in which skilful stitching might have purpose beyond technical accomplishment. I draw principally on my stitched diary study<sup>56</sup> complemented by observations of others' work and observations drawn from workshops held with student participants specifically devised to explore this theme.<sup>57</sup> I use the example of looking at the backs of embroideries, which are usually hidden from view, to illustrate these different ways of knowing: the explicit and the tacit. Informed by theories of sensual and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009; Dant, 2010) and building on craft knowledge (Pye, 1995; Dormer, 1997c; Ingold, 2000; Sennett, 2008) I use Julia Kristeva's (1986) concept of the Semiotic to begin articulating this relationship between the explicit and implicit domains of experience. Next I draw on observations of beginners at drop-in stitching workshops, and my own first hand experience of learning to carve stone to highlight the importance of emotional and physical sensations in the acquisition of a hand skill: feeling and listening, as well as watching and making. I then use this

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<sup>56</sup> First mentioned in Chapter One pp. 49-53.

<sup>57</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 63-64 for information about these workshops, and Appendices VI and VII for details of participants and workshop tasks.

understanding of a tacit recognition of practical ability to explore ways in which the patterns of hand-stitching articulate a relationship between skill and knowledge.

## Lines, marks and autobiographical traces

In contrast to the automated reproducible perfection (or imperfection) achieved by machine-made textiles, hand-making visibly reflects the uniqueness of the individual. The spontaneity and infinite subtle differences represented by traces of the hand as an instrument of individuality and human feeling no longer indicate imperfection keenly replaced by machine uniformity, but on the contrary are prized and valued representations of personal expression, experience, commitment and intelligence (Frayling, 2011; Sennett, 2008; Ullrich, 2005; Leslie, 1998). The hand is capable of more than mechanical duplication: it records “the sense of life and the moment-by-moment human decisions” (Ullrich, 2005: 205) in its subtleties and variations, even minutely, as with stitching. In fast-paced, digitally mediated lifestyles much can pass us by without leaving any real impression or testament to us ‘being there’ and ‘having done it’. As with hand written notes, letters, diaries or sketchbooks, a hand-made artefact is therefore an autobiographical document of sorts that describes the close physical interaction between the maker and their world.

Similarities are sometimes drawn between handwriting, drawing and stitching because of the evident individuality and inferred presence of the hand (Pajackowska, 2010: 145), and the shared characteristic of using a continuous line – thread or ink – as a way of transcribing a visual interpretation of ideas, or laying a thought, onto or into a surface (Ingold, 2007). For example, Rosalind Wyatt’s ‘transewing’ visually resembles handwriting, and Shizuko Kimura’s embroidery mimics the drawn quality of sketching.

The marks can look spontaneous, as if hurriedly capturing the subject, however the precision and care I know is applied in the crafting of stitches lead me to think otherwise. As a means of capturing raw thoughts explicitly, I believe handwriting has more in common with the spontaneity, revisions and crossings-out of drawing and sketching than embroidery. In the example of my stitched diaries the thoughts may have been spontaneous, but the embroideries on the other hand, are deliberately composed and edited versions of them. Because some types of stitches and motifs are time-consuming to make, the spontaneity of the

thought is lost. The example in fig 24 was executed in stages; the act of stitching was a means of revisiting and dwelling on my thoughts in an attempt to strike up some sort of scripted conversation between my inner self and a world of potential interlocutors. Skilful stitching translates and materializes the thought somewhere between authentic expression and invention.

## Intrasubjective selves

The slow deliberation of hand-stitching, therefore, allows me time to compose, or even manipulate or exaggerate, my thoughts. Definitions of the verb 'to embroider' support this. The earliest, dating from the fourteenth century, is "to ornament with needlework" (OED). A second meaning, introduced in the seventeenth century, is "to dignify; to set forth floridly; to embellish with rhetoric or with exaggerations" (OED). I, and other stitchers, use embroidery to embellish, dignify or exaggerate aspects of ourselves and compose what we want the viewer to see. Our skill gives us the means to control what our stitches look like as we deliberate how to translate our thoughts. We do this through the selection of motif, stitch type and arrangement of pattern.

For instance, during one of the workshops with student participants devised specifically to explore questions concerning how to demonstrate, visualize and discuss the tacit knowledge of skilled hands,<sup>58</sup> I invited participants to respond freely to found fabrics, already coloured and patterned. This task provoked overtly personal responses as the participants tried to find a way to intervene on the material using their hand-stitching skills. They experienced this particular stitching task diversely as empathetic integration or aggressive possession, and in the process knowingly revealed aspects of their selves.

One participant, Kelly, who had chosen a fabric she liked – a green gingham – followed the contours of the existing shapes with her stitching, describing that she was

using the shapes that were on the fabric already and just adding to it really ... I think I blended in a bit ... It's quite an easy fabric to add to. (fig 25)

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<sup>58</sup> Tacit knowledge is the term used to describe the phenomenon of the body learning how to do something and to consequently store this knowledge to refer back to and use intuitively to execute tasks like cooking, driving and making things. Craft critic Peter Dormer calls it "practical know-how" (Dormer, 1997b: 147). It is acquired from watching others and by practising, through physically engaging the body as opposed to reading instructions in a book. The knowledge is evidenced in the doing, and can become so habitual as to go unacknowledged.

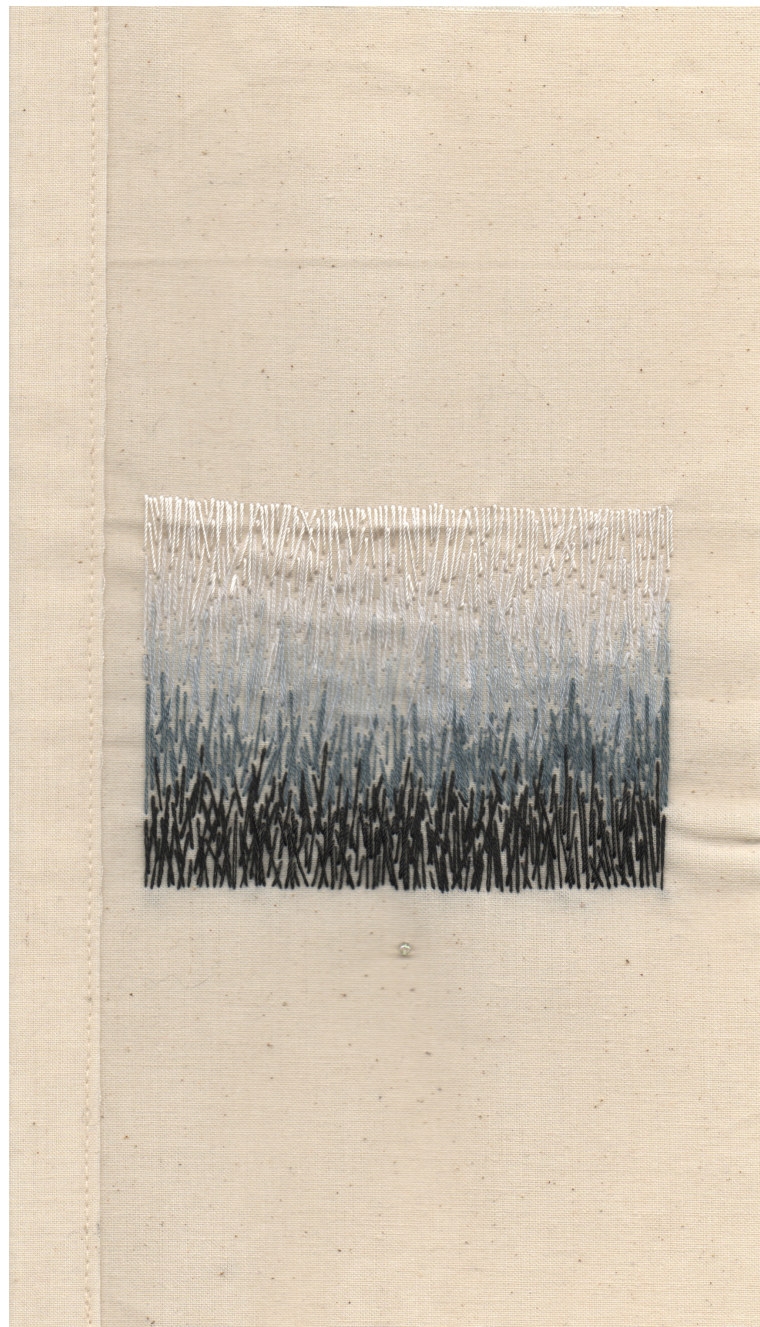


Fig 24. 27 December 2006. Shaded long and short stitch, silk thread on calico. This page was executed in stages; the stitch used, in fine thread, is a time-consuming technique. Spontaneity has been replaced by periods of reflexion.



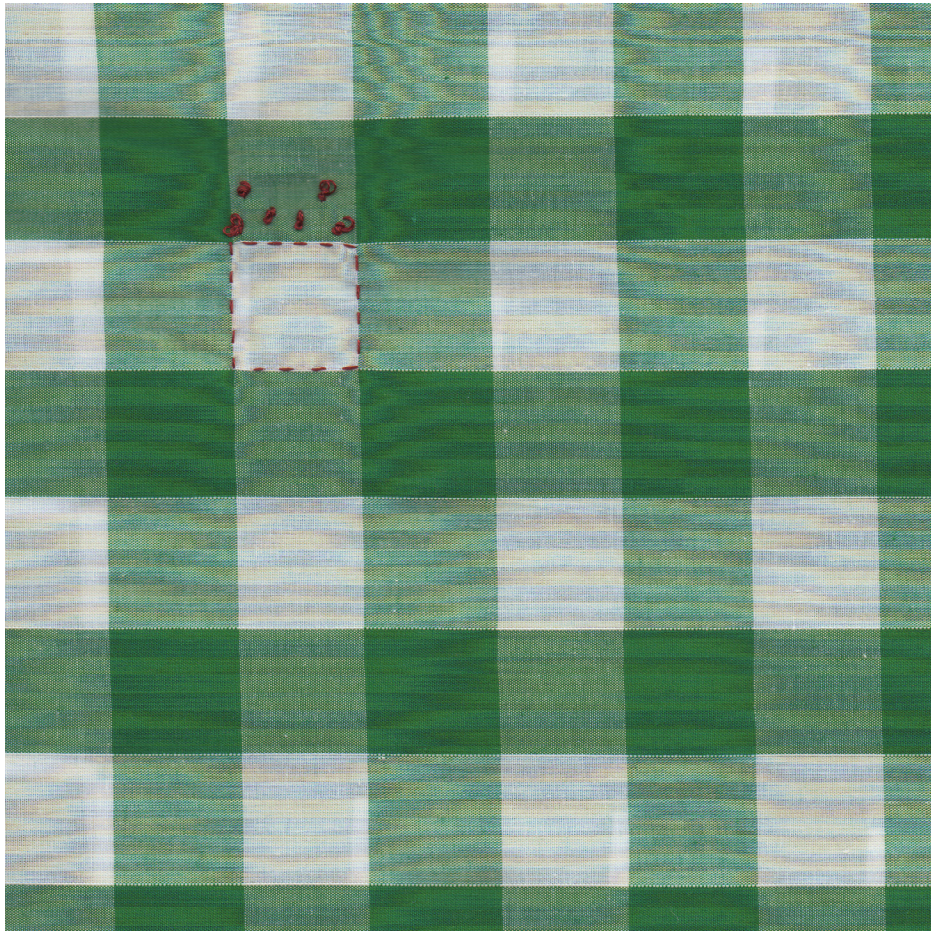


Fig 25. Blending in: subtly intervening on a found fabric by neatly outlining and filling in the gingham checks.



Fig 26. Hating flowers: stitching a strongly personal mark onto a found fabric.

Another, Jess, described her response as an attempt to overpower and possess the material in order to transform it. Her intervention, shown in fig 53, is also inspired by the existing motif, but instead of blending in her stitching almost smothers it. She explains:

I think mine stands out. It's quite obvious that I've added to it ... For me that was like vandalism, it was like graffiti ... so I didn't want it to blend in ... I'd rather passionately hate or absolutely love something. Like if I absolutely hate something I'll try and put my stamp on it, cut into it, destroy it, make it into something I actually like.

These were graduating students from a Textiles degree course<sup>59</sup> used to reflecting on and discussing their work-in-progress, and practised in applying their skills towards an individual aesthetic that might deliberately subvert conventions of skilled stitching; or put another way, present a version of their selves that they hoped set them apart as recognizably unique. I found an alternative application of stitching skills evident in the different context of the patchwork-quilting group,<sup>60</sup> where the precision, order and conformity required of work made by members echoed that recognized by City and Guild's awards, or the Women's Institute Basic Certificate (Connell, 2007). Most members had completed a course,<sup>61</sup> which confirmed their practical ability and served as a code of acceptance into the group that was recognized by fellow members. Their skills represented more than their dexterity and "practical know-how" (Dormer, 1997b: 147); they represented recognition by others of the self that chooses to belong to, and be recognized by, a particular group by demonstrating that he/she can conform to its codes of acceptance.

Others, or even the same person in different circumstances, who do not want to conform in this way, might subvert the rules, but do so with just as much dexterity, care and technical precision. Tilleke Schwarz is such an embroiderer. Her embroidered compositions have been published and exhibited alongside conceptual contemporary artworks (McFadden, 2007; Compton Verney, 2008; Monem, 2008) as well as with amateur enthusiasts at the Knitting and Stitching Show in 2007 and 2013, and craft makers at Art In Action in 2008, defying the conventional categorizations of art, craft or hobby. Her well-known works of hand-

<sup>59</sup> The BA (Hons) Textiles course at the Arts University Bournemouth where I teach.

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 60-62 for information about the patchwork quilting group. Also Chapter Three, pp. 106-109, and Appendix VIII for information about the participants.

<sup>61</sup> The City and Guild's award in Patchwork and Quilting is popular, although other members may have followed similar courses to learn the foundational skills but without leading to an award.

stitched ephemera and found quotes, resembling a graffiti-style mash-up of scrambled code, belie their careful execution (fig 27). These present one version of her self. Another version exists exemplified in one of her earlier strictly ordered traditional samplers made to celebrate her parents' fortieth wedding anniversary (Schwarz, 2013) (fig 28). Quite different in style, these nevertheless show the same care and precision in the execution of the stitching.



Fig 27. Tilleke Schwarz, *Moose in the Sunset* (1996). Hand embroidery on linen.



Fig 28. Tilleke Schwarz, cross-stitch sampler made as a gift for her parents fortieth wedding anniversary (1978).

## Different sides

I recognize in my stitched diary pages a similar approach towards a carefully crafted, selectively chosen, 'autobiographical' account where my hand-stitching is used self-consciously and skilfully to articulate to others a particular version of my self. However, although self-consciously composing stitches by selecting and arranging them on the surface of the fabric, the actual sensation of making the stitches does not feel manipulated in the same way. As I concentrate on **what** to stitch (applying my skill) I am not paying attention to **how** I stitch (how I know what to do).

Clues can be found on the reverse side of hand-embroidered cloth, which will usually tell a different story from the front.<sup>62</sup> The two different sides suggest ways in which hand-stitching describes simultaneously different aspects of the same hand: the hand executing what the mind wants to be seen and the hand thinking through how to achieve this. It can be seen in a neatly finished front chosen for display that might conceal a knotted and entangled back as with the example shown in (figs 29 & 30).



Fig 29. An ordered design on the 'front' side.



Fig 30. The workings out hidden on the 'back' side.

<sup>62</sup> An exception is Chinese Su embroidery, where both sides of the fabric are hand-embroidered as if each were the right side. There are three sorts of Su embroidery: the same image is embroidered on each side in the same colours; the same image is embroidered on each side in different colours, or different images are embroidered on each side. All traces of knots and thread ends are hidden, and the embroideries tend to be displayed in screens in order for both sides to be appreciated.

Embroideries are often mounted like pictures, their backs covered, which hides the traces of fingers thinking through the practical challenges of making the desired marks. Works are presented with the 'right' side facing the world; they carry titles and explanatory statements if exhibited, or, if not, are described and talked about amongst colleagues, friends or family. The 'right' side faces an ordered world of signs and language. The 'wrong' side is covered, out of reach and hidden away. It is not explained, talked about or given a title.

The different sides recall the different possible interpretations of stitch and its inherent contradictions.<sup>63</sup> The two sides can be noticeably different depending on the type of stitch used. The example shown in fig 31 taken from my stitched diaries is made using French knots. A selection of eight different coloured threads knotted at intervals over the surface of the cloth resulted in a tangled set of traces on the back (fig 32). As I was making it, I was looking at the front planning the arrangements of the knots, and was not paying attention to what was happening on the back. I was consciously attending to the pattern (Polanyi, 2009), yet the back shows the paths of the threads between the knots tracing the movements of my hand as it works out how to make what is to be seen on the front. The contradictory qualities of order and entanglement are apparently formulated simultaneously. Whilst the front displays the pattern or motif representing my thoughts as I had consciously composed them and intended the viewer to see, the back suggests a different part of myself unconsciously lodged in the work: the part that was sensing and intuiting how to make the work but without recourse to the same logic of order and representation.

Julia Kristeva's concept of the Semiotic is useful here. According to Kristeva (1986), the Semiotic is a poetic, pre-verbal state of pulsations and drives that precedes what she calls the Symbolic order of signs and language with its formal laws of grammar and syntax. As we develop language and knowledge of the Symbolic, the Semiotic state recedes in us but doesn't completely disappear; it is out of reach but still known to us, possibly recognized as sensations, or sounds, for example. In its place we experience tension between the conscious and the unconscious, whereby the Semiotic (that which relates to the material, the biological and emotional) and the Symbolic (that which communicates in signs) are interdependent and inseparable, giving

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<sup>63</sup> Stitching is often thought of as quietly discreet, yet it is pervasive and commonplace. A neat, smooth and ordered appearance will often disguise a fragmentary and rambling narrative as work is continually picked up, interrupted and put down. Considered benign, it is evocative of powerful emotions in the form of mementoes and gifts to loved ones, and is used by some to both provoke and speak loudly of pain, injustice and violence, as seen in works by Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin, for example. Contradiction is also present in the definition of the verb to stitch, which means to fasten together by sewing, but also to stab or pierce causing a sharp, sudden localised pain (OED). The act of stitching with a threaded needle involves both an undoing – in the destructive piercing of a hole, a potential cause of damage – and the reparative making of the stitch which joins the edges, closing or covering the pierced hole: "within a single gesture it combines both aspects of the paradox of destruction and creation" (Pajaczkowska, 2010: 143).

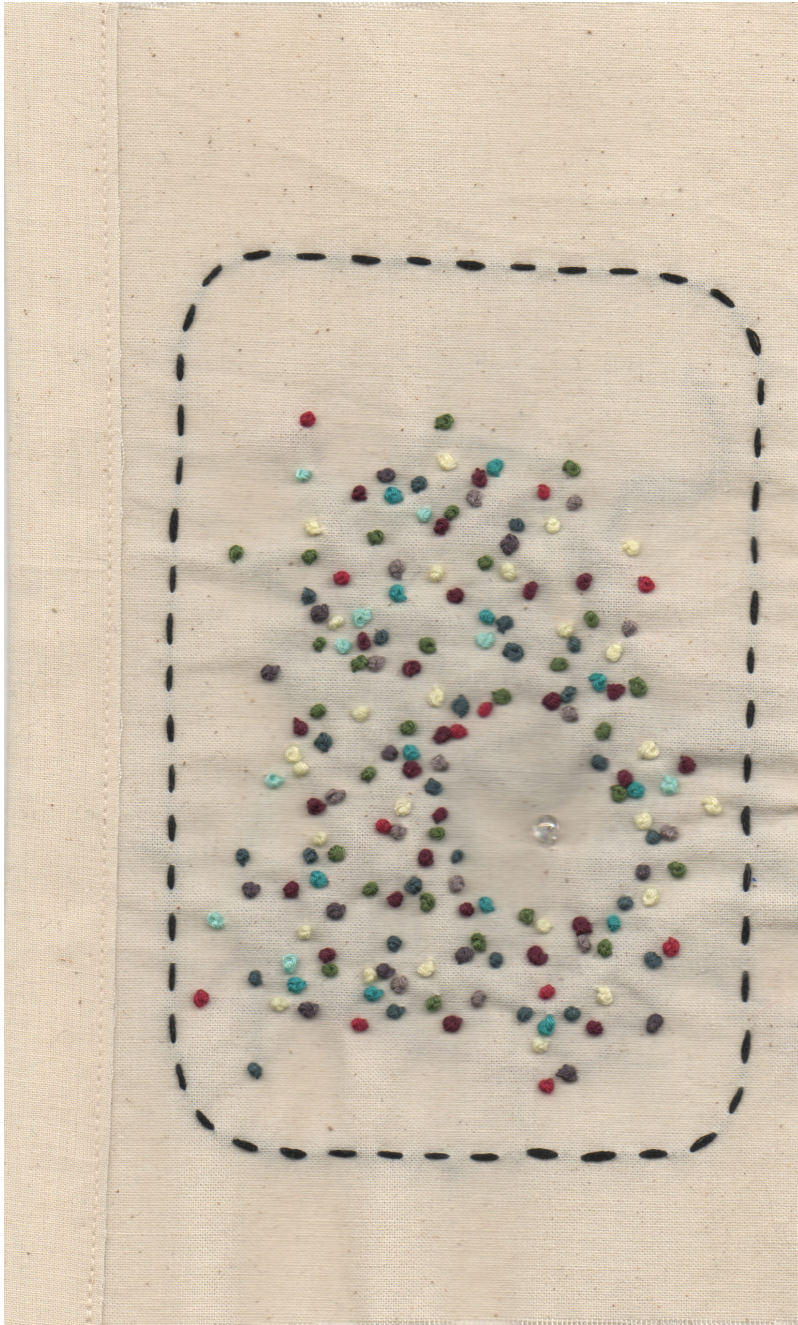


Fig 31. 26 October 2006. Front.  
French knots on calico.



Fig 32. 26 October 2006. Back.  
French knots on calico.

rise to what she calls the “signifying process” (Kristeva, 1986: 91). This can be understood as a process of meaning making produced through an oscillation between these two states that is known and valued in the experience, but which always in part remains out of reach of words and explanation, yet paradoxically is felt as real, as hinted at by Brodsky when, referring to the act of making, he explains that “[T]he first, the second, and the last reality for him is the work itself, the very process of working” (Brodsky, quoted in Pallasmaa, 2009: 80).

The two sides of these embroideries are similarly interdependent. The marks left by the stitches remain as a trace of a ‘signifying process’, representing these two different, yet interdependent knowledge systems: the ordered system of signs and the disordered realm of feelings and drives. The tension between the conscious and the unconscious described by Kristeva equates to the dynamic relationship between the idea or thought held in the mind and the tacit knowledge employed to materialize it. The separation of the two clearly indicates two simultaneous modes of thinking. The continuity of the thread between the two sides of the fabric connects the two and articulates between the symbols consciously composed on the front and the unconscious, but knowing, felt sensations underneath.

## Embodied intelligence

The coordination of the eye, hand and mind is therefore not limited to an automated ability to mechanically execute practical tasks, but is a constantly evolving process of embodied engagement with conscious and unconscious processes and the different knowledge systems. Kristeva explains the vital connections made between language as it is spoken or heard and our biological, emotional processes:

“Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both” (Kristeva, 1986: 93).

By extension, an individual’s knowledge of making is equally indebted to both: therefore both explicit and tacit. Using the example of my stitched diary page, I know explicitly to make a pattern of knots, and I know tacitly how to do so. When making

things by hand actions of the body are known tacitly, but executed intentionally. Implicitly intelligent, skilled hands hold an understanding of the possible consequences of their actions. Frayling (2011: 78) explains this as “the knowledge which enables him to understand and overcome the constantly arising difficulties that grow out of variations”.

Another of the tasks undertaken by the student participants during the workshop attempted to explore if and how aspects of this implicit, embodied intelligence might be articulated. Without prior discussion or explanation each participant was required to reproduce a piece of stitching originally made by another. They drew on their store of tacit knowledge to work out which methods were used by their partner stitcher, and then again to reproduce the techniques they recognized. The exercise illuminated ways in which the careful coordination of hands that “appear to do it on their own, without referring to the head” (Pye, 1995: 124) can be applied to understand and interpret hand-stitching without recourse to verbal instruction. Figs 33-36 illustrate two of these pairings and shows the possible extent and variation of this kind of practical understanding from a tentative reproduction to a loose interpretation that bears little visual similarity to the original.

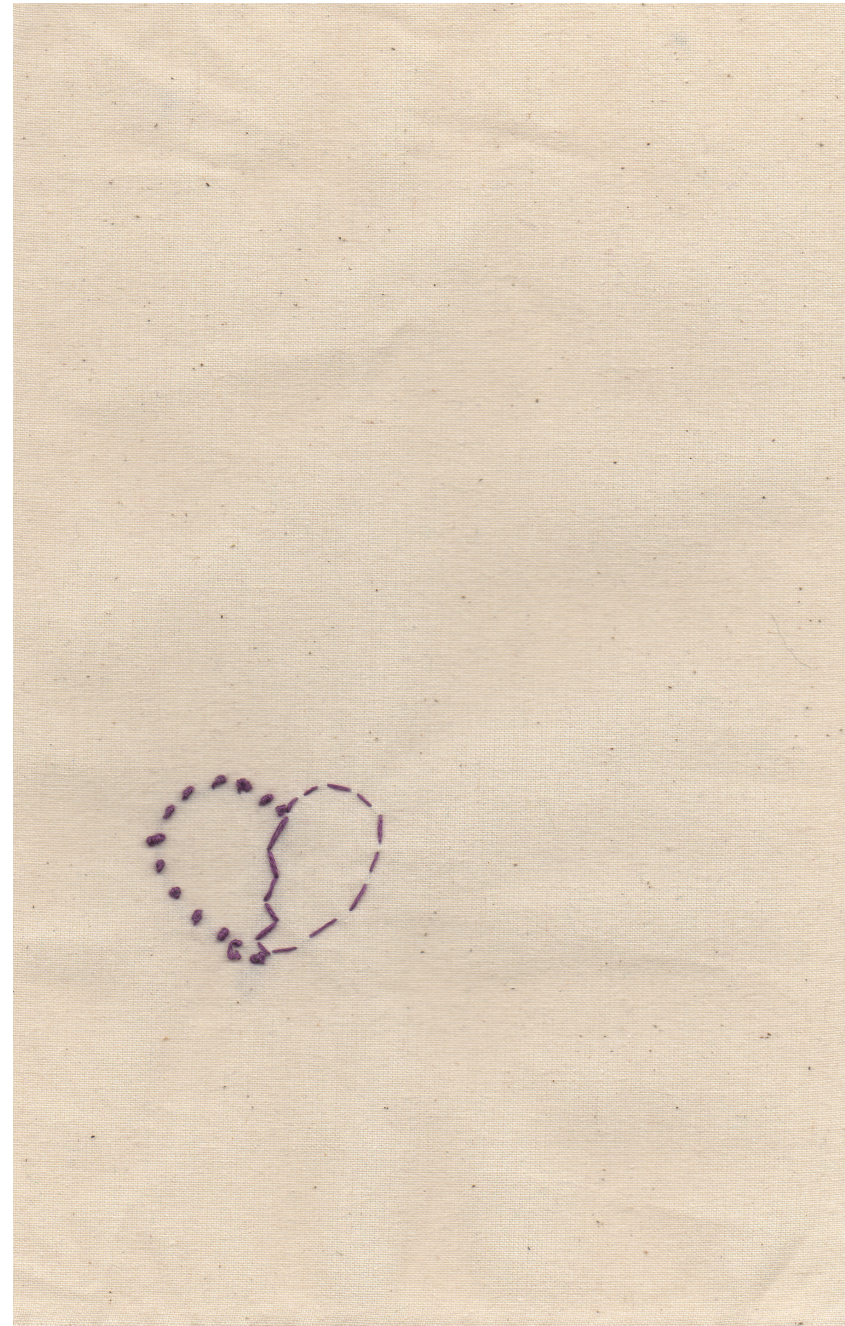
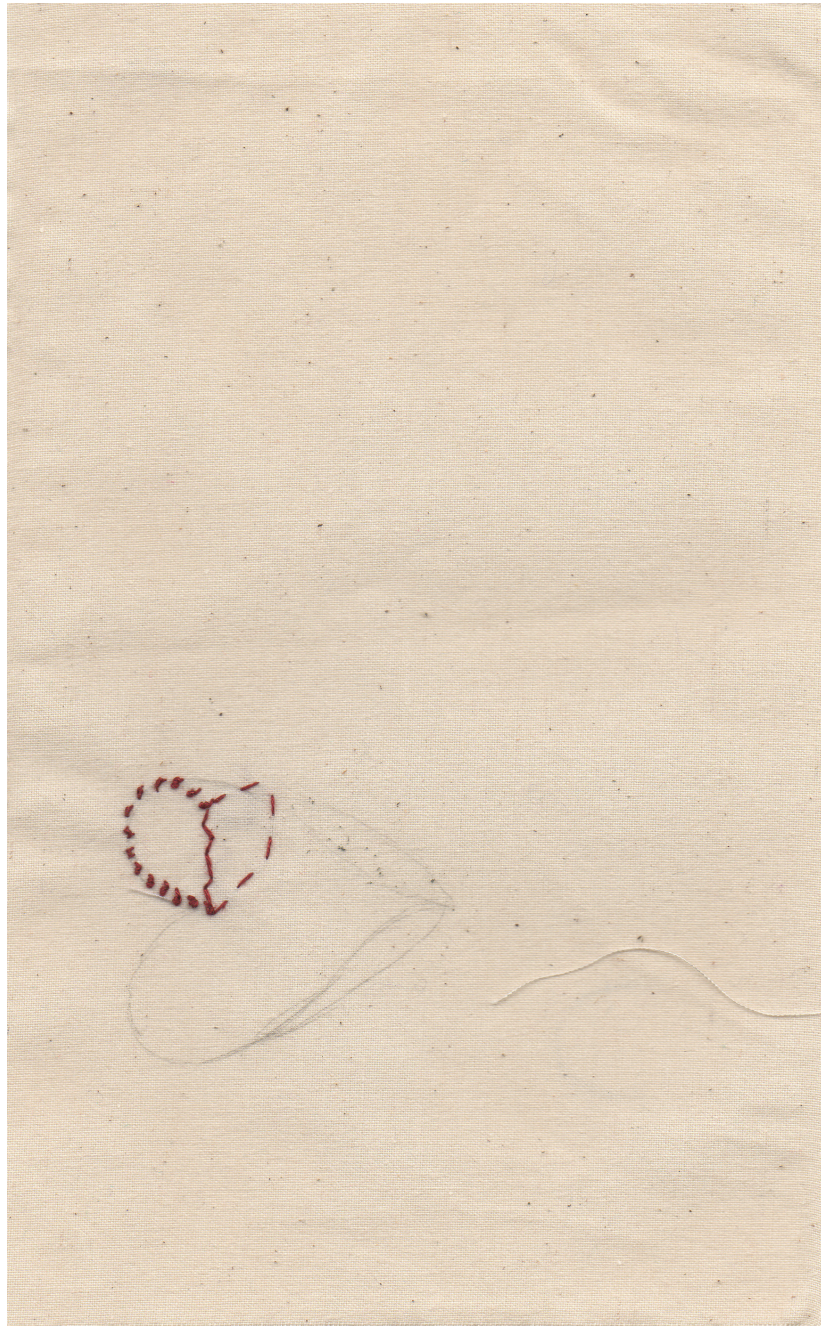
Initially, all participants found it difficult to describe in words how they had set about the task. The thinking hands performed the activity without recourse to language as described by Pallasmaa:

“Artistic images expose us to images and encounters of things before they have been trapped by language. We touch things and grasp their essence before we are able to speak about them.” (Pallasmaa, 2009: 36).

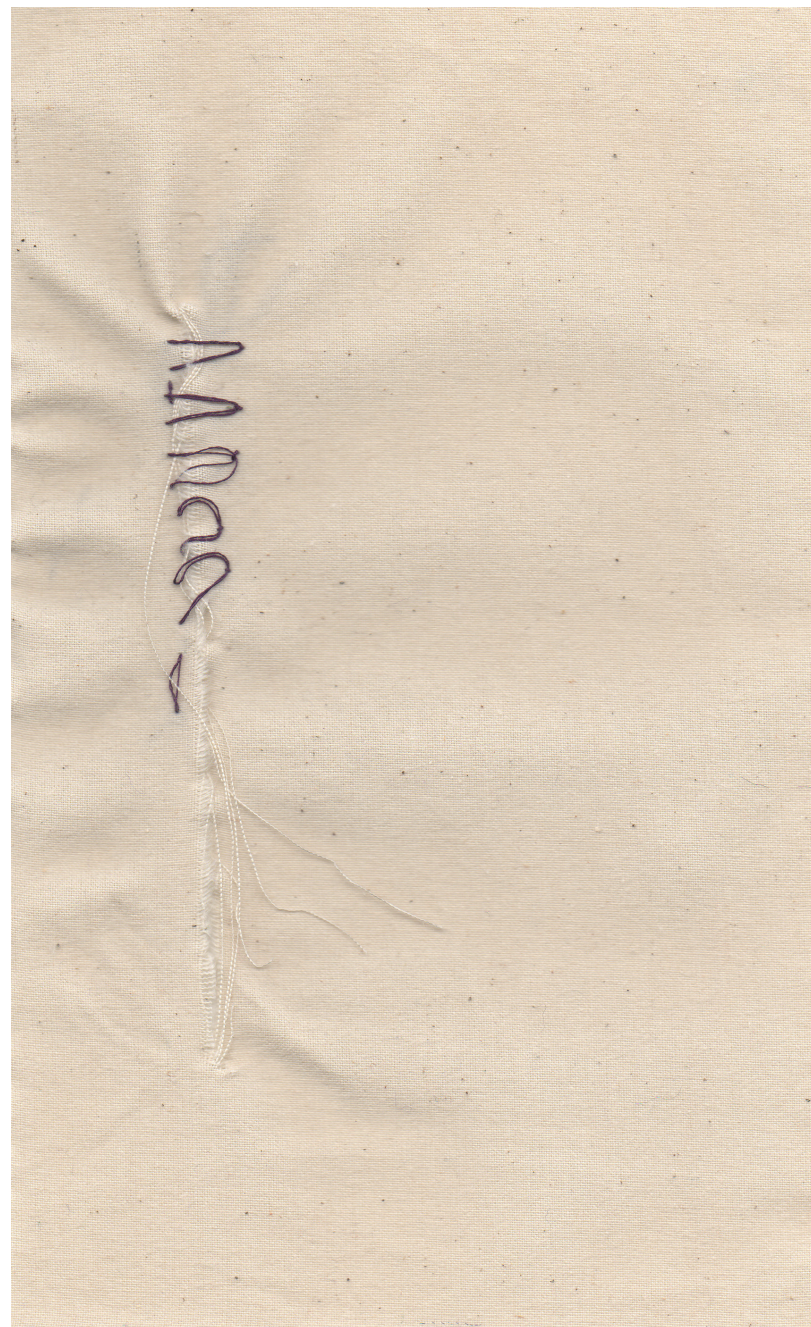
Further discussion revealed that the eye, hand and mind were working simultaneously, intuiting how to make the work: looking closely to dissect what had been done in the original, thinking about how to interpret the intentions of their partner, and drawing on their store of practical knowledge to execute the task. Fingers holding the needle feel across the fabric, searching for the exact position to reinsert the needle in cooperation with the eyes that check resemblance, and the mind that imagines the interpretive response. A sensual intelligence (Dant, 2010) accompanies the dexterity and precision of handling and positioning the needle as hands gauge distance and use pressure in their search, feeling when the tension of the thread is sufficient to have satisfactorily made a stitch.

Video footage of a later piece of stitching shows my hands at work in a similar way: my left hand underneath fabric stretched on a frame feeling its way and coordinating with the other, my right hand (see \* *GOB*) (fig 37). The tacit knowledge my hand holds





Figs 33 & 34. Samples from the Taking a Thread For a Walk workshop held at the Arts University Bournemouth with a small group of Textiles students, all able stitchers. Sample on the left is the original, and the sample on the right is the reproduction.



Figs 35 & 36. Samples from the Taking a Thread For a Walk workshop held at the Arts University Bournemouth with a small group of Textiles students, all able stitchers. Sample on the left is the original, and the sample on the right is the reproduction.

means it knows what the needle, fabric and thread should feel like when it finds the correct placement, whilst I consciously attend to the kind of stitch I want to be seen. Sennett describes this as “a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective” (Sennett, 2008: 50). I could concentrate my attention on ordering the front of the work to my satisfaction and rely on my hands knowing what to do underneath the fabric, out of my sight.

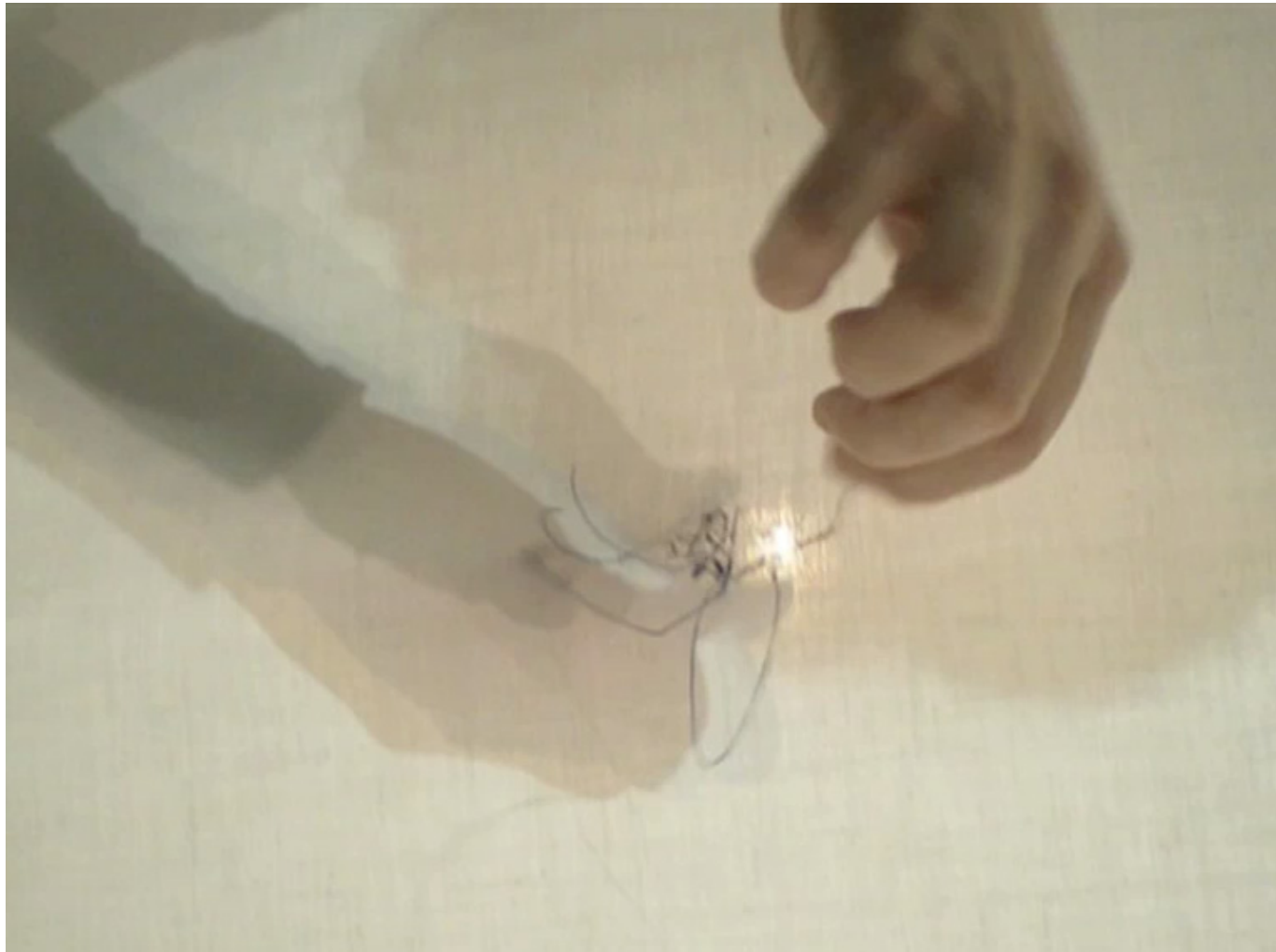


Fig 37. Still from *GOB* video footage of my hands coordinating gestures as they work.

## Knowing what 'getting it right' feels like

Joining a drop-in craft event gave me an opportunity to explore how I might describe what these knowing sensations feel like and what it allows me to know that a less skilled practitioner might not. Drop-in 'have-a-go' craft events are popular as part of this new craft revival, and take place in a variety of venues attracting new audiences for a variety of DIY making activities.<sup>64</sup> In August 2010 the Camden Arts Centre in London hosted one such drop-in craft evening. The fashionable location attracted a number of young people curious to have a go at the crafts on offer: knitting or crochet, badge-making, collage illustrations and make-your-own burlesque-style knickers. I took part in the make-your-own burlesque-style knickers circle. Apart from the facilitator and myself, participants in the group were new to sewing. Conscious that I had sewing skills and knew how to handle the tools and materials, I became aware of the important contribution physical sensation makes to a satisfying experience of knowing how to make things. The novelty of 'having-a-go' is attractive, but is not necessarily sufficient stimulation on its own for the skills to be known by the body and for the experience to have meaning for the person making. The indebtedness to both the Symbolic and the Semiotic proposed by Kristeva I understand to mean in this context as an ordering or conscious recognition of the sensations and sounds of making. As an example, the body needs to know the sensations in order to make judgements about the drape of the fabric or tension of thread.

Listening to participants' comments during one of my later stitching workshops<sup>65</sup> I discovered that the knowledge gained from doing is a notably different experience from looking. This particular workshop requested participants to make value judgements of simple stitching tasks I had executed myself prior to the workshops, firstly by looking and secondly as a result of having done the tasks themselves. Their evaluations changed; the doing altered their perception of the stitching. Referring to the sample on the left in fig 38, having made her own version (shown on the right), Priya explains:

I found that my evaluation in terms of its aesthetic qualities changed a bit after doing it according to which I enjoyed more.

<sup>64</sup> For example: HungaMunga craft nights at the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club offer a large range of materials and activities for customers to experiment with whilst socializing (Hungamunga, 2012); the Notting Hill Craft night at Notting Hill Arts Club offered a similar experience (Ahluwalia, 2007); the Crafts Council Craft Club arranged drop-in knitting sessions at schools and day centres for children to learn basic skills with the help of local volunteers (Crafts Council, 2013); many museums run craft events in association with exhibitions.

<sup>65</sup> Examples mentioned here are taken from a workshop undertaken with fellow research students at the Royal College of Art, some of whom had stitching skills and some did not. Further information about these workshops can be found in Chapter One, pp. 63-64, and Appendix X.



Figs 38 & 39. The participant initially ranked the sample on the left (fig 38), executed by me prior to the workshop, as the least aesthetically pleasing. After executing the task herself, shown in the sample on the right (fig 39), she then ranked it the most aesthetically pleasing.

Other participants express similar changes of perception:

You get into it. It's like you become it, really, so then you change how you think. (Vanessa)

and:

Now I've done it, it gives me a different insight' (Rob).

A process is not necessarily apparent from just looking. Doing the tasks led to a deeper appreciation of what is perceived visually.

For the body to get used to the sensations and learn to make judgements based on them requires the physical embedding of a skill over time. During the drop-in session at the Camden Arts Centre I was aware that my hands and eyes were working together to make these sorts of judgements. I was also observing the choices and judgements of the others in my group whose hands were not so discerning as mine and could not help them make the same informed decisions. The first difficulty was choosing a fabric. Their eyes, seduced by one element – for example the appeal of a shot blue chiffon – could not communicate with their hands, which did not know how to manipulate this difficult-to-control fabric, firstly to cut and then to make it into a pair of knickers. I knew I could trust my hands to discriminate between the fabrics on offer; they could discern a difference between a pleasant sensation and one that isn't, and they could pre-empt the behaviour of certain fabrics, allowing me to make an appropriate selection.

In my description below, I use a mixture of words that evoke both the appearance and the feel of the knickers, and combine these with technical terms drawn from my knowledge of fabric, how it is made and the composition of fibres. My hands work with my eyes, detecting nuances through handling that are not visible to the eye, or sensing behaviours that the eye cannot know. I make judgements based on the tacit knowledge held by my hands:

*The fabric is a synthetic brocaded satin. It's red. The outside of the satin, the right side, feels quite soft and quite smooth, but there is a slight stickiness to it. If it was silk satin it would feel more like skin temperature. Because this is synthetic, as my fingers move across it they judder ever so slightly. That's the sort of stickiness I mean, where the synthetic fabric is ever so slightly warmer than skin temperature. The reverse side, which is the side that would be*

*worn against the skin, being knickers, is rougher. It's not rough, but it's rougher. And catches slightly because there are the synthetic fibres. In fact the synthetic fibres would be very fluffy fibres, and it's that sort of fluffiness that catches.*

I have acquired this type of knowledge through my continued use of fabrics over time, familiarizing my hands to begin with as a child watching and helping out my mother with her sewing and then through my own attempts. Their ability to discern difference in the quality and behaviour of fabric developed later, particularly through twelve years of working with an international fabric trade fair,<sup>66</sup> where technical and aesthetic judgements are made in large part through the handling of cloth. The knowledge is built up, stored in our hands, and used discerningly. My experience reflects Crawford's claim that "the intellectual virtue of judging things rightly must be cultivated, and this is typically not the product of detached contemplation" but requires "bodily immersion in hard reality" (Crawford, 2009: 60).

## Learning: grappling with a new material

Although during the drop-in craft evening I could witness the dissatisfaction experienced by the other participants at not being able to manipulate the materials and tools, possessing this knowledge tacitly in my hands made it difficult for me to understand what it feels like. Such encounters are perceived as emotional as well as sensory experiences. For example, the frustration felt at not finding the appropriate technique and spoiling materials by having to unpick and re-stitch, or the shyness felt when faced with a new material or method, or the nervousness when learning a new manual skill. In order to experience first hand, through my hands and body, what it feels like not to know, as might an unskilled beginner, I joined a stone carving class.<sup>67</sup>

The shyness I felt on my first evening as I began to carve the stone presented itself as timid, wobbly gouges. Similarly to the beginner stitchers, my eyes were able to visualize what I wanted to make but my hands did not know how to go about it. My nervousness when faced with the unfamiliar stone reminded me of a defensive attitude taken in conversation with a stranger.

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<sup>66</sup> Première Vision – [www.premierevision.com](http://www.premierevision.com) – a twice-yearly global event that brings together textile and clothing industry professionals to showcase, sell and buy fabrics.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter One pp. 65-66 for details.

My lack of knowledge and understanding of the material and methods led me to adopt a rigid stance whereby I try to impose my will on the stone in an attempt to assert my presence in this exchange. Absorbed thus in my self-assertion I resist the “forces and flows” (Ingold, 2010: 2) of the encounter. I write in my notes:

*I spent the rest of the evening having a go on a rough piece of stone to practise and get the hang of using the tools. As expected, I felt very clumsy to start with. Holding the chisel correctly and guiding it against the stone at the correct angle looks straightforward, but isn't ... My forearms are very sore from wielding the hammer. They ache, particularly my right arm (hammer arm). The fingers on my left hand tend to lock from gripping the chisel in a particular manner. I have to slowly un-bend them when I release the chisel and my right hand is shaky. It hurts. I'm sure I am tense, and grip the chisel like a dagger, which will make it uncomfortable for me. (28.04.11)*

I experience this grappling with a new material as alien and hostile. I find it tiring and frustrating. Conscious of trying to make some sort of mark I rigidly resist listening to the material. I feel this resistance in my body as pain. From my knowledge of other handcrafts I know that as I practise I should not feel this hostility, but aim for a sensation of mutual interdependence, whereby the material yields to the tools which I should be able to hold comfortably as an extension of my fingers and hands. I can identify this in the relaxed, knowing friendship I observe that my teacher has with the stone:

*I love watching Marcia carve when she demonstrates – her movements are so graceful and confident, the subtleties like adjusting the angle of the chisel are so smooth and deft. The way she carves is more like moving through the stone. I feel like I am trying desperately to assert my thwack onto the stone. The stone always gives in to Marcia. It resists me often. Resulting in a large loss of energy on my behalf. (12.05.11)*

As I learn the procedures all my attention was needed to adjust my body and attempt to attune my position, the pressure exerted and the angle of the tools. I am acutely conscious of how my body feels all the time. The gestures are not routine for me; I have to concentrate fully on what my hands and body are doing. My teacher's apparent ease is a result of continued practise over time. Sennett (2008: 172) estimates that ten thousand hours of practise is needed to reach this level of mastery; at this stage I had acquired only ten.

Hand-stitching is also precise work that depends on one's ability to control and manipulate the sensations felt at the end of a



sharp tool. The deft coordination of the hand, eye and mind requires a combination of the senses – especially touch and vision – adjusting spontaneously to constantly changing stimuli. With a lack of experience, a practitioner consciously pays attention to the sensations, literally feeling the acquisition of knowledge.

Student participants in my stitching workshops voiced similar experiences. Depending on the task, the stage of execution and the skill of the stitcher, the type of attention may vary. Vanessa, a participant with only basic skills explained her need to pay close attention:

If you come from a non-practical stitching point of view, as I do, ... what was difficult was to actually put the needle in the right place... I needed to concentrate more.

And Lisa, a skilled participant un-learning a technique was acutely aware of the level of attention necessary to prevent the automatic responses of her hand:

I was automatically pulling it to make sure that the tension was right... I had to consciously pull the thread out again... I don't know how much my hand is used to it, but it kind of did it on its own.

Knowing from my stone-carving experience what it felt like emotionally and physically to learn a new hand skill I took the opportunity to observe it, in different circumstances, from the perspective of teaching the new skill. I had been invited by the organisation Craftspace to work with young people in an event held during the Clothes Show Live in December 2011.<sup>68</sup> The young audience (on average between 10 and 18 years old) were invited to have-a-go at hand-stitching and contribute to a large fabric installation on site at the Birmingham NEC. In the role of educator, I recognized the intense concentration, and the clumsy, physical awkwardness of their stiff and uncomfortable, sometimes aggressive, movements, as by trying to force their will on the cloth, without listening to or feeling its response, the participants attempted to embroider. Often the resources of their own bodies were not sufficient to coordinate these awkward movements, and help from a second person was required (figs 40-43).

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter One pp. 64-65.



Figs 40-43. Learning to embroider at the Clothes Show Live, December 2011.

In the time I spent learning to carve stone I became slightly faster and managed greater accuracy with the tools as I became more familiar with the reaction of the stone to the chisels. Nevertheless, the accuracy I achieved I believe had less to do with my improved level of skill but more because I enjoy making precise and detailed work. In this sense I was able to transfer some knowledge from one craft (hand-stitching) to another (stone-carving). However, the two terms of stone-carving were not enough for me to develop an intuitive fluency in the craft. I did not manage to achieve the self-reliance that occurs with a deeply embedded tacit knowledge of a craft but gained only a superficial knowledge, which my body doesn't fully understand and cannot put to use without guidance and supervision.

Understanding the world, according to Ingold (2010), is not about understanding what is done with or to objects as static forms; as 'things' they are alive and intermeshed with the forces that bring them to life and transform them. It is by intermeshing with the forces, by learning from hands-on experience through making, that such an understanding can be reached. Ingold's argument is that the hylomorphic model of creation, of an agent such as the practitioner imposing form onto matter, assumes that matter and form are lifeless, whereas he proposes that artists and makers join with the "forces and flows" (ibid: 2) of material, and through these encounters allow forms to emerge. For him this is a process where things and people are continually in movement, improvising and edging a way forwards in the environment together. From the perspective of a skilled practitioner I understand and agree with this definition of a making process. But Ingold assumes that artists and makers already have sufficient knowledge and experience of working smoothly with these materials, as in the example of Marcia, my stone-carving teacher. Whereas my experience of learning a hand skill, and helping others to learn, seems to suggest that for a beginner this initial encounter with a strange material does not flow, but is resisted by the body. The body tries to impose its will because it doesn't yet know how to respond: it doesn't know the language and can't hear its subtleties and nuances.

### Rhythm, repetition and pattern: embedding a skill

Other criteria that concern the physical embedding of a skill and a practice need to be fulfilled in order for the body to listen to the sensations and learn to make judgements through assessing how it feels, both physically and emotionally. Skill, defined

as the practical ability to apply a technique, requires repeated practise for hands and the body to learn the rules and gain the knowledge and understanding relative to a particular craft (Sennett, 2008).

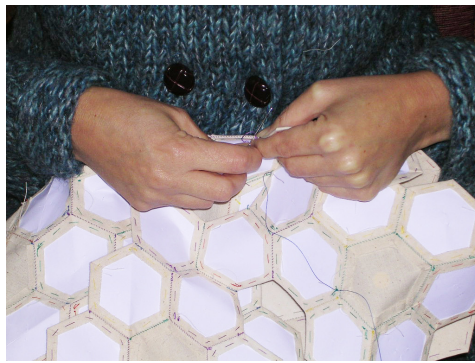
Dexterity in hand-stitching is felt in the ease and accuracy of locating where to place the needle and the speed and tension of pulling through the thread to make a stitch. Despite being trained to wear a thimble during my apprenticeship, I rarely wear one now because I take instructions from what my fingers feel and I dislike the interruption from the thimble's protective barrier. The needle has become an extension of my fingertips and I use the sensations I feel through it to guide my hand's movements. It demands a disciplined paying attention to what the body is doing, keeping alert to the sensations of the gestures and learning to feel subtleties and variations that might signal error, adjustment and improvement or imaginative innovation. Practise that entails repeating the same gesture like this consigns it to memory, eventually to reside in the body tacitly (Polanyi, 2009) - hence the hands that "appear to do it on their own" (Pye, 1995: 124). Repeating the action revives the memories of it that each time consolidates the knowledge.

I find that nevertheless, I cannot command my stitching skills at will; they need to be rehearsed. Commenting on the process of stitching rows of plain running stitch by hand on a large piece of linen cloth<sup>69</sup> I write in my notes:

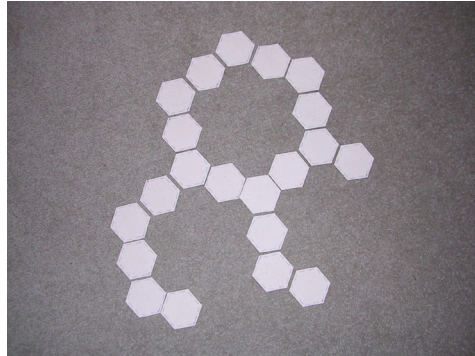
*I'm paying attention to the rhythm of the stitches, and the gap between the rows. The banality of it. I have to think about it. I have to work to merge with the piece. I find my way into the piece by paying attention to what I'm doing. My plying my needle is the means by which I find my way in to the piece. There is a moment of wrestling with it, of having to draw up from somewhere the knowledge I have that enables me to ply my needle, that enables me to find my way back into the piece. (Monologue, 2009 - see Appendix V for full text).*

For me, paying attention like this to a particular rhythm reminds my body of the sensation of the stitches I want to make. The rhythm is timed by the poking of the needle and the singing of the thread as I pull it through, recognized by my body as a pattern. As I adapt to its familiarity, I sense minute differences in the material, tool or environment as alterations to the pattern, and I adjust the position of my body or the pressure of my hands to find or fit the new pattern.

<sup>69</sup> This piece, *Monologue* (see Appendix V), I worked on from time to time over a period of three years from 2007-2010. I deliberately kept the 'motif' minimal in order to be able to concentrate on the sensations of the simple rhythms and patterns easily learnt by my hands, enabling my thoughts to issue a commentary on the process as I stitched, which I recorded.



- Pick up two pieces, face right sides together and stitch together. Finish and cut thread.
- Unfold and put down in place.
- Knot end of thread.
- Match up with next piece. Pay attention to the straight grain.
- Face right sides together and stitch together. Finish and cut thread.
- Unfold and put down in place.
- Knot end of thread.
- Match up with next piece. Pay attention to the straight grain.
- Face right sides together and stitch together. Finish and cut thread.
- Knot end of thread.
- Match up with neighbouring two pieces. Pay attention to the straight grain.
- Face right sides together and stitch together.



End of thread.

- Finish and cut thread.
- Unfold and put down in place.
- Cut thread, thread needle and knot end of thread.
- Match up with next piece, pay attention to the straight grain.
- Face right sides together and stitch together. Finish and cut thread.
- Unfold and put down in place.
- Knot end of thread.
- Match up with next piece, pay attention to the straight grain.
- Face right sides together and stitch together. Finish and cut thread.
- Unfold and put down in place.
- Knot end of thread.
- Match up with next piece, pay attention to the straight grain.
- Face right sides together and stitch together. Finish and cut thread.
- Unfold and put down in place.
- Knot end of thread.
- Match line with flower edges. Face neighbouring piece, right sides together and stitch together.
- Unfold, rotate and move on to next piece in the line, without cutting thread.
- Fold over to face neighbouring piece, right sides together and stitch together.
- Unfold, rotate and move on to next piece in the line, without cutting thread.
- Fold over to face neighbouring piece, right sides together and stitch together.
- Unfold, rotate and move on to next piece in the line, without cutting thread.
- Fold over to face neighbouring piece, right sides together and stitch together.
- Unfold, rotate and move on to next piece in the line, without cutting thread.
- Fold over to face neighbouring piece, right sides together and stitch together.

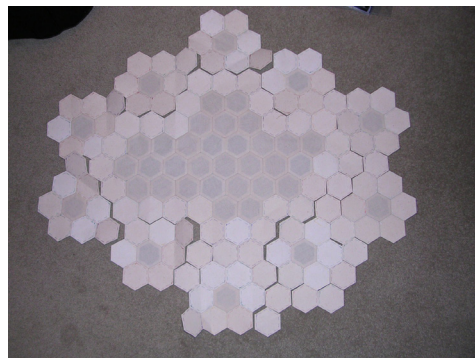
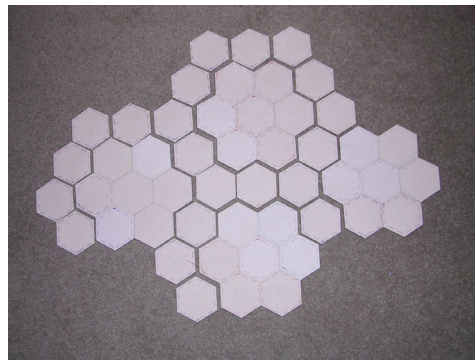


Fig 44. *Part of a Piece (extract)*, on making patchwork. See Appendix IV for full text and images.

A stronger visual example of this can be seen in the extract shown in (fig 44), and accompanying video of sewing where I record the folding, unfolding and turning of patchwork pieces to an emerging pattern (see \* *Part of a Piece*). The rhythm I illustrate refers to a pattern my body knows and repeats seamlessly, normally without giving it much thought. The pattern is in the small movements I make, coordinating my left and right hands to hold and manipulate the fabric. In some aspects it resembles a dance routine. In *Socrates' Ancestor*, Indra Kagis McEwen (1993) explores the relationships between the ancient Greek 'kosmos' (order) and craft, proposing that the regular movements of making invoke a visual pattern of the 'kosmos', the order of things. She writes:

"The discovery of a pattern seems to me to be an inherent feature of the human experience of making. Whether he or she thinks about it or not, or is even aware of it, a person who makes something implicitly assumes the existence of an order or standard of rightness that transcends all recipes and rules of composition: a standard, a pattern, or – to use the Greek word – a *paradeigma* which both measures the work and is measured by it. This pattern can be thought of as a single, immutable template to be traced or copied, which appears to be how Plato understood it, or it can be thought of as a mutable rhythm governing a pattern of movement, like the figure of a dance: a rhythm or order (*kosmos*) that is rediscovered with each new tracing of the figure." (McEwen, 1993: 41-42).

The 'kosmos', the order of things, does not have a fixed form but is manifested differently with each new making. Each time I repeat the pattern I make small adjustments with my hands to accommodate the infinite subtle variations of materials, weight and pressure. In becoming a pattern, the technique is consigned to memory; I remember it more fully and know it more intimately with each repetition. As an ordering of movements it becomes embodied, and it becomes the standard by which I measure the work and by which the work measures my skill.

# Chapter Three:

## Experiencing satisfaction

Skilful stitching as I have defined it in the previous chapter draws on a store of practical and sensual knowledge acquired tacitly by hands that can reward practitioners with physical, mental and emotional satisfactions. The rewards gained from these kinds of creative rituals must be, or be believed to be, sufficiently fulfilling in ways that attract practitioners to continue to invest time and effort in their stitching. If, as Clayton (2010) and Crawford (2009) suggest, some of the dissatisfactions with visual and material cultures might be addressed in part by skilled handcrafting, it is worth investigating the sorts of satisfactions hand-stitching might offer. As mentioned in Chapter One, these satisfactions might include the mutual benefits of shared experiences, company and conversation that via crafting skills builds confidence and social networks within communities, or support in times of loss and suffering. I also believe that the satisfactions offered by hand-stitching are worth pursuing for their own sake as private, intimate experiences enjoyed by the individual.

This chapter explores factors contributing to these feelings of satisfaction and the “mysterious bodily pleasure which goes with the deft exercise of the bodily powers” (Morris, 1883). I draw principally on interviews and observations from my visits to the south London quilting group and compare with my own experiences of making patchwork and plain stitching. Satisfaction and pleasure in making may in part be derived from a sense of purpose in serving one’s community or gifting quilts to family and friends, but I argue that the haptic qualities experienced in association with working cloth underlie our motivations.

Building on an existing multi-disciplinary approach to the study of textile practice (Graves, 2002; Stalp, 2007; Araujo, 2010; Igoe, 2010) I draw insights from ethology (Dissanayake, 1995a, 1995b), positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), psychoanalysis (Pajaczkowska, 2010) and craft knowledge (Pye, 1995; Dormer, 1997c; Sennett, 2008; Pallasmaa, 2009; Frayling, 2011) to propose that the satisfactions derived from hand-stitching depend upon an embodied knowledge of the patterns of the whole craft, leading to a stronger personal sense of control.

### “That mysterious bodily pleasure”

Writing as a craft practitioner, William Morris (1883) tries to find words to articulate what he understood to be the worthwhile effects of the feelings of satisfaction experienced when making things by hand:



“The pleasure which ought to go with the making of every piece of handicraft has for its basis the keen interest which every healthy man takes in healthy life, and is compounded, it seems to me, chiefly of three elements; variety, hope of creation, and the self-respect which comes of a sense of usefulness; to which must be added that mysterious bodily pleasure which goes with the deft exercise of the bodily powers.” (Morris, 1883).

Others since have also been intrigued by this “mysterious bodily pleasure” and seek to define it or offer explanations for it. Dissanayake (1995b) suggests that this type of pleasure derived from handling and making is “hardwired into human nature”, citing the example of babies born with incipient hand movements that presage the grasping, gripping and handling of things, which might lead to more sophisticated patterns of playful experimentation, and potentially to tool use and making (Dissanayake, 1995b: 41). Noting that a great deal of time and effort is spent on what might appear to be gratuitous pastimes that divert energy away from more directly useful activities, she proposes making as a human behavioural trait that “satisfies an intrinsic and deep human imperative” (Dissanayake, 1995a: 34). She states “there is something important, even urgent, to be said about the sheer enjoyment of making something exist that didn’t exist before” (Dissanayake, 1995b: 40).

Crawford (2009) goes further to propose that the satisfactions drawn from seeing and feeling one’s ability to resolve complex technical problems using a hands-on practical knowledge of making and fixing things enable autonomy of means, and also autonomy of thought, which he fears is at risk of becoming increasingly unattainable. He claims:

“We have come to live in a world that precisely does not elicit our instrumentality, the embodied kind that is original to us. We have too few occasions to do anything, because of a certain predetermination of things from afar.” (Crawford, 2009: 69).

He explains:

“There seems to be an ideology of freedom at the heart of consumerist material culture; a promise to disburden us of mental and bodily involvement with our own stuff so we can pursue ends we have freely chosen. Yet this disburdening gives us fewer occasions for the experience of direct responsibility.” (Crawford, 2009: 56).

The rhetoric of freedom and creativity of contemporary culture has become linked to a concept of flexibility in workplaces and

homes, the reality of which, he argues, is incompetence leading to dependency on systems and a lack of a personal sense of control, resulting in a fragile sense of self.

I agree there is a “mysterious bodily pleasure” (Morris, 1883) experienced when making things, and that the challenges can lead to a satisfying sense of achievement. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, learning and practising a handcraft is challenging, frustrating, sometimes painful. Making can be an intimidatingly difficult task requiring stamina and dedication. The result of these efforts may not turn out as desired. Paula, a patchwork-quilter, enjoys the process of stitching patchwork quilts, but admits to recurring feelings of dissatisfaction:

I feel the need to create something and I found this media is wonderful and suits me. I feel comfortable with it and, ... it sounds pretentious to say to create something but even if it's silly or not good but that's what I feel, that to create something gives me a satisfaction, yes. Most of the time I feel frustrated because, as I told you, I end up not liking the things.

The sorts of satisfactions offered by being engaged in hand-stitching processes are associated with a knowledgeable handling of materials manipulated through the controlled, repetitive gestures of skilled hands. This can offer a combination of physically pleasurable sensations, curiosity for trying out new patterns, and psychologically testing, but compelling, challenges. Morris's tenacious idea of pleasure in handcrafting still has relevance, but the new contexts of contemporary cultures raise questions about the ways in which these pleasures and satisfactions are attained, and if the resultant artefacts are not used, sold or displayed – nor even liked – to what ends are they made?

## The patchwork quilting group

As a result of a chance meeting at the Knitting and Show<sup>70</sup> early in the research I had made contact with a group of patchwork quilting enthusiasts based in south London. Founded in 1986, they have 25 members and their own programmes of guest speaker talks, workshops and exhibitions. The group meets twice a month at times to accommodate those who work during

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<sup>70</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, see p. 62.

the day and those who have family to care for. Meetings are held in their homes and responsibility to host meetings is rotated between members. Their twice-monthly meetings are intended to stimulate their creative ideas and working methods, as well as providing informal social support. All members of the group are proficient in patchwork quilting techniques, having followed courses prior to joining. They are motivated to discover new patterns and techniques, sew regularly and have high standards of workmanship. The group is well informed and actively interested in their craft, describing themselves as “strong minded, vociferous and adventurous in their work, exploring new design possibilities, techniques and materials” (The Dulwich Society, 2008).<sup>71</sup>

I met 13 members who make up a culturally mixed group of middle-class women<sup>72</sup> who, in part due to their geographical proximity to London, have ready access to a range of cultural events, workshops and classes that provide inspiration and keep them up-to-date with notable quilters, events, exhibitions, publications and new techniques. Some of the keenest members meet amongst themselves to share ideas and seek constructive criticism. They also regularly enter competitions, show and sell their work at exhibitions and accept commissions.

The majority of the members I met are of, or nearing, retirement age. Their lives are centred around their families and volunteering duties. Many care for grandchildren and/or elderly family members; some work part-time, and one or two still have children living at home. Time to spend on their own interests has to be fitted in around these other obligations. Some will try to spend as much as half their day sewing most days of the week, but others might find time sporadically, sometimes having to leave their quilting as other priorities take over. The quilts produced vary in size and use various hand and machine techniques. Some are based on traditional designs found in pattern books (figs 45 & 46), others are contemporary in style and

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71 The group established themselves independently from the nationwide Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, although some of their members belong to the Guild and its subsidiary specialist quilting groups, such as the Contemporary Quilt group and the Miniature Quilt group. The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, established in 1979 now has over 6,500 members. Its aims are to “bring together quilters in a spirit of friendship and learning. We promote quilt-making in all its forms across the UK. As an educational charity we preserve the heritage of quilting and work to ensure a vibrant future for the craft.” (The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, 2010). This is achieved through its network of regional groups. It organizes events, competitions and exhibitions nationally to nurture members' interests and skills, and now has a dedicated museum in York to house its collection of historical and contemporary quilts, as well as hosting touring and temporary exhibitions. The Contemporary Quilt group represents “a diverse group of over 600 quilters and fabric artists at the cutting edge of quilt making. We like to work in textiles to create innovative and dynamic art” (The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, 2010). Their aims are to “provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information relating to the practice of contemporary quilting, take traditional techniques and push them to their limits by using new fabrics and technology and encouraging original design, and to encourage members to be makers and exhibitors of their own work and to attend and appreciate exhibitions of contemporary work” (The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, 2010).

72 See Appendix VIII for further details about the participants and our meetings.



Fig 45. Biddy: inspired by traditional patchwork quilt patterns.



Fig 46. Ruth: following a Kaffe Fassett patchwork design from a commercially available pattern book.



Fig 47. Paula: experimenting freely with original patterns and colour combinations in her contemporary quilt designs.



Fig 48. Eve makes wall hangings incorporating hand painted and dyed fabrics with embroidered surfaces.

experiment more freely with the patterns, motifs and techniques used (fig 47). Occasionally embroidery is included, but the majority of work is pieced and/or appliquéd.<sup>73</sup> Some members prefer making quilts to use as bedcovers; others make quilts as wall hangings (fig 48). Most quilters collect scraps of fabric from cast-off clothes, remnants, pieces exchanged with friends and re-distributed fabric from friends' 'stashes',<sup>74</sup> but will also buy new pieces of fabric, or dye their own, for specific projects.

From time to time the group works on collective projects designing and making quilts to donate directly, or to raffle and raise money for local charities. Participating in a group project provides the opportunity to experiment with new patterns and perfect techniques; donating quilts to charities provides an outlet for their prolific production.<sup>75</sup>

Through their quilting activities the group forges links with their local community. For example, their collective quilts hang in local doctors' surgeries; they hold exhibitions of their work in one of the schools and they offer charitable support to local organisations by donating proceeds from raffling quilts. However, serving their community in this way is not their primary objective. The group's attentions are primarily oriented towards their community of fellow quilters. The group's aim is mutual self-motivation by creating opportunities to perfect or learn new skills, share tips and provide occasions for informal criticism, thereby nurturing their enthusiasm and inspiring the betterment of their workmanship. Each member has their own special interest and they pursue their creative experimentation by making unique pieces for themselves, for exhibition and as gifts for friends and family independently from the collective work they do with the group.

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73 Pieced work is a generic term for patchwork that is made by stitching pieces of fabric shapes together to form a flat pattern, usually geometric. Appliquéd work is made by stitching fabric shapes, usually figurative, to a base fabric.

74 A 'stash' is a term adopted by quilters to describe their collection of fabrics intended for use in patchwork quiltmaking. The passion for fabrics that attracts people to the craft often means they hoard more fabric than they will ever be able to use. Somewhere between a mark of pride and embarrassment, a 'stash' is termed as such as its storage will often present problems, and this is a frequent conversation thread for bloggers (Simms, 2007; Kat, 2013; Stalp, 2006, 2007).

75 For example, I was invited to observe the group on two occasions as they worked towards a collective donation of individually designed and made cot quilts for the charity Babies In Prisons ([www.babiesinprison.co.uk](http://www.babiesinprison.co.uk)). Members have also made, and continue to make, small quilts for another charity, Project Linus ([www.projectlinusuk.co.uk](http://www.projectlinusuk.co.uk)) who distribute them to sick children in hospitals.

## Personal pleasures

More quilts are made by the group members than they need. Some are kept, but many are given away:

Sometimes when I'm making the quilt, the person who it's destined for becomes plain. Ah, I know who this quilt is for. And so then it goes to this person. And, it doesn't really matter whether they like it or not, they get it nonetheless.

Some quilts may be gifted as a way to clear stock, as is implied by Ruth, quoted above. Others are made and given away specifically to strengthen friendships or family ties, investing the work with the symbolic power to represent this (figs 49 & 50).



Fig 49. A pieced and embroidered patchwork quilt made by the members of the quilting group and gifted to Bidy, the group's founding member, to mark their friendship.



Fig 50. A patchwork quilt in progress intended as a gift to Bidy's son and daughter-in-law on moving to the USA.

I have also made quilts as gifts. I have made and given small quilts to my niece and nephew following their births, to cousins on the occasion of their marriage, and similar gifts to other family members and friends (figs 51 & 52). Whilst I acknowledge the satisfaction of giving and receiving gifts, and of investing the quilts with personal and emotional significance as a way of marking these occasions, I actually experience an equal or possibly greater satisfaction in the making of the quilts; finding suitable fabrics from my stock, trying out the patterns and colours next to each other, cutting the strips of fabric, and the quiet moments spent sewing it together. As Ruth puts it:

The fun part for me is making the quilt: creating it, sewing it, putting it together, quilting it, finishing it off. I've had my fun with it.

The gifting of quilts could easily be the subject of a larger study,<sup>76</sup> but as Dissanayake writes “more essential than the result is the behaviour or the activity, and more interesting, ..., is the impetus that animates the behaviour or activity” (Dissanayake, 1995a: 61). For the purpose of this research I believe there is something more compelling to say about the personal satisfactions experienced whilst making. My conversations with the quilters confirmed this as I listened and watched how they articulate the extent to which they craft for themselves. In response to my question ‘how long did it take you to do that?’, Liz responds:

I don't know. It didn't matter – I was enjoying it so much.

For them, and for myself, hand-stitching is a personally pleasurable experience. Penney Burton (2007) has suggested that textile makers “choose this type of work because they receive some sort of physical or emotional benefit while creating with repetitive and accumulative textile techniques, which then results in their desire to continue with these artistic practices” (Penney Burton, 2007: 147). Patchwork quilts, with their complex patterns, sophisticated colour combinations and the precision of craft skills applied in their making, offer personal satisfactions for the individual beyond their practical function as bedcoverings or wall hangings and their social function of consolidating familial ties as gifts. One example, explained by Ruth, is the satisfaction had from feeling and seeing progress made as something tangible:

I don't make quilts for approbation. I make quilts because I need to use up my fabric stash, don't I? And I need to – I'm a 'what have you achieved today?' person.... and this is a wonderful way of achieving. Because I can see what I have done with my day.

<sup>76</sup> See Stalp (2007) and Kuchler (2005) for examples.



Fig 51. Double bed quilt given to cousins on the occasion of their marriage. Mixed fabrics, hand-knotted. 200 x 230 cm.



Fig 52. Bed cover / floor mat given to my nephew. Mixed fabrics, hand-quilted. 100 x 125 cm.



## Sensory stimulants: touch, pattern and order

Handling fabrics depends upon the sense of touch. Touch is a reciprocal sensation; to touch is also to be touched. The sensation of cloth against skin is familiar to most people. It is worn or wrapped around us throughout our lives as bedding and clothing, protecting the body against discomfort and the elements. As such, the sensation is perhaps so familiar that our attachment to it is taken for granted. The sensations and smells of cloth recall feelings of intimacy and reassurance.<sup>77</sup> It is not surprising to hear quilters find a certain physical pleasure or comfort in handling fabrics, as Paula recounts:

I love to work with the fabric. I think that the texture that I handle is immediate. It is so sensual, isn't it? You touch – I love that, actually.

As an “agent of tactile and visual experience” (Igoe, 2010: 5) the pliability, subtlety and variety of textures, colours, patterns and weights of fabrics provide a limitless playground of sensory stimulants for the eyes as well as the hands.

The visual feast of pattern-making is compelling in its own right, independently from the craft of stitching, and the various combinations of shapes possible are not unique to patchwork but are also evident in other crafts, for example in mosaics or paper collages.<sup>78</sup> Making patterns from shapes of colour can be strangely enthralling (Araujo, 2010: 191). The physical sensation of handling cloth combined with the visual intrigue of pattern is pleasingly mesmerising. Part of this satisfaction is the sense of order it generates; mismatched scraps and odd-shaped remnants are transformed into the neat, clean lines of repeated pattern. However, endlessly repeated pattern is, according to Jane Graves (2002: 47), “always on the edge of nightmare”, potentially inducing anxiety as well as delight. Paula, for instance, explained to me her dissatisfaction with a particular repeating design:

I designed the blocks, two different blocks and then I started repeating them and I found it so hard and so boring because you have to repeat the same thing over and over again and really makes me very bored and it's difficult.

<sup>77</sup> Cloth can also be associated with disturbing and distressing sensations. For example, feelings of abandonment are treated in the work of Mike Kelley, evoked in piles of soft toys; the stiff, scratchy feel of some woollens recalls uniforms and enforced discipline; Louise Bourgeois' use of textile expresses her fears of isolation and manipulation, evoking suffocation (Celant, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> As with gifting, visual pattern-making in textiles crafts could easily be the subject of a larger study. See Araujo (2010) and Graves (2002) for further discussion relative to textile pattern.

Patterns on or made with fabric will usually be cut, hemmed or bordered, halting the entrapment of infinite repetition. In this, a patchwork quilter develops a mastery and control over pattern through skilfully crafting with it. In the example shown in fig 53, Paula repeats the same block pattern, but alters the colour combinations each time. She has contrived a sophisticated approach to balancing the engulfing boredom of repeated pattern with a desired sense of order. She goes on to say:

At least I felt happier that I was not doing all the same, you know, repeating the block. Yes I prefer.

An approach I enjoy is to work in an ordered manner with simple patterns using stripes and squares, but leave my arrangement of colours to chance, picking randomly from a vaguely pre-selected pile of fabrics (fig 54).



Fig 53. Each repeating block is altered slightly to engineer difference, but the attraction of the pattern is not disrupted.



Fig 54. Randomly selected colours creating interest in an otherwise simple striped patchwork design.

## Controlled patterns

Part of evolving a hand skill is knowing the patterns of the whole craft and understanding the ways in which they interconnect. The craft of patchwork quilting, for example, comprises many different tasks, or 'patterns', and tedium can be offset by variety in tasks. The sense of control valued by the quilters also applies to the choice of tasks to be undertaken. Part of the skill developed by a patchwork quilter lies in managing the potential tedium of the craft, controlling the patterns and rhythms of the sewing, sensing when to stop and to change tasks. Different types of tasks can be undertaken independently from one another, and in parallel to each other, without compromising the whole piece of work, and providing opportunities for the maker to progress steadily through the work avoiding boredom. It also offers different satisfactions that respond to different physical or mental stimuli:

Every aspect of it is fascinating and that's why I've always got more projects than just one on the go.... Sometimes I want to cut these things out, and sometimes I want to piece little pieces, and sometimes I want to do some appliqué, or to sit here with work in my hand and sew, and sometimes I want to quilt. So I've got to have various projects in various stages. (Ruth)

Reflecting on why she chooses to work in this manner, Ruth goes on to say:

It's got to be some sort of stimulus, hasn't it?... I don't know what the stimulus is for it. But just that it is there and I know how to respond to it. I know that something says – I think you should do a bit of appliqué – so I do.... There are days when I need to put things together, or days when I need to appliqué, or days when I need to cut or days when I have to tidy up this fabric.

She acknowledges the satisfaction she feels at responding to the stimuli, that they seem to be varied and not always requiring the same action to be taken. She says she "knows how to respond to it" here implying she recognizes the pattern, she is in control of her making and knows what decisions to make. She hints that this gratification is physically felt and makes a comparison with a physiological need that echoes Dissanayake's claim that our impulse to make is biologically "hard-wired" (Dissanayake, 1995b: 41):

It's like being hungry. I'm hungry, I'm going to eat something. That was nice. I don't feel hungry anymore. It's like that, isn't it?.... That's what it is.

## A job well done

Dissanayake writes "discipline and carefulness are virtues that have sustained humans for millennia... making special meant making with care, that is, taking pains and doing one's best" (Dissanayake, 1995b: 45). To make with care and to take pains over a quilt is a personal satisfaction; I know when I have taken pains, it might or might not show in the work, and it might not matter to other people. My ability to make this kind of judgement implies I measure the quality of my work against certain standards or criteria; these can be both objective and subjective. For some this might only come on completion of the task and one way is to expose the work to external criticism. In instances where the work is intended for display or sale, paying attention to its careful execution brings rewards in the form of external praise. For instance the quilt in fig 55, which won a prize at the nationwide Festival of Quilts competition, is a source of pride for Eve.

Alternatively, satisfaction might come from constant use. Bidy's first quilt was an ambitiously large and detailed, pieced and appliquéd bedcover (fig 56). Years later it is still admired by her, her family and visitors.

For others the sensation of pride in having taken pains to do one's best is felt in other ways; for example, through successfully working out a particularly complicated design, then cutting out and stitching together the shapes with the necessary precision and dexterity (fig 57). Ruth explains:

This design is created by using first of all three and three-quarter inch squares made into a square, sewn together as squares. And then it's bordered with some of this fabric. And from that I cut out these smaller squares. It's called "tessellated pinwheels", the design. I cut out smaller squares from within that grid and then I turn them and sew them together again to create this tessellation.... this is also very satisfying... And I think you're right, I probably get satisfaction from that as well as the satisfaction of getting my points to match, and getting things to fit together and, oh look it's all fit together, this is fabulous!



Fig 55. Eve's winning entry for the Festival of Quilts.



Fig 56. Biddy's first ambitious quilt, still used and admired.



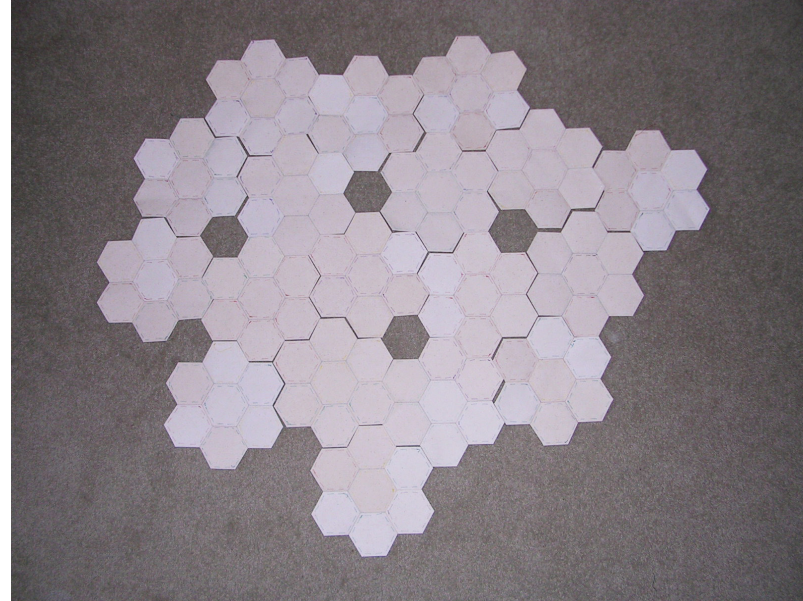
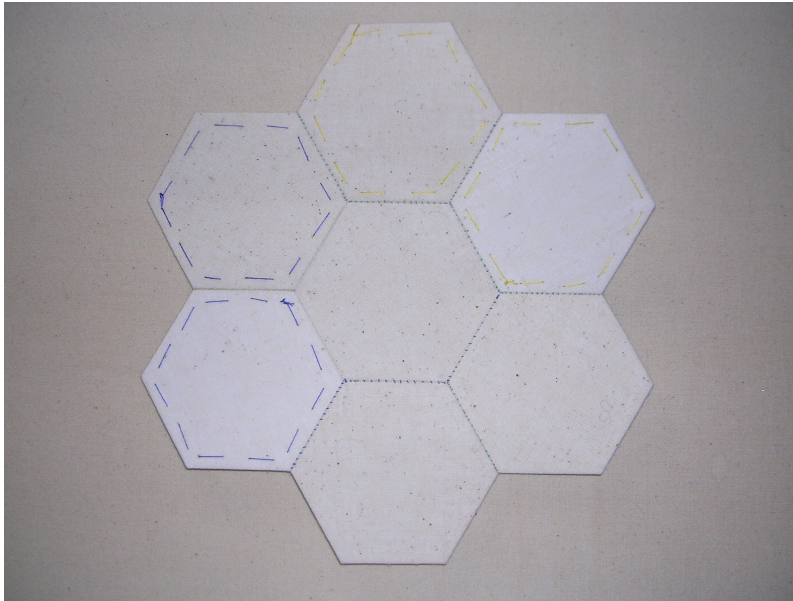
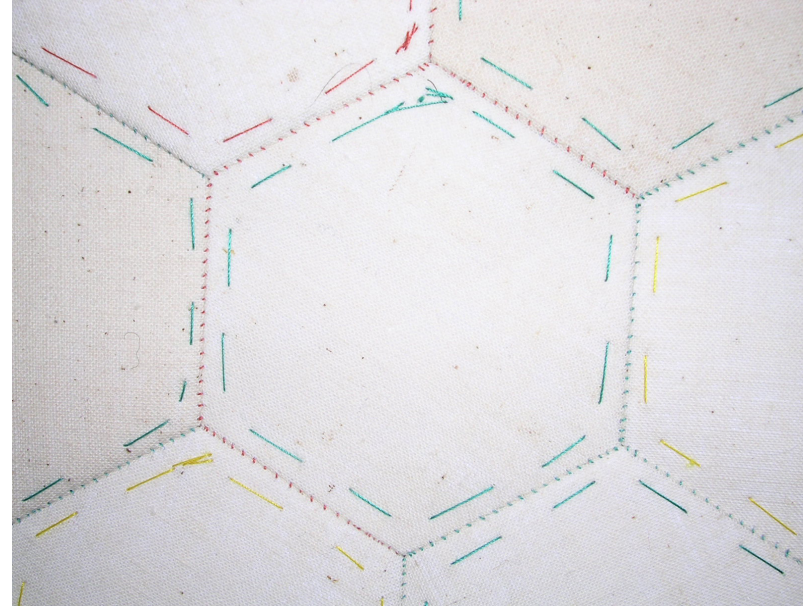
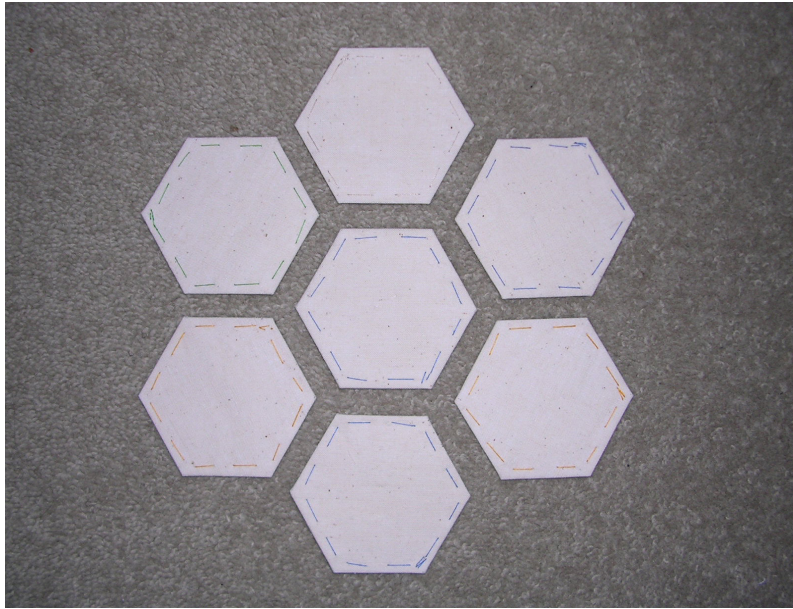
Fig 57. Ruth's accurately matched 'tessalated pinwheel' patchwork.

Ruth finds her satisfaction in her own rigorous approach to standards of workmanship and quality of finish, even if others can't see these:

I get pleasure in nice stitching.... But I don't want you to see my stitching. You can just see where it's pulled in – but I don't want you to see the stitching... I get pleasure from nicely made. The stitching that you're not meant to see – you can't see. Now that's satisfying.

Inspired by the pains taken and the pride in workmanship expressed by these quilters, and to demonstrate that I had the dexterity and precision to match their sewing skills, I began work on a piece of patchwork to remind myself of the exacting process of composition and the precision expected by the geometric shapes. In the patchwork piecing method I chose, hand-stitching has a different function from that relating to embroidery. It is used firstly to secure the fabric to the paper templates and secondly to attach the shapes together. The stitches are normally small and tight, binding the separate pieces securely. In contrast to the embroideries, the stitching usually remains invisible and the properties of the cloth and pattern are emphasized. In my example I chose to reverse the usual combination of decorative, coloured fabric shapes and invisibly stitched joins with plain calico fabric and coloured stitching to deliberately highlight the stitching and draw attention to the pains I had taken (figs 58-61).

The inherent rigour of patchwork techniques means these sorts of geometric shapes only fit together to complete the pattern if they are precisely cut out and stitched together. Discovering the pattern as it emerges, with shapes neatly slotting together in this manner, I found satisfying. I found I could sense this quickly through the way the materials behave: for instance, whether the shapes slot together smoothly, or overlap and have to be bent and forced to fit. This is because I know the rules of making patchwork, and recognise when I have 'got it right'. Dormer (1997c) writes of craft as a "practical philosophy" and advocates the importance of a disciplined learning of the rules as a source of personal satisfaction. For him there are rules of making, which concern how to do a particular task and with practise are assimilated to become instinctive, forgotten or even broken, and rules of procedure, which a practitioner establishes for herself or himself in order to maintain a personal integrity in the work (ibid: 222). Ruth, whose rule of procedure is the accuracy of her stitching, explains her search for satisfaction and consequent motivation to launch into a new project:



Figs 58-61. *Part of a Piece* (2007-08), hexagon patchwork in calico and coloured thread. See also Appendix IV.



I made it with the intention of improving my accuracy. I wanted to make a quilt with a proper ¼" seam so that when I put my nine patches together every one of these joins was absolutely perfect. Well, of course, it didn't work out. It wasn't absolutely perfect. But it was an improvement. I found that very, very satisfying. And I enjoyed making it. And I thought, okay, I got that cracked. I can now do a ¼" seam – I can get things together, so I can do things more complicated now.

It is clear that the importance of taking pains and taking time to make the work to the best of their abilities matters to the quilters. They are in control of the means by which they measure their satisfaction in having done the job well: in their own time, at their own pace and with their own resources (Frayling, 2011: 80). Conversely, losing control over one or more of these aspects is expressed by some as a negative experience:

I didn't do that as carefully as I might have done, I must have been running out of time. (Liz)

and:

I didn't have too much time. I really had to rush, it was horrible. (Paula)

## Losing oneself

Although he was an outspoken critic of the Arts and Crafts ideals, Pye appears to agree with Morris about "that mysterious bodily pleasure which goes with the deft exercise of the bodily powers" (Morris, 1883). He admits that:

"there can be a certain pleasure in finding that one's judgement is being exercised only half-consciously, and in letting the process continue.... One can, for instance, do a great deal of sawing and chopping without quite knowing how one has arrived at the result correctly. The hands appear to do it on their own, without referring to the head." (Pye, 1995: 124).

The focused hand-eye coordination required for the combination of precision and repetition of needlework engenders an almost trance-like state of mind. Pallasmaa (2009: 82) describes this “mental and material flow between the maker and the work” as “so tantalising that the work seems to be producing itself”. In recording my commentary of thoughts as I worked on the *Monologue* piece, I note that once started,

*There’s something calming about pushing the needle in, pulling it out, and pulling the thread through. Like breathing. A rhythm. Like a beat. It’s quite slow. There is comfort in the simplicity of it. The plainness of it. The boringness of it. I’m looking at my stitches. I’m trying to keep them even. All the same length. And straight... Drawn in by the rhythm, I forget what I’m doing. (Monologue - see Appendix V for full text).*

I find it hard to stop. The participants from the quilting group know exactly what I mean. They describe to me occasions of losing themselves in their sewing work. Ruth talks about how

The fun part is... the hand stitching. It’s very slow and it’s very satisfying.... If I get really involved in something then I do quite a lot. I disappear upstairs, and you know, to hang with everything else, and get on with it.

**She continues:**

I have been known to be so engrossed in something up here that on one occasion I missed lunch. I don’t quite know how that happened. I was listening to the radio and something came on at two o’clock and I thought - it can’t be two o’clock ... I usually stop at one o’clock. At the one o’clock news I stop and have a sandwich or something and I’d completely missed it.

The words used to describe this experience include phrases like ‘drawn in by’, ‘lose myself’, ‘disappear’, ‘sink’, which suggest the sensation of being absorbed into or swallowed up by the work; a letting oneself become part of the work without quite knowing how it happened (Pye, 1995: 124). The boundary of the self is blurred with that of the work. The self as a contained subject, normally conscious of where the body stops and the external world begins, relapses into a “lost ‘oceanic’ state of synaesthetic synergy, where boundaries differentiating self from other have become fluid, permeable or mutable” (Pajaczkowska, 2010: 145). The normally clear distinctions between the person doing and the thing being done to, between

subject and object, are temporarily suspended, as is the sense of time passing, and even of location. Pajaczkowska proposes the term 'haptic', the muscular action of manual dexterity and the sensory relationship between vision and touch, as a clue. Like knowledge acquired tacitly, a haptic experience is outside language; beyond the reach of words and the formal rules of syntax and grammar it does not adhere to the rule of subject, object, verb. " 'Doing' can have the meaning of 'being done to' in a way that combines active and passive both simultaneously and indivisibly" (Pajaczkowska, 2010: 146).

Positive psychology offers another explanation. This total absorption with the task in hand, this feeling of wholeness, typically generates a heightened sense of self-awareness and a losing track of time that is described by the American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in his research into states of optimal experience as "flow". Flow is understood to be a form of pleasure that arises from total absorption in an intrinsically motivating activity. It is a component of an experience worth having for its own sake independently from any other type of external reward. According to Jackson (2011), this intrinsically motivating experience, although valued for its own sake, is not solely derived from the moment of the act of making, but "comes from an engagement with particular kinds of practice. This allows us to think of flow not as a purely internal psychic reward achieved by autonomous individuals, but as an experience that is also connected to wider social contexts and patterns of behaviour" (Jackson, 2011: 7) that include environments and networks of people with common interests. He also suggests that to achieve this quality of experience practitioners will demonstrate a "careful control and mastery" (Jackson, 2011: 1) of and within their space of work. Jackson's research concerned highly skilled amateur practitioners who disposed of time and space to practise their crafts in well-organized and well-equipped home-based studio-workshops. My experiences differ in the disposal of time and space: few participants – including myself – have access to a studio-workshop and time is not always set aside but grabbed between and around other demands.

In the examples I mention, losing oneself in repetitive hand-stitching generates a sense of being able to stop time and dissolve boundaries, demonstrating a different sort of "careful control and mastery" of space; time and space that is otherwise filled with obligations to other activities and people can thus be retrieved for the self. Cutting out the patchwork shapes and stitching them together piece by piece and block by block can easily be contained to the scale of the body; the work is usually within reach. Hand-stitching work, held by the hands against the torso, draws the eyes downward, shaping the body into a studious, inward-looking posture, with the head bowed over the work (figs 62 & 63). Containing the activity within



Figs 62 & 63. Head bowed over stitching work in concentration.

this manageable scale of the body helps to restore a sense of control over external events. Thus absorbing the individual's attention, it feels possible to manipulate time and space to allow for a re-ordering, a re-patterning of thoughts, feelings or priorities. Piecing together bits of discarded fabrics into a new whole metaphorically performs the piecing together and re-articulation of a dispersed self.

## Stillness and control

It is possible that the "careful control and mastery" of space within hand-stitching practices is contrived by the slightly bowed posture bent over the work and the stillness of the body as it is focused on and drawn in by the rhythms and patterns of stitching. Considered as such, it is an effective means of making, and signalling to others a private 'space' for contemplation and for suspending responsibilities; a space without borders as such but with boundaries 'built' by focused concentration. If it is desired, one manages to feel alone, even if that might not be the case.

*My thoughts move independently from what my hands are doing, and what my body is doing. Which is still. My hands are slowly moving to a rhythm. The rhythm begins to play a part... of being still, being in one place... It transports me. Although I'm very much here, I'm not completely here. (Monologue - see Appendix V for full text)*

I try to capture above in words the sensations of simultaneously being still and moving my hands to the gestures of hand-stitching but I am also aware of my thoughts wandering. I was working on the large piece of plain running stitch; a technique my hands know well and could perform independently without needing my full concentration releasing my thoughts to drift. Virginia Woolf evocatively describes this seductive state of sinking into oneself and closing off the outside world:

*"I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts." (Woolf, 2003: 61).*

She was not actually writing about stitching, but the state of self-subsisting within a quiet stillness and keeping all else at bay whilst feeling simultaneously physically present and absent, I borrow to help articulate the sort of control over space and time that comes with the sensation of introspective stillness, where my thoughts swim unchecked, free from “hostility, or obstacle”.

I hint that this state of being is not automatic. Careful attention is required to start the process and remind the body of the necessary hand-eye-mind coordination. The rhythmic, accumulative gestures generate conditions that draw together mind and body, and inspire a focussed attention on the moment in hand. The mind and body are fully engaged in the activity, albeit whilst sitting still. I write in my notes:

*I'm paying attention to the rhythm of the stitches, and the gap between the rows... I have to think about it. I have to work to merge with the piece. I find my way into the piece by paying attention to what I'm doing. (Monologue - see Appendix V for full text).*

This is prompted by following a design, or given instruction, which guides the hands and body into the rhythms of the gesture. Once the pattern is recognized, and is settled into a rhythm, concentration lapses, or changes its focus, allowing the mind to drift off into introspective rambling thoughts, or to join the conversation and participate socially. Jessica Hemmings describes it as “a place of concentration that allows the hands to take over from the mind” (Hemmings, 2006: 62).

## “Having something for myself”

To some this inwardly-turned reverie might appear self-indulgent, as this attention, that might otherwise be paid to a partner or other family members, is directed towards the self. The shutting-out of the outside world in search of an uninterrupted calmness signifies a self-reliance sometimes experienced by an observer as threatening or suspicious. The writer Colette observes the hostile feelings she has when watching her daughter:

*“I shall speak the truth: I don't much like my daughter sewing.... Bel-Gazou is silent when she sews, silent for hours on end, with her mouth firmly closed, ... She is silent, and she – why not write down the word that frightens me – she is thinking.” (Colette, 1970: 206-207).*

Bel-Gazou's silence, stillness and concentration suggest this same self-containment I describe above. She wholly occupies her own world with an autonomy that signifies her unavailability to attend to others, resulting in her mother anxiously resenting her inaccessibility and willing her return. Stalp's research into quilters finds similar reactions:

"Family members sometimes see time spent on quilting as 'wasted' time. Quilters reported that their families misunderstood their quilting time, and that they wanted the quilter to be doing something more directly related to the family." (Stalp, 2007: 99).

Despite this kind of resentment embroiderers and quilters find stitching satisfying in the way it allows them to carve out a private space for quiet contemplation. The guise of a usefully practical crafting activity enables these stitchers to turn their attention to their own needs and thoughts without having to be physically separated from others. Sara Impey, now an award-winning quilter exhibiting internationally, recounts that she relied on her stitching earlier in life to provide this kind of distraction during her time as a political journalist, and later to offer respite from the demands of raising a family (Freeman, 2007: 7). Liz explains how she too came to depend on her stitching:

In a way, it's not as necessary to me now as when I had the small children because... I felt desperately trapped with these children who I could never sort of get away from and it was a way of having something for myself.

Hand-stitching inspires ambiguous images of acquiescence and rebellion, of constraint and freedom of thought, of the effort of manual labour and private pleasures. This is possibly exaggerated in circumstances where restrictions are enforced, as is the case in prisons. A.S. Byatt (2008), in her review of 'The Fabric of Myth' exhibition held at Compton Verney in Warwickshire in 2007, associates sewing, spinning or weaving with danger, isolation and tragic fate where the embroiderers or weavers are imagined to be made vulnerable because of their craft.

However, I think there is scope for an additional view that affords stitchers greater independence of thought and action. Rather than being "passively trapped" (Byatt, 2008: 16) by such work, I would argue that these men and women use the apparent innocuousness of their craft to cultivate a degree of control over their oppression by exploiting the satisfaction of shutting themselves off in a private, intimate space where personal freedoms can be made possible. The example of samplers embroidered by Major Alexis Casdagli whilst held as a prisoner of war by the Germans from 1941–1945 demonstrate his defiant

resistance to captors. His simply decorated sampler with its ordinary inscription contains discreet borders of Morse code messages spelling out "God Save the King" and "Fuck Hitler". Although it was displayed in the camps where he was held captive, the subtle, almost invisible, messages were never deciphered by his Nazi captors.

" 'It used to give him pleasure when the Germans were doing their rounds,' says his son, Tony, of his father's rebellious stitching. It also stopped him going mad. 'He would say after the war that the Red Cross saved his life but his embroidery saved his sanity,' says Tony. 'If you sit down and stitch you can forget about other things, and it's very calming.'" (Barkham, 2011).

Fine Cell Work offers a contemporary version: for some the stitching offers temporary escape from the constant noise and surveillance of life in prison:

"with the sewing it just made me stop and think about how things could have been different... I calmed down ... It gave me the space I needed. ... Because I had things to do, I was not in prison in my head." (Fine Cell Work inmate, 2012).

The repetition and rhythms of hand-stitching 'builds' a 'space' where the skilful crafting of stitches can serve a practitioner's careful mastery of and within his or her space of work, effectively permitting the control of space and time to make and protect space for private satisfactions.



# Chapter Four:

## Joining in

This chapter will explore ways in which skilful crafting in the context of a group project metaphorically articulates an individual into and within a wider social network, from which it is possible for the individual to derive additional rewards. I draw principally on direct observation from my experiences as a participant observer joining the Wiltshire embroidery group to identify ways to explain hand-stitching practices as relational and socially functional, serving both the individual and the group.

Sociological perspectives on group dynamics offer thorough insights into the ways in which groups operate as semi-structured and informal communities of practice both in physical locations (Wenger, 1999) and as online networks of contributors with shared interests (Gauntlett, 2011). As my focus here is the subjective experiences of hand-stitching practices I concentrate on the characteristics of this practice within a group setting, and although the social interactions between individuals form a part of this, they alone are not the subject of this research. I explore the functions of gossip in order to conceptualize the different types of articulation facilitated by the stitching practices. By investigating the simultaneity of social, cultural and physical processes in speech patterns, sewing practices and group dynamics, I propose that these practices have a particular quality of process that I describe as rhapsodical. By this I mean that within this type of group setting the activity is made visible and audible in the form of miscellaneous narratives enthusiastically pieced together, added to and rehearsed in an irregular, improvised and on-going collection of experiences. That sewing has a profoundly symbolic social meaning, within its functional utility, is intimated by its ubiquity in cultural and social discourse. Informed by theoretical insights from anthropology (Verdier, 1979; Douglas 1987), cultural history (Warner, 1995), and feminist approaches to learning and linguistics (Belenky et al, 1997; Lakoff, 1975; Jones, 1990; Coates, 1988) I investigate and articulate these relationships between sewing and speech.

## The embroidery group and their project

As mentioned in Chapter One p. 62, family contacts in Wiltshire put me in touch with a local village community embroidery project that had started around the same time as this research project. In the UK there is a tradition of locally and voluntarily formed sewing groups brought together to create specific commemorative projects or to make social opportunities available

for individuals from mixed social classes and ages with a shared interest in the craft.<sup>79</sup> Informal social networks organized around specific projects within neighbourhoods, like this embroidery group, and which may or may not be associated with church activities, are often initiated and managed by women (Warner, 1995: 34).

In this, the embroidery project I became involved in is no different. The group is formed of local women – mostly retired, but not exclusively – with varied experiences and abilities in sewing and/or embroidery.<sup>80</sup> Robina Orchard, an embroiderer with prior experience of designing for and managing community stitching projects, leads the group. Their task was to produce new embroideries and vestments to celebrate the 750th anniversary of their local church. The project was ambitious in scale and participants met regularly every week in order to achieve it within their agreed time frame. The group has seven core members, including Orchard, the project designer, who come to the weekly meetings as often as they can, fitting sessions around other family and work commitments. Three participants also continue to work on their embroideries at home in between meetings.

The embroideries consist of five interchangeable panels for the church altar frontal, kneelers for the altar rail stools, a lectern drop, and vestments for the parish vicar. Designed by Orchard, they are abstract in style, use the hand-stitching techniques of appliqué, embroidery and patchwork, and also include rug hooking (figs 64-69). Although initiated and designed by one person, the group made the pieces collectively.

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<sup>79</sup> There are too many, both small- and large-scale to list here. Some notable examples that illustrate the tradition include: *The Quaker Tapestry* (Kendal, 1982-1996), a narrative embroidery of 77 panels recounting the non-conformists' contribution to society and culture, made by groups of volunteers from across the world; *The Last Invasion Tapestry* (Fishguard, Wales, 1997-1999), made by more than 70 local embroiderers to commemorate the bicentennial of the event; *The Great Tapestry of Scotland* (2012-13), an ambitious narrative embroidery recounting the history of Scotland, initiated by writer Alexander McCall Smith, stitched by 300 volunteers across Scotland and overseen by a board of trustees; *The Leeds Tapestry* (1992-2002) embroidered by hundreds of volunteers to celebrate life in Leeds for the occasion of the millennium; the Wells Cathedral quire embroideries (1937- early 1950s), designed by Lady Hylton and made by over a hundred of her friends and other volunteers; the on-going restoration of *The Country Wife*, an embroidered mural designed by Constance Howard (1951) to celebrate the Women's Institute's craft activities for the Festival of Britain, and *The Patchwork of The Century* (1951) made of 100 panels, each commemorating a key event from each year and exhibited at the Festival of Britain.

<sup>80</sup> See Chapter One p. 62 and Appendix IX for further details about the participants, our meetings, and transcripts of interviews and conversations.



Fig 64. Altar panels: hand embroidery, couched threads and beading onto layered and appliquéd synthetic fabrics.



Fig 65. Detail of the hand embroidered altar panels.



Fig 66. The embroidery panels and altar rail kneeler 'in progress' on display in the village church for the 750th anniversary celebrations, 2007.



Fig 67. Altar rail kneelers: a sequence of hooked rugs made using woollen carpet yarns on hessian cloth.



Fig 68. Detail of rug hooking technique: loops of yarn are worked from the back side of the cloth, loosely following painted coloured guides.

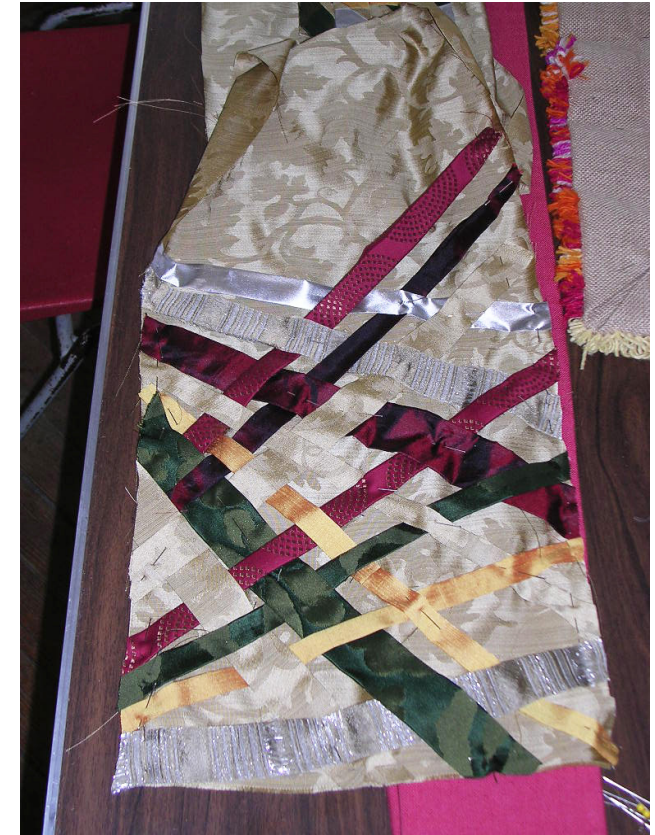


Fig 69. Pieced and appliquéd stole for the vicar's vestments.

## Belonging to the group

From earlier experiences of working in and with informal groups,<sup>81</sup> I knew that participants were attracted to these sorts of stitching projects for reasons that meshed both personal and collective goals. Such a large-scale project is beyond the capacity of an individual; its success depends upon collective contribution. In this case, the participants' wanted to contribute to a project of communal value that they felt was worthy of their time and effort, to use their skills to make something of which they felt proud, and to be a part of a socially stimulating and supportive group. The collective making process has drawn a group of individuals together and strengthened their sense of belonging to their particular community. In turn the shared experience of belonging to a particular community at that time in the run up to the village celebrations is "satisfied in communally valued and validated activities" (Dissanayake, 1995a: 61), i.e. the making of the embroideries. In support of this, Kate explains her motivations:

It's the social aspect... it's nice to come here because I'm actually getting to meet some more people in the village, you know... Social interaction, that's it. And for the gossip, you know, of course... I want to contribute somehow to the village as well, and doing this I think is a good thing for the church, so you know, it's a contribution to the church as well. I don't go to the services, so I just feel like I need to do something to help the church, you know. So ... I tend to help out with the village fête and the Christmas thing, so yes, it's just being involved and doing villagey stuff.

Kate feels that making the embroideries is a worthwhile contribution and in exchange she enjoys being part of a social group she wouldn't otherwise have access to. For her, the exchange is about offering her commitment in return for securing her part within a larger whole.

I first joined the group's weekly meetings as an observer to study and document a group of stitching enthusiasts where the rewards they gained from their regular social meetings were of equal importance to the work they made for their embroidery project. I discuss in Chapter One (pp. 20 & 53-5462) how I use my skills to make connections with people across different contexts in order to learn more about the relationships revealed or enabled through textile making. Joining in and taking part

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<sup>81</sup> As discussed earlier: see Chapter One pp. 20-21.

in the embroidery seemed to me the next logical step. At this point the group had been working on their project for just over a year. I could sense a rhythm of practice emerging between the social function of the group, our speech, and the practical tasks undertaken which led me to investigate the relationships between stitching practices and speech patterns. As I grew more acquainted with the group and the project, taking part in some of their social events as well as making the embroideries, I began to consider ways in which the relationship between the social functions of the group and the embroideries was articulated in practice.

## Gossiping

Historically, meeting places for informal gatherings of women have typically been homes or public places where designated female tasks happen such as the laundry, the market place, or the church (Warner, 1995: 35). The Wiltshire group fits this description, meeting in the village church rooms; a publicly available but semi-private room used for community activities. The participants did not necessarily know each other when they joined the group. The shared goal of the embroidery project facilitated social exchanges between them that might not have happened otherwise, forming new friendships, which in turn helped to motivate the participants to continue to come and stitch, as Kate describes:

It's made a huge difference ... because, I was, you know, with my job sitting at home working on my own all day long, and now I know lots of people in the village.

The talk and company of the other participants is as much a feature of the project as the embroidery; news is exchanged, keeping everyone informed of project decisions and other events in the wider community. According to Jones (1990), conversation, gossip, or 'idle chatter' is usually an integral component of the types and means of exchange these networks serve. I note:

*A lot of chatter goes on in the sewing group I am working with. It is as essential an ingredient to the group meetings as the stitching work. On each occasion that I have visited the group, the noise of voices has been more or less constant. The level and tone varies, it comes and goes in waves, descending to a conspiratorial whisper and rising to*

*shrill exclamations, accompanied by hums, groans, sighs, and occasionally laughter. (20.02.08)*

The word “gossip” originates from “godsibb”, an Old English word denoting the relationship between a god-child and god-parent (OED). A “gossiping” in Early Modern England was a christening feast; a gathering of mainly female friends and family to congratulate and bless the mother and newborn baby (Warner, 1995: 33). The use of gossip as it is now commonly understood to mean, “idle talk; trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle”, dates from the early nineteenth century (OED). This etymology connotes an aspect of emotional labour akin to parental caring traditionally designated as feminine, which transfers beyond biology into society and culture, here evident in speech patterns, and earlier highlighted in relation to textile crafts.<sup>82</sup> With this emphasis on a traditionally female form of caring, I have found that examining the myths of gossip and the functions of female speech patterns illuminates a tacit relationship between skilful stitching practices and speech within this embroidery group. First I draw out the connections between gossip and informal gatherings of women; next I discuss the social functions of gossip that I believe reflect the social function of the embroidery group, and then I explore the ways this is performed through stitching practices.

Held to be a symptom of idleness, an unbecoming tendency to tell tales, or evidence of a malicious streak, women’s gossip since classical times, has been at best disapproved of and hence disguised behind other household activities or informal gatherings, and at worst feared or even forbidden (Warner, 1995).<sup>83</sup> These informal gatherings of women consisted of prostitutes, midwives, or wet-nurses for example; women whose professions allowed them to circulate with some freedom between different groups and communities as guardians of particular types of knowledge, usually unwritten and therefore transmitted orally and practically in the company of other women (Warner, 1995, Classen, 2005a; Alcoff & Dalmiya, 1993). Sharing the connotations of emotional labour and caring with the origins of gossiping, these professions typically relied on forms of experiential knowledge gained from first-hand personal experience, as opposed to objective, scientific,

<sup>82</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 30-32. Lippard (1995) makes this connection between a feminine “sense of care and touch” evident in the fussy and decorative nature of some domestic textile crafts.

<sup>83</sup> Marina Warner (1995) maps a path through European mythology, folklore and fairy tales to reveal the origins and evolutions of tales and tale-tellers and in the process recounts incidents of prejudice against women’s talk. Religious authority is one such example. Warner describes how for centuries Christianity has endorsed silence, obedience and discretion as feminine virtues, citing St. Paul’s Epistle to Timothy as a source of particularly virulent sanctioning: “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission (2:11) And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence (2:12)”. Another is the medieval ‘brank’, or ‘scold’s bridle’; an iron head brace forcibly worn by women in punishment for their gossiping or scolding. A Belgian Iron scold’s bridle (c. 1550-1800) can be seen in the Wellcome Collection, London.



propositional knowledge found in books (Alcoff & Dalmiya, 1993).<sup>84</sup> In her study of female roles in traditional French village life, anthropologist Yvonne Verdier (1979) adds seamstresses to this list of professions, linking sewing rituals to traditions of women's oral cultures and knowledge networks.<sup>85</sup> Women's talk, under the guise of a usefully practical craft that is otherwise considered benign, functions as a means to transmit other kinds of experiential knowledge.

Warner and Verdier both explore knowledge networks alternative to book learning through women's traditional oral cultures and their meeting places, and both link them with textile-making, either directly (Verdier) or metaphorically (Warner).<sup>86</sup> These links drew my attention to ways in which the embroidery group I was working with perpetuated some of these traditions pertaining to the informal oral transmission of knowledge coupled with practical activity.

## Speech patterns, stitch patterns

Within the broader feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s, sociolinguists and educational psychologists extended their investigations into the particularity of speech patterns in all-women group conversations (Lakoff, 1975; Jones, 1990; Coates, 1988; Belenky et al, 1997). Lakoff's (1975) initial studies offered a context for the particularities of women's speech patterns as compared to men's. Coates' (1988) and Jones' (1990) built on this to explore the formal structure and social functions of gossip as an all-female form of conversation, and in their study of women's ways of knowing, Belenky et al (1997) explore women's speech as a function and expression of learning modes. These studies emphasize the cooperative principles of all-female conversation, and highlight how the structure of women's talk underpins the purpose of their informal gathering. Avoiding the more customary pejorative bias towards gossip, Jones analyses its strengths as a social binder, and describes it as:

*"a way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and*

<sup>84</sup> See Classen (2005b) and Howes (2005a) for further discussion about the historical influences behind such a hierarchy of the senses that sustained prejudice against domains of traditionally female knowledge, and Alcoff & Dalmiya (1993: 217) for their argument against such "epistemological discrimination".

<sup>85</sup> It was common in rural French communities until the mid-twentieth century for young girls approaching puberty to spend a winter season with a seamstress who would instruct them in the rudiments of sewing and 'sophistication': "the reference to sophistication gained suggests that they learn how to look their best, how to deal with admirers, become wise about sex and avoid conception" (Douglas, 1987).

<sup>86</sup> Warner acknowledges common metaphors used to describe story-telling, such as: spinning a yarn, weaving a plot, unravelling the plot, piecing together a story, connecting this with "One of women's principal labours – the making of textiles from the wool or the flax to the finished bolt of cloth" (Warner, 1995: 23).

setting, a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role, but also gives the comfort of validation." (Jones, 1990: 243).

Like Warner (1995) and Verdier (1979), Jones associates the setting for gossip in the personal or private domain and with typically female roles. As mentioned above, the stitching group follows a similar pattern. Secondly, she identifies that participants share a pool of common experience, which in this instance is the village and its environs, and their sewing or embroidery skills. The topics of conversation tend to be anecdotal and personal, rooted in their common experience, and through this, address wider themes: "the general and personal are intertwined" (Coates, 1988: 102). I write in my notes:

*Chatter, not discussion. About exchange of good addresses of shops etc; recipes; the size of meals eaten and how much one eats when; how nice the café is; trips and visits; family situations; children; sisters; brothers; how long have been widowed; health checks. (08.02.08)*

Gossip functions as an informal and mutually supportive networking facility. The exchange of information is essential but not the chief goal, which is "the maintenance of good social relationships" (Coates, 1988: 98). The subject of conversation is not necessarily the principle interest. Participants appreciate being included in the network; gossip can be understood as a mechanism for creating the boundary of a group regardless of the content of the speech. Thus the process demarcates those who 'know' from those who 'don't know', making insiders of all participants and thereby securing group identity. Like embroidery, gossip dresses the surface between different individuals. The process of participating articulates the individuals into their network and converts "inner and often passive awareness of others into active engagement" (Sennett, 2012: 63). Following in the traditions of women's oral cultures, this active engagement is developed through their speech as well as through their practical contribution to the stitching.<sup>87</sup>

The two most common functions of gossip are defined as 'house-talk', which usually centres around concrete tasks, useful tips, local news and information exchange, and 'chatting', which provides "a continuous chorus and commentary on the incidents

<sup>87</sup> My research experience has been with groups of women who meet physically, and I have been able to watch and participate in this phenomenon. However, the phenomenon described also exists in other formats. For example, Gauntlett (2011) highlights similar strategies at work with groups of online enthusiasts connected via websites, blogs and forums using Web 2.0 applications to recreate what Jones (1990: 243) terms "the comfort of validation". He writes of "the importance of warm social connections, recognition, and appreciation for those who invest significant amounts of time in the creation of online content. This does not simply mean that they yearn for friendliness and praise, but rather that making things and sharing them online is a process which also creates networks of emotional support and significant social bonds" (Gauntlett, 2011: 104).

of women's daily lives, in an evaluative process that also provides emotional sustenance" (Jones, 1980: 248). Most of the embroidery group participants have families, and caring for others figures frequently in their conversation. Advice might be sought; it seems to be implicitly understood that talking about a personal problem openly will help to find solutions. A problem, or 'irritant', worrying an individual, can thereby become a pearl of wisdom exchanged, improved, and passed on. As a figure of speech, pearls of wisdom<sup>88</sup> exchanged orally stand for hard-won knowledge gained through the practical and emotional difficulties of everyday life. The embroideries have quietly captured these conversations within the stitches. Those moments are remembered by the participants, and continue to exist through the embroideries as a representation of the care extended by the group.

'House-talk' is the most common function of the embroidery group's conversations. This usually covers news of family members, illness and health issues, events both local and national, visits and travel plans, entertainment or educational opportunities (cinema, theatre, television, clubs, courses and exhibitions). Also included would be the exchange of recipes, addresses, computer problem solving, useful tips on how to do or where to find something. Topics are introduced and laid out like motifs or short tasks. Interruptions are frequent, so a thread of conversation is usually of short duration and moves on rapidly to the next. The conversation and the embroideries are jointly produced; the rhythms of one influence the rhythms of the other. I describe the stitching tasks in my notes as:

*broken down into short and simple, or repetitive and monotonous tasks. Both methods require only a minimal level of attention. They are easy-to-remember, automated sequences of gestures: thread winding, cord making, seeding, background filling in a uniform colour, tacking, finishing loose ends. The start and stop points for the tasks are either tightly contained in a small space, or a short time lapse. Alternatively it might be a section of a larger, tedious task that is easier to work through with frequent interruptions that break the monotony. The design of the working method takes into account and allows for the distraction of conversation. (16.04.08)*

The cooperative nature of the group means there is progressive adaptation, alteration, checking and revising between the participants conducted informally through snippets of conversation, exchange of tools, threads and physical help if needed, for

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<sup>88</sup> The pearl, as nature's only self-generated jewel, is formed through 'irritation', when a grain of sand is accidentally lodged within the shell of an oyster. The grain of sand becomes clothed in mother of pearl in order for the organism to defend itself. A precious jewel is produced.

example setting an embroidery frame in place. This continually refreshes the process; the incessant repetition of hand-stitching gestures cannot become a dull habit in this context. There is a constant stream of interruptions in the form of questions seeking advice on next steps, changing topics of conversation, or decisions to change colour. Figs 70-73 depict this aspect of the group at work.



Figs 107 – 110. The embroidery group at work: taking decisions, airing opinions, critiquing work.

I observe in my notes:

*The stitching work advances at a slow pace. It cannot be described as intense production. Instead a fluid interaction of bodies, gestures, tales, suggestions, advice, and somehow a few more beads are applied, background stitching filled, tacking stitches removed. The work gets done almost in spite of itself ... But when asked, the members are extremely proud of their achievements. (16.04.08)*

To an observer, progress appears to be slow. However, as a cooperative production, as with their conversation, the achievement is the process of carrying everyone along and securing their shared identity a little more.

## The design of the project

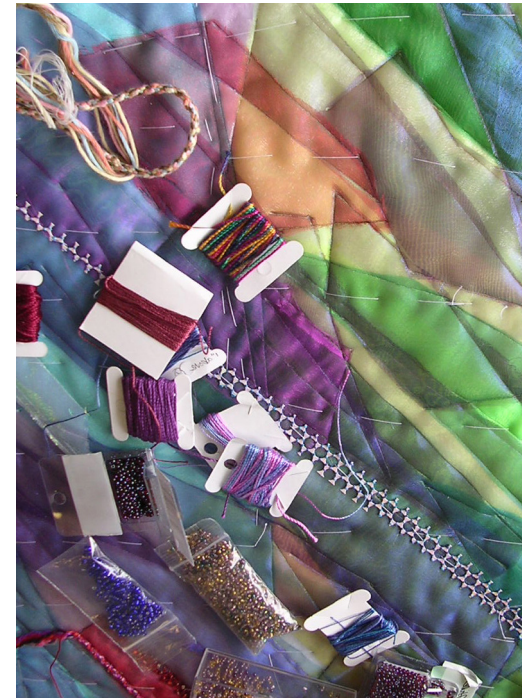
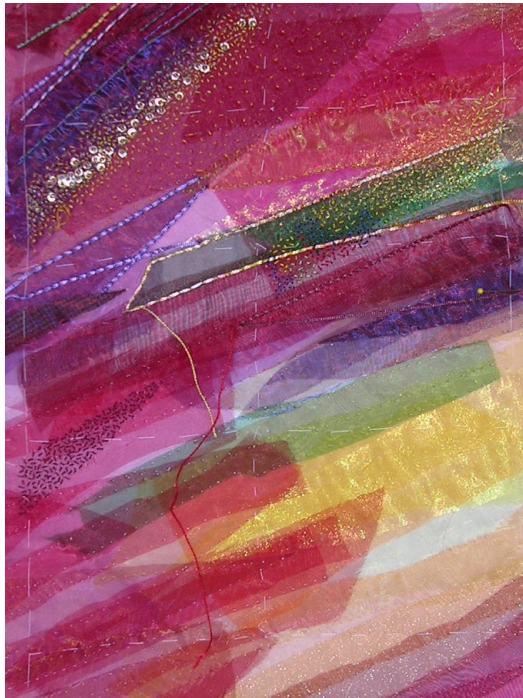
The loose design of the process makes possible these parallel activities of embroidery and conversation. Jones (1990: 246) describes the reciprocity of women's speech as "contemplated, rather than argued", where each participant contributes to a shared pool of common experience. This open and inclusive, mutually supportive function of women's speech is reflected in the design of the embroidery project.

As well as the visual aesthetics of the embroideries, Orchard designed the process and the development of the project. The whole embroidery project was physically broken down into smaller panels to allow for easier handling and transportation (figs 74 & 75). The different components are designed in such a way that a group of participants with varied abilities and varied amounts of disposable time can contribute accordingly. Technical elements are considered independently so that there is a task for each participant that can be adapted to their available time, their varied skill levels and the probability of them acquiring new skills and improving as they work.

The embroideries are abstract, colourful designs of shard-like shapes of organza applied onto a base cloth using a variety of embroidery stitches, beading and couched threads such that "a continuous chorus" (Jones, 1990: 248) of individual styles of stitching and colour choices are easily and deliberately absorbed into the whole design without causing discord to the intended overall effect (figs 76 & 77).



Figs 74 & 75. Transporting work: taking it home to continue in between sessions.



Figs 76 & 77. The fragmented, abstract design aesthetic allows for individual idiosyncrasies to be absorbed into the overall effect.

## Reciprocity

In speech, information is shared, built upon through multiparty discussion, and reflected upon collectively (Coates, 1988). At the embroideries, skills are shared and built upon through collaborative practice. For instance, thread winding always needs to be done; it is a quick and simple task easily done by participants with less time to spare or limited ability (fig 78). It is possible to add a few stitches to a panel and feel that a contribution has been made, without having to commit to finishing what has been started because, in due course someone else will continue the task (figs 79 & 80).



Fig 78. Thread winding: winding off threads from skeins onto cards in preparation for multiple users. A short and easy task, quick to accomplish requiring little concentration.



Figs 79 & 80. Janet contributing some stitching to a panel (left) that is later taken on by Maureen, who continues alone and completes it (right).

The components are such that they can be worked on entirely by one person (for example, if they are taking it home to continue working on) or they can be worked on by two or more people interchangeably at the same time, or consecutively (figs 81 & 82). Within the framework of Orchard's instructions, and with some negotiation, each participant freely interprets the work they are asked to do through chosen technique, colour and material used.



Fig 81. Pat working her panel on her own,



Fig 119. Pat and Beryl working together on the same piece.

Like women's speech the project is cooperative. What is produced together as a group takes precedence over the individual's lone contribution: "it is very much a joint effort, with individual speakers concerned to contribute to a jointly negotiated whole ... working together to produce shared meanings" (Coates, 1988: 112-113). 'Speech' and 'speakers' could easily be replaced here by 'stitching' and 'embroiderers' to describe what is happening with the embroidery project. Each participant has brought to the group their previously acquired skills and the design accommodates the different abilities and experiences of each



participant in a “jointly negotiated whole”. This type of stitching practice is articulating individuals within a group in a similar way to their conversation, connecting them together yet allowing each to freely move according to their level of commitment.

## Anecdotes, embellishments and monologues

The speech motifs (e.g. ‘house talk’ topics) are arranged and re-arranged into patterns throughout the conversation; anecdotes and embellishments are added by contributors, enhancing its ‘design’. Within shared conversations like this, Coates (1988) observed that short anecdotes might introduce a new topic for discussion. An equivalent in the embroideries would be getting up to change colours for a new stretch of stitching or beading, or thread winding. According to Coates (1988) in speech the contributor might then elaborate on the topic as a monologue and is given the right to speak uninterrupted by others. At a later stage in the monologue, once the group has accepted the topic for discussion, it is common for others to then contribute more anecdotes in parallel discussions, with speakers overlapping and actively reinforcing each other with prompts in a multiparty discussion. In stitching, the embroiderer might choose to work alone on one particular panel developing a theme of knots or beading as in fig 83, whilst an equivalent to the parallel discussion shows several participants working on several different tasks at once, or sometimes together on a panel (figs 84 & 85).

There appears to be a compatible relationship of form and purpose between meeting to chat and meeting to stitch whereby the patterns of one are reflected in the patterns and processes of the other. This work of crafting mutual cooperation through speech is mirrored by the embroidery work and is simultaneously represented by it. As with speech, the embroideries are built progressively and openly as a joint production. Aside from their ultimate goal of completing the embroideries, the group’s activity is otherwise aleatory, without rules so that it makes evident the significance of the process itself and its purpose.



Fig 83. 'Monologues': Maureen and Lorna work their panels on their own, taking them home in between sessions to continue independently.



Figs 84 & 85. 'Multiparty discussion': participants working together on the same piece of work.

## Rhapsodic improvisation

*A background hum of chatter is the more common soundtrack to the work. Many strands of conversation are happening at one and the same time, between two participants, or often between more than two. The conversation is bitty and chopped; the participants move from one to another, joining in. The subject changes rapidly, leaving issues apparently unresolved and conclusions unsought. Seemingly pointless, in the sense that the point of the exchange moves continuously, and without challenge, the unfolding story follows an unspecified rambling path often ending in the middle of nowhere, but miraculously it is uprooted and placed again at a new starting point to continue. It can be joined or left at any point, you can slip into it or step out of it, become immersed in it, or just let it wash over you. (2.04.08)*

I try above to capture what it feels and sounds like to be immersed in the conversations. Earlier I describe a medley of embroidery tasks that overlap each other, are shared and interchangeable between participants. The combination of tasks might change from one week to the next: from beaded panels to rug-hooking, for instance. The similarly overlapping and fragmentary talk also has a form that changes each time I visit the group. The order of embroidery tasks each week is improvised; there is no fixed form or written agenda, and tasks are allotted depending on who turns up. To describe a literary work as rhapsodical means it “consists of a medley of narratives” and is “fragmentary or disconnected in style” (OED). Although not literary works, the embroideries consist of “a medley of narratives” and are fragmentary both in style and in the methods of production.

The Greek origin of the word ‘rhapsody’ is in its compound formation of the verb ‘rhaptO’, to sew, to stitch, and the noun ‘aoidE’, meaning song. A rhapsody is a poetic act of sewing the poem. Rhapsodes are defined as the ‘stitchers of songs’, performing the traditions of their oral culture to each new generation. Bearing in mind the definitions of stitch,<sup>89</sup> these ‘stitchers of songs’ may be attaching together a selection of different elements to make a new whole, possibly derived from

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<sup>89</sup> See Chapter One p. 20.

a traditional pattern, or embellishing an existing base.<sup>90</sup> In both possibilities, a rhapsody implies a creative intervention that re-configures or re-presents the tradition in a new form. The meanings are relived with each new telling, and remade with each new making. The sewing group shares these characteristics, perpetuating and passing on past practices subtly adapted to present circumstances, and made meaningful for the current 'stitchers of songs', such as the Wiltshire embroidery group.<sup>91</sup> With roots in oral cultures of the past, participation in the sewing group is an informal performance of an unwritten process: a blend of doing, watching, listening, talking and repeating, whereby with each 're-telling' the performance is made relevant anew.

### Piecing and passing on: learning

As with other oral traditions, the passing on of these practices occurs by listening, watching and practising (Ong, 2012: 9). On one level the kind of knowledge transmitted in the context of the sewing group is practical 'know-how':<sup>92</sup> participants learn techniques, short cuts and finishing methods appropriate to executing the embroideries. To this end the embroidery group offers its participants informal learning experiences through social participation as a "community of practitioners" (Wenger, 1998) (figs 86-88). The participants' individual needlework skills varied but they were not necessarily allocated work on this basis. Their skills multiplied as the group strengthened, as individuals got to know each other and grew in confidence.

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90 Ong (2012: 140-141) explains that at the time of reciting the Homeric epic poems "There was no list of the episodes nor, in the absence of writing, was there any possibility even of conceiving of such a list. If he were to try to proceed in strict chronological order, the oral poet would on any given occasion be sure to leave out one or another episode at the point where it should fit chronologically and would have to put it in later on. If, on the next occasion, he remembered to put the episode in at the right chronological order, he would be sure to leave out other episodes or get them in the wrong chronological order." Plunging in and piecing together the episodes of these great narratives was the only way to conceive of reciting them, hence the 'stitchers of songs'.

91 As mentioned above (pp. 130-131) there is a tradition in the UK of informal sewing groups, and see Chapter One, pp. 37-44 for further examples of these past practices renewed in changed circumstances.

92 The learning of practical skills is also discussed in Chapters Two, pp. 95-99. Here my emphasis is on the learning of these skills informally as a shared social experience rather than on the personal challenge, as is discussed earlier.



Figs 86-88. Learning through social participation as a “community of practitioners” (Wenger, 1998).

Individuals passed on their skills through shared tasks. I experienced this on one occasion when I joined in the rug hooking. The group were using a technique unfamiliar to me and Mabs demonstrated how I should proceed. Part of the demonstration included a verbal explanation of their own shared experience of learning what to do:

You need to get Emma to thread it the right way for starting, don't you. You know, 'cause there's two ways of threading it, effectively, isn't there... We got very confused about this to start with, didn't we? And we kept on having this long bit. And everybody was going 'what do we do with it now?' And we were all sitting here puzzling over it for ages weren't we. (Kate)

On another level, being involved in the group, the conversation and the stitching also gives access to a different kind of knowing. As with other traditions of oral culture, knowledge of this mode of practice is transmitted through the whole performance; of turning up and joining in, helping to set up equipment and sharing tasks. As a process it can only be known by participating in it: “Knowing is not necessarily a matter of saying and representing what is the case but can also be a kind of practical involvement with the world” (Alcoff & Dalmiya, 1993: 235). This practical involvement integrates within it a system of behaviour, ideas and practices that transcend the embroideries themselves. It includes a way of knowing how to function

within and help maintain this type of mutually supportive network. My experience of joining the Wiltshire embroidery group was something I recognize from my past experiences of working with groups. My previous knowledge of these practices, bolstered by my loose attachment to the local area, enables me to adopt the role of participant. This time, though, as a passive participant rather than a project designer or coordinator, I notice the mechanisms that hold an individual in the group. Whilst involved in the process it makes sense to me: I could hear, see and feel a harmony in the medley of pieced together extracts of stitching interrupted by shared conversation and I am buoyed along by it:

*You follow it, move with it, somehow. It seems to make sense at the time, and not be a problem, or difficult to follow, but afterwards, or on reflection, if you stop to think about it, it is quite nonsensical. (2.04.08)*

## In harmony

An analogy with voice is helpful again here. A song can be sung by one voice as a solo, or by many in a chorus, or as a combination of these. The group could be described as a 'chorus', which assigns them a collective identity through their activity – the stitching – and describes the activity itself: for example, the recurring refrain of the embroidered panels. 'Chorus' also means "any simultaneous utterance by many persons" (OED), and in Greek tragedy is the term used to describe "a group of performers who comment together in voice and movement on the main action" (OED). This etymological reference indicates that movements and actions speak in unison as well as words.

Tullia Magrini (1998), in her studies of improvisation in Italian lyrical singing groups, identifies very similar practices to those I have experienced with the embroidery group. As with the embroidery project, these groups follow a loose traditional format revised and thereby re-valued by the participants. She explains:

*"It cannot be said that the singing here is ruled by a strict pattern which entails predetermined choices; rather, it is reasonable to suggest that the singing is developed within a general GP [group plan] which makes available to performers, some schemes which have already been tested, but which also allows the performers to modify these schemes in sheer creative play" (Magrini, 1998: 174).*

One specific example from the Campania region is described thus: "The whole series of renditions has the form of an "interrupted speech", that is, a sort of incoherent dialogue made up of disjointed parts, occasionally connected by recurring words" (ibid: 175), echoing the rhapsodical characteristics of the embroideries as I have described them. That singing and stitching in a group share form and function draws attention to the personal characteristics of an individual's participation: one might say the melodic and tonal qualities of their stitching. The rhythm of repeated gestures in stitching can be imagined as similar to rhythms and notes in the music of the singing voices. A singing voice can control emphasis by varying the volume. Embroiderers however, cannot change the volume of their work but emphases are altered in other ways, through the manner in which they approach their stitching. The 'volume' of the stitching isn't necessarily even across the panels; the embroideries are more like a choir of voices, sometimes singing at different volumes, sometimes all together in unison, and occasionally with soloists.

Not all participants want to or can participate equally. Some members want to feel a part of the project but contribute with basic tasks like thread winding or rug-hooking, joining in when they can; some become progressively more dedicated as their skills improve; others eventually take their panels home to continue their embroideries independently, working as soloists within the group. The group broadly works seamlessly together, with each participant able to realize their personal as well as their collective intentions.

However, there was an exception. One participant, Maureen, had been working too independently on her embroidery both in and out of group meetings. Her beading turned out to be too dense compared to what had been co-produced on the other panels (figs 89 & 90). In this instance, the volume of her solo voice was too loud. Too much of the individual could potentially upset the collective identity of the group. The work could not be unpicked and redone, so the associated panels had to be added to in order to carefully re-establish the overall harmony. Working on this type of group project is not the place for individual assertion; it is more usual to quieten individuality in favour of the collective.



Fig 89. An individual stitching too 'loudly': the density of beading and stitches is greater than the other panels.

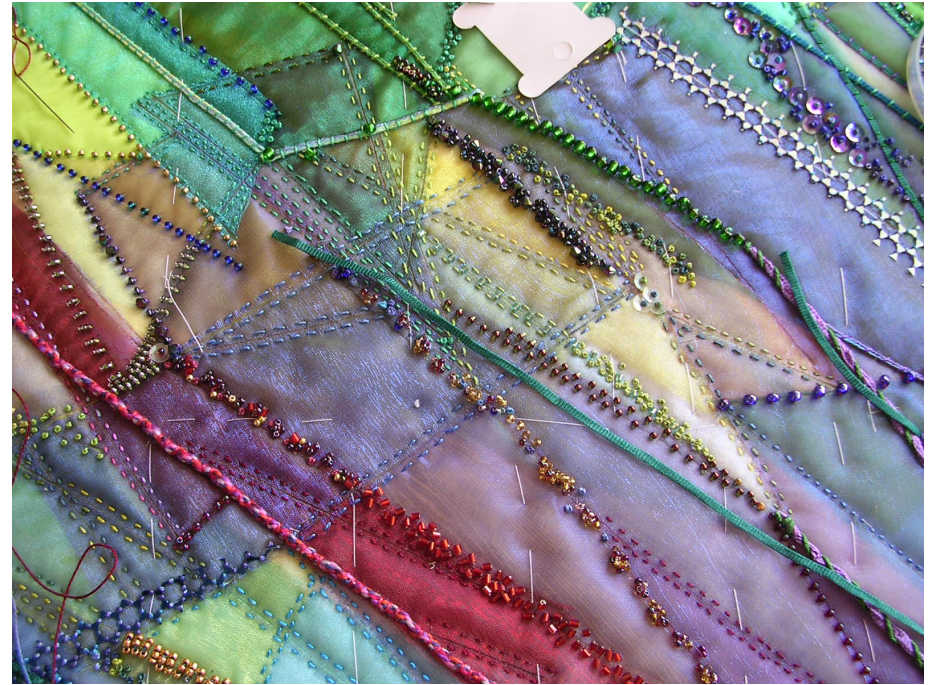


Fig 90. The stitching and beading on this panel, representative of the majority, is 'quieter'.



## Opting in: mutual cooperation

As with my stitched diaries, in joining the Wiltshire embroidery group I was using my stitching skills to fit in to a new social situation,<sup>93</sup> this time to experience collective identity. It is possible to choose the level of participation and this appears to correspond with the type of stitching task undertaken. The group leader's embodied knowledge of the process and methods of this kind of group activity is evident in the manner in which she has designed the project, making a range of tasks available to participants simultaneously. We might all contribute equally sometimes, both to conversation and to the embroideries, but an individual might also be released from our shared social space to occupy a solitary, quiet space even though throughout she is physically present in the group. One might slip in and out of it according to or depending on the reward sought by the individual. For instance, seeking the comfort of being present in the group, but not wishing to stand out, a participant might choose to continue independently a pre-arranged set of tasks on an embroidered panel. Alternatively, a participant seeking to actively join in the conversation might opt to help others on a collective task like the rug-hooking or thread winding.

This was the case for one particular participant who works from home and was keen to belong to the group in order to give herself an opportunity to meet people in the village and extend her social activities. She always seemed to have a strong central presence in the group, but moved between short simple tasks like searching for beads and matching threads, choosing to maximise her social input over her stitching.

As for my own experience, I enjoyed going to the weekly sessions in order to stitch without having to make decisions about the project. I would find it relaxing to concentrate on my allotted embroidery tasks, and would continue on a panel for the duration, contributing intermittently to the conversations. I write in my notes:

*For me it is relaxing doing this embroidery work with them. I don't have the responsibility of decision-making. It is a relief to relinquish responsibility. It doesn't matter what I do in the same way as it does when I do my work. It matters that I do it, and that I do it well, but that is all. (2.06.09)*

*To sit and couch down cords, slowly, carefully and deliberately was a very restful thing to do.... I did not necessarily*

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<sup>93</sup> See Chapter One, p. 49.

*join in the talk if I was stitching. I was looking at my work, concentrating on it, but listening. Occasionally moving out of the bubble when my own thoughts crept in. (2.04.08)*

Here my hand-stitching skills are exploited to blend in and enjoy the anonymity of a group identity. As “the socially and symbolically negotiated, contractual bonds of social inter-subjectivity” (Pajaczkowska, 2007: 146) it in turn allows parts of our selves to be articulated; for example, the part that wants social contact and exchange or the part that wants relief from professional demands. The research has revealed characteristics of hand-stitching, evident in the rhythms and patterns of the craft, sought by practitioners in order to experience sensations of participation, belonging or interdependence suggesting that possessing this practical skill is itself a mode of interaction. For individuals wanting to participate, the embroidery project presents the possibility of belonging to a group and enjoying the benefits of cooperation. Conversation is a key component of the experience and a rhythm of practice emerging between the social function of the group, our speech, and the practical tasks undertaken suggests relationships between stitching practices and speech patterns. Both appear to dress a surface: of local and mutual interest in the shared conversation topics, and of cloth stretched on a frame for the embroideries. This sort of mutually beneficial experience involves opting in to the network and its support system, and emphasizes maintaining the network not challenging it. The group identity absorbs the individual, and in return for this secured group identity members are rewarded with the “comfort of validation” (Jones, 1990: 243). Challenges to the rules and conventions of the craft are neither encouraged nor rewarded; this kind of project does not aim to reinvent or subvert. Instead it fosters an environment of conformity, which offers in exchange the satisfactions of mutually supportive endeavour. The process of belonging to the group typically relies on forms of practising and passing on this kind of experiential knowledge gained from first-hand personal experience, and can only be known through direct participation. This skilled process of cooperation as embodied knowledge (Sennett, 2012) transcends the practical work of the embroideries but is performed through them and embedded within them.

# Chapter Five: Conclusion

I began this research sensing that the practical knowledge of hand-stitching I shared with others taking part in collective textile making activities enabled us to know more than the technical skills of the craft, but that this type of knowledge was not articulated through conventional forms of instruction like speech and demonstration. Using video to record the knowledge-in-action of participants' hands as they stitched led me to focus on the particular gestural characteristics of this embodied knowledge and to build a contextual framework that concentrates on the physical sensations and mental activity of hand-stitching processes. With the tacit knowledge of a practitioner I **know how** to stitch, and from my investigations into the history and theory of textile art, craft and material culture I **know about** stitch. This tension between theorizing the context of stitching and experiencing the practice has been felt throughout the research and this thesis has aimed to articulate a relationship between these two forms of knowledge – one explicit in language and text, and the other implicit in actions and sensations felt.

The research explores the dynamic relationship between practical skill, the body and its proximity to tools, materials and other people during actual experiences of making, which in turn drew me to examine analogous connections between the tacit knowledge of hand-stitching skills, inter-subjective and intra-subjective experiences. My previous experiences of textile crafting as a social activity initially drew me to this question, and my interest as a practitioner and teacher in the contemporary and future relevance of skilful work motivates me to better understand what it is that I, and many other stitch practitioners, do. As an investigation into the nature of knowledge acquired through “the skills of this meticulous and intimate engineering without which all manner of stuff (material and social) would fall apart” (Mitchell, 2006: 29), the research has drawn out the strengths of a flexible and adaptable stitching practice as a means to explore social interaction.

Strong associations with domesticity have, according to some, hampered the conceptual development of the craft (Barnett, 1982; Parker, 1984; Harris, 1999; Jefferies, 2000), but I believe its persistence owes more to the inherent rhythms and patterns of the practice than its historical influence. Revisiting the associations of embroidery and patchwork quilting with the history of women and domesticity reveals traditions and ideologies of cooperative labour that to my mind illuminate the continued and renewed appeal of crafting stitched textiles. Aspects of group stitching pertain to women's traditions of gathering informally to share knowledge through talk and practical activity that is in itself a form of tacitly embodied knowledge – knowledge of mutuality and cooperation. As with other oral traditions, like singing for instance, embodied knowledge of the practice includes patterns of interaction and particular attitudes and behaviours inseparable from the practical skill that can only be acquired and

understood when experienced as an active process. Each new performance is re-made and its meaning for the practitioners is re-configured. In the case of hand-stitching the slow and rhythmic craft describes both functional and symbolic dimensions of attaching and joining, and surpasses its functional attributes when considered as a material practice that offers particular metaphors for other processes of connecting, collaboration and integrity – or even separation and isolation.

I have emphasized throughout the thesis that this knowledge is demonstrated in practice as a process of active engagement with materials, tools and other people. The focused awareness of the body encouraged by hand work cultivates a distinctive form of attention to the self in relation to the material world and other people that proposes “a conception of the human being not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships” (Serres, quoted in Connor, 2005: 322). As ‘a continually unfolding field of relationships’ this process by definition has no end, nor necessarily produces an ‘object’, but materializes a consciousness of self that, according to Carter (2004: XII), “enables us to think differently about our human situation ... To understand how identities form, how relationships with others are actively invented... essential knowledge if societies are to sustain themselves”. I conclude that the post-feminist context for stitch enables theory to include the concept of the “subject-in-process” (Kristeva, 1986) in ways which generate possibilities for understanding a new concept of ‘object’ or artefact as ‘a continually unfolding field of relationships’.

## Articulating dimensions of subjectivity

One of the aims of this research was to explore ways in which hand-stitching activities articulate dimensions of subjective, personal experience. The illusion of experience mediated frequently today via screen technologies causes the materiality, temporality and spatiality of real experience to stand out as novel or precious. As a real experience of engaging with the material world, the physical experience of making by hand provides “a central point of bodily reference within the fluidity of time and action” (Ullrich, 2005: 211). Building on theories of craft knowledge that seek to promote an understanding of the importance of using hand skills in post-industrial post-digital cultures (Sennett, 2008; Crawford, 2009; Clayton, 2010; Ingold, 2011; Frayling, 2011), I provide examples of how the patterns of repeated hand-stitching gestures help to instill a sense of order

and autonomy that in turn give a stitch practitioner a sense of being able to manipulate time and construct personal and/or shared space.

Part of the sensations of satisfaction created and expressed through hand-stitching is the feeling of situated control over these otherwise infinite and unwieldy abstract notions of time and space. McEwen (1993) draws attention to the role of pattern in movement and gesture as an embodied knowledge of order; an understanding of what 'feels right' that in stitching is felt implicitly in the rhythms of the gestures and sensations of surface tension or pressure. Sennett (2008: 106) warns however, that "Getting things right – be it functional or mechanical perfection – is not an option to choose if it does not enlighten us about ourselves". I argue in response to this that the skilful crafting of stitches taken as a whole process of interconnected patterns is a form of embodied knowledge that can provide clues to a better understanding of our interaction with the material world and particularly with other people.

Hand-crafts, of which stitching is one, have a renewed role to play in measuring emotional and psychological performances damaged by the disembodied sense of self experienced in virtual cultures and it is timely to explore ways in which this can be known. I suggest that the focused, calm rhythms of accumulative hand-stitching is one way for individuals alienated by the intangible nature of the objective world of consumption to assimilate the surrounding material world, strike up conversation with it, feel grounded by it and articulate themselves within it; literally to make it one's own.

## Stitching skills construct relationships

Additionally, the research reveals ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group is constructed through their crafting skills. The pleasures and satisfactions experienced by stitchers seem to suggest that the skilful, and repeated, practise of hand-stitching is a type of embodied knowledge that can inform an ability to interact as an individual within wider social networks. As a participant in the Wiltshire embroidery group, I was able to study how participants were supported by, and helped to maintain, the group's collective goals both as a social entity and as embroiderers. The skill acquired enables these makers to tacitly manipulate their level of interaction through the type of stitching task undertaken and control the personal satisfactions sought: participation in a shared conversation or activity can be exchanged for isolated contemplation and a sense

of self-reliance. This ability to interact socially – or even to isolate oneself – is implicit in the rhythms and patterns of stitching gestures, which in turn are reflected in the rhythms and patterns of speech in collective work.

Conversation is a key component of the rhythm of practice emerging between the social function of the group and the practical tasks undertaken. Part of developing a manual skill such as hand-stitching is knowing how to recognize the patterns of the whole craft and understanding the ways in which they interconnect. This includes its relationship to language as well as sensing the necessary movements and adjustments of the body. These different components of the craft of belonging to the group are learnt and practised as a whole process, which typically can only be known through direct participation.

Sennett (2008), although writing from a different perspective to Carter (2004), Crawford (2009) and Clayton (2010) addresses similar concerns of social unease and repair to them, and also seeks solutions in skilled craftsmanship. His latest writing explores the skilled process of cooperation as a form of embodied knowledge (Sennett, 2012), a theme which has resonated with my experience of joining and working with the embroidery group. The process of cooperation transcends the practical work of the embroideries but is performed through them and embedded within them. In this example the stitching practice subtly articulates the different individuals, nurturing the development of a particular type of socialization that tends to prize the maintenance of the group over individual performances. As with a seam, these articulations, when skilfully performed, adjust the tension of the 'thread' to ease and ensure a smooth fit. There is 'give' between the individual component parts that allows for flexibility and constant adjustment between the group members. Being part of a group like this attends to the enmeshed surface relations between individuals. Maintaining the practice thus secures the network for the individual to dip in and out of as desired. The "sense of care and touch" (Lippard, 1995) manifest in the fine detail of the stitching is applied to the service of social cohesion, metaphorically dressing and smoothing the surface, holding the network together.

## Contribution to knowledge

I intend this research to extend existing approaches to the study of textile craft practices to include an understanding of skilful hand-stitching as a mode of interaction between people, things and places that is articulated through the gestures, rhythms and patterns of the craft. This practice-led research brings into focus the influence of the gestural characteristics of

skilful hand-stitching on a metaphorical concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) of 'articulation'. I propose that practising the craft of hand-stitching offers a conceptual understanding of participation, belonging, interdependence – or even separation. An ability to manipulate one's stitching practice in order to join in or isolate oneself implies that an embroiderer possesses a form of knowledge that enables him or her to transform materials into relationships with things and people. As an elemental form of articulation between individuals – and between people, places and things – hand-stitching simultaneously and skilfully creates, describes and maintains these connections. Defined thus I propose hand-stitching as a material practice that makes certain kinds of social practices visible and tangible as part of a broader concept of craft as an "everyday attitude and approach" (Greenhalgh, 2011).

Rudolf Arnheim (1986: 20-21) writes: "Propositional language, which consists of linear chains of standardized units, has come about as a product of the intellect; but while language suits the needs of the intellect perfectly, it has a desperate time dealing with field processes, with images, with physical and social constellations". I have shown how the tacit knowledge of a handcraft can be studied in order to understand acquisition of other types of embodied knowledge concerning 'physical and social constellations'. In the example of a group stitching collectively, I have shown how the stitching makes more than the sum of its parts; the analogy of thread passing through the surface of the cloth refers to the joining, attaching and articulating networks of relational exchange that are created through the stitching to structure an implicit understanding of modes of interaction.

## Evaluation of methodology

My research has drawn from a small sample of hand-stitching experiences accessible to me geographically and logistically during this project. Many other types of stitch practices exist in other locations and contexts. The heterogeneity of hand-stitching activities is to be celebrated, and the increased interest in the study of textile craft mentioned in Chapter One (pp. 45-46) suggests further opportunities for research in this area.

Making hand-stitched textiles has been the principle method used in this research. As a researcher I have found that conversation prompted by making and the sensations experienced in the process has helped me to get closer to articulating something of an experience that is otherwise silent and elusive. The spontaneous use of practical skills allows embodied



knowledge to come to the fore, and because different types of information can be observed and gathered – for example visual, oral, experiential and emotional – connections between doing and thinking can be captured simultaneously, and then explored in informal conversation with participants. The slow, steady rhythms of hand-stitching allow for considered responses by participants (Gauntlett, 2007: 185) and myself, which produce richly detailed, and sometimes poetic, insights into making processes.

However, whilst the information gathered is rich, the limitations of this thesis mean much is left out. On one level, one is immersed in the experience of stitching attending to certain aspects of the activity (Polanyi, 2009), but with a focused attention on the sensations at the end of one's fingertips for example, one cannot also be attentive to the movement of participants behind one's back. With the combined textual, aural and visual methods of documenting the varied experiences I have tried to get as close as I can to it. Video has been useful for recording the making processes and group meetings, providing documentation that can be viewed after the event and revisited throughout the research.

On another level, much of the information gathered is not easily put into words and some degree of interpretation is necessary, firstly by the participants themselves as they find words to describe their experiences, and secondly by me, the researcher, as I reflect on what I hear. I value greatly the conversations I have shared with participants throughout this research and have come to appreciate the sometimes poetic – even outlandish – descriptions of hand-stitching sensations as we search for words that struggle to reproduce these feelings. As a result I believe there is scope in research for encouraging participants in creative interpretations of their experiences as a way to find clues to other types of silent, embodied knowledge.

The impact of this approach to using creative practice in research has, for me, opened possibilities to use hand-stitching as a reflective method of enquiry, particularly in group settings, as a way to access thoughts, expressions, opinions and memories of experiences that perhaps remain invisible or difficult to articulate through more conventional methods of data gathering such as questionnaires or interviews which tend to put the participant on the spot and demand words in answer to the questions. By contrast, the slow pace and inherent self-reflexivity of stitching, the 'in' and 'out' gesture of needle and thread, helps to articulate between the visible and the invisible, the said and non-said leading to rich, and sometimes deeply personal, material.

As a research method, this approach can be used to explore questions pertaining to making activities, but could also be

applied in other domains. The familiarity of stitching, and the ubiquity of cloth make it a comfortable medium to explore hard-to-articulate feelings, experiences and emotions. Already there is interest in the domain of public health and citizenship (Arts For Health Cornwall, 2012; Hackney, 2013; Pajaczkowska, 2014), and creative making activities are also being used in the social sciences to access domains of experience that questionnaires or interviews fail to get close to (Gauntlett, 2007). The easily transportable tools and materials make hand-stitching a viable activity to initiate in a diverse range of locations. As artist Françoise Dupré explains, this kind of collective making activity

“provides a context for participants to become active social subjects. Integral to the process is the production of some kind of tangible object where individuals and community can, through the making and experiencing of the object’s physicality and materiality, translate emotions, desires and experiences, create new meanings and shape their identity.” (Dupré, 2008).

Hand-stitching activities involve direct physical engagement with materials, a personal journey through sensations and emotions, and criticism of its subjective and infinitely nuanced nature might be expected. However, the detail and rich material yielded can be used to question broad generalizations about the craft. The act of making stitches is a subjective experience, but it is also a practical skill that many choose deliberately for the quality of this personal experience. My subjective accounts of stitching are personal to me, but discussions with other practitioners lead me to believe that aspects of them are likely to resonate more broadly. My own closeness to the making experience also enabled me to notice details in what others were doing and saying whilst making. In cases like this, the insights that arise from using and reflecting upon one’s own experience within the research illuminate details that might otherwise be overlooked, or even missed entirely.<sup>94</sup>

However, it has felt at times impossible to know a subject that I thought I knew so intimately from the inside as a practitioner. I write in my journal that

*I find it difficult to make notes, photograph, and be making with the embroidery group at the same time. It is difficult to be involved in the making whilst at the same time trying to remember, note, photograph what is being said, what is going on. (20.02.08)*

<sup>94</sup> Bolt (2007) makes this point using the example of David Hockney’s research into the drawing methods used by the painter Ingres. It was because of Hockney’s own practical knowledge and experience of drawing, particularly as a portrait painter, that he suspected the speed and quality of Ingres’ small sketches were not solely due to his proficiency and skill. Hockney’s own use of cameras suggested to him that Ingres has made use of similar devices. He ascertained that Ingres had used a camera obscura. This detail concerning Ingres’ working methods had until then been missed.

And whilst stitching I am tempted to

*just forget the rest of the project, allow myself to be absorbed into it and just do it, enjoy it for what it is and go with it. (02.06.09)*

I find myself both on the outside of the experience looking in and also at the centre of it, immersed in it and doing it. The subject of my research – the experience of stitching – remains in part inaccessible by the very fact of being a researcher. It requires a critical distance that in itself prevents the experience being had fully. The development and flow of an intuitive creative practice can be inhibited by the interruptions of documentation. Reflexive note-making after the action helps to turn the experience into words, although some of the spontaneity of sensation had when in contact with tools and materials is lost. As a subject of research, tacitly embodied knowledge is impossible to know entirely and objectively. The spontaneity and accuracy of the sensual experience is lost through translation into the language and order of rationality expected of the researcher. It is impossible to capture entirely the totality of these experiences of making, to be at one and the same time “the dispassionate onlooker able to observe the goings-on rationally and impartially, and also to be the intuitive, instinctual colleague ... This is the taxing position (...), the problem of ‘being there.’” (de Waal, 2002: 185).

## Changed perspectives and new directions

Prior to this research I was using my stitching skills in a variety of contexts from making contemporary artworks to leisure craft activities and facilitating community initiatives, which according to some parameters of definition may seem like different types of creative practice. In the Introduction on pp. 20-21 I explain how my stitching practice has enabled, and continues to enable me, to meet and create works with people from a wide variety of social and cultural contexts. I mention that I had varied intentions for the works made; that they might be intended for exhibition, to commemorate an event or celebrate a particular community.

However, undertaking this research has allowed me to define a new context for my stitching practice as a “person-oriented approach” (Freeman, 1997) that prioritizes processes of making as sites of knowledge generation. What is more, the knowledge

generated widens definitions of a hand-stitching practice to include other types of embodied knowledge beyond the technical and practical 'know-how' of stitching. In particular I broaden it to include knowing and recognizing the patterns of the whole craft, incorporating both social dynamics and self-reflexivity within this definition to explain the articulation of social connection, participation – or separation – materialized through hand-stitching practices. Additionally, in my changed view the significance of making as a thinking process usurps the role of products, artefacts or finished works in material culture. I agree with Ingold that the continually evolving activity of working with materials "in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings" (Ingold, 2011: 10) may lead towards a better appreciation of our attachment to environment and our sensory intelligence "within which both ideas and things reciprocally take shape" (ibid: 10). However, as a process, this kind of practice is by definition ephemeral. Resolving how to capture, present, display and make visible the process for critical dialogue remains a challenge for researchers.

I have touched on the dissatisfactions and frustrations of learning hand skills in Chapter Two, but envisage further investigation into the impact of practical skills on modes of learning. This is particularly pertinent now as the sense of autonomy and control achieved by the disciplined practise of dexterous crafting that I, and many of the participants in this research, appreciate is bound to be compromised with the increase of touch screen technologies guiding decision-making operations. I am familiar and at ease with the materials of hand-stitching (fabric and thread); my relationship with this aspect of my material world is confident and knowledgeable. Through this research I have begun to learn how my knowledge of stitching facilitates other types of relationship such as fitting in or standing out, and how the sensations of easing in comfortably or feeling overwhelmed are literally 'made'. As a researcher-practitioner my curiosity is now drawn to a better understanding, and articulation, of subjective experience in social and learning contexts. I envisage a role as less a maker of things and more a maker of processes and experiences with which I hope to contribute to the changing landscape of textile craft practice, and especially to the learning of craft skills. Anticipated to be on the decline (Crafts Council, 2014) in my view partly due to a lack of understanding about the human context of crafting, as educators there is a need to consider a wider definition of craft practices, possibly by finding ways to design and nurture the embodied knowledge of social interaction through making as well as a technical understanding of materials and technologies.

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