

Maxine Bristow: '3 Weeks to Turn 348, Three Years to Turn Intuition Towards Understanding'.

Originally presented at a research symposium, University of East Anglia, 25 April 1998, convened and edited by Pamela Johnson. Published in Johnson, P. (1998) ed. *Ideas in the making: practice in theory*. London: Crafts Council.

The *3 Weeks to turn 348* within the title of this paper refers to a piece of work that I produced during the summer of 1995. It was a piece of work that upon reflection seemed to mark a point of transition. The years immediately prior to its production had been a period of considerable re-evaluation and reorientation, both of a personal and of an artistic nature. *3 Weeks to turn 348* was largely an intuitive response to the visual research that had resulted from this period of reflection. It marked the culmination of much speculative activity and the emergence of a visual language - a means of articulating sensations and emotions that were very real but until that point had remained intangible. It has taken the last three years, however, to fully recognise the significance of that initial visual research and the work that has resulted from it. This paper places my work in an evolving critical and artistic context. It charts the movement between visual research, studio practice, and a developing interest and acknowledgement of the crucial interdependence of theory and practice. What I have come to realise over the course of these three years is that 'Art is usually made before a critical language is in place to make it understandable,'¹ yet it is often this critical language that makes us aware of the implications of our actions.

As a lecturer and practitioner with a history rooted in the traditions and conventions of textile practice, it was my repositioning within a department of fine art, nine years ago that prompted a re-evaluation not only of my own practice but of the validity of textiles in general within the broader category of contemporary visual culture. With a degree in Embroidery and an MA in Textiles I had spent a number of years as a free-lance designer of furnishing fabrics, something that I had fallen into almost by accident. Situated within a fine art department this work suddenly seemed out of context. In my teaching role I was introduced to students as 'Head of Textile Design' but was conscious of the fact that what I taught had nothing to do with design. I knew what it wasn't but wasn't sure what it was! Textiles as a term did not even seem totally appropriate as cloth was only one of the many materials utilised by the students I taught. I was aware even at this early stage, of my border position - not quite fitting into any established category. I was also subconsciously aware of a hierarchy within the various disciplines. I was reminded of my time at college and the way that I felt that I had to continually qualify the term 'embroidery' - 'it's not *really* embroidery' - in a way that was almost apologetic. Fine art was adventurous, concerned with personal expression and the conveyance of meaning, textiles was the complete antithesis - at least it was in commonly accepted context of fine art history - yet it was to this history of art that I felt it necessary to

look for what Rosalind Krauss describes as a paternity, a set of forefathers who could legitimise and thereby authenticate the strangeness of this activity for which I was now responsible. ²

Freed from the constraints of having to produce work that was commercially viable I was also faced with the problem of what was to be the nature of my own artistic activity and what were to be its motivations. The MA work, by this time seemed too distant, and the design work was a means to an end and in this new context seemed increasingly inappropriate. The students were encouraged to compile a journal of both visual and written evidence which could provide clues as to the purposeful development of their work. I decided to make the same demands of myself as I did of my students and actively engaged in a process of visual research. Intuition and instinct were the only determining criteria - I collected what I liked!

It is strange to note that though in my teaching position my research was directed towards such aspects of art history as Process Art, Art Informel, Arte Povera etc., and artists who used an expanded palette of processes and materials, when given a free reign and trusting to instinct, I was initially drawn to very little art with a capital 'A' but to artefacts, in a sense I went back to my utilitarian roots. I found Museums and Ethnographic collections equally if not more inspiring than Galleries and on trips to London would choose the bedding and fabric departments of *Liberty's* and *Conran* in preference to the National Gallery! I collected items of everyday domestic linen, and studied examples of plain sewing. I collected old sewing manuals, needlework paraphernalia and amassed a large palette of materials.

The contextual research proved to be of tremendous value in terms of establishing a broader critical framework, but my own personal research was at this stage primarily visual. I responded to the sensuous and the aesthetic and gained pleasure from looking at, ordering and arranging my evidence.

Though at the time there seemed to be an urgency to somehow make sense of this visual evidence, in retrospect, I can now see just how important it was to not have any clearly defined intentions - to have the time to think, time to look, time to absorb and time to respond in a purely intuitive way. The subsequent three years have been largely concerned with making sense of this research, together with the initial dilemma I felt within my teaching role.

Through a process of both visual and theoretical reflection, it is now apparent that my work's motivations are precisely those aspects of textile's tradition and cultural heritage that in those early days of teaching 'in order to be taken seriously', I somehow felt that I had to deny. Rather than rejecting those factors that have for so long been seen as an encumbrance to textile's acceptance within the higher canons of fine art, I became aware that their association with utility, domesticity and a gendered division of labour, could be used in a strategic way to challenge commonly held assumptions. It is an engagement with theory and

a growing personal confidence that has allowed me to make the critical shift whereby as Bev Bytheway and Jennifer Harris suggest in the preface to the catalogue which accompanied the 1988 *Subversive Stitch* Exhibition, 'the restrictive and oppressive constraints of the tradition are recognised but it also provides a way of negotiating new and particular meanings and methods.' ³

Theory has not changed my work in any practical sense but it seems to have somehow legitimised what was intuitive, it has provided a way of interrogating these constraints, to see how they have been socially and historically constructed and thereby has generated 'new theoretical perspectives from which the dominant can be criticised and new possibilities envisaged.' ⁴

The history of textiles is inextricably bound up with a particular code of feminine behaviour. It has been complicit in the development of an ideology of femininity and within this ideology there is a clearly defined separation of art and craft.

... there is no place for women in the language of art history despite the fact that there have been so many women artists... The evolving concepts of the artist and social definitions of woman have followed different and almost contradictory paths. Creativity has been appropriated as an ideological component of masculinity whilst femininity has been constructed as man's and therefore the artists negative. ⁵

It is interesting to see how ideology, though not a conscious process, can be responsible for reproducing the values and systems of belief of the dominant group it serves. However, to understand that my work by the very nature of its materials and processes has implications for reaffirming existing social relations, is to understand that it can also by its very presence open them up for examination and contest them. As Rosalind Krauss states when discussing the methodologies of Poststructuralism in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*

... those timeless, transhistorical forms which had been seen as the indestructible categories wherein aesthetic development took place, were themselves opened up to historical analysis and placement. ⁶

If as artists / craftspeople it is to be accepted that we are concerned with producing meanings within a wider cultural sphere, it is reassuring to understand that those meanings can be open to reinterpretation - that meaning *can* develop out of the history of a given medium, but that it does not necessarily have to be subject to its prejudices and discriminations. To acknowledge that *any* vehicles of cultural production can

be submitted to the test of their own history in order to transcend or subvert the authority of conventional definitions of meaning, is reassuring when those definitions have proved to be particularly restrictive. Implicit in an awareness that meaning is socially and historically constructed is the possibility of multiple meanings. As Chris Weedon states in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*:

The effect of representation in which meaning is apparently fixed, is but a temporary retrospective fixing.....Consequently, it is always open to challenge and redefinition with shifts in its discursive context. What it means at any particular moment depends on the discursive relations within which it is located, and it is open to constant rereading and interpretation. ⁷

The application of the historicist model within either Art or Craft practices, brings with it certain assumptions about the nature of those practices. It implies that there are essential characteristics, prescribed patterns of behaviour and indisputable truths that determine the interpretation of those practices. Subjected to the discursive context of fine art, textile's role and potential for meaning is limited, but once the exclusivity of that discourse is acknowledged and the discursive context renegotiated, textiles can be recognised as a medium 'with its own values, a medium comprising *very specific* language and meaning.' [emphasis added]. ⁸ Its materials and processes can be used to create metaphors that articulate ideas that go beyond any initial aesthetic response, and in its plurality and what Pamela Johnson described as its ability to 'articulate simultaneously the individual and the social; self and other,' ⁹ the associative potential of its materials and even its transience, textiles seems to be a medium which is particularly appropriate for our time.

3 Weeks to turn 348 was the first of what seem to have become my signatory 'bag forms'. It derived from a need to find an appropriate vehicle for the surfaces I so enjoyed, combined with a wish to make subtle reference to utility - to those familiar domestic artefacts that I had collected as part of my visual research, or to the less familiar museum artefacts whose transferral from their original context made their interpretation open to question. The whole notion of art or artefact is a main preoccupation with the work and one of the critical contexts in which it operates. Much of this interest is borne out of textiles history and tradition as an applied art and the crisis of identity it has suffered over the past twenty years in trying to rid itself of its 'futile' daily connotations. But it is undoubtedly textile's social integration and their position within material culture that affords the medium its potency. As essential accoutrements of cultural practice, textiles operate almost like a language written into the structure of society, playing a vital role in the social, economic and religious life of the community. It is through this language that my work hopes to communicate.

The reference to utility has significance on another count as it addresses the notion of functional being touchable, intimate and accessible, qualities that are more and more under discussion within the visual arts, particularly in the light of much conceptual art where contemporary practice finds itself increasingly distanced from its sensory origins.

My initial visual research was based almost exclusively on what were sensory and aesthetic responses. It was not enough to make a mental note of the experience, there was an intensity in my need to touch, a need to possess the objects, images and materials that were the agent of this experience. Where this was not possible a photograph would have to stand as a surrogate. Collecting and recording became a way of articulating those experiences, a way of focusing concerns. The act of making was about giving those sensations coherence and meaning - a way of trying to make them tangible, a way of satisfying a desire. I have become increasingly interested in how this visual material had the potential to produce such an intensity of experience, and on a personal level how this experience was often of a sensory nature, evidenced through what were very physical responses. My usual reaction when confronted with something that 'touched the spot' would be to lick my lips, to stroke, and to let out murmurs of pleasure. My students are laughingly familiar with the term 'it's scrummy' which always accompanies this physical reaction and is the perhaps the closest I can get to a verbal definition.

I have since noticed that most of the things that evoked such an intensity of feeling were themselves tactile in nature or referenced a history beyond themselves. Pamela Johnson stated in a paper that she presented at the 1997 Crafts Council Conference *Obscure Objects of Desire* that:

Through imagined touch we may experience a tactile intimacy with things that are removed from us. This possibility relies on experience, memory and expectation.¹⁰

I have become increasingly aware that therein lays the potential of objects and of cloth in particular, to convey meaning. Through their ability to access the sensual and the tactile they have the potential to express a familiarity and an intimacy of real lived experience. Michel Thomas in *Textile Art* observes:

The interest of textile artists in fabrics is characterised by the recovery of a language. This is the language of art, long forgotten by the traditional disciplines, but also an everyday language. It is a language that is still living, written into the structure of some societies in rites that are often only a repetition of primal myths, and living also in our societies, as close as it is possible to be to each of us, indeed right next to the skin. A language inscribed in fabrics which our hands touch, fabrics with which we come into physical contact.¹¹

Having in a very direct way through my own visual research, recognised the potential of objects to act as Pamela Johnson suggests 'as potent symbols in our personal narratives,'¹² recent theoretical encounters have provided further insights into what has increasingly become my fascination with the dialectic between the rational and the intuitive response - between reasoned thought and subconscious reaction and in particular how cloth has the potential to articulate the gap between the two.

Julia Kristeva offers a psychoanalytical model of this dialectic. Her notion of the 'semiotic chora' and the idea of the 'semiotic' in constant tension with the 'symbolic' has resonance's with what I have observed in my own very physical response to intense visual stimulation. In *Poststructuralism and Postmodernism* Madan Sarup states that:

The semiotic is the rhythmic, energetic, dispersed bodily series of forces which strive to proliferate pleasures, sounds, colours or movements experienced in the child's body. Like the repressed, the semiotic can return as disruptions within the symbolic. The semiotic is both the precondition of symbolic functioning and its uncontrollable excess. It is used by discourses but cannot be articulated by them.¹³

As individuals we have patterns of behaviour through which we make sense of ourselves and within these patterns of behaviour there are things that disturb the consciousness which we have a habit of revisiting again and again. The process of making can be a way of retelling a story through which we fix our identity, it can be rational and reasoned, but it is also a means through which the disruptive notion of unconscious process can be accommodated. Only when an idea takes physical form can we recognise its real nature and potential.

In his article *Light as Surface - on recent British Abstract Painting*, Simon Morley suggests a parallel theory to Kristeva's idea of disrupting energies in Jean - Francois Lyotard's notion of the 'event' and 'figural', stating that 'the 'figural' is that energy which bursts through the ordered, rational structures of thought and being'¹⁴ which cannot be reduced to intelligibility.

Both of these theories owe a debt to D.W. Winnicott's notion of 'potential space' and provide further areas of interest and investigation.

An introduction to such theoretical models of conscious and unconscious reaction has extended my understanding of my own individual creative response and provided a critical framework against which I can test my personal motivations and methodologies.

In their acknowledgement of the interaction between two modifying forces they seem to articulate verbally what my work aims to articulate visually and echo in a very real sense one of the conundrums within my own practice, which is what I have often described as its opposing factors of austerity and sensuality. It seems that one of the recurring issues within my work is how sensuality can be achieved through the minimal of means, how in a way that is quiet, almost stripped to the bone, reduced but not inhuman, work can have a powerful personal resonance. There is a need within what I make, to balance or integrate this sensuality or deeply rooted emotion with an appearance of rationality and order - a need to constantly defer meaning by setting things in opposition.

The contradictions within my own work are reinforced within its process of making.

The continual working of row upon row of stitching and the hand turning of buttonholes is repetitive and often tedious, yet through what becomes a mesmerising personal ritual the work becomes invested with something more than just time. The work is 'soft', quiet, unassuming, but through the process of quilting, stitching, patching etc., it is imbued with a strength that is belied by its outward appearance. I would like to think that it has, as Robert Rosenblum described the early paintings of Frank Stella, 'the persistent aura of some private drama that must lie behind their solemn monkish presence.'¹⁵

The contradictory messages continue within the form of the work. The bags through a scale that makes reference to the body, suggest intimacy, warmth, comfort and protection, but they are also forms that could ultimately confine and restrict.

The accuracy, neatness and orderliness to the work's process of making, runs contrary to the commonly held assumption that emotion is generally evidenced through gesture and spontaneity. Art is represented to us as heroic and adventurous. The 'creative genius' is imbued with inexplicable powers which are to be venerated but not analysed. Repetitive, self-effacing industry epitomised in what is often called 'women's work', is often seen as the antithesis of self-fulfilling individual creative activity. There is a need for a critical shift, which hopefully my work begins to articulate, whereby textile's usual only sense of value in 'oh it must have taken ages' can be seen as something positive rather than in its usual context as a compensation for the work's lack of creative experimentation.

Although I have lately become interested in more general aspects of cultural studies as a way of authenticating subjective experience and affording textiles the legitimacy I initially sought, it has been contextual theory which has in the main, provided a mediating discourse between personal experience and a developing critical understanding. The critical discourse that surrounded Minimalism and subsequent Postminimalist tendencies within sculpture in late 1960's has greatly informed both my thinking and my practice. The work makes reference to the serial repetition, sequence, order and

'objectness' that was a specific concern of Minimalism, but it departs from Minimalist concerns in its insistence on direct emotional engagement. It has the rationality of much Minimalist sculpture, but the signifying potential of the cloth disrupts its rationality. Though not working with cloth, Sculptors such as Eve Hesse, Ulrich Ruckriem, Anish Kapoor, and Marcus Taylor, somehow seem to balance the two polarities of geometric simplicity with an emphasis on the sensuality of the material.

In a similar way the work makes reference to what Robert Hughes describes as 'the seriality, repetition and exalted emotional silence that was the mark of a certain phase of American modernism epitomised in the work of artists such as Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin.'¹⁶ However, in these instances it is the subtle nuance of the autographic trace that is the disrupting force, rather than the associative potential of the materials.

In many ways my work is a synthesis of some of the issues that are a specific concern of painting and those that particularly relate to sculpture. Though generally occupying the same space as painting, viewed frontally and very much concerned with surface, the work is in fact three-dimensional, having a front, back and interior space. It acknowledges the convergences and the reciprocal recognition's of both activities but is also enriched by a language that is very specific to textiles.

Both in a very practical sense and in an ideologically constructed sense, it has been important to understand what it is that is intrinsic to these various disciplines, in order to recognise just where it is that their boundaries lie and where there could be possible points of transition.

Whereas textiles was seen of little strategic value within the discourse of fine art, and my sense of not fitting into any particular category was something of a concern, I can now positively embrace my border position. By recognising where the boundaries lie and then by transgressing them and refusing to affirm generally accepted codes of practice and behaviour, the limitations of those practices can be opened up for scrutiny, and thereby offer alternative possibilities. As Rosmond Kinsy Miller states in her description of the work of Nina Saunders 'the inadequacy of binary oppositions is eschewed in favour of an inclusive strategy: not either/ or, but both/ and.'¹⁷

Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* seems to sum up the situation perfectly.

The individual, who has a memory and an already discursively constituted sense of identity, may resist particular interpellations or produce new versions of meaning from the conflicts and contradictions between existing discourses. Knowledge of more than one discourse and the recognition that meaning is plural allows for a measure of choice on the part of the individual, and even where choice is not available, resistance is still possible.¹⁸

Notes

1. Mel Bochner interviewed by Joan Simon, *Eva Hesse Drawing in Space*, Cantz, 19, p.90.
2. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, London and Massachusetts, 1986, p.278.
3. Bev Bytheway and Jennifer Harris, *The Subversive Stitch*, Whitworth Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1988, p.3.
4. Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford and Massachusetts, 1987, p.5.
5. Griselda Pollock, 'Vision Voice and Power Feminist Art History and Marxism', *Block [6]*, Middlesex Polytechnic, 1982, p.4.
6. Rosalind E. Krauss, The Introduction to *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, London and Massachusetts, 1986, p.2.
7. Weedon, op cit. p.25.
8. Michel Thomas, Christine Mainguy, Sophie Pommier, *Textile Art*, Skira, Geneva, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1985, p.15.
9. Pamela Johnson, 'Moments of Being', *The Jerwood Prize for Applied Arts 1997: Textiles*, Crafts Council, 1997, p.8.
10. Pamela Johnson, 'Out of Touch: The Meaning of Making in the Digital Age', *Obscure Objects of Desire*, Crafts Council, 1997, p.297.
11. Michel Thomas, Christine Mainguy, Sophie Pommier, *Textile Art*, Skira, Geneva, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1985, p.14.
12. Johnson, op cit. p.10.
13. Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p.124.
14. Simon Morley, 'Light as Surface', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, Issue 15, p.34.
15. Robert Rosenblum, *Penguin New Art 1 Frank Stella*, Penguin, 1969, p.21.
16. Robert Hughes, *Amish, The Art of the Quilt*, Phaidon, 1994, p.
17. Rosmond Kinsey Milner, 'Impure Thoughts: Gendering Architectural Space', *Hidden Agenda: Nina Saunders*, Bluecoat Gallery & Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, 1997.
18. Weedon, op cit. p.102