

Maxine Bristow, delegate pack statement

***Symposium: Pushing Boundaries* - a partnership between Craftspace, Staffordshire University and Designer Maker West Midlands, developed to accompany the *Made in the Middle* national touring exhibition. Staffordshire University 16th June 2007**

Some thoughts in relation to the notion of 'pushing boundaries' and my own practice.....

The theme of the symposium - 'Pushing Boundaries', is particularly appropriate for someone whose practice seems to engage with the notion of the boundary on many levels.

In this presentation I aim to explore the idea of moving beyond boundaries in terms of my own working procedure, the significance of boundaries in terms of my own critical understanding, and the physical and metaphorical articulation of boundaries in my more recent work.

The practical challenge of pushing the boundaries of our own practice is something with which we are all familiar. There is the conceptual challenge of what we are going to make, and more to the point why we are going to make what we are going to make. Then there are the very real challenges of how we are going to practically realise our ideas together with the challenges of the way we formulate opportunities and the context in which the work is seen.

As someone who made a conscious decision to have the financial security of a full-time lecturing position, the challenges of creating new work has never really been dictated by financial considerations. The 'day job' gives me the freedom to engage with 'art for art's sake' and not to have to worry about the market, but as anyone involved in Higher Education will testify, there is a trade off between financial security and time, which with the increasing demands of academia is becoming more and more difficult to find.

As a textile artist I am only too aware of my border position - as the writer and curator Pam Johnson states in the catalogue to accompany the second Art Textiles survey exhibition 'Art textiles has always operated in a border zone, caught between a paradox; too radical for traditionalists, too connected to material to carry conceptual weight, caught between mind and body, thinking and doing.'¹

As somebody who trained in textiles but having for many years taught within a fine art department, a key feature of both my academic and artistic career has been one of positioning - the mapping of material and ideological domains in order to determine my relative position and to understand the contexts and thereby meanings of my practice.

Krauss's concept of the 'expanded field' - examining the internal logic and limits of a practice's boundaries in order to plot the logical extensions of that practice, has become common parlance, and in many ways the

various heterogeneous manifestations of the 'expanded field' now define the nature of contemporary practice.² Similar to the methodology that Krauss adopts in her text, what was crucially important to the development of my own practice was an initial understanding of the characteristics that define the various traditions and disciplines of practice - what Greenberg describes in what is often seen as his 'manifesto' for modernism 'Modernist Painting' as, 'that which was unique and irreducible not only in art general, but also in each particular art'.³ Any territory by definition is shaped and bounded, it has sets of rules which define it and determine where the borders lie, but who decides the rules and what are the ordering principles? In order to be aware of the fact that one is operating in a border zone, it is necessary to first map the terrain and determine the relative positions and the limits of any boundaries. To recognise that my work occupies a boundary position and operates simultaneously in the expanded fields of textiles, painting and sculpture, I firstly had to engage with, and understand something of, the histories and accompanying discourses of each of those disciplines.

Continuing with the significance of spatial metaphors: fundamental to any historicist model of meaning is the concept of centre and margin (or periphery) - the centre or norm against which all else was defined as marginal or other. What was crucial in terms of the development of my own work was understanding something of the ideological bias of modernism. Subjected to the discursive context of fine art, Textiles role and potential for meaning has been limited. Recognition, however, that borders are not natural and secure but are arbitrary, and socially and historically determined, means that they are subject to critique and revision. If we acknowledge a socially and historically constructed system of inclusion and exclusion, then it follows, as the critic Brian Wallis suggests, that 'there may exist within any system not only margins which may serve as sites for resistance, but also whole fields or communities of interest which might be inhabited and invigorated.'⁴

A personal engagement with the broader debates that have surrounded art theory and practice over the last forty years or so has been strategically useful in opening up a critical space both for Textiles in general and my own practice in particular. As the critic Mel Bochner states 'Art is usually made before a critical language is in place to make it understandable,'⁵ yet it is often this critical language that makes us aware of the implications of our actions. I began to see how my work could strategically explore the fluidity of boundaries, submitting disciplines to the test of their own history in order to transcend or subvert the authority of conventional definitions of meaning. My intention with the work is to eschew the traditional binary oppositions of art/craft in favour of a more inclusive strategy where aspects of both disciplines can be drawn upon for the purpose of extending and challenging the boundaries that have traditionally defined and delineated these categories of practice.

In addition to the significance of spatial metaphors in terms of my own critical and contextual understanding, my more recent work engages with the notion of boundaries in a very physical and literal sense. Informed by an interest in the poetics and politics of space, the work explores features of the built environment that mark boundaries or points of transition between different realms of space. These are aspects of the of the built environment with which we have an actual physical, though often unconscious, bodily relationship and which mediate between the body and space, instigating in us routinely repeated patterns of behaviour. The unconscious patterns of behaviour instigated through repetitive action and routine are echoed in my own work

through its repetitive form and processes, particularly recently through needlepoint and darning which bring both a private and a feminine intervention into the public realm of architectural space. The more recent handrail and barrier forms can be seen as supports but they also - although clearly in a temporary way - divide space, define boundaries and alternately either deny or allow access.

The idea of cloth as a skin or membrane providing on the one hand a very real tangible point of contact and material boundary and on the other hand a more ambiguous metaphorical boundary between self and 'not self'; is something that has informed the more recent work and is something that I am currently revisiting with proposed ideas for new work. Whereas previous work has been largely concerned with gestures of the hand and localised touch, what I am currently thinking about is less focused touch, touch that is not limited to static contact between fingertips and surface but like its corresponding organ of the skin is dispersed more widely across the body.

The symposium premise of 'pushing boundaries' suggests conscious action, an awareness of working at the limits of one's practice and the continual challenge of moving forwards with new ideas and new opportunities. Within my own practice it has been less about pushing boundaries than slowly nudging boundaries, responding to opportunities as they present themselves and a subsequent slow accumulation of experience and corresponding understanding. Through a continual process of making and remaking, responding intuitively and then revisiting ideas through critical engagement, it has been largely about negotiating boundaries in an attempt to understand the terrain and determine the position of my practice. The inclusion in survey exhibitions is undoubtedly important in pushing the boundaries of Textiles as a discipline and raising ones own profile within ones own field of practice, but what are also crucially important (though less forthcoming) are exhibitions which explore the fluidity of boundaries and allow for dialogue across disciplines and the migration of ideas and concerns between a range of constituent communities.

References

1. Pamela Johnson, 'Thinking Process' in *Art Textiles the Second Major Survey of British Artists Working with Textiles*, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery 2000, p21
2. See Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, 1996.
3. Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison [Eds] *Modern Art and Modernism A Critical Anthology*, Harper and Row Ltd, 1982, p5.
4. Brian Wallis, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, p.xvi
5. Mel Bochner interviewed by Joan Simon, *Eva Hesse Drawing in Space*, Cantz, 19, p.90.