

**Maxine Bristow: 'Staging (and restaging) the specific unspecificity of textile'**

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What I want to do today is to focus on a body of studio enquiry conducted between July and November 2011 and provide some reflections on what marked a considerable new trajectory for the research and a shift in methodological approach.

In order to place this new trajectory in some context, I will begin by giving a brief overview of my project and the conceptual framework that has begun to emerge out of the research so far. I will then briefly discuss the first phase of studio enquiry and outline three new directions in terms of methodological approach before focusing on the first of these in relation to the title of my paper: *Staging (and restaging) the specific unspecificity of textile (and other) things*.

So the project in general.....

The research takes as its point of departure an investigation into the formal and semantic conventions of textile. Through an interrogation of these conventions the aim is to develop a critical practice, which entrenches textile within its own area of competence whilst strategically negotiating its conventions within a post-medium fine art context. My argument is that it is the cultural unspecificity and mutability of textile that makes it a particular potent medium where the pursuit of aesthetic effects can be continuous with an engagement with social, historical and cultural contexts.

Implicit within this are two broad areas of enquiry: 1. What are the characteristics of textile that afford it such cultural unspecificity and subsequent potency as an artistic medium; and 2. how can these be negotiated within a fine art context without reaffirming prejudices and leaving intact the critical and ideological categories through which the medium has been traditionally defined.

As indicated in the formulation of this argument, what is central to both of these questions and what has begun to emerge both as a conceptual framework and a methodological approach is the notion of indeterminacy and the corresponding pragmatics of attachment and detachment or assimilation and differentiation.

The ontological identity of textile is formulated around an inherent tension between materiality and meaning. It both physically and symbolically mediates between the self and the world. However, the fundamental paradox of textile is that it is a mutable and ambiguous boundary which both blurs distinctions and facilitates a process of connectivity, whilst also dividing and framing and allowing us to distinguish and differentiate self from other.

I don't have the time to go into it here, but three key points of reference for the contextual review include:

1. The intermediary character of mimesis conceived by Theodor Adorno as an non-conceptual mode of subjective experience and sensuous affinity with the other - a mechanism for inscribing ourselves in the world and bridging but not collapsing the difference between subject and object.
2. Joanna Drucker's notion of complicit formalism as a means by which artistic production can embrace the reality of our contemporary condition assimilating with systems of mass material culture and countering 'the very basis on which autonomy could be assumed, while returning respect for the aesthetic properties of works of art' (Drucker, 2005b, p.xvi).
3. Neil Leach's theory of camouflage and its two principal operations: its visual and its strategic dimension (*Neil Leach is coming from a background of architecture and architectural theory*).

So, why does this new body of studio enquiry mark a new trajectory - how does it differ from the first phase of the research?

#### *SLIDES: IMAGES OF BAGS*

I began the project by, understandably, drawing on established practice. Whilst this practice was manifest in a range of outputs from sculptural objects to installations, what characterised this body of work (which had developed over about a 10 year period) was what became my signature 'bag' form. These forms operated somewhere between two dimensions and three dimensions, mimicked the shape and occupied the same space of painting, whilst simultaneously making reference to material culture and the object conventions of textile. Central to my methodological approach (although this emerged largely through an intuitive process of making) was the development of a reductive visual vocabulary that privileged formal conventions over substantive referential content and the establishment of rational, 'objective' systems of working which consciously attempted to deny emotional engagement. The intention in adopting such procedures was to demonstrate the affective potency of textile - how any attempt at rational coherence or seeming autonomy was continually disrupted by the somatic sensuality of cloth and the social and historical connotations of the needlework techniques employed in its production.

This process of subjective self-effacement and the mimicking of the autonomous language of modernist abstraction was largely an unconscious response at the time, but on reflection it was undoubtedly informed by my repositioning as a young lecturer within a department of fine art (my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees were both in textiles). Similarly to the biological operation of camouflage, it was a way of inscribing myself in this new cultural setting, a way of adapting to new surroundings and a process of assimilation by adopting the language against which textile's marginalised identity had been formulated.

#### *SLIDES: AGNES MARTIN BAGS*

Whilst the initial body of work emerged out of what was largely an intuitive process of making, two pieces of work produced in the early stages of the research employ more intentional imitative strategies consciously mimicking the paintings of Agnes Martin (*briefly describe the process - translating Martin's drawn pencil line through a withdrawn thread*).

In so far as the process of adaptation takes place on the level of intention, it can be seen as expression of human self-preservation - mimesis as mimicry is the expression of self-empowerment and self-consciousness. As Homi Bhabha observes: it is in the 'almost the same but not quite' that mimicry locates its strength: 'in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (Bhabha, 1994 p.122).

However, the potential problem of mimicry is that it always runs the danger of reproducing what it mimics. As Neil Leach observes: 'over invested engagement may lead to an uncritical absorption into the other' and an urge to distinguish the self from the other in order to overcome the fear of the undifferentiated self (Leach, 2006, p.245). In this way whilst a level of assimilation is crucial, differentiation also emerges as a defence reaction in response to the dissolution of the self (Gebauer and Wulf, 1992, p.281).

I would suggest that the problem with the 'Agnes Martin bags' is that there is an insufficient contemporary context by which the handmade processes of drawn thread work and darning can be recognised – as techniques that are no longer practised, they fail to signify the traditional conventions of textile, as was the intention, becoming instead indistinguishable from the sophistication of their industrially produced mass material equivalents.

And so coming to the more recent work and why it marks a new trajectory for the research?

The approach that I adopted was threefold:

The first new point of departure was to shift the agenda of the research from one that was largely dictated by visual culture and the legacies of modernist abstraction to one that drew its reference from textile's own logical and historical conventions and its traditional position within material culture – specifically its object and functional conventions (*more of this later*).

The second shift in methodological approach was to move from resistant aesthetics of autonomy and processes of contingent mimicry through the strategic mediation of binary oppositions to a more open and affirmative mimetic complicity - a conscious yielding and more empathetic affinity with the other – in my own case with the other of both modernist abstraction and industrial production, against which textile art's identity has been historically formulated. The aim was to move from dualist conceptual constraints and an interpretation of the work that is largely dictated by a rhetoric of negative opposition, to a more productive affinity with a range of historical positions and cultural references. This involved a much more playful mixing of codes and creation of multiple connections across a range of contexts and disciplinary practices. The multiple/mutable contexts and conventions of textile provided a point of departure for the investigation, but the studio enquiry was not bounded by these conventions. Instead, the aim was to investigate textile as 'the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences' (Braidotti, 1994, p. 4).

The third shift in methodological approach was to move from an approach where the outcome is clearly defined, to one where the outcome is much more provisional. This new strategy of making entails the production of a series of separate elements which can be variously configured and reconfigured, offering the

potential for an infinite variety of possibilities and multiple iterations. The aim with this approach is to maintain a sense of mutability where meaning is not stable but continually in flux; produced through the temporary coalition of different elements which allow for multiple correspondences and connections.

And so, what I want to do for the remainder of the presentation is to look at how these new methodological approaches have been manifest in the provisional studio enquiry. I also want to use this opportunity to briefly reflect on the emerging practice in relation to what was the first new point of departure that I mentioned and broader themes of objecthood and thingness.

But before I show you the outcomes of the studio enquiry, I want to set the scene by looking at what were three points of reference for the work:

*SLIDES: ST PETERSBURG ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM*

The first was informed by a visit to St Petersburg ethnographic museum back in 2007 where I recall being particularly struck by the relationship between a display of embroidered Russian towels presented in a series of display cases and the staging of similar artefacts in a series of tableau.

I must admit that I have always been drawn to the ambiguity of museum artefacts and the way that they activate a series of contradictory registers: between art and artefact, between the aesthetic and functional, between the material and the symbolic, between the universality of form and the specificity of cultural language. Isolated for aesthetic contemplation, cut from the continuity of time, taken out of their social context, and not ascribed any authorial identity, it is often their unyielding anonymity and indeterminacy that seems to awaken the imagination. It is the tension between the formal and aesthetic dimensions and ambiguous social function that I would suggest affords the artefacts their potency. As Pam Johnson observes 'We might not understand the specific meanings of a textile object from another culture, but we, nonetheless, can recognise an area of associative potential which may arouse further curiosity' (Johnson, 1997, p.8). To add to this list of contradictory experiences, what was communicated most effectively in the St Petersburg Museum was a particularly heightened tension between mobility and stasis where the tableaux that were meant to bring the objects to life, presented them in a strange formalised suspended animation.

*SLIDES: INTERIOR RETAIL DISPLAY*

The second point of reference - the aesthetic staging of furnishings used in interior styling and retail display - is, I guess, in some ways a contemporary equivalent of the museum tableau where objects that are normally caught up in the messy business of everyday life (or in this case have yet to enter into circulation) are removed from the business of living and aestheticised through formal arrangement. The identity of textile as an artistic medium has historically been formulated in its relation to craft and its subsequent opposition to industrial production. However, acknowledgment of my own affinity with mass material culture and the affirmative nature of interior design and seductive sophistication of industrial manufacture, provided something of a release from the contingency of hand production, allowing me to embrace this significant aspect of textile's cultural identity.

## SLIDES: ARTISTS, STRATEGIES OF STAGING

The third point of reference was the formal strategies of staging and the creation of tableau/ mise-en-scène that I had begun to recognise in the work of a number of contemporary artists including Claire Barclay, Tatiana Trouvé, Thea Djordjadze, Tom Burr, Carol Bove. These formal strategies often provide a vehicle on which to stage smaller objects. Significantly, however, in terms of my own investigation into the pragmatics of attachment and detachment, they also afford a level of contiguity between the works of art and the architecture of the spaces in which they are exhibited whilst simultaneously maintaining a self-conscious artifice through the reformulation of modernist distancing devices such as the frame and the plinth. So the next series of images are of speculative studio enquiry conducted last summer where I was intuitively trying to give form to some of these concerns.....*(and there are quite a few of them so I am going to go through them fairly quickly)*

## SLIDES: SUMMER STUDIO WORK

As indicated earlier, the main aim was to shift the agenda of the research to focus on textile's own logical and historical conventions and its traditional position within material culture. Whilst drawing reference from the functional object conventions of textile - particularly upholstery, soft furnishings and objects that define the spaces that we inhabit and mediate between us and our environment - the intention was to also maintain a mimetic affinity with the legacies of modernism and the objecthood of minimalist sculpture through a conceptual reworking of these received formalist traditions.

- *As is often the case with practice, I didn't really know what I was doing and it was just a case of making use of the temporary studio space that I had over the summer to instigate some work.*
- *Amassing a range of appropriated objects that I could variously figure and reconfigure*
- *Creating a series of scenarios*
- *Maintaining a level of tension between autonomy and re-orientation; subjective attachment and objective detachment.*
- *Plinth elements and upholstered elements – fleshing out the hollowness of minimalist sculpture*
- *Curtain elements as flexible frames*
- *Introduction of digital stitch*
- *Smaller objects*
- *The paper templates - carpet element again operating as framing devices.*

## SLIDES: DEVELOPMENT OF SUMMER STUDIO WORK – 'CATALOGUE' OF VARIOUS ELEMENTS

*From the initial testing of ideas through appropriated objects I then moved onto thinking about making my own elements or components.*

- *Went on an upholstery course, introduction of fabricated forms*
- *Mimicking their mass material counterparts but maintaining a level of ambiguity and distinguishing themselves through their production values.*

- *A considerable amount of preplanning, involvement in making processes, and logistical operations but without any real sense of the outcome. The contrast between the order and control in the construction of the various elements and the provisionality and uncertainty of the outcome.*
- *The introduction of digital stitch*
- *The introduction of traditional/cultural references through smaller hand stitched quasi artefacts/objects staged on or amongst the larger structural forms.*
- *The slides that I am showing you here are testing out the the notion of the 'catalogue' as a possible model for documenting the components of the work. Again what I am interested in is the contradiction between a quasi-ordered system – an invented objective taxonomy and the subjective improvised nature of the work itself.*

#### *SLIDES: BITE-SIZE PIECE*

And so to conclude; I have subsequently been reflecting on the notion of *thingness* as an emergent theme and a useful conceptual premise the research. It is a term that Joanna Drucker suggests 'updates Fried's notion of objecthood and is more appropriate for the current nature of contemporary fine art practice - a new form of theatricality that is 'more connected to and complicit with the cultural world' (Drucker, 2005, p.160). At is also a term that might appropriately be applied to the specific inspecificity of my more recent work.

*In Sweet Dreams Contemporary Art and Complicity*, Drucker states:

*In contrast with minimalism's "objecthood," the concept of "thingness" links sculpture to objects in and of the world in a combination of traditional arts, conceptualised contemporary art, and mass culture production... The category depends on the intersection between the world of things that are irrefutably and indisputably a part of material culture and those that are in the world of art. Rather than preserving the thin dividing line that minimalism relied on to separate these domains, these new works aggressively blur those boundaries. In capitulating to material culture, they embody its most phantasmatic properties: continually deferred possession, seductive contemplation, and endlessly displaced signification. (Drucker, 2005, p.157).*

This would seem to correlate with my own practice, which operates in an unspecified territory between the domains of material culture and contemporary fine art practice. It mimetically aspires to, and assimilates with the conditions of mass material culture, celebrating its richness, the potency of its associative meanings and embodying subjective consumer desire; whilst at the same time employing a range of formalist strategies that distance the viewer, heighten the works artifice and differentiate and distinguish it from its mass material counterparts.

In the introduction to his edited collection entitled *Things* Bill Brown makes a distinction between objects and things suggesting that objects are subjected to concepts and have 'codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful' (Brown, 2004, p.4) whereas *things* exist in a suspended form of identity as both 'the before and after of the object' – they are the not yet formed and an excess that remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects (Brown, 2004, p.5). He states:

*Things is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable... On the one hand, then, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, something not quite apprehended. (Brown, 2004, p.5)*

This would seem to find resonance with Claire Pajackowska's analysis of the unspecified materiality of 'stuff' which similarly accords with both the generality and particularity of thingness; (Pajackowska usefully reminds us that 'stuff' is a translation of the French étoffe which also means fabric or material).

*We experience cloth as neither object nor subject, but as the threshold between, as a liminality where meaning decomposes into materiality, and threatens nonsense. It is this quality of non-sense that makes textiles especially interesting. (Pajackowska, 2005, p.221).*

I would suggest that it is this inherent indeterminacy that accounts for textiles cultural significance and subsequent potency as a medium. Revolving around a founding contradiction between what it is in a material sense and what it does in the social world, textile it is indeed complex stuff. Embodying an inherent inbetweenness, entangled in the relationships between subject and object and as a site of multiple, mutable and potentially conflicting meanings and experiences, it is far from the realm of the arbitrary and visually meaningless against which Greenberg was at pains modernist works of art had to register their difference.

And so, I want to just end by showing you some images of the work that came out of the provisional summer studio enquiry which resulted in a small exhibition at Five Years gallery in London at the end of November.

SLIDES: STUDIO SHOTS OF VARIOUS ELEMENTS

SLIDES: FIVE YEARS EXHIBITION

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