

Rachel Johnston

Making Stories

... where there is a dynamic participation, forms are not just visual – they lead ... to a relational experience with listening. They lead to the formation of identities grounded in the communicative realization of our intersubjectivity ... (Gablik 1991: 114)

Writing as an artist and a maker who works with people, the acts of making and of listening are for me intrinsically linked. The processes through which ideas arise and manifest themselves in the manipulation of materials are understood: ‘we *can* tell of what we know through practice and experience, precisely because telling is itself a modality of experience that *abhors* articulation and specification’ (Ingold 2013: 109). Art, with all its ambiguity and open-endedness as a means of investigation, can be used effectively as a mediating tool in creating a positive dynamic for communicating with others and in uncovering personal narrative.

That is, art’s function as an adaptive mechanism is as an antidote to the habitual. Its social value lies in its presentation of a practice area where one can embrace the disorienting experience. (Morris 1970)

My question here is how stories come from making and how making creates a space for listening.

Storytelling and craftsmanship have been intertwined since their beginning. There are layers of narrative to be considered in relation to making: first of all, there is the story of the craft itself, the essential skills and knowledge and how, as a maker, these skills have been learned. In the past, skills were passed down through generations, bringing together layers of tacit knowledge with practical direction and personal history. There is also the notion of materially embodied narrative – the visual depiction of a story or record of historical events woven into a tapestry, for example. The particular resistance of different materials plays a part in this; a woven image is formed from what is essentially a grid, making the use of curved lines difficult (though not impossible). Feltmaking involves the laying out of motifs in fleece

which then become distorted and transformed as the wool fibres mesh together. This knowledge and ability to work with, rather than against, the structure and forces of a material does not detract but adds to the visual impact of the outcome. The inventiveness demanded in working with materials finds a parallel in the telling and retelling of stories for new audiences and contexts, but also in the flexibility of approach required during the process of negotiating and collaborating with others.

Then there is the temporal story of making, the narrative of the maker as they produce an object. In her book *Zeros and Ones* Sadie Plant describes this process in relation to textiles production:

A piece of work so absorbing as a cloth is saturated with the thoughts of the people who produced it, each of whom can flash straight back to whatever they were thinking as they worked. Like Proust’s madeleines, it carries memories of an intensity which completely escape the written word. (Plant 1998: 66)

This notion of a story being embedded into the very fabric of a cloth during its making has ancient precedents. The myth of Penelope, weaving by day and undoing by night as she awaits Odysseus’s return in Homer’s *Odyssey*, is well known; it is the narrative of a life and the texture of an individual’s experience enmeshed in the fibres of the cloth.

Finally, there are the stories that come from the very process of making. How does making create space for stories? To work in solitude can be inward looking and meditative, but there is something about working with others that gives rise to conversation and spontaneous storytelling:

Textiles production tends to be a communal, sociable work allowing plenty of occasion for gossip and chat. Weaving was already multimedia: singing, chanting, telling stories, dancing and playing games as they work, spinsters, weavers, and needleworkers were literally networkers as well. (Plant 1998: 65)

A relationship in which art and making are the mediating factor between people is particular, fascinating and full of potential, and it is this dynamic that is under consideration here. Perhaps it is the repetition inherent in techniques such as knitting or weaving that distracts from the immediacy of the present and allows for a kind of openness in which the mind can wander and conversation flow. My experience of working with people tells me that once the context is established the making can take any form; it could be the comfort and positive association of working with familiar materials or the absorption of a challenging new task, but the atmosphere of willing communication or, to use Gablik's term 'relational experience with listening', is usually the same. For Immanuel Kant, 'The hand is the window to the mind' (Sennett 2009: 149), and even those who would not normally see themselves as image-makers or craftsmen are able to find expressive form and a means of self-expression.

Whereas articulate knowledge takes the form of statements about the known, personal knowledge both grows from and unfolds in the field of sentience comprised by the correspondence of practitioners' awareness and the materials with which they work. Relative to articulate knowledge, then, personal knowledge ... rather swirls around and between the islands that articulate knowledge. (Ingold 2013: 111)

We are conscious of the value of listening in many areas of our lives. In his book *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, Richard Sennett likens the acquiring of social skills and cooperation to a craft which must be learned like any other and relies on an adaptable and responsive attitude to others. Like a craft there is repetition and ritual inherent in this process of understanding, and for the relationship to work it requires practice. He makes a case that associates craftsmanship with less obvious tasks and circumstances:

To do good work means to be curious about, to investigate, and to learn from ambiguity ... nursing craft negotiates a liminal zone between problem solving and problem finding. (Sennett 2009: 48)

The skills needed in caring for others are founded in listening; in a clinical setting, the value of a seemingly casual conversation cannot be underestimated. Much important knowledge can be gleaned through conversation with a patient that may illuminate their

condition far more effectively than a diagnostic checklist.

The sharing of stories through making can be a cathartic and self-affirming experience, contributing to individual wellbeing and the sharing of understanding amongst peers; people can tell their story, gaining a voice in the community and dispelling myths. Viewing this work as therapy, however, is not helpful and there can be moments of real conflict. The need we have to frame our experiences and to discover significant aesthetic forms as a representation of them is clear, but working together is complex and it is important not to be simplistic about the tensions and strains inherent in the process – 'repair work is a complicated matter; there are conflicting ways for fixing broken things, and these strategies lead in conflicting social directions' (Sennett 2013: 199).

Examples are given below of projects in which making and imagery have been used as a way of allowing people to tell their story. The focus here is on process – the experience of making with people and the stories that arose rather than artistic outcome. Finding effective ways of communicating is the aim, but often the focus of an end result and the production of a tangible artwork can be important in galvanising a group of people to join and work together. The aspirations for a community project can be great (and sometimes unrealistic), with expectations that the artist will heal rifts and establish a dialogue between disparate groups. It is difficult to prove the real success of a project on this level, and the true experience of participation is rarely captured in evaluations, but it is clear that as people work together and listen, things can change.

Themes of journey-making, mapping and place run through these projects, and a focus on sensory experience, especially in relation to place, has often formed the starting point in the work. Responding to the haptic sense, rather than the visual in the first instance, allows individuals to tap into powerful memories – the tactile experience becomes both a catalyst for stories and part of the means of defining and capturing them in a new object. The aim is not to 'dig', but to allow personal narratives to gradually rise to the surface.

Maps for life

To use one's steps as a measurement to establish a route between two points is a sentimental mapping of sorts, an act that reminds us of the way in which

we represent the world in relation to sensorial experience. (Medina in Godfrey et al., 2010: 119)

Storyteller Richard Neville, artist Emily Lawlor and I worked together as 'Mappa' for a number of years, and during this time our interactions with the people we were working with took in a wide range of conceptual and practical approaches. Our aim was to explore the dynamic between story and image and how one could lead to the other, telling and gathering stories from participants within a context of making. An early project at Lewisham Bridge School in London (1998) helped us to focus ourselves thematically and make some practical discoveries, some of which are reflected here.

Our brief was to work with primary age children from Traveller families and their peers, a significant number of whom came from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds, in the hope that collaborative work between the groups would help to build bridges and generate understanding between the Traveller and settled communities. Disseminating an understanding of Traveller life was central to this process, and we began by inviting an elder in the community to talk to the children about her life. She brought in items such as china and lace from her caravan to show the children, and they were able to ask her about these. We then began to explore the children's own experiences. Richard offered them folk tales that were full of journey-making and transformation and the children enjoyed these, but were initially unable to relate them to their own experiences.

When we asked them to trace the journeys they had made on a map, they were curious but unable to do so. The answer to this was to take them on a walk, and we made several journeys around the streets adjacent to the school, 'botanising on the asphalt', in the words of Walter Benjamin (Solnit 2001: 199). We asked them to focus particularly on sensory moments and to find places they had a connection with. What emerged this time was a quite different set of responses; as an expression of these walks the children drew their own maps and, when they were discussed, these were brimming with stories beginning on the streets of Lewisham, but quickly expanding to encompass other, more significant, journeys.

We continued to explore this idea by working with textiles – interpreting the scent and texture of fabrics using line and printmaking. This was quite a simple task, but it provoked some remarkable reactions, stirring intense memories. What had happened here? In focusing on bodily and sensory ways of exploring

personal experience, a deeper seam of narrative had been uncovered. Using transformative processes such as printmaking, which have their own qualities of tactility and repetition and are deeply absorbing, was key. The absorption in process is an essential factor in this work: 'we are now absorbed *in* something, no longer self-aware, even of our bodily self. We have become the thing on which we are working' (Sennett 2009: 174). Working together as a group with the focus being on finding the space between story and image making, rather than just 'doing art', seemed to create a particularly open dynamic. The parameters of the project and our instincts told us never to 'dig', but during the process of making the most profound personal stories rose to the surface. 'I am able to touch effectively only if the phenomenon finds an echo within me, if it accords with a certain nature of my consciousness' (Merleau Ponty 2002 [1945]: 369).

As the project progressed it became clear that physical and practical activity was needed in order for the children to understand the stories they were told and to allow them to tell their own. It was very striking that they experienced a story as a series of moments that animated them physically; they much preferred to 'tell' a story through movement and material rather than through text, and we began to focus on processes that had a physical dimension: stomping through sand in response to a story about walking, then casting the footprints in plaster, projecting images onto the body and photographing them, using the cyanotype process to make collages which were transformed as the sunlight developed the imagery to capture a moment in time.

Social consequences are built into the structure and the functioning of the human body, as in the workings of the human hand ... the capacities our bodies have to shape physical things are the same capacities we draw on in social relations. (Sennett 2009: 290)

The themes that arose – of empirical measurement represented through the use of maps versus the real, lived experience of place – came to define this project and many of those that followed from it. There have been many moments, especially in conversations with refugee and asylum-seekers and older people, in which the sense of the 'here and now' sits in uneasy relationship with the location of that person's thoughts – they are physically in one place, but emotionally elsewhere.



Cyanotype image from 'Maps for Life', Lewisham Bridge School, 1998

Notions of bodiliness and making in relation to story were developed further during a project at Guston School in Dover. We were asked to work with children from refugee and asylum-seeker families, many of whom came from a Roma background, and their Dover peers. We decided to work with feltmaking, choosing it for its tactile immediacy and its engaging physical process. The visual motifs found in traditional felt have a strong relationship with storytelling, and felt is a material associated with nomadic cultures that have an oral rather than written tradition of storytelling. The telling of stories and prayers often accompanies the long and often monotonously repetitive feltmaking process, incorporating a story into the very fabric of the cloth: 'stories issue from moving bodies and vital materials, in the making' (Ingold 2013: 110).

Making a large piece of felt requires cooperation, and the hope was that the process of working together would forge bonds between the newly-arrived children and their Dover peers, dispelling myths and creating friendship. We began by telling stories and looking at traditional textile symbols, and these fed into the initial image-making – a kind of story map based on the idea of a carpet. A large collaborative piece of felt was made as an interpretation of this. The physicality of the feltmaking process was key; to make a large piece meant pressing and treading the fibres, rolling the felt, working with water and everyone getting involved. The transformative process of feltmaking was compelling: participants could observe the gradual

matting together of fibres to create a solid whole. Images became distorted as the material was formed, and this had significance too – a heart or a cat shape laid out in fleece morphed into something strange and unexpected as the wool fibres knitted together; the images were recognisable, but different.

metamorphosis provokes material consciousness in three ways: through the internal evolution of a type-form, in the judgement about mixture and synthesis, by the thinking involved in a domain shift. (Sennett 2009: 129)

There is something surprising yet pleasing about this (a bit like the reversal of an image in printmaking) – it's not quite what you were expecting, but it has its own solidity and identity. These unanticipated transformations, that take place as a material finds its form, seem to have a crucial role to play in the dynamic between making, listening and telling. Quoting Levi-Strauss, Sennett goes on to say that 'symbolic value is inseparable from awareness of the material condition of an object: its creators thought the two together' (Sennett 2009: 129). The emerging form allows a shifting of the boundaries of the story and opens up new possibilities. In the oral tradition of storytelling this process happens continuously and stories are different each time they are retold. There was a strong sense that the children were prepared to allow their felt image to change and to exist in its new form alongside everyone else's.



Felt detail from Guston School, 'Maps for Life', Dover project, 2000

We have one minute to talk

We worked in Dover again with adults who were living in hostels, before being dispersed to other areas of the country (as was the practice in 2001), alongside the inhabitants of Dover, basing ourselves in the local library and at the Museum. The aim of the project was to tell the story of this very idiosyncratic place and its inhabitants at a particular moment in time. In the national and local press there was much negative comment about those who had recently arrived and were claiming asylum. We hoped to explore these views in a non-judgemental way and to give a voice to the new arrivals for whom there really was no right to reply.

In the unsubtle language of politics, refracted through the rarely more subtle language of the media, a simplifying term can become as crude as a club or a chain. Its incessant repetition, both to say, and to imply what is not (yet) acceptable to say, erodes awareness of the complexity of individual lives as water smoothes the surface of the rocks it passes over. (Matarasso 2013: 19)

The beginning of many of the conversations we had started with making. We created 35mm slides for a projection piece, and these were later used as the basis for printed artwork in a publication that brought together text and imagery. Participants were given cameras to record their everyday lives and we asked them to find places around the town that had resonance for them. These photographs were then developed as 35mm transparencies and layered with coloured gels. Some people used the tiny frame of the slide as a canvas, drawing or making texts with Letraset. The small working area was part of the fascination – using pens on the slick gel or film, the image was quite hard to control and to see whilst it was being made. When the slide was projected, however, there was a true moment of transformation as the tiny image became a huge, textural mass in space in which every fibre of the pen mark was evident. An internalised and inexpressible idea was made manifest, and as people worked on their slides they began to talk and we gathered stories:

In the real world, something is happening and no one knows what is going to happen. In the image-world, it has happened, and it will forever happen in that way. (Sontag 1979: 168)

'We Have One Minute to Talk' brought to the fore a sense of dislocated space, of people dwelling in

one place, but existing emotionally and sensorially elsewhere, along with all the challenges to personal identity that this implies. This liminal state of being, in which different places and selves coexist for someone in the present, has recurred many times throughout our projects. That tactile/haptic experience in the present may connect a person powerfully with moments in the past is well known and the process of making can become a catalyst in this process. Jean Schulkind writes of this in relation to Virginia Woolf's essay *A Sketch of the Past*:

If life is a 'bowl which one fills and fills and fills', each new experience added to the existing ones displaces them ever so slightly and alters their previous meaning by forcing them into new combinations. The present moment is enriched by the past but the past is also enriched by the present. This view of the self ... emphasises simultaneously the change and continuity of the individual identity. (Schulkind 1989: 18)



Identity

To know or to teach? In his book *Making*, Tim Ingold asserts that the skills of making can be passed on in many ways, often in more subtle forms than those of traditional teaching: 'Know for yourself!' (Ingold 2013: 1). For many people there is an inherent understanding of process and material that can be tapped into given the right opportunity.

To tell, in short, is not to explicate the world, to provide the information that would amount to a complete specification, obviating the need for would-be practitioners to inquire for themselves. It is rather to trace a path that others can follow. (Ingold 2013: 110)

This notion of tapping into inherent knowledge and learning through observation was at the heart of the Identity Project (of which I was participant and evaluator) at the Friendship Centre in Portsmouth. The aim of the project was to work with the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Activity Group 'to collect and share stories and experiences of living in Portsmouth

and to create a lasting testimony of this in the form of a sculpture and video’.

Zimbabwean sculptor Anthony Sarireni was asked to work with project participants over the course of several months. His approach to making was spontaneous and intuitive, not telling people what to do, but allowing them to accumulate skills whilst working alongside him. As Sennett says:

bodily gestures take the place of words in establishing authority, trust and cooperation. Skills like muscular control are required to make bodily gestures communicate, but gesture matters socially for another reason as well: physical gesture makes social relationships feel informal. (Sennett 2013: 205)

Anthony had learned his skills from childhood: ‘My father did this before me. When I grew up these tools were my toys.’ Participants began by choosing a piece of serpentine stone and were shown which tools to use. They then worked with the stone, allowing a form to emerge from the material. Extracting the sculpture in this way worked well – you didn’t have to draw or to plan, but at the same time there was a sense of learning something new. A participant in the Identity Project described his experience: ‘At the beginning when the stone is not started, you don’t know what it’ll be. You find something inside – look for a shape. During the work you have to look into yourself and be patient.’

Many participants related what they were doing to skills they or their families had been involved in while in their home country. This provided a sense of connection and continuity – it seemed to be a comfort to people, not a source of sadness, and the practical activity appeared to provide a way for people to think about their identity past and present without dwelling on difficult circumstances. As with previous projects the focus on making and the dynamic of working in a group led to the emergence of many stories. Even those who did not wish to actually participate in the stone carving were drawn to the activity as it created a focal point for conversation during the afternoon.

Ingold suggests that making an object is not about ‘form and matter, but between *forces* and *materials*’ (2013: 45). Quoting Deleuze and Guattari (2004), he uses their analogy of a woodsman bringing down an axe on a piece of timber to illustrate the point: the axe follows the grain of the wood to expose all the complexities in pattern and structure that have

evolved during the tree’s growth. An individual’s story is formed in response to the forces of history, politics, migration and time, but like the inner pattern of the tree remains hidden and sometimes inexplicable. The communication established through the act of collaborative making allows people to tell their story and to reveal the form within. To work with materials reveals ‘the consciousness or thought of the matter flow’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 454).



Carved head from ‘Identity’ project, 2006

Sennett observes:

the craft of making physical things provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others. Both the difficulties and the possibilities of making things well apply to making human relationships. Material challenges like working with resistance or managing ambiguity are instructive in understanding the resistances people harbour to one another or the uncertain boundaries between people. (Sennett 2009: 289)

Shared knowledge of making and craftsmanship can create a bond between practitioners, but the focus

on repetition, bodilyness and tactile experience inherent in the act of making may give any individual new ways of accessing personal narrative. There is a quality to discussion that arises from engaged making that is hard to define. Why, as Ingold describes it, does it make a difference if discussion is grounded in practical activity? What does it *feel* like to work with others, to construct a context in which thoughts and stories can be exchanged? As a workshop leader there are inevitably strange moments of disjuncture – you are aware that you are imposing upon people, asking them to tell you their story. There are expectations on all sides and questions of power and agency arise.

The making, though, is the leveller. Once the work begins and process and material become the focus, self-consciousness around these potential imbalances is mostly overcome; sensory values are privileged and this focus on the texture of things allows people to connect to memories and past experiences. ‘Tactile experience ... adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 368). The shifts are imperceptible as they happen, but gradually as people’s hands and bodies are engaged the stories unfold. Sometimes people say very little, but others want to tell their story, reframing it for a new audience. It is often, though, the small and seemingly inconsequential details that linger in the mind. In his book *Bread and Salt* (2013), François Matarasso says that we do not need to have experienced what another has experienced in order to understand and speak of what they have told us:

To suggest otherwise is a dangerous form of essentialism that enshrines authority in a person’s biology or their heritage, rather than in their conduct. ... if one human can have more authority because of who they are, it follows that another can have less. (Matarasso 2013: 14)

The absorption of a task shared with others, with an emphasis on listening, can have a profound effect on those involved; in looking to the space between making and telling, hidden narratives emerge. Although the dynamic created whilst working as a group is of the essence here, the experience of telling through making is ultimately individual. The projects described here gathered together people from many places, each bringing with them an infinite variety of experiences and distinct attitudes. To work with people as a group does not imply homogeneity but

the opposite – to create a dynamic through making and listening allows individuals to tell their story.

This, then, is the moral taught us by Mermoz and his kind. We understand better, because of him, that what constitutes the dignity of a craft is that it creates a fellowship, that it binds men together and fashions for them a common language. For there is but one veritable problem – the problem of human relations. (Saint Exupery 1984: 26)

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