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Why Do We Still Knit?

I am a maker, academic and practice-led researcher. The paper I want to give is as a maker, because it is about my making that I research and it is with an understanding of making that I teach. My making is that I knit. As any knitter knows, you can buy knitwear cheaper and with less effort and thought than if you made it yourself. So why do we still knit? Why is knitting a popular and developing practice?

I say the answer is haptic knowledge.

Haptic knowledge is an understood term in academic circles. As a maker, the way for me to explain my understanding of haptic knowledge is to find a balloon, place a marble inside, blow up the balloon and tie a knot at the end. Then roll the marble around inside the balloon. The understanding of the materials involved, the latex and glass, their relationship to each other and the movement is haptic and comes through touch. This is why I knit. This feeling, this knowledge of things is why I make.

For this paper I want to explain some of the context of my thinking about haptic knowledge, about objects and people, and show you some of the work I have done specifically addressing this topic.

Starting with the context. Three people from areas outside making help to contextualise what I know viscerally from making. Howard Gardener is the author of *Multi-Intelligences*, a book that widens the view of what intelligence is, beyond the logic and linguistics of IQ tests. Through a set of biological and anthropological criteria he has established a multitude of intellects including music, social and kinaesthetic (the knowledge of space and our bodies within space). Proof that art, music, dance and making can engage intellectually. We all have this range of understanding to a greater or lesser degree and they are all important facets in our travels through life. So everyone has a haptic relationship to objects alongside an understanding of music, space, society, etc. There are seven in the book, but more have been added since. Understanding objects is not just internal, it is an element of communication, and communication through objects is important in my work. When I make something I know I'm

communicating effectively when someone wants to take it home with them.

This brings me to Daniel Miller, a professor of material culture. His book on shopping investigates that point when a thing is bought. Looking primarily at food shopping as the most common form of shopping, he describes shopping as an act of love, providing sustenance, comfort and aspirations for ourselves and our loved ones. Jo Turney in her book *Knitting Culture* takes this a step further, describing the making of things for others as strengthening the ties in a relationship and physically building our aspirations. So we have a tactile understanding of the world around us and we use things to describe ourselves and our relationships. As social creatures these object bonds are as important as words and deeds, and words and deeds are often commemorated in objects. A good reason to still make.

So how do I fit these words into my practice?

To start with, some history of my work. I work with materials to understand them and the possibilities in their transformation primarily in knit. My website at stephaniewooster.com shows examples of past knitted and crocheted samples I made in wire, ppte tape, cassette tape, latex, nylon, elastic, plastic and glow-in-the-dark threads. Inspiration for this comes from everywhere. A simple technique of stapled ceramics. The description delicacy and empirical preservation though the use of cotton wool in a specimen jar at the Darwin Centre, London. The sentimental collection of objects on a mantelshelf. How people combine things to create new meaning. I find joy in combining unexpected things. My sketchbooks and drawings are material and technique based. The use of unusual yarns in a textile context is a recurring theme. This is what I do when I make. I am interested in making the fabric and making the object.

My research on the haptics of things started during my MA and has continued through my practice and research. With my MA work I wanted to consciously explore haptic knowledge, not just have it as a methodology in my practice. I started by collecting

fabrics of interest, ones that harmonised and complemented, wool, cotton, paper, card, foam, latex and plastic. The choices were obviously textile with a muted colour scheme. I didn't stick to just knitting, I looked at construction and combination as well as creating knitted fabrics with a strong tactile element. Using a range of yarns and techniques was one aspect, combining fabrics another which introduced a focus on construction. These samples I placed onto a body, as I knew this is where I wanted the pieces to be, building on the relationship between object and person, to touch the thing and to be touched by the thing. Playing with the convention of the worn object really helped to introduce the haptic not only in the surface but the whole and the experience of the thing.

After making larger pieces I then started to wear them. To experience how they felt, how they changed me. I started to look at haptic as not located in the hands but through the whole body. This was an important development that built on the relationship between the object and wearer. My haptic reactions to how it felt, physically and emotionally fed back into the design of the object. Sometimes difficult to see, like a woven band next to knit created a mix of structure and comfort. As an example, a long thin

scarf that reaches the ground could be bound to make you very aware of your stance, and the long ends floating added to an awareness of movement and the space left behind. The final collection combined fabrics, involved a focus on construction and transformation, played with expected modes of adornment. All building an awareness of haptic knowledge, bringing this intelligence to the fore.

As makers, if we acknowledge the haptic in object and activity we can deepen the relationship and meaning between people and objects. You don't throw away things that have strong meaning to you. A stronger haptic bond will promote longevity in ownership and this will support sustainability. A final word from Jo Turney, who said in the recent BBC programme 'Fabric of Britain' that the current rise in the popularity of knitting in this age of virtual work and email living is because the experience of building something real is fulfilling.

This is why we still knit.