

Above Ground

Post-Consumerism and the Designer-Maker

By Christine Roberts



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Introduction

At Making Futures Conference 2015 participants were offered a practice-led presentation in an unconventional format within the sessions titled Lifecycles of Material Worlds. As a creative practitioner in textiles, rather than stand before my audience I gave my presentation in their midst for a non-hierarchical participatory sharing, with an offer to learn a craft skill the end. As a concession to the ubiquitous PowerPoint there were a series of images of my circle drawings on the screen. These drawings were done over the year following my Degree and are an unwinding of the mental and physical tension it created. Using charcoal or pastels on paper I drew the largest circle I could with my left hand; as a right-handed person this has a profound effect especially when done repeatedly in both directions. I continue to draw with my left-hand being especially interested in moment when the drawing materials gravitate back to my right hand.

Above ground in this title means, on the one hand, to be alive, as suggested by the BBC story series in which writers consider themes of age and ageing broadcast in May 2015. On the other hand it also refers to being out in the open, existing, produced and on the surface, relating to honest practices or to materials already available above ground without mining for new resources, with the possible exception advanced landfill mining.

This paper sets out a recollection of the unique event that took place at the conference, followed by my backstory; setting out the contexts and research that supports my work.

Introducing the textile manifestations I reveal that as a resident of Totnes, Devon, a Transition Town, I only brought as much as I could carry on public transport and these considerations are important and come within my circle of concern as well as my sphere of influence. It is important to take personal responsibility for our work and I demonstrate this by not making anything that I cannot physically deal with by myself, this is one of my many self-imposed limitations. Carried in plastic bags from a 99p shop for the charity Barnardo's, I explain that this shop is crucial to my practice, being the penultimate revenue extraction from donated stock for the charity, before being passed onto the recyclers for sorting to re-sell in Eastern Europe and parts of Africa or to India for shredding and processing into cheap blankets. Restricting my acquisition of materials from this shop exclusively is another self-imposed restriction designed to test my creativity.

From each bag I offer to pass my pieces among participants and invite them to hold and manipulate them by turning them inside-out, for instance. I think it is important to allow those who hold these objects to feel free to verbalise whatever reaction they have, rather than be contextualized in advance.

Only facts: such as, explaining that they are made using only pre-owned, mass produced knitwear and low-tech hand tools: scissors and latch-hook in the process of creation, and that towards the end of the session there will be an opportunity to engage in a close examination of materials selection and how this impacts on the outcome; the process is examined with a sharing of handwork techniques using traditional tools.



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The size and shape of the pieces is deliberate and simple, kept intrinsically related to humanity by the familiar sphere, usually being about the size of our heads, they are easy to hold and their spherical shape relates to our planet, our biology and psychologically makes us feel whole. Whilst the haptic experience occurs a conversation arises

and it is possible to slowly introduce the concept of the amount of resources and human energy used to bring these materials into existence; in the manufacturing; retail; wearing; waste collection and that these remain embedded in the fibres. They are seductive, fun to look at, comforting in the hands as the momentous weight of the global textile production and waste problems are revealed, which are said to be second only to the oil industry. Luckily the work of Tatiana Iliopoulou presented immediately before me contained plenty of crucial information about textile waste so I didn't have to repeat this, just focussing on the knitted textiles. At this point, whatever the participants are feeling, my textiles reveal themselves as a very personal response to this overwhelming and depressing predicament. I am trying to make something shapely out of the mess.

My practice is materials led in the first instance and secondly by the making process that uses no other resources except time, thus I re-use the textiles rather than recycle or upcycle, both of which require the addition of further resources. It is a slow process that utilises the products of very fast, prolific machines, created in haste, which I painstakingly destroy. Each cut, unravelling and knot honours the people who have laboured to create garments for the fast fashion market, some of which are worn only twice before being discarded. A time for reflection on the number of people who are involved in getting these garments from the raw materials to our wardrobes. Of the lives tediously lived, both making and wearing, the works reveal a narrative of pointless consumption; a history personal to the original object that is imbued and informed by the global fast-fashion as described by Andrew Brooks in his book [Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes](#) (2015).

In the room we are made aware of the role of dust in these objects, we have just added our own discarded skin cells and traces of body oils to the works, perhaps we want to hold our breath at this moment. A realization that in a finite world even the air we breathe has passed through another before us. This aspect is intrinsic to my presentation. How many designers, makers and craftspeople consciously make anything that is just another elaborate way to collect dust? Dust figures largely in the lives of the workers in textiles from hazardous chemicals of manufacturing to recycling.

From the charity shop volunteer clothes sorters to those finally processing them into rags for re-spinning. Panipat in India is a major centre for processing the clothes we discard, the people employed there rarely benefit from the health and safety rules operating in the West, so dust is a significant cause of ill health. Pyramids of clothes arrive in unlabelled bales at the docks where they are slashed before being imported, as a law first introduced by Gandhi forbids the import of wearable garments into India. These are sent by road to Panipat where hundreds of mills process the rags into cheap blankets, many of which are sold to aid agencies for disaster relief. We pause at the irony of this.

Still on the subject of our bodies, we look at the surface of the forms I have made, the inside and the outside. These contrasting surfaces are created by the latch hook knots: the carrier fabric and the knot form a relatively smooth resistant and limited surface area, whereas the cut strands of the knots form a thick pile, like enormous velvet, increasing the surface area exponentially. The spheres are made to be reversible so the cut-pile side can either fill the inside to make a ball or on the outside as a hollow pompom. However we feel when we touch them we can also be aware that inside our bodies such surfaces exist: namely the villi of our intestines and the rods and cones of our retina. Perhaps they evoke the many similar manifestations; fronds, tentacles and fur found on planet Earth.

Even as they are made globally, my materials are sourced locally; as it is important for us to take responsibility for the waste we produce in our communities. Fast fashion is so cheap it seems designed for us to throw away when we are finished with it. Yet there is no such thing as 'away' on a finite planet. An extraordinary amount is still going to landfill where garments made of pure synthetic fibres will still be found in exactly the same condition many hundreds of years in the future. Those of mixed fibres are very difficult to recycle successfully on an industrial scale, so, although polycottons save resources by being easier to launder, we are now finding particles of plastic released from the bio-degradable cotton in the sea – and even salt.

As a post-consumer I believe that the drivers for this will become obsolete, although perhaps not in my life-time. There is growing recognition that owning more 'stuff' cannot bring the lasting contentment that an experience can.

As designer makers our role is crucial, as we share our work, offer participation maybe, rather than encapsulate it into a product, show that post-consumerism is not a barren place, but rich with opportunities to create emotional attachments and lasting memories. Alternative economic models already exist in diverse sectors, it is possible for my practice is to survive ethically, and continue to challenge the hegemony of market forces and global capitalism that have become normal in my lifetime. In 50 years 'to shop' has become equated with 'to be', therefore post-consumers have no use above ground, except perhaps to raise awareness; Making Futures is a platform for this. The concepts of dissociating work from wages, parallel currencies such as the Totnes Pound, time banks, open source, cooperatives and skill sharing are all possibilities, which are beginning to spread, and post-capitalism is already on the horizon.

I used the opportunity to ask how it might be possible to bring my work to a wider audience. The consensus was that a gallery setting is not ideal since an element of participation is required, yet there is a growing movement for another way to engage with audiences in a haptic experience. Museums and galleries can appeal to audiences with this relational or installation art when it is exhibited where it can be touched, unlike exhibits such as Sarah Lucas' Nud. Taking my work into communities, creating opportunities for the growing public interest in stepping off the 'hedonic treadmill' and engage in an experience with materials, get ideas, make something by hand as the longer we touch something the more emotionally invested we become in it, so that lasts forever, rather than the five week average.

We move to the skill share part of the presentation, sorting through my haul from the Plymouth Barnardo's shop that morning. We look at labels, fibre content, country of manufacture and garment construction. I explain that my intention is not to cherry pick so that I can create beautiful, elegant work, but to offer some redemption to the discarded or dismissed, and to manifest the depression of a post-consumer conscience. Globally produced knitwear is intercepted at a crisis point in its lifecycle, not for aesthetics but to re-route it from the linear 'cowboy' economic model (take, make, use, discard) into the circular spaceship economic model (take, make, use, recycle).

Using scissors we cut the knitting into strips creating short lengths of yarn each with a unique crinkle formed by the stitches, we collect it into a bundle and using a latch hook make a symmetrical knot into another knitted fabric. I suggest that it is a post-apocalyptic life-skill with which we can create our own version of fur.

In 2012-13 as an undergraduate researching sustainable practice, a photo of [Buddy Balls](#) (1972) an installation by American fiber artist Clare Zeisler (1903–1991) fascinated me. She began her practice as a weaver and then moved off loom to create self-supporting knotted textile sculptures. The monochrome photo I saw does not give much away- [Buddy Balls](#) look like giant pom-poms, it was quite inspirational. I love pompoms, as do many others, in many cultures. For me the appeal is the sphere, the velvet pile of the surface and its relationship to light. My start was to make the biggest ones I could. To save money, my conscience and test my creativity further by using only recycled materials, using (slow) hand tools and no additional power (climate change/peak oil). After many experiments I abandoned the traditional pompom construction which is made by tying many strands together at the centre which reminded me of fascism, and gravity always makes the big ones droop.

Instead I knotted shorter strands onto a knitted ball, much like cut pile carpets are made, and stuffed them. As I wanted to make big ones like Zeisler's the issue of the filling became problematic: they became heavy, took up too much room in storage and were hard for me to transport. Inflatable balls were a good solution; at about this time I found the accession details for [Buddy Balls](#) into Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which revealed that Zeisler had used Styrofoam balls inside hers. More importantly for my practice I found the hollow inside fascinating and that the stretchy knitting allowed the pompoms to be turned outside in like a soft geode. Haptic immersion with the crinkled yarn from pre-owned knitwear made it impossible to use any other type of yarn, the once were shapes of the garments embodied in each piece. Cutting and knotting the yarn completely alters its aspect, from fabric to fur and gives it a new lease of life. The colours of randomly selected fashion knits cannot clash when put together – like a pentatonic scale in music.

As an artist I use a surface, brush and colour in an alternative configuration and seek to make my works intrinsically useless; apart perhaps from their potential role in the 'tea cosy (on the head) phenomenon'. As a craftsperson I use eons old techniques and tools, yet I am ultimately a designer, inasmuch as my creative challenge is to make the most out of what is presented to me within my sustainable practice and self-imposed limitations. What are they for? If I ask you this question in return, we can start a conversation, which could lead to some awareness of recycling, consumerism, ethics, values, and start to create some new stories to challenge the all-pervasive one called 'progress'.

The many books I read on these subjects are listed in the references section, as they are so full of information I will not repeat it all here. As a consequence of reading I became increasingly emotionally invested in one particular sphere – the Earth. Facts about climate change and peak oil are depressing, as a sufferer of dysthymia they drove me to the verge of catatonia; the quantity of textile material available can certainly bring on choice paralysis and as it is possible to become immobilised by guilt and shame in the evidence of our exploitations. We suffer from 'Post Petroleum Stress Disorder', the symptoms of which are listed in the [Transition Town Handbook](#) (Hopkins 2008) and include out breaks of nihilism and a sense of bewilderment, being saved only by practical work as outlined in [The Power of Just Doing Stuff](#) (Hopkins 2013). The writings contained a lot of 'should-ing' & 'need to' which can sap creative forces. After information, creativity is our greatest asset to deal with our predicament; those stories told with wit and wisdom serve us best. It is possible to overthink these global issues; rather than meditation I prefer magical thinking (Hutson. 2012) putting my locus of control outside myself, often I use luck, chance, and synchronicity in my work. I sense the interconnectedness between all life forms and substances - the universe becomes a web woven with invisible threads as I see meaningful patterns and associations where others don't. The downside is that when things don't work out, I am slower to recalibrate my fatalism and move on.

Inspired by the affordance of a post-apocalyptic world as seen in the Mad Max movies, which imagines a world where fossil fuels are rare, the concept of peak oil outlines this scenario, suggesting that we have already used more than half the fossil fuels left in the Earth. What remains becomes less and less cost effective to extract, and the growing realisation that climate change is related to using them. The Transition movement is about bringing communities together as we have to power down. They often offer a chance to use Joanna Macy's book and training [Active Hope](#) (Macy. 2012) to tackle the mess we're in, even if we often consider it too depressing to think about. She uses the term 'The Great Unraveling' to explain the disasters past and present of the 'Business as Usual' scenario and how to counteract the prevalence of individualism by communicating with each other in an alternative format. To go beyond the limitations of language, yet without too much mysticism, I suggest that texture can say much more. I create 'cut/ velvet-pile' surfaces which increase surface area six hundred fold: all for interaction, inextricably joined to and inseparable from, it's opposite, yet as quickly changeable as our mood.

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