*Emma Shercliff*

# *A Poetics of Waste: evaluating time and effort spent sewing*

## Introduction

Popular conceptions of waste related to the production of objects in contemporary Britain concern the use, or misuse, of resources, time and effort. The economics of productive gain mean us to measure and quantify these resources. Much can be said about the excessive use of materials and energy resources, but my interest here specifically addresses the input of time and effort.

The assumption is generally held that time is a measurable commodity. Like money, we are encouraged to spend it wisely. As an accountable resource it is meted out with the understanding that gain is acquired in exchange: we expend time and effort and are consequently rewarded. Increased productivity and higher rewards are achieved by streamlining and maximising the expenditure of time and effort. Speed and efficiency are, on the whole, highly prized and generously rewarded. To take one's time is considered inefficient, even extravagant or profligate, and is discouraged.

This paper will discuss the use of time in relation to craft processes, and will outline the nature of the gains acquired in exchange by the maker.

Making things is the production of material objects. According to Thorstein Veblen 'throughout the history of human culture, the great body of the people have almost everywhere, in their everyday life, been at work to turn things to human use' (Veblen 1898). This purposeful action he terms 'the instinct of workmanship' (Veblen 1964), an activity, he argues, endorsed by humankind: 'what meets unreserved approval is such conduct as furthers human life on the whole' (Veblen 1898). Traditionally the functionality associated with the crafts pertains to this purposeful production of necessary things.

But how could we consider the making of unnecessary things? Our world is already too full. 'Why make art or craft in such a full world?' (Harrod 2005). Many of the material objects we make are superfluous to our essential requirements. They do not at first glance serve a purpose. Is this not wasteful? The key factor behind this assumption is the link to functionality: the purposeful production of necessary things.

Sewing commonly falls into this category. It has the history of a functional craft whereby the relevant skills are employed primarily to make requisite goods. The necessity of the object defines its value. Its making has therefore been purposeful. But if it is deemed unnecessary, what purpose does its making serve?

Side-stepping a discussion of the merits or otherwise of craft as art, I will explore a contemporary purposefulness embedded in the process of making unnecessary things: patchwork quilts.

As a method of making warm bedcovers for the family patchwork quilting is in origin purposeful production. However, nowadays this is no longer so, as the majority of people choose the convenience of duvets, making the quilt functionally redundant: 'quilts are no longer necessary household goods' (Stalp 2007: 97).

Patchwork quilting has two salient points of interest in relation to the notion of wasting time and the production of things:
• it is a laborious and time-consuming activity, the products of which are unnecessary.
• the production of patchwork quilts and its strong association with domesticity pertains to a hierarchy of purposeful labour that has conventionally held this sort of activity in low esteem.

To return to Veblen, he argues that labour is purposeful; that human beings have a natural proclivity for workmanship and are generally appreciative of accomplishment and achievement, yet find effort wasted in uselessness 'distasteful':

> 'They like to see others spend their life to some purpose, and they like to reflect that their own life is of some use. All men have this quasi-aesthetic sense of economic or industrial merit, and to this sense of economic merit futility and inefficiency are distasteful. In its positive expression it is an impulse or instinct of workmanship; negatively it expresses itself in a deprecation of waste.' (Veblen 1898)

He also reveals in his argument the categorization of a hierarchy of purposeful labour:

> '… there comes a distinction between employments. The tradition of prowess, as the virtue par excellence, gains in scope and consistency until prowess comes near being recognized as the sole virtue. Those employments alone are then worthy and reputable which involve the exercise of this virtue. Other employments, in which men are occupied with tamely shaping inert materials to human use, become unworthy and end with becoming debasing… In the barbarian scheme of life the peaceable, industrial employments are women's work… In this way industrial occupations fall under a polite odium and are apprehended to be substantially ignoble.' (Veblen 1898)

Labour in the domestic realm falls into a category of work that is classed in these terms as base and distasteful. Essentially menial tasks, they are relegated to this base level as they do not further the progress of humankind, but are concerned with maintaining the balance of a stable foundation. The work is invisible, only noticed perhaps when, or if, it is not done. Typically, a cyclical rhythm establishes itself in the domestic sphere, whereby the work is done, undone and re-done, leaving behind very little trace of the effort expended.

In her essay Women's Time, Julia Kristeva introduces her concept of 'cyclical time' and 'monumental time' as distinct from 'linear time'. Linear time she presents as sequential and directional; the time of history, progress and language – the 'symbolic order'. Cyclical time, associated with the recurring cycles of nature and biological rhythms, and monumental time, in the sense of the infinite and eternity, in relation to female subjectivity, are helpful concepts here to situate the pertinence of such repetitive invisible work and its significance in maintaining stability.

The cyclical nature of invisible domestic work patterns sets a rhythm that is replicated in the making processes of patchwork quilting, evident in the repetitive manual work of piecing together fragments of cloth with tiny invisible stitches. Making patchwork quilts – unnecessary household goods – is an occupation undertaken for the most part within a domestic setting. In Veblen's terms it is futile, inefficient, unworthy and base. It is quite possible therefore to conceive it as time and effort 'expended without useful effect' [1].

When discussing function in relation to craft, it is perhaps not the function of the object but rather the function of the making process itself we need to think about. The purpose and usefulness, i.e. the function, lies in the process.

What is the purposefulness of a time-consuming process in the making of an unnecessary object?

On closer inspection, the craft of patchwork quilting enables 'other work' to go on alongside the material production of the unnecessary object. Of a social and relational nature, this 'other work' has significance for the maker as an individual and for the individual as part of a community that convincingly argues for the craft process itself to be considered as purposeful production.

## *Marking time: leaving a trace*

*I'm a what have you achieved today person and this is a wonderful way of achieving. Because I can see what I have done with my day.* [2]

Stitching, as with other forms of mark-making, is a personalised and creative method of leaving a visible trace of one's existence and achievements. Alfred Gell writes of drawings that they are a 'frozen residue left by this manual ballet' (Gell 1998: 95). Extrapolating from this, other forms of mark-making, including stitching, are similarly a freeze-framing and recording of an instance of human activity. Stitches mark, and thereby record, the passing of time leaving a physical and visible document testifying to the presence and achievement of the maker.

Located in a domestic realm of otherwise cyclical, non-progressive, invisible work, the craft of patchwork quilting offers the maker a method of visibly marking the passing of time that otherwise goes unrecorded, balancing Kristeva's cyclical time with an inscription into linear time.

For the women that make them, these quilts serve as a narrative of events lived through time. Sociologist Marybeth C. Stalp in her recent study Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life (2007) describes completed quilts as 'life bookmarks' acting as receptors and emitters of both personal and collective memories of events and experiences:

> 'Quilts mark time for women by book-marking life events, and maintaining memories symbolically. Quilters process, store, and retrieve in quilts things they want to remember about their everyday lives, whether or not anyone else believes they are important. Such memories include who the quilt was made for, the occasion it represents, and the people with whom these women shared time during the quilting process. Yet, quilts are also life bookmarks of non-obvious things, such as what was occurring in women's lives at the time the quilts were made.' (Stalp 2007: 111-112)

One such example of a quilt as 'life bookmark' was described to me by Joy, a quilter participant:
*It was not a very good phase in my marriage because my husband gave me ties and the ties he gave I used to exorcise my feelings. It's very messy. It didn't come out well at all.*

## *Me time: the pleasure of making*

*In a way, it's not as necessary to me now as when I had the small children because… I felt desperately trapped with these children who I could never sort of get away from and it was a way of having something for myself.*

Stalp writes of women quilters that 'they pursue it voluntarily and intensely for individual pleasure. Women also quilt because it helps them to relax from paid work, unpaid household work, and other familial carework duties' (Stalp 2007: 96). Choosing to expend effort and 'waste' time in this way suggests a preoccupation with the quality of time spent. The quilter participants in my study are not in the habit of recording the amount of time spent on a piece of work, but they remember and recount 'the intention of the quilt and the artistic processes surrounding it, and they detail what they were experiencing in their personal lives at the time that the quilt was constructed' (Stalp 2007: 114).

Quilt-making absorbs immeasurable emotional investments, and equally rewards the maker. Penney Burton notes in her study of North American textile artists that 'these artists choose this type of work because they receive some sort of physical or emotional benefit while creating with repetitive and accumulative textile techniques, which then results in their desire to continue with these artistic practices' (Penney Burton 2007: 147). Making is pleasurable. The doing of it for its own sake has value. This attitude is briefly and succinctly exemplified by Ruth's response to my question 'how long did it take you to do that?':
*I don't know. It didn't matter – I was enjoying it so much.*

American scholar Ellen Dissanayake suggests that this pleasure we get from making is 'hardwired into human nature' (Dissanayake 1995b: 41), and that making might be considered as a human behavioural trait that 'satisfies an intrinsic and deep human imperative' (Dissanayake 1995a: 34):
• the experience of making is pleasurable; it 'feels good'. We are positively inclined to do it and it contributes to our well-being.
• a great deal of time and effort is spent on what might appear to be gratuitous pastimes taking away energy from more directly useful activities.

She uses the term 'making special' in place of making art or craft. A verb it indicates that the significance for us as human beings is in the doing of it; in the process: 'Making special emphasizes the idea that the arts… have been physically, sensuously, and emotionally satisfying and pleasurable to humans' (Dissanayake 1995a: 59). 'Making special' is inherently gratifying. Playing with pattern, shape, colour and materials is pleasing perceptually, emotionally and cognitively. Art-making that exploits this pleasure has become attached to valuable behavioural traits and is associated with desirable results:

> 'we make something special because doing so gives us a way of expressing its positive emotional valence for us, and the ways in which we accomplish this specialness not only reflect but give unusual or special gratification and pleasure.' (Dissanayake 1995a: 54)

Aside from the satisfaction of creating something that did not exist before, there is pleasure in handling materials. These sensations trigger emotional responses (Metcalf 1997). This is particularly pertinent for a textile craft as the pliability of cloth; the subtlety and variety of textures and weights of fabrics provide a limitless playground of sensory stimulants [3]. For good reason this behavioural trait is built in to us biologically. The enjoyment of handling stimulates the activity of play noticeable in small babies. Thus predisposed to enjoy handling, we are born to make things with our hands, 'to be tool users and makers'

(Dissanayake 1995b: 41). We therefore continue to make our world and to make it special.

Joy emphatically stresses the pleasure she derives from making patchwork:
*I love to work with the fabric. I think that the texture that I handle is immediate. It is so sensual, isn't it? You touch – I love that, actually. I love to cut the fabric as well.*

## *Slow time: re-collecting the self*

*And the fun part is… the hand stitching. It's very slow and it's very satisfying.*

Stitching is slow work, endlessly repeating the same gesture of piercing the threaded needle through the cloth and pulling it out again. Whilst appearing to be a mindless and achingly dull occupation, close observation reveals that on the contrary, there is a productive 'mindfulness' to the act of engaging in these repetitive, accumulative gestures typical of stitchcrafts.

Dissanayake argues in defence of invisible repetitive labour and craftwork:

> 'Let us not forget that nature itself is cyclical, or repetitive, and human work in the world, concerned with the daily round and the cycles of the seasons, has a rhythm and recurrence that for millennia have given satisfaction to many. Such work engenders a contemplative state with access to remote parts of our mind, unknown to those who dash continually after novel experience.' (Dissanayake 1995b: 45)

Stitching is not a craft that allows for instantly gratifying results: progress is slow. However, it is recognised and appreciated by those that practise it as offering moments of calm to reflect. Its rhythmic, repetitive nature encourages a contemplative state of mind providing time for introspection. Piecing together bits and scraps of discarded fabrics into a new whole illustrates metaphorically the piecing together of the dispersed self. These moments of calm afforded by the execution of repetitive manual work generate conditions that draw together mind and body.

William Morris was a passionate believer in the redeeming qualities of good craftsmanship. One of the earliest supporters of the idea that there is pleasure to be found in making things, he acknowledges in The Lesser Arts (1877) - without our contemporary knowledge of scientific progress - a sensitivity to mind-body synchronisation and the intrinsic physical and emotional benefits:

> 'nothing can be a work of art which is not useful; that is to say, which does not minister to the body when well under command of the mind, or which does not amuse, soothe, or elevate the mind in a healthy state.' (Morris 1877: 174)

Although she discusses knitting, design historian Jo Turney writes of the self-healing virtues of taking up a seemingly benign craft activity and how a contemplative practice such as this has helped individuals 'by emphasizing spiritual awareness and a sense of the creative self as a means of self-help, personal empowerment and self-healing' (Turney 2007: 249). This could equally be said of patchwork quilting. Crucially, the experience of doing it is central to its effectiveness:

> 'Experience is initiated and consequently marked by the ability to create and sustain a state of stillness and calm, which is described as "mindfulness". Like meditation, mindfulness is far more directional and pro-active and encourages the meditative state to focus on progressive activity, combining both body and

> mind. Mindfulness exists in the moment, it has no past or future, and can be understood as the expression and experience of being.' (Turney 2007: 251)

Fine Cell Work is a charitable organisation that teaches prison inmates embroidery, patchwork and quilting skills. Manned in large part by volunteers, it operates in twenty-two HM Prisons. Collections of needlepoint tapestry cushions and bed quilts are made by hand by the inmates. Their work is sold enabling them to build up a capital of savings to draw on once their term is finished. Embedded within this very practical purpose are the psychological benefits of practising the contemplative craft of stitching. Purposefully productive, it is also a means to repair and restore dignity: 'I find the marking, cutting, piecing and quilting are in themselves calming and therapeutic,' says one inmate.

## *Time in: total absorption*

*If I get really involved in something then I do quite a lot. I disappear upstairs, and you know, to hang with everything else, and get on with it.*

This total absorption with the task in hand, which is commonly experienced in rhythmically repetitive tasks like stitching, typically generates a heightened sense of self-awareness and a losing track of time that is described by American psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi in his research into states of optimal experience as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow is understood to be a form of pleasure that arises from total absorption, a merging of the self with the work, and is explained as an experience worth having for its own sake independently from any other type of reward.

Participants in my study have described to me occasions of total absorption in their sewing work matching that of Csikszentmihalyi's state of flow.
Mary recounts:
*I have been known to be so engrossed in something up here that on one occasion I missed lunch. I don't quite know how that happened. I was listening to the radio and something came on at 2 o'clock and I thought - 2 o'clock? It can't be 2 o'clock. But it was 2 o'clock and I usually stop at one o'clock. At the one o'clock news I stop and have a sandwich or something and I'd completely missed it. And on another occasion I was working and it was 6 o'clock. I heard the pips and I went downstairs and I hadn't even cleared up from lunch or breakfast. There was dirty things in the kitchen, and I hadn't thought about supper.*

## *Time out: belonging to a group*

*One or two people have lost their husbands or they have got ill husbands who restrict their lives and so on…. It also replaces counselling in a way.*

The restorative self-healing benefits of patchwork quilting are amplified when a stitcher belongs to a group. The quilters participating in my study all belong to a quilting group that meets regularly once or twice a month in one or other of their homes. Many textile crafts, especially quilting, are highly social activities and lend themselves to the building and consolidating of an informal support network. Creating the opportunity to get out and go to the meetings offers a distraction from personal problems. Belonging to a sewing group facilitates access to emotional support in times of difficulty.

Discussing the reasons why she was attached to and appreciated the sewing group she belonged to, Ruth explains:
*The other reason I had this feeling for it is that when my son was six he was very ill… and they were such a support… this illness went on for several years to a greater or lesser degree…. And it was just wonderful to have that group there… and forget about the problem for a little while.*

Conversation - the exchange of news and advice, friendly distraction and reassurance - provides a continuous soundtrack to the group meetings. It is as essential an ingredient as the stitching work. Although meeting to chat is arguably constructive in itself [4], doing something 'useful', or 'worthwhile' at the same time gives permission for it to take place. The sewing provides a cover that loosely staves off the accustomed derision directed towards gossip [5]. Participants admitted that although sewing was the official reason for meeting, they spent most of the time chatting.

According to linguist Jennifer Coates the function of gossip is to create and maintain an informal and mutually supportive networking facility. The exchange of information is essential but not, she argues, the chief goal, which is to reinforce communality and 'the maintenance of good social relationships' (Coates 1988: 98). It is not necessarily the subject of conversation that is of interest. Members of the group appreciate being part of the network and able to access the support system. Similarly it is not making something for swift and profitable accomplishment that attracts them. The aims of the meetings are twofold, and they jostle for position of primary importance: to do a bit more stitching, and provide a mutually beneficial social encounter. In my observational notes from one visit I remark:
*The stitching work advances at a slow pace. It cannot be described as intense production. Instead there is a fluid interaction of bodies, gestures, tales, suggestions, advice, and somehow a few more beads are applied, background stitching filled, tacking stitches removed. The work gets done almost in spite of itself. If efficient production were the goal, the groups fail on every count. But when asked, the members are extremely proud of their achievements.*

Just as the stitching articulates pieces and fragments of cloth into a larger unity, the 'idle chatter' binds together the participants, articulating the group members as a community.

## *Taking time: taking care*

*My job is nicely made. That's a real compliment to me because I get pleasure from 'nicely made'.*

Taking time to ensure that the work is well done matters. Investing care in the execution of the work is important to the quilters. As Veblen says, 'much of the functional content of the instinct of workmanship is a proclivity for taking pains' (Veblen 1964: 33). Arguably taking pains is more than just 'the functional content of the instinct of workmanship'. The emotional content also has influence. The satisfaction of doing a job well is a source of pleasurable pride for the maker (Metcalf 1997).

William Morris' horror at the plight of the craftsman undertaking simple reducible tasks much as a machine would motivated him to promote the idea that satisfaction and pleasure in work can be found in the good workmanship of well-designed artefacts:

> 'with the pleasure of working soundly and without haste at making goods that we could be proud of – much the greatest pleasure of the three is that last, such a pleasure as, I think, the world has none like it.' (Morris 1877: 173)

Peter Dormer, addressing craft as a 'practical philosophy', advocates the importance of learning and practising a skill in order to do things well. A search for excellence in one's work, practised as a disciplined learning of the rules, acquiring knowledge through doing, is, according to him, an activity of self-exploration: 'the craftsperson's determination to work excellently is an exercise in self-clarification' (Dormer 1997: 219). In support of this, Mary explains her search for satisfaction and consequent motivation to launch into a new project:
*I made it with the intention of improving my accuracy. I wanted to make a quilt with a proper ¼" seam so that when I put my nine patches together every one of these joins was absolutely perfect. Well, of course, it didn't work out. It wasn't absolutely perfect. But it was an improvement. I found that very, very satisfying. And I enjoyed making it. And I thought, okay, I got that cracked. I can now do a ¼" seam – I can get things together, so I can do things more complicated now.*

Returning to Dissanayake, she explains that 'discipline and carefulness are virtues that have sustained humans for millennia… making special meant making with care, that is, taking pains and doing one's best… indicating the value we attach to a thing' (Dissanayake 1995b: 45). If the taking pains indicates the value we attach to a thing, and this thing, in the case of a patchwork quilt, has no function per se, what is the nature of the value attached to it?

Quilters often make quilts as gifts for family and friends. The taking pains in the work reflects an investment of care that suggests an emotional value whereby the work represents the receiver of the gift and/or the nature of the relationship with that person. Dissanayake's term 'making special' 'denotes a positive factor of care and concern' (Dissanayake 1995a: 53). Gifting quilts is a way of securing and maintaining emotional ties, and reflects the value of connectedness running through family and friendship networks, as Susanne Küchler describes: '… sewing in action, paving new connections along which people and ideas move back and forth' (Küchler 2005: 183).

Conversely, not having the time, or not being able to take the time necessary for the job to be well done is expressed by quilters as a negative or unpleasant experience:
*I didn't do that as carefully as I might have done, I must have been running out of time.*
and: *I didn't have too much time. I really had to rush, it was horrible.*

## *Snatching time*

In answer to my question 'how much time do you set aside for doing your patchwork and quilting?' one quilter's response was:
*It isn't a case of setting aside – it's a case of grabbing it while you can.*

'Women incorporate quilting into everyday activities, they steal time away to quilt' (Stalp 2007: 99). The quilters participating in my study are in the majority retired or nearing retirement with relatively busy lifestyles juggling part-time work, volunteering duties and caring for other family members. Like Stalp, I have found that they 'make quilting fit into the rest of their lives' (Stalp 2007: 98), snatching short periods of time when they can, sometimes even for just half an hour. Other demands on their time will normally take priority and sewing is slotted in around them. Mary explains:

*There are certain conditions that need to apply before I can sew, which is there can't be anything else that demands my time and attention…. If the house is a mess I cannot work. I need order and the order doesn't just have to be physical order, it has to be order in my head. If I think I need to make bread, I need to write to my friends and I would like to do some sewing, the need things have to come first…. I have to clear away the needy things before I can think 'and now I can please myself'.*

The nature of patchwork, especially when hand-sewn, lends itself to being executed in small separate sections before joining the whole together. Clean and dry work, it can easily be packed up in a bag and bits taken out to do in situations outside the home. Some quilters will travel with their work, sewing whilst in airport waiting lounges, in the aeroplane, on long car journeys or whilst in hospital, making use of time when otherwise incapacitated or restricted. The design of certain quilt projects such as the traditional American block quilts, English hexagons, and the more contemporary 'quilt as you go' projects are popular as they enable these ambitiously large quilts to be broken down into portable smaller units.

## *Fractured time*

*It took me about five years to make, on and off.*

> 'Piecing is the art form which best reflects the fragmentation of women's time, the dailiness and repetitiveness of women's work. As Lucy Lippard observes, "the mixing and matching of fragments is the product of an interrupted life…. What is popularly seen as 'repetitive', 'obsessive', and 'compulsive' in women's art is in fact a necessity for those whose time comes in small squares (Lippard 1983: 32)".' (Showalter 1986: 228)

It is worth expanding here on the relationship between the use of time and the design of the craft process. We see how quilters snatch time to accommodate their making fitting it in and around other demands. The flexible and fractured nature of the craft makes this possible. Making patchwork quilts consists of a series of different tasks that can be broken down into singular activities, resulting in advantageous propositions of time use for the makers:

• the work can be easily interrupted: picked up and put down again without disrupting the continuous quality of the work. It will not dry out, fall apart, burn or rot. It can even be safely forgotten in a cupboard, pulled out and taken up again years later. Ruth explains how she started on her sewing projects:

*Probably when I had my first child because I'd been trying to do oil painting and it didn't fit in very well with bringing up small children because you know it is difficult to just put it away and get it out again.*

• despite the inherent repetition and the sometimes painfully slow progress of a piece of work, tedium is offset by variety. Different tasks can be undertaken independently from one another, and in parallel to each other, without compromising the whole. This diversity of tasks provides opportunity for the maker to progress steadily through the work avoiding boredom. The variety also offers a series of different satisfactions that respond to different bodily or mental stimuli:

*Every aspect of it is fascinating and that's why I've always got more projects than just one on the go…. Sometimes I want to cut these things out, and sometimes I want to piece little pieces, and sometimes I want to do some appliqué, or to sit here with work in my hand and sew, and sometimes I want to quilt. So I've got to have various projects in various stages.*

Reflecting on why she chooses to work in this manner, Mary says:
*It's got to be some sort of stimulus, hasn't it?…. I don't know what the stimulus is for it. But just that it is there and I know how to respond to it. I know that something says – I think you should do a bit of appliqué – so I do…. There are days when I need to put things together, or days when I need to appliqué, or days when I need to cut or days when I have to tidy up this fabric.*
She acknowledges the satisfaction she feels at responding to the stimuli, that they seem to be varied and not always requiring the same response. The multifaceted and fragmented process of sewing patchwork quilts permits the satisfaction of a plurality of physical and mental requirements. Interestingly, she hints that this gratification is physically felt drawing a parallel with a biologically engineered need echoing Dissanayake's claim that our impulse to make is biologically 'hardwired':
*It's like being hungry. I'm hungry, I'm going to eat something. That was nice. I don't feel hungry anymore. It's like that, isn't it?.... That's what it is.*

## Conclusion

When viewing a patchwork quilt, its arresting, visually complex patterns waylay consideration for the many layers of invisible work that have produced it. This paper has set out to peel back these layers and reveal the nature of the invisible effort and rewards, and demonstrate how the immeasurable quality of time spent takes precedence over speed and efficiency, producing rich and multiple outcomes. Valued highly by the quilters as contributing to their well-being, the purposefulness of the craft is firmly located in the process of making, and goes some way towards offering an answer to Tanya Harrod's question 'why make art or craft in such a full world?' (Harrod 2005).

Functionality has been an unfashionable topic in craft circles of recent years. Suggesting a shift of emphasis within the debate to the function of craft processes rather than the function of the craft object might be more relevant and of greater interest today as an expanded field of craft practice increasingly addresses issues of community cohesion, the therapeutic benefits of mind/body synchronisation and the self-actualizing positive gains afforded by learning and practising manual skills. [6]

Less needy of material objects now, we are nevertheless needy human beings. Perhaps the more time we 'waste' on making things, the better we provide for our social, emotional, physical and biological needs: justifiably wanted and useable remainders, or by-products, of spending time and effort making otherwise unnecessary things.

The quilters I have been observing and working with embrace a mode of practice that effectively straddles and intertwines the human 'instinct for workmanship' and purposeful action with the less conveniently measurable roles of listening, feeling and caring, thus ensuring, for the individual and for the community, the good maintenance of human relational networks and social support systems.

In the context of a discussion on crafts and sustainability, it is pertinent to note that it is the working methods employed by these practitioners that successfully negotiate time and these relational networks. Situated therefore in a position that counters the proposition that 'environmental and sustainability discourses might be leading to new formulations, or re-articulations, of craft practices' (Plymouth College of Art 2009), is this not an example of craft practice that might contribute to sustainability discourses.

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## Notes

[1] From the OED definition of 'waste'.
[2] Extracts in italics are from transcripts of interviews held with quilter participants. Names have been changed.
[3] A fuller discussion of the significance of touch and the stimulation provoked by handling materials would require a separate study, and in this instance falls outside the remit of this paper.
[4] Linguist Jennifer Coates (1988) explores in depth the structure and purpose of women's conversation in her study Gossip revisited: language in all-female groups.
[5] The word 'gossip' originates from 'godsibb', an Old English word denoting the relationship between a godchild and godparent. A 'gossiping' in Early Modern England was a christening feast; a gathering of mainly female friends and family to congratulate and bless the mother and newborn baby. The use of 'gossip' as it is now commonly understood to mean: 'idle talk; trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle' (OED) - dates from 1811. Since classical times women gathering to gossip has been at best disapproved of, and at worst feared. Held to be a symptom of idleness and time-wasting, an unbecoming tendency to tell tales, or evidence of a malicious streak, women's chatter has constantly been ridiculed and openly discouraged. For a greater cultural analysis of gossip see Marina Warner (1994) From the Beast to the Blonde: on fairy tales and their tellers.
[6] Examples include: Craftspace, Fine Cell Work, the work of artist Françoise Dupré, amongst others.

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