

Objects in Purgatory and Hardware Hopes

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Synopsis of presentation and discussion

Paradox: overconsumption and the emotional repository of home

I am endlessly fascinated by the way we depend on the objects we surround ourselves with. We live in our homes surrounded by familiar possessions, which serve a vital role as repositories for our memories and identities. It is well understood that we consume too much, and in a way that isn't sustainable, and that we need widespread cultural change. Yet it doesn't seem so easy to catalyse this change: our emotional selves are bound up with our things; we depend on them.

Critical thinking about emotionally sustainable design

There are many developing concepts and theories concerning designing products for emotional sustainability, exploring methods for encouraging us to cherish our possessions and keep them in the long term. I find some of this debate inspirational, but also struggle with the plausibility of influencing emotional durability through design, as the circumstances influencing emotional attachment to a product can be very idiosyncratic. Is it truly possible to design for emotional durability?

I have embarked on a series of creative projects that explore how the emotional resonance of a possession relates to its design and material properties. Unpicking our emotional dependence on possessions raises some interesting questions. How does emotion flow into artifacts and out again? Are some artefacts or materials resistant to emotion? Can the design of artifacts influence attachment or keeping behaviours?

Making plays a vital role in these research projects. I am a maker, and to explore and interrogate these themes I have had to learn how to reemploy making. Being a maker in a sustainable aware society has for me meant using making as a vehicle for critical thinking and audience engagement.

The research

This paper discusses three events: two participatory exhibitions and a workshop. These events have involved jewellery production, making, exhibition, interview and story collecting, and have been explored through academic publications. My research examines an underexplored area: artifacts that are associated with mixed feelings, whose meaning isn't stable or vital, to get at the questions I outlined.



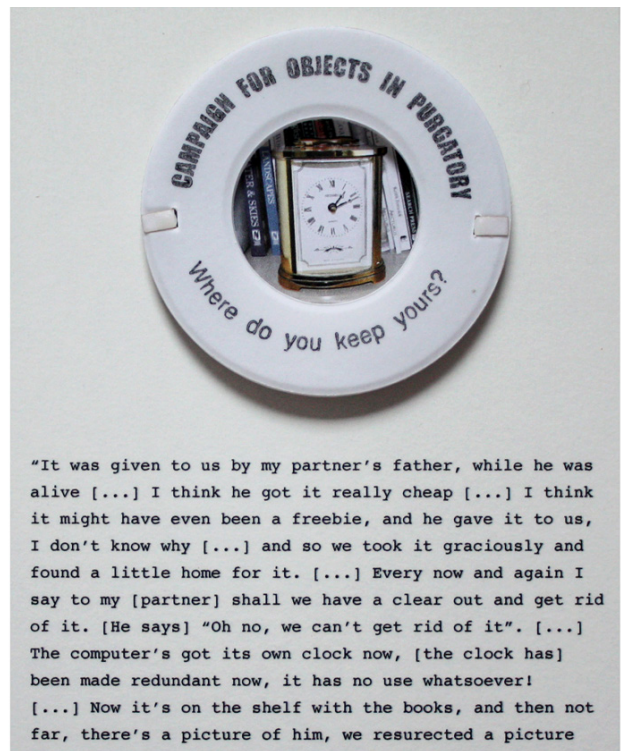
Objects in Purgatory participatory exhibition, Sheffield, 2011

Objects in Purgatory explores people's experiences of gifts they have received and don't like, but feel compelled to keep. I invited visitors to contribute the story of their uncherished gift along with a drawing of it, a photograph, or a real object. The contributions were added to the exhibition, and in return I gave the participant a brooch designed and made by myself, featuring an object in Purgatory contributed by another participant. I received over seventy contributions, some of which can be viewed on the Objects in Purgatory website.



The drawing depicts an object in Purgatory, and was submitted to and displayed in the exhibition. It is a green sparkly hairclip, described by the contributor as 'big, heavy' and 'gorey'. It was given to the recipient by her best friend, who misjudged her taste. The recipient keeps it at the bottom of a box in the bathroom. I find it interesting that it was not just in a box, but the bottom of a box, buried so that an encounter was unlikely. It was put out of sight, an uncomfortable reminder of a misrepresentation of self.

Copies of the submitted objects in Purgatory were made and inserted into circular brooches (see photograph above). The brooches framed the objects and gave them new visibility, new meaning and value, and a platform on the body. Participants could choose a brooch to take away with them, and it was interesting to see how this exchange encouraged reflection and empathy, as participants became aware of others' dilemmas. They took away the brooch, and with it the retelling of the object's story. The brooch exchange and its contribution to practice based research are discussed in articles in the Studies in Material Thinking vol. 13 (2015), and in the Research Through Design 2013 proceedings.



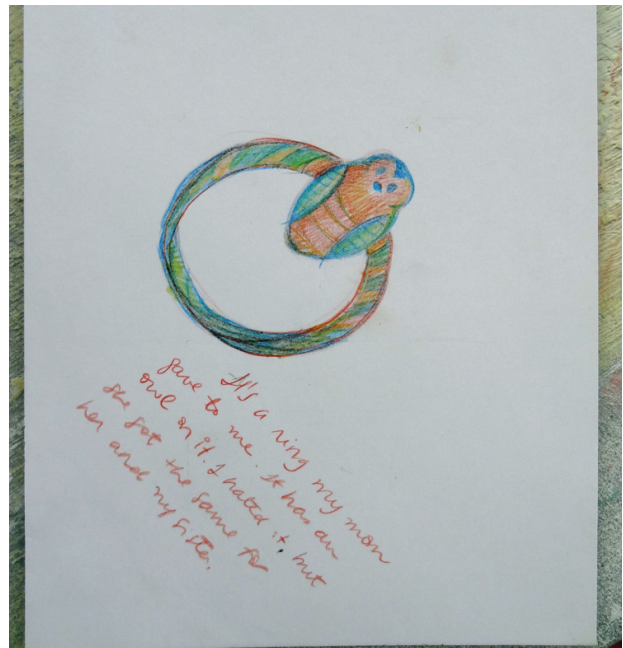
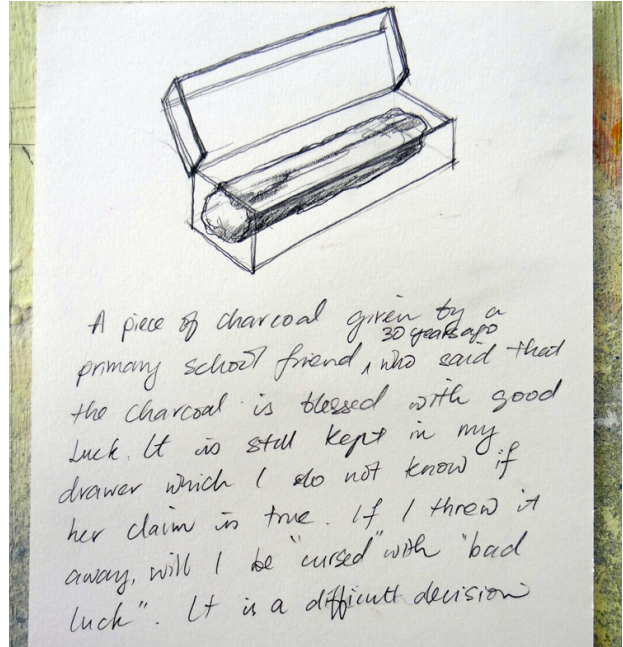
The most interesting stories collected showed how the tension and emotion embodied in the object in purgatory changed over time; feelings transitioned into new ones, objects were assigned new roles and new chances at being successful possessions.

For example, the carriage clock pictured in the brooch (previous page) has undergone subtle transformations in value. The participant believes it to be of little material value and probably acquired by the giver as a free gift and passed on. The clock was initially kept simply because it was felt appropriate to seem grateful. It was brought to the attention of the recipients every now and again as it was the subject of a commonplace ritual; changing the batteries. However it was eventually superseded in its function by a nearby computer and the batteries were no longer changed. Following the death of the giver the bond between person and object strengthened, and it became harder to contemplate getting rid of it. Ultimately its status has been elevated and its location referred to as 'a bit of a shrine', as a photograph of the giver has been placed nearby. The story demonstrates how the object's location, material, and form, all contribute to the object's meaning.



EAD framing workshop, Gothenburg 2013

I extended my exploration of framing, making and exchange by leading a participant workshop, in the 'power to the people' strand of the European Academy of Design conference 2013, hosted by Otto von Busch. I invited participants to think of and draw an uncherished gift. Working in pairs, I invited their partners to listen to the story of the gift, and frame their partner's picture in a way that drew attention to important parts of the story, or helped them to see it differently.





It was interesting how participants used materials to express meaning. Materials were used to hide and reveal objects and emotions. For example the drawing of a ring, left, is surrounded by a clear acetate box to describe its protected, sacrosanct status. By making frames for each other, participants reflected empathetically on each other's dilemmas and 'reframed' them. Participant feedback suggested that what was powerful was the **transition** in the way they thought about the object. Some rediscovered the value or meaning in the object, some realised they needed to move on from it.

Hardware Hopes participatory exhibition 2014, Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester

I initiated the participatory exhibition Hardware Hopes to discover what different sorts of emotional tensions arose in digital possessions. I was interested to find out how people relate to the material devices, rather than software or interface. It was about looking for material triggers that spark an emotional connection or rejection. As with Objects in Purgatory, I found different intensities of attachment and ambivalence, confrontation and unconscious acceptance.



Some examples arose where participants had made the device more personal, or less ubiquitous, through small acts of making. For example, one participant wore her unusual 'stupid phone' around her neck on a strip of exuberant coloured fabric. She appropriated the phone as jewellery, seeing personality in its unusual aesthetic and functions.



These projects have led onto new research mapping the emotional lifetime of possessions as a series of transitions. The transience of emotion needs to be better understood by designers. My research suggests that these transitions can be influenced to affect positive change, and that design can be instrumental. My projects engage an audience in debate, through exhibition, display and making, and help to articulate the desires and dilemmas associated with possession and accumulation.

An computer literate laptop user continually upgraded his laptop (pictured above) and added stickers to its surface, as a way of overcoming the anonymity of the mass produced device, expressing his identity, and actively prolonging his relationship with it.

Reflections

I've identified several ways which making can catalyse our relationships with possessions:

- My own making: making an exhibition: making brooches and making a form of exchange
- Facilitating other people's making as a self reflective dialogue
- Identifying making in participants relationships to their possessions– small-scale instances of making that have a significant effect on their relationship.

Through this I have also identified examples of emotional transitions in participants' relationships with their possessions:

- Emotional transitions influenced by the location of the artefact, its material and form (e.g. carriage clock from [Objects in Purgatory](#) participatory exhibition)
- An emotional transition in a person's relationship with their possession, triggered by the empathetic exchange of making and stories (Participatory framing workshop)
- Small acts of making enabling participants to take ownership of their digital devices ([Hardware Hopes](#) participatory exhibition)