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Bellacouche

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Introduction

Designer makers are physically more engaged with material than industrial designers who increasingly work remotely on computers, seemingly unconcerned with the sources for the raw materials, their processing, and what may happen to products at the end of their useful life. Actual hands-on physical engagement with manipulating material brings a closer knowledge, respect and a sense of awe with that material and has led, in our case, to a desire to be knowledgeable about its source. Questions arise of where it comes from, how it is grown, in the case of wool for instance the quality of husbandry. If organic standards are met so much the better. This underpins my work and that of Anne Belgrave, and our partnership that is Bellacouche.

This paper seeks to present an overview of the thinking behind our business. There are many aspects to our holistic approach, all of equal importance to the cohesive whole, and all of which we are striving towards, and have yet to fully achieve.

Treading Lightly

In 1999 an invitation to take part in an exhibition called Treading Lightly gave rise to my current pathway. The exhibition sought to illustrate ethical and environmental practice within craft discipline; how can we, as designer makers, tread lightly on the Earth?

The cycle of life and how we deal with death came to mind. Whether this is connected with how we dispose of our own bodies at the end of life, or how we deal with a plastic bag when we no longer can use it; both are imperative and in essence connected. We standardise and homogenize, and this is reflected in the way we handle death – as soon as death occurs we zip it up and make it disappear out of sight, in 72 per cent of cases by cremation (in the UK cremation accounts for 11 per cent of the annual dioxins emitted – National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory), or by incineration or landfill in the case of our commodity waste. Denial of the sanctity of death – its necessity for renewal is costing us a spiritual connection with the Earth, an attitude that governs our generalized disregard for the natural order. We have become disconnected with how Nature works; the cycle of life.

Until the invention of plastic substances made from oil, mankind had taken for granted the fact that everything born of the Earth, all matter, inevitably returns to the Earth through a process of biodegradation. The invention of non-biodegradable materials did not call into question the issue of what happens to products at the end of their useful life. Plastic does not conform to the natural laws of return and we are now witness to a horrendous pollution problem that affects the air, the ocean and the land. For decades it seemed mankind turned a blind eye to this ubiquity.

We are only just beginning to understand the extent of damage caused by the uncontrolled, unparalleled and unexamined over-production of plastics.

In the quest to produce a material that transports and stores effectively, we have unwittingly created a range of products made from a substance that is totally at odds with the environment. And having conquered the land, plastics are now taking over the planet's greatest oceans. The UN estimates that 70% of all seaborne plastic will eventually sink, sequestered to the depths of oceans where a toxic graveyard will fester. (Dumas – 2007: 35)

It was this reality of 'out of sight, out of mind' that I wanted to address by grappling in my own mind the concept of what happens to the physical body after death.

Dust to Dust

A British law in 1666 decreed that the dead MUST be buried in wool, not hemp or other fibre, thus ensuring the continued market for wool. Then, as now, the wool industry was in decline in the UK.

I designed a shroud using this as my point of reference. Could this have a real and contemporary application, addressing a cultural need to review how we dispose of the dead, as well as investigating the conundrum of ethical and sustainable sourcing of materials for this life event?

The exhibition piece led to an invitation to visit a family where a death was imminent. I was commissioned to make a shroud, using personal (to the patient) references, such as the inclusion of his dog's hair, an image of his helicopter, and for the blackest fleece to be used, reflecting his atheism. I found myself initiated in a life process I had never contemplated being involved in and found it to be deeply cathartic and meaningful. The willingness of the family to be intimately involved with their impending loss and to meet it with dignity by organising the funeral event themselves with minimal and sensitive guidance from a local undertaker made me aware of how distanced we have become as a society from this process. In the main, large corporately owned undertakers offer an inflexible package and most of the decisions are already made on behalf of the clients. This is spiritually undermining.

Grief and our deeper understanding of the process of decay can only truly be addressed if mourners are engaged with the whole process of death. What happened to the skill of the laying out of the dead prevalent in all traditional communities? The commercialisation of death has disconnected us with this process as it is carried out by specialists. We do not see it or face it. How many of us have felt something incomplete following a conventional and contemporary funeral? How many of us have actually come into contact with a dead body? Ask a cross section of British society and most people will answer the question with 'no, I have never seen a dead body', even though a relative close to them may have died. Joseph Beuys said 'People today no longer have a sense of the essence of things, be It the meaning of life or the meaning of relationships in the world'. (Borer 1980: 15)

We have a phobic horror and natural disgust of personal waste, and because we are no longer obliged to look it in the face, our phobias are given the liberty to develop.

The gaps in our deeper knowledge and understanding of the fundamental workings of the natural world are widened. I suggest that an awakening to the laws of nature may only take place if every individual can become more involved with the life process of death and decay.

Likewise, every individual should become more accountable, through education, of what happens to their 'waste'. It can no longer be left to councils to take the problem away. It is indeed perilous to neglect the laws of nature.

Resources are extracted, shaped into products, sold, and eventually disposed of in a "grave" of some kind, usually a landfill or incinerator... ..Everything [else] is designed for you to throw away when you are finished with it. But where is "away"? Of course, "away" does not really exist. "Away" has gone away. Cradle to grave designs dominate modern manufacturing. According to some accounts more than 90% of materials extracted to make durable goods in the US become waste almost immediately. (McDonough & Braungart – 2002: 27)

The cradle to grave paradigm has replaced the 'cradle to cradle' paradigm.

Landfill is a modern term and this is a place where everything can now go at the end of its useful life. As with dead bodies, our excess can be zipped up in black plastic and popped out by the front door and forgotten. Magically, it disappears by the next morning.

Bellacouche – out of the box

Anne Belgrave had been thinking and working along similar lines to my own and over the years had made shrouds and artefacts symbolizing ceremony connected with death and the funerary process. Our discussions led us to form a partnership leading to the creation of 'Bellacouche' (meaning beautiful resting place) in 2005.

Not surprisingly, the 'natural burial movement' is one of the fastest growing areas within the green movement. There are many issues to address; people are looking for more meaningful, personalized ceremonies, whether religious or otherwise. Conventional coffins are often made of synthetic materials that may have a detrimental environmental effect - veneers over composite boards containing toxic glues, plastic handles and ornaments. Most wooden coffins are constructed from timber coming from unsustainable sources such as prime tropical rainforest.

Woodland or natural burial is becoming more popular among people with a preference for a simple, natural way of doing things, with a desire to make as little impact on the environment as possible.

An increasing number of farmers with a need to diversify are giving over land for natural burial. Either, this can be turned gradually into woodland, as native trees are markers for each burial; or the land can continue to support animal grazing, as meadow burial.

Our aim was to invent and design a new type of shroud that could be effectively used in these situations. As designer makers we wanted to make something with intrinsic beauty and appeal that could provide a platform for more meaningful and personal ceremony. Our criteria being:

- A new aesthetic approach to holding the body securely
- Local, organic sourcing and processing whenever possible
- Fair trading
- To support farmers with particular rare breeds to encourage gene diversity
- To encourage a closer link between farmers, processors and designers to

achieve a better understanding of the problems of farming on the one hand, and the versatility of wool on the other. Most farmers are ignorant of the potential of wool and have become disconnected from the possible end view of the raw material growing on their land

- To sustain a more consistent financial return than we have been used to as 'one-off' designer makers. We believe it is possible to make a commercially successful and instantly available product without compromising ethics, integrity, aesthetics and good craftsmanship. This in turn will add to the local economy by using local materials and services.

Some fundamental and practical problems in the design needed addressing; moving away from the ugly finality of the, admittedly practical, box (coffin) presented the issue of how to convey the body to the graveside safely and securely; a shroud, on the other hand, is traditionally just a sheet wound around the body and this gives an impression of vulnerability and crudity – historically this was how paupers were buried and this perception still exists.

The Leafshroud concept

We experimented with different ideas and concepts, looking at different ways boxes are constructed, how to make cocoons or envelopes. We commissioned biers for carrying the shroud and discussed sustainable sourcing of wood with other makers, with a view to continual commissioning. The various avenues led to the more practical concept of making a simple, integrated construction hidden in layers of felt, supported by six strong handles. A leaf symbolizes the cycle of life, a metaphor we naturally adopted for our final design. By making the felt 'leaves' into layers, each with a specific function; encasing the bier; enfolding and securing the shroud wrapper; finishing with a simple felt leaf outline with naturally dyed decorative details; we created an aesthetic that looks soft, comforting and approachable on the outside, whilst providing security and functionality inside. The Leafshroud is not just a shroud, nor is it a rectangular box coffin; it provides a much-needed new approach for encouraging burial in a more natural and environmentally sensitive way.

Scaling Up

The question of how could we make enough felt consistently to supply the possible demand also occurred? There are two ways of making felt; one is the wet hand method which is physically very demanding especially when required on a big scale; the other is the mechanical dry needle method used for industrial felt. We decided the latter was the practical option. If this was to be a serious and sustained business from the outset then hand made felt was not an option. For the first time we needed to consider straddling the 'handmade' look with an industrialized process.

However, finding a company that would be willing and able to work with us on this (to them) small scale needed some research. With the aid of Arts grants my initial searches in Yorkshire mills proved inconclusive. However, the mention of a carpet underlay needle felting machine at Buckfastleigh in Devon (a mere 15 miles away) led to a 'phone call and discussions with the production manager and later the managing director. Their willingness to conduct trials resulted in some samples being made. Wool is carried through the machine on a polypropylene scrim, and finished with recycled rubber latex backing. Obviously this was not our preferred option. We also rejected an alternative hessian scrim as giving an industrial feel to the felt. Although there was initially some reluctance the technicians

finally agreed to trial a 100per cent pure wool felt using our own sourced wool. We wanted the felt to be thick and strong and this presented some technical difficulties that caused needles to shatter. Thousands of pounds worth of damage to the needle beds were done on our behalf. In our own, hand made practises, we might curse if our hand held needles break; this was on a grand scale and caused us consternation. We were struck by the enormity of scale; however, this was but a slight disruption to a mill of this size.

Over the following 3 years more trials were conducted, each one causing an interruption to the mills normal flow of tonnage. Slowly over these years, a working relationship and understanding of the extremes of scale have led to the production of a superbly satisfying felt using our own sourced wool.

The mill, part of Axminster carpets, has been fulfilling carpeting orders from large multinational organisations; a business built up since 1755. The question that often posed itself to my mind was what is in this for them? Why were they willing to conduct trials for such a small-scale quirky operation?

My query was in some part answered in late August 2008 during the production of our felt, when the news came of the bankruptcy of one of the big airline companies. The mill was in the process of fulfilling an order for this very same company.

Since our initial trials at the mill, five other customers have been welcomed at Buckfastleigh who are interested in using regional wool, with a variety of products being made, from baby mattresses and wool duvets, to insulation for meat boxes. New machinery has been set up to cope with the variable qualities required. Soil Association accreditation has been acquired. A complex system for recycling and utilizing slurry from the wool cleaning process to produce energy has been set up. It is my understanding from discussions with the managing directors that there is a need and real willingness in the organisation to work with, and enable development of more local and smaller scale businesses concerned with the use of local wool. It seems that climate change and recession have combined to cause a directional shift in types of customers in the last 2 years, a scenario only for dreamers a few years ago. Mindful of the collapse of many of the great Northern textile mills, Buckfastleigh is eager to engage with more local and diverse businesses, regardless of scale.

Local Wool, Local Processing

Our workshop is constantly fielding calls from farmers and smallholders asking us to take their wool. Ideally, we would welcome our local farmers' offers of dealing direct so that we can be accountable for our sources, describe methods of rearing, quantify transportation and trade fairly.

Conformity and legality however, demands that the annual clip be taken to a Wool Marketing Board designated sorting house (of which there are two in Devon and Cornwall). There, the wool is graded, baled and sent to Bradford for auction.

From Bradford it may travel further afield or even overseas for processing and manufacture. For a raw material that begins with a relatively small carbon footprint the marketing paradigm embedded in the industry imposes the aforementioned ubiquity of homogenization and in most cases, unnecessary mileage. The laws and strictures make it necessary for farmers to register every sheep grazing their land and to submit the subsequent fleeces for the Wool Board marketing system. Strictly speaking, designers and farmers are not

allowed to initiate enterprises that highlight local distinctiveness and celebrate regionality by developing products from specific flocks.

Diversification is a byword for farmers; offering and managing land for natural burial and then using the same land to support flocks of sheep would be one of a raft of plans which could be incorporated into the sustainable management of a farm. Sheep are supremely sustainable farm animals given the right conditions. Potentially they can provide not just the meat, but milk and of course wool. The current market system encourages a narrow margin of economy. Many farmers simply burn or bury their annual clip as the price paid by the Wool Marketing Board does not even cover the cost of shearing. A Dartmoor farmer I recently interviewed (August 2009) stated that the sale of wool and meat does not financially sustain her family. The only reason for keeping her flock is because it is supported by grants to maintain a grazing regime on the moor. This is a fractured notion of the meaning of sustainability. A globalized economy disperses finance and is a major cause for instability, encouraging an un-sustainable worldview. In order to encourage sustainable practises systems should be put in place that encourage divers and localised economies. If bureaucratic constraints were lifted the national flock would become more resilient to economic fluctuations. A key towards the pathway of achieving sustainability is to link farmers with designers and makers of end products.

Positioning Wool in the Global Textile Context

The global fashion and textile industry as a whole is vast, employing millions of people worldwide. It has a massive environmental impact and is a vast subject needing careful review. It is not simply a matter of saying if it's natural fibre it must be environmentally ok and if it's synthetic it isn't! The making of sustainable textiles is full of complexity. Huge advances have been made in the industrial production of manmade fabrics, using previously un-thought of sources of raw materials which could potentially be sustainable. Knowledge, research, and educating the public are essential for any progress to be made. It is not my suggestion that we all wear a hair (wool) shirt, but rather to celebrate the versatility of wool as part of the raft of solutions to our textile needs. Rather than wool being an annual cost to the farm (shearing) it should be regarded as a valuable and natural resource the United Kingdom excels in producing. We have more than 60 breeds of sheep in Britain alone, most of them originally bred for the diverse quality of their wool rather than their meat. Returning to a more local and regional approach to making textiles encourages 'economic resilience, social engagement and cultural and aesthetic diversity'. (Fletcher, 2008, 140)

By sourcing our wool locally we can support mixed agricultural systems that work with Nature in a sustainable way. This means using natural on-farm fertilizer, biodiversity to keep the balance between pest and predator through polyculture and a mixed and integrated farming ethic. Reliance on oil on such farms is reduced to a minimum.

A system that turns agri**culture** into agri**business**, turning land into a monocultural desert, causing soil erosion and a rapid decline in nutrients that necessitates increased application of artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides, is becoming increasingly undesirable.

Organic agriculture has the potential to reverse those trends, and reduce carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane, greenhouse gasses (GHG) that contribute to global warming [1]. Organic agriculture could double soil carbon sequestration in livestock based systems and decrease GHG by 48-60 percent. For example, organic systems have decreased the use of fossil

fuels by between 10-70 percent in Europe, and 29-37 percent in the USA.

On organic farms, increasing soil organic matter and microbial biomass is a fundamental principle to support agro-ecosystem stability. Mandatory crop rotation, the use of seeds and breeds that are adapted to local conditions, and the regeneration of functional biodiversity all contribute further to ecological balance. Burcher – 2007: <http://www.i-sis.org.uk/FAOPromotesOrganicAgriculture.php>

The connection between food and farming is of course obvious, but the connection between farming and textiles – or indeed other commodities – is seldom acknowledged. In a holistic and sustainable outlook everything is connected to farming, land management and the environment.

Organic farming is concerned with an holistic approach to animal welfare and the environment in its broadest sense and strives to minimize pollution in any form by avoiding the use of artificial chemicals wherever possible – artificial herbicides and fungicides are prohibited as are organo-phosphate dips and Genetically Modified Organisms. These principles have been extended to cover the processing and production of textiles and the Soil Association has worked diligently to develop Standards for Organic Textile Production that is ethically sound and realistically achievable in practice. <http://organicwoollies.co.uk>

Wool can, and is, easily grown in the UK within a sustainable system. History has proved this. It is ideally suited for exploitation for contemporary use, for clothing, insulation, temporary housing (yurts), footwear, soft furnishings and natural burial. We also have a tradition of growing hemp and flax (linen) and potentially we could return to these traditions, given the systems and expertise to process and manufacture the products. This would make a useful contribution to our textile needs and help to reduce transportation; it would create jobs and a sense of regional difference and culture.

Big Hand Little Hand

Over the past twenty years I have been making felt in schools through a scheme run by the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, teaching children about the beauty and simplicity of using wool to create expressive two- and three-dimensional pieces. I have become increasingly aware of the children's (and often the adults too) ignorance of basic textile terminology that I took for granted as a child; words such as fleece, fibre, spinning, yarn, loom, warp and weft. I have to explain the connection between wool and sheep in some cases, and the fact that wool is an annual renewable crop harvested in the summer and does not entail the wholesale slaughter of the nations flock. The true meaning of the word 'fleece' has been appropriated by an industry driven by the production of cheap, mass produced synthetic garments to keep humans warm. It's original meaning is largely forgotten in our move away from this unique and undervalued fibre. The disconnection with what a farm can produce and our needs for food and shelter has been recently highlighted by our celebrated iconic chef, Jamie Oliver, in a quest to improve school dinners by sourcing food locally from farms and awakening the public to the basic skills of turning raw ingredients into enjoyable meals.

The learned skill of turning a raw material into useful and beautiful garments and artefacts teaches children knowledge and understanding on many different levels; it develops

concentration and a sense of wellbeing, eye/hand co-ordination, it encourages creativity through the unusual manipulation of coloured fibres and the application of water and friction to make felt happen. It is primeval. Its immediacy encourages enquiry and a desire to take the investigation further. Children, who previously thought of themselves as un-artistic, discover that other ways of 'drawing' using different materials can give them a new view of themselves. The value of making art with children cannot be overstated.

We look at the garments we are wearing and read the labels inside; similar to parents reading the labels on food packaging to understand what they are feeding their children, I am introducing the idea for the clothes we wear. What are they made of? Where does the raw material come from? I try to create a sense of wonder at how did this tea shirt happen! Is it woven or knitted; and what is the difference? Who made it? How much did they get paid? How far has it travelled?

Whether it's a food dish, carving a spoon or knitting a scarf, encouraging children to learn basic skills of making things and to question what the material sources are and where they come from, is essential in a drive towards sustainability. There is no one solution.

The great thing about the dilemma we're in is that we get to re-imagine every single thing we do. There isn't a single thing that doesn't require a complete remake. There are two ways of looking at that. One is: Oh my gosh, what a big burden. The other way, which I prefer, is: What a great time to be born! What a great time to be alive! Because this generation gets to essentially completely change this world. Hawken – 2007: 32.

We need to encourage future designers – the children in schools now – to make the connections between material and source, object and purpose and they can only do that by learning to make things; by manipulating and connecting with material, fashioning objects and feeling a sense of joyful satisfaction.

My work over the last 10 years has been dominated by the deep connections between artefact and material; making something meaningful that will spiritually connect people with the Earth, the raw material and it's locality, the need for ceremony and respect for the cycle of life.

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