Collectively making thinking spaces using drawing and stitching

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Introduction

Discussions about craft education inevitably necessitate investigation into processes of acquiring embodied knowledge. By extension, this leads to explorations of what this embodied knowledge enables practitioners to do or to know, and its relevance to particular contexts. This paper will discuss and compare examples of collective making and drawing for textiles – specifically hand-stitching and mark-making – that draw attention to ways of knowing that question the emphasis on individuality currently prized in arts education. These kinds of shared making experiences could open an alternative view which favours a mutually informed sense of multiplicity.

As a starting point, I present findings from my doctoral research, which examined the contemporary relevance of hand-stitching skills in social contexts. I then discuss examples of new research workshops that begin to explore some of these ideas in an educational setting, also providing an opportunity to compare the material processes of hand-stitching and mark-making.

In the context of an increasingly networked world, where collaboration and interdisciplinary practices emerge as the norm, I want to suggest that increased opportunities for collective making practices in craft and design education may help to enhance the important human dimension within sustainable craft and design practice more widely. My research leads me to investigate further what making practices can tell of networks as a concept or metaphor, and of networking as an activity.

Starting point: articulating skilful hand-stitching

My PhD research grew out of my prior involvement in community art projects facilitating collective textile making activities. My experience had been that the practical knowledge of hand-stitching I shared with other participants enabled us to know more than the technical skills of the craft, but that this type of knowledge was not articulated through conventional forms of instruction like speech, text or demonstration.

Focusing on the dynamic relationship between practical skill, the body and its proximity to tools, materials and other people during actual experiences of making, the PhD explored the correlation between the nature of embodied knowledge acquired and practiced through the rhythms and patterns of skilled hand-stitching, and the crafting of mutuality and cooperation acquired and practiced through participation in collective making (Shercliff 2015). The research took its direction from the principle that knowledge of the material world and the relationships we make in it and with it is understood foremost through manipulation and active engagement; that this kind of knowledge is not handed down through texts but emerges from experience, and that theoretical understanding follows (Gray and Burnett 2007).

Certain aspects of group stitching pertain to traditions of gathering informally to share knowledge through simultaneous talk and practical activity that is in itself a form of tacitly embodied knowledge. As with other oral traditions, like singing for instance, embodied knowledge of the practice involves recognizing the patterns of the whole craft and understanding the ways in which they interconnect. This includes its relationship to language as well as sensing the necessary movements and adjustments of the body required of the tools and materials, alongside patterns of interaction between individuals, particular attitudes and behaviours. I argue that these different components are inseparable from the practical skill; they are learnt and practiced as a whole process, which typically can only be known through direct participation. Rudolf Arnheim writes:

Propositional language, which consists of linear chains of standardized units, has come about as a product of the intellect; but while language suits the needs of the intellect perfectly, it has a desperate time dealing with field processes, with images, with physical and social constellations. (Arnheim 1986: 20-21)

My research explores the possibility of studying the tacit knowledge of a handcraft in order to understand acquisition of other types of embodied knowledge specifically concerning 'physical and social constellations'. To this end, one of the aims was to reveal ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group can be constructed through their crafting skills. As a participant amongst a group of embroiderers I had observed how participants were supported by, and helped to maintain, the group's collective goals both as a social entity and as embroiderers. The stitching activity in fact makes more than the sum of its parts. Embroideries are produced but the analogy of thread passing through the surface of the cloth in all its different arrangements also refers to the joining, attaching and articulating networks of relational exchange that are created through the stitching activity and in so doing structure an implicit understanding of these modes of interaction. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 3). Accordingly, experiences can be understood through the structures of learnt and practiced body movements and gestures as well as language; actions, like words, can carry a symbolic transfer of meaning.

I therefore propose that the craft of hand-stitching is an example of a type of embodied knowledge that can inform an individual's ability to understand and practice a certain form of social interaction, and that this knowledge is implicit in the rhythms and patterns of stitching gestures. Furthermore, a skilled maker is able to tacitly manipulate their level of interaction through the type of stitching task undertaken. By subtly articulating the different individuals in this way, the collective stitching practice engenders a certain kind of group performance. As with a seam, these articulations, when skilfully performed, adjust the tension of the 'thread' to ease and ensure a smooth fit. There is 'give' between the individual component parts that allows for flexibility and constant adjustment between the group members. Being part of a group like this attends to the enmeshed surface relations between individuals where they perform what Richard Sennett (2012) describes as the skilled process of cooperation as a form of embodied knowledge.

Undertaking this research has allowed me to define a new context for my stitching practice as a 'person-oriented approach' (Freeman 1997) that prioritizes processes of making as sites of knowledge generation. The impact of this approach has, for me, opened up possibilities to use hand-stitching, and other making or drawing activities, as reflective methods of enquiry, particularly in group settings, as a way to access thoughts, expressions, opinions and memories of experiences that perhaps remain invisible or difficult to articulate through more conventional methods of data gathering such as questionnaires or interviews. I envisage what I do as less a maker of things and more a maker of experiences, which in turn leads me to question more closely what I am looking at and for, especially during workshop activities where the aim is not to produce or create a product, but to explore and experience sensations and ideas.

Current research: pilot drawing workshops

This has brought me to a recent research project that, in its pilot stage, examines some of the issues raised in my doctoral research to see if there are elements transferable to a different context. I continue to be interested in the relationships between crafting and social interaction, and this time seek to:

- question whether the rhythms, patterns and motifs created through drawing – specifically mark-making – can also implicitly generate an embodied knowledge of mutuality or cooperation within a group.

- as with the hand-stitching, examine what sort of manipulation of, or interaction with, the social structure these skills might enable.

- explore to what purpose this might be put within a formal educational setting.

Over a period of four months I organized a series of pilot workshops with student participants from the BA (Hons) Textiles course at the Arts University Bournemouth, where I teach. Experimenting with different formats, methods and delivery, hand-stitching workshops were integrated into the level 5 curriculum, whereas the mark-making workshops invited level 4 students to volunteer their participation.

I discuss the level 4 mark-making workshops here. These were extra-curricula activities and took place with small groups of students in studios on campus. In a similar way to the collective stitching experiences, they were designed to cultivate a relatively intimate and reflective environment conducive to conversation (Gauntlett 2007; Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd 2015). Contrary to the more usual goal oriented activities, the aim for these workshops was to create reflective making experiences drawing on the inherent qualities of the drawing processes, such as rhythmic repetition and pattern making, in order to engineer time and space in which to recon¬sider entrenched habits and for shared discussion of fundamental topics related to textile practices.

Drawing for textiles more generally aims to capture visual information that can be transformed into surface pattern. The activity of mark-making in particular, as a certain type of drawing, was chosen because it involves continuous repetitive gestures with tools and media that leave marks valued for the quality of line or surface texture. Removing the need to produce representative or symbolic imagery, and without consideration of scale or perspective, mark-making allows participants to concentrate on the rhythms and patterns of the gestures as they fill space on the paper and immerse themselves in the process. Materials and tools made available were familiar to them from their studio work and they had all been introduced to mark-making through taught studio sessions earlier in the year.

Figure 1. Collective mark-making with students at the Arts University Bournemouth (2015).

During the workshops participants worked collectively on one large piece of paper (see Figure 1). They were asked to undertake four tasks, each task lasted approximately 10 minutes:

1. Fill an area of the paper with marks using a tool and media of your choice.

2. Move round and repeat the exercise in an adjacent space.

3. Move to a different area of the paper and attempt to copy a neighbour's marks.

4. Move to your neighbour's place and work on top of their drawing.

They were asked to undertake specific timed tasks in the hope that the prolonged repetition of simple mark-making gestures would generate sufficient visual material and provoke insightful and surprising responses to the work created. Breaks between tasks were planned for participants to view each other's work, and for conversation prompted by questions about the tasks. The workshops were documented using video and photography; the ensuing conversations were captured on a digital voice recorder.

Findings so far: similarities and differences

In a similar manner to hand-stitching, the mechanical repetition of hand using tool on paper, draws attention to the uniqueness of each individual. However, working collectively on the same piece of paper forces individuals to have an awareness of the other participants and interact, even if silently. Whilst I was attracted to the drawing taking shape, I found my attention was drawn to this silent awareness of and interaction with the others making itself evident through their gestures, behaviours and attitudes, and how their drawing activity both influenced and reflected these social qualities of the experience. Reflection through shared discussion after the event drew their attention to this; the unique characteristics of the marks enabled us to identify and then discuss how the participants experienced the drawing tasks.

From my position as workshop leader and observer I noticed that through their drawing participants were simultaneously asserting themselves as individuals and finding ways to negotiate fitting in to the wider group. This type of interaction differed from my previous experiences with stitching groups where the stitching practice subtly nurtures the development of a particular type of socialization that tends to prize the maintenance of the group over individual performances; the group identity absorbs the individual rather than cultivating a sense of difference.

I have grouped my observations into four emerging themes, and where relevant compare the mark-making characteristics with those of hand-stitching to draw attention to converging attributes or to highlight differences.

Repetition

As mentioned above, mark-making potentially has much in common with hand-stitching. To begin with, the repeated hand gestures of both activities share the inherent qualities of rhythmic repetition and surface pattern making that pull participants into the process. As with stitching, the extent of marks applied to an area of paper is measured by the arms reach; the work remains physically close to the body. The phrasing of the mark-making instilled a gestural pattern similar to stitching with needle and thread: a run of stitches ends when the needle runs out of thread, a run of marks might pause for the brush to be re-loaded with ink, or a chalk to be rotated in order to find a less flattened surface to apply pressure to. Both leave visible traces marking the break in rhythm like a natural pause to draw breath, or the full stop at the end of a sentence (see Figure 2). In both instances these mini-cycles of exertion and rest originate in and mimic the scale of the body's rhythms.

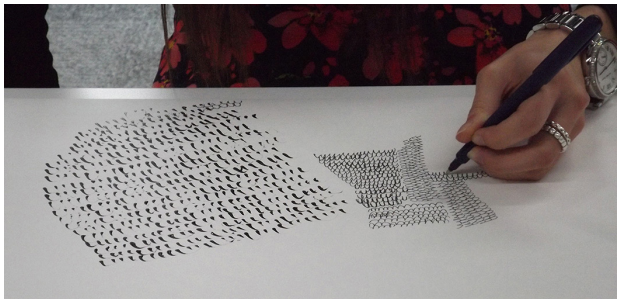


Figure 2. The idiosyncratic rhythms of repetitive mark-making appearing like phrasing on the paper.

On the other hand, the marks made in drawing are considerably more varied in scale and type, can be achieved with a much wider choice of tools, and are often applied more quickly thereby covering larger surface areas. The sounds too are varied: some are staccato, others a soft puff-puff or a smooth elongated swish.

Negotiating boredom

However, with repetition comes the routine of automatism; the body can struggle to repeat these same gestures indefinitely and the mind loses its focused interest, as expressed by Amy: 'I found it interesting at first then it got a bit tedious come the end … 'cause I did the exact same pattern for the whole thing.'

Repeating the same mark for what felt like a long time for some tested the limits of their concentration, even their physical stamina. Jane describes: 'It was very repetitive. I was quite bored … I got to a point where I just thought I wish this would just stop now, because I'd done enough and my wrist was getting tired.'
Feeling obliged to continue drawing until the timed task came to an end, participants found ways to subvert the instruction given and break the boredom to maintain their focus on the task. Alex explains how she decided to break up the tedium visually rather than physically:

I was thinking more about the composition. I like spreading my marks out and I don't want to have just one mark so heavy in it. I want to keep mixing it up so the piece doesn't look boring by re-using the mark.
(See also Figure 3).

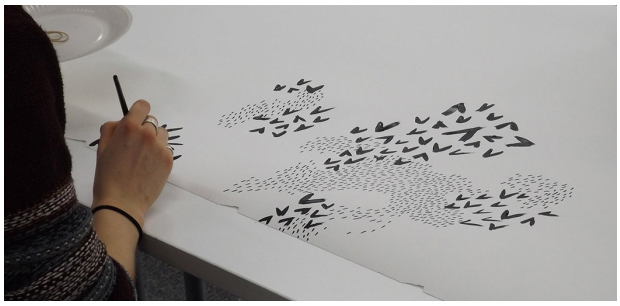


Figure 3. Using placement of mark and motif composition to avoid boredom of repetition.

Without a thread attached to the tool preventing the hand from straying off course this is easier to achieve in drawing than with stitching. The hand can move freely from one place to another with no risk of tangling thread. The spread of hand movements is restricted only by the reach of the body, whereas with stitching the scope tends to be more contained and is governed by the material used: the thread.

Another way is to continue making the same mark but vary its proportions slightly, even change direction (see Figure 4):

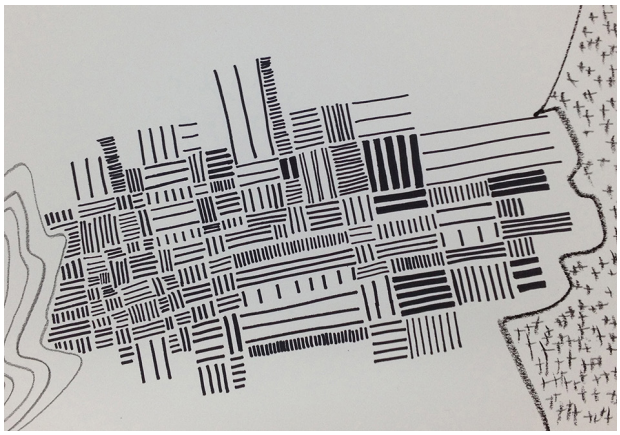


Figure 4. Jess describes 'at the start I was doing it all the same, then as I got bored I started to change it … just to make it more interesting … I started to think about it more.'

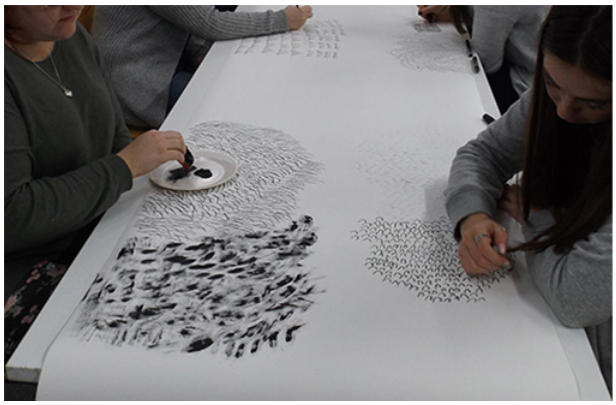
The mark-making moved at a faster pace than hand-stitching; a larger surface area can be covered effectively and although the hand gestures of mark-making are similarly small and repetitive, directional movements of the whole arm are infinitely varied. The greatest difference seems to lie in the quality of hand-eye-mind coordination this demands. Hand-stitching, which is naturally slowed by the in-out manipulation of needle through cloth, requires a focused hand-eye coordination intensely concentrated through the fingers to the point of the needle. The eye is concerned about placement of the needle but knows its movement across the surface of the cloth is governed by the length of the thread. The hand is always attached to the work; the repetition of each stitch is felt more intimately by the body.

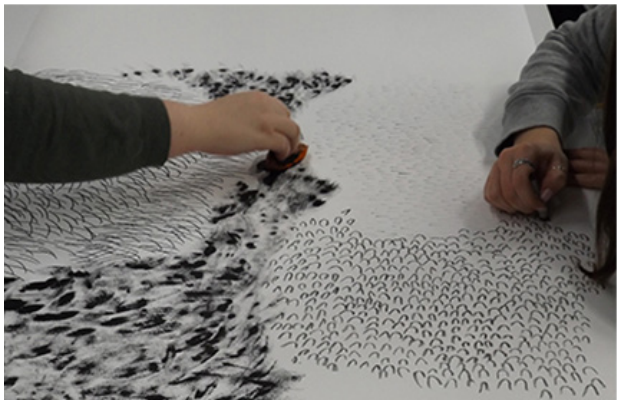
Once a rhythm of stitching is installed, a skilled practitioner can let the mind shift its focus to ‘a place of concentration that allows the hands to take over from the mind’ (Hemmings 2006: 62). With the mark-making however, the hand-eye coordination seemed to demand greater concentration in the moment to guide and track the fingers and tools across the surface of the paper to the desired effect making spontaneous decisions and counter decisions constantly. Movements are fast and vivid; the hand is not waiting for the thread to whistle through the cloth and arch back on itself before making the next stitch. There is less time to dwell as the gestural traces quickly cover the surface. The image created fills the mind and isn’t easily dislodged.

Covering the surface

The key defining characteristic of hand-stitching is the piercing of the surface. A threaded needle passes through from one side of cloth to the other taking the thread with it. In doing so, the gestures of hand-stitching join the two surfaces, metaphorically binding together the seen and the unseen, simultaneously articulating the explicit mark and the implicit thought or sensation. The tension played out across an embroidered surface is predominantly one of an intra-personal nature.

Because there is considerable variation in people’s marks, differences are distinct and the visual occupation of a space is very apparent. In one particular zone of the drawing it was interesting to observe a silent battle over territory taking place where the orientation of marks made was put into the service of controlling the boundaries between two areas (see Figure 5):





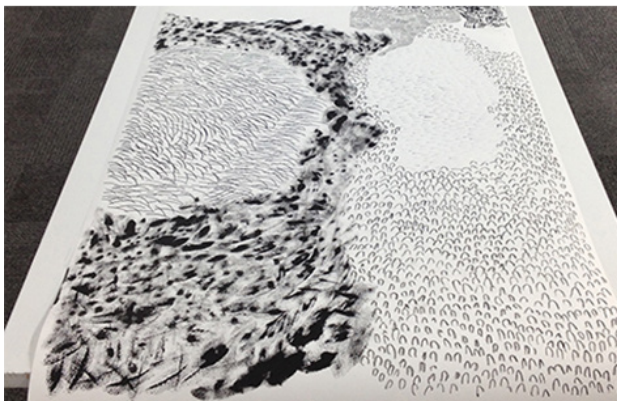


Figure 5. Establishing territorial boundaries between two zones of drawing.

The forceful energetic marks of one participant, large in size and quick to make, were kept in check by another’s determined and consistent staking out of the boundary to her zone.

In a second group, participants defined the edge of their zone of activity by tacitly agreeing not to trespass into another's space (see Figure 6):

Figure 6. Courtney explains: 'I don't think she wanted to go over anyone else's space, so she just stayed on this side.'

But in contrast to this, a third group appeared to tacitly agree to share the surface with no strictly defined personal zones of activity. Individual participants worked up to the edge of another's zone, and even negotiated together the filling of space (see Figure 7):

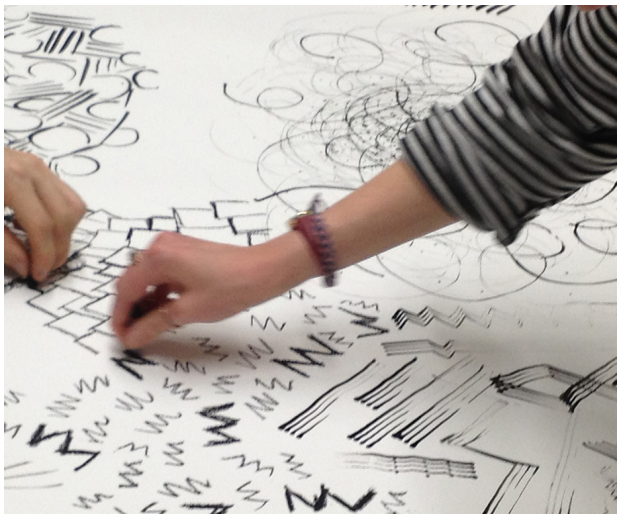


Figure 7. Negotiating together the filling of space.

Working on top of someone else's work

The distinct differences between individuals' hand-stitching tends to be more subtle in appearance, and as a result boundaries between participants' work tend to be less evident. Hand-stitching may therefore lend itself more readily to collective making, and I frequently observed pieces of embroidery started by one person and completed by another. This sometimes involved working on top of another's handiwork with little visible disruption to the intended pattern or design.

In the drawing however, the differences are accentuated. The final task asked of the participants was to move round the table to a neighbour's space and work on top of their drawing. I was curious to observe their reactions to this task and to see how this manifested itself in their drawing. Almost all participants were initially worried they might ruin their neighbour's work. The drawings themselves revealed how they then approached the task finding a way to fit in, add to, discreetly sit alongside, or even mask over the original drawings.

The most common approach taken was not to deliberately mask what had been done, but to enhance what was already on the paper by outlining or adding to it (see Figures 8 & 9) or to find gaps in the original drawing to fill with new marks (see Figures 10 & 11):

Figure 8. Jane reflects: I quite liked enhancing what was already there … working along the edge of what somebody else had done.'

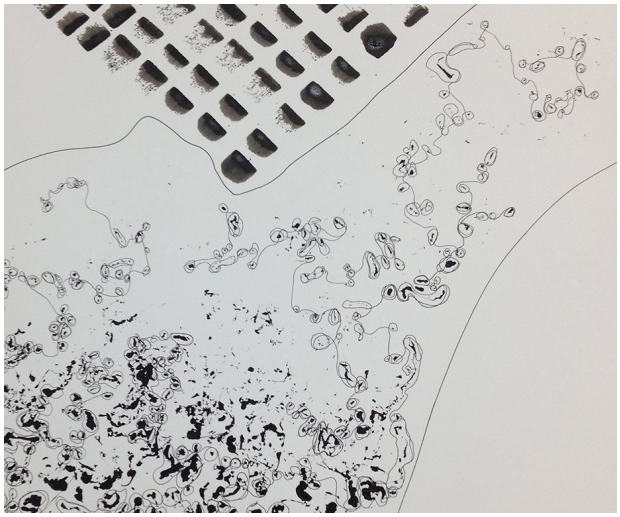


Figure 9. Jess explains: 'It's hard to work over something that's quite dense, but I enjoyed sguiggling around it.'

Figures 10 & 11. Finding gaps to fill with new marks.

Others however, confidently work over the top of the original drawing paying less attention to what's underneath (see Figure 12):

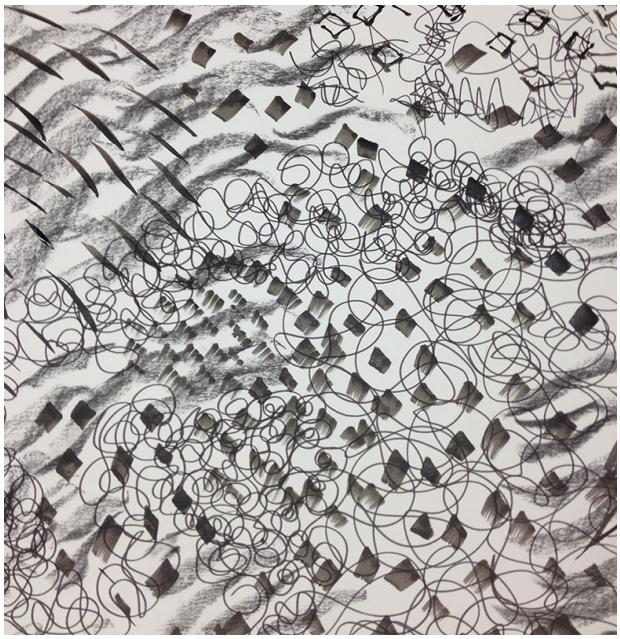


Figure 12. Working on top of someone else's drawing.

One participant began by trying to contain her marks within the blank spaces left in her neighbour's drawing but quickly found herself covering up the existing marks and spreading over boundaries (see Figure 13):

Figure 13. Dana explains: 'I didn't really want to cover up Alex's work, but I ended up doing that anyway.'

Izzy explains how she preferred drawing on a worked surface and set about masking over the original work without hesitation (see also Figure 14): 'I quite liked having something to work on top of so it's not a plain white piece of paper like the other times. It made it more interesting.' When questioned as to whether she felt it mattered that she was covering over someone else's work she replied: 'Not too much. Sorry Heather … Maybe [I have messed it up] a little bit – you can't see her lines anymore. I've kind of covered them up a bit.'

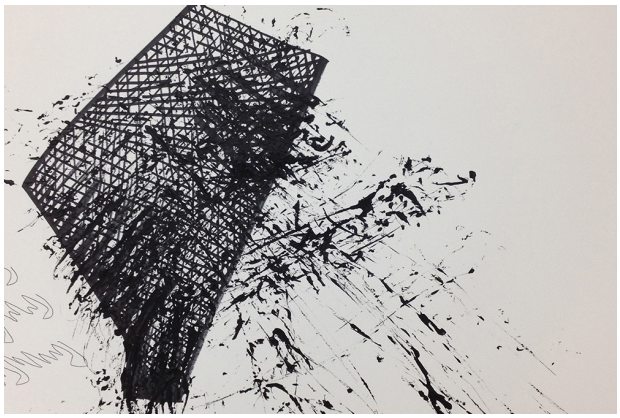


Figure 14. Masking over someone's work without hesitation.

Others experienced the opposite, and reluctantly found a way to continue making a separate drawing in a different place (see Figure 15):

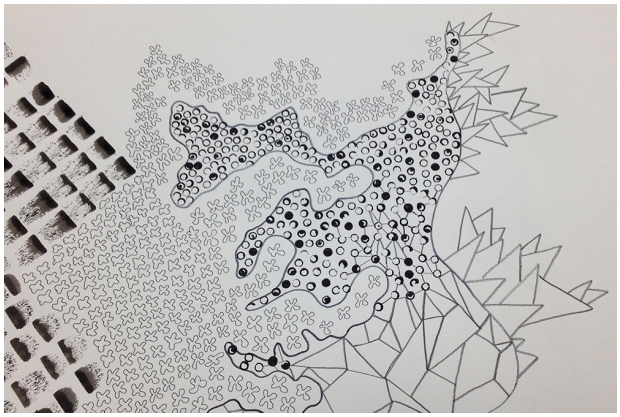


Figure 15.

About this, Alex states: 'I didn't like it. Because Jane's quite a neat mark-maker, and I felt if I was going to start drawing over it, I was going to ruin it.' She then goes on to explain her strategy for finding a way to fit in: 'working into the blank space that she hadn't finished filling, then trying to link the two with the line work connecting some of the dots … accenting it rather than taking over it.'

Lastly, an alternative approach taken was to make marks that 'go' with the original, mimicking what was done to fit in and suit the original drawing (see Figure 16):

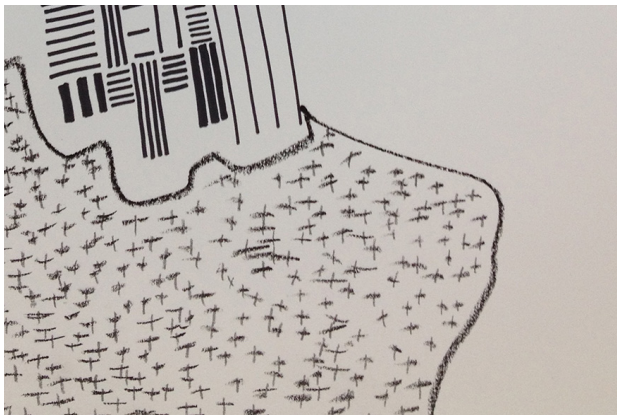


Figure 16.

Here Georgina describes her decision making: 'I found it quite hard. There were quite a lot of marks there already so I couldn't really add any. I started turning them into crosses instead.'

Discussion: reflective space and exploratory space

My starting point was to examine whether elements relating to some of the issues raised in my doctoral research on hand-stitching might also be observed in a different type of collective workshop setting, that of mark-making in an educational environment. My focus on the micro context of hand gestures, rhythms and patterns of making in both instances enables some comparisons to be made. There are certain similarities between hand-stitching and mark-making, such as the small repetitive build-up of pattern and texture on the surface, but the differences throw into relief characteristics specific to each.

Mark-making demands the eyes pay attention in order to make decisions quickly based on a visual assessment of progress; the sense of touch is not relied upon in the same way to pass on the responsibility of paying attention and making decisions to knowledgeable hands. In this aspect, hand-stitching activities lend themselves more readily to a context of collective making that prioritizes social exchange. This in turn raises questions concerning the particular insight on modes of interaction drawing in this collective format might offer, such as the use or occupation of space.

The slow pace of hand-stitching controlled by the material restrictions of a threaded needle and the subtle visual variation of stitches builds a slow, reflective space, allowing concentration to fade letting the hands take over from the mind and leaving it more easily available to switch its focus onto the social interaction. Mark-making on the other hand, although sharing repeated gestures, rhythms and pattern-making with hand-stitching, has greater variety visually and demands a more sustained and focused concentration. There is a greater sense of urgency in this type of collective drawing activity, in part due to the speed at which the surface is covered, but also the range of visual effects achievable. Because there is more variety to create and choose from, greater diversity is possible, and perhaps because of the diversity, the drawing activity generates opportunities to discover and explore different approaches to individual expression and social interaction.

Conclusion

This research is in its early stages. It is necessary to acknowledge that the contexts, formats and instructions differ. These mark-making workshops were undertaken within an art school, and I am the participants' tutor; the nature of our interaction is not one of informal community support as was the case for my earlier collective embroidery work. The tutor-student relationship has been difficult to lay aside and this bias in our relationship influences conversation topics and the way my question prompts are answered.

That said, the evidence so far seems to suggest that hands at work drawing do articulate forms of interaction that can perhaps be known and understood implicitly by the body, but that are not necessarily exploited as a learning experience.

An example might be to explore how these types of collective drawing activities could be implemented for students to prepare for collaborative projects, especially where difficulty finding common ground through the more conventional means of conversation might prevent creatively stimulating opportunities from happening. As Juhani Pallasmaa writes: 'The hand grasps the physicality and materiality of thought and turns it into a concrete image' (Pallasmaa 2009: 16). Watching what hands are doing could give clues about how a person might interact, collaborate or contribute in ways that otherwise might be hard to articulate in words.

This knowledge is demonstrated in practice as a process of active engagement with materials, tools and other people. The focused awareness of the body encouraged by hand work cultivates a distinctive form of attention to the self in relation to the material world and other people that proposes 'a conception of the human being not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships' (Serres, quoted in Connor 2005: 322). As 'a continually unfolding field of relationships' this process by definition has no end, nor necessarily produces an object, but materializes a consciousness of self that, according to Paul Carter 'enables us to think differently about our human situation … To understand how identities form, how relationships with others are actively invented… essential knowledge if societies are to sustain themselves' (Carter 2004: XII).

According to the Crafts Council (2014) making skills are anticipated to be on the decline. In my view this may have been partly due to a lack of understanding about the human context of crafting as it happens. As educators there is a need to consider a wider definition of craft practices, possibly by finding ways to nurture the embodied knowledge of social interaction through making as well as a technical understanding of materials and technologies; to generate possibilities for understanding a new concept of object or artifact as 'a continually unfolding field of relationships' (Serres ibid). More opportunity for collective making may help to enhance this important human dimension worthy of closer attention in the current context of increased emphasis on co-creation, collaboration, peer-to-peer networking within sustainable craft and design practice more widely.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the patience, trust and generosity of all the student participants in these workshops: Alex Barnes, Heather Bold, Suman Dhesi, Brienny Dudley, Courtney Guy, Ellen Harris, Isabelle Hill, Sophie Kiddell, Dana Lovett, Jess Orme-Dawson, Aditi Patwari, Georgina Price, Steffi Stough, Jane Trevorrow, Amy Williams, Ollie Woodall. And to Callum Howat-Maxted for editing the video footage.

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