

Beyond Junk: The complex art of value-hacking

by Jivan Astfalck, Rachel Darbourne and Laura Bradshaw-Heap



Abstract

In this paper we aim to explore how we, as arts practitioners, educators and makers, can find ways to construct, disseminate and put on display the often complex, and at times ambiguous, underlying methodological approaches of live, collaborative, practice and action-based research. Collaborative projects, like JUNK: rubbish-to-gold, which we introduced at the Making Futures conference 2015 (1) by necessity, see the intersection between multiple ways of thinking, seeing and making and often continue to evolve throughout the duration of a project. To be successful, a merging of methodologies, aesthetics and concepts is required that satisfies all involved while remaining concise and easy to understand for the audience. This is especially challenging when a project aims to address a layer of aims and objectives, for example a project where the audience are participants and at the same time the live project is part of an academic research project. Alongside and inter-dependant is our interest in the dynamic of values in the transformation of materials, their bibliographies and contexts. While some would class the turning of one product into another as merely up-cycling, if reframed as valuehacking a more complex set of understandings arise. A valuehacker can be understood as someone who finds ways to intelligently apply their skill in a playful and exploratory way to reveal, and put on view, the shifting of values regarding materials, ideas or relational aspects, and so searching for innovative ways to negotiate, represent or communicate. By moving beyond a simplified understanding of the up-cycled product, JUNK: rubbish-to-gold was a co-authored, collaborative project with multiple concepts, goals and manifestations. It sought to question and put on view, physically and digitally, the whole cycle of a material (JUNK jewellery (2)) from its production, consumption, disposal, deconstruction, reconstruction, possible revival, to the associated economies that are then subsequently developed around this process. This in turn poses the question how does one successfully navigate and incorporate complex dialogical relationships within the curation and publication of such a project? Are there ways in which we can valuehack complex, constantly growing projects as a means to find ways to clearly disseminate an evolving methodology? In order to find a means of articulating this complexity, the proposed paper will include a re-reading of a passage in Kant's *The Critique of Judgement*, where he writes about the importance of not presupposing either a judgement of sense or one logically determinant, but one of reflection(3). Key words: valuehack & value-hacking collaborative dialogic delight value materials (1) <http://rubbishtogold.com> http://crafthaus.ning.com/group/junk-rubbish-to-gold?xg_source=activity <http://makingfutures.plymouthart.ac.uk/2015/journal-home/current-journal/workshop-papers/?id=1399>

(2) The JUNK jewellery was broken or unserviceable jewellery gifted to the project by a number of partnered charities, who in return received a percentage of the profits made from the redesigned pieces created as a result. For more about the project visit www.rubbishtogold.com (3) Kant, I. (2004: 23) Book II. Analytic of the Sublime, Section I. Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement, in The Critique of Judgement, available at <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16j/index.html>





JUNK: rubbish-to-gold

9th-13th November 2015 , School of Jewellery, Birmingham City University

Performing Makers:

Davit Alexander, (UK)
 Drew Markou, (UK)
 Farrah Al-Dujaili, (UK)
 Francesca Antonello, (IT)
 Francisca Onumah, (UK)
 Hannah May Chapman, (UK)
 Imogen Clarkstone, (UK)
 Jillian Moore, (USA)
 Jivan Astfalck, (UK)
 Jo Pond, (UK)
 Kate Bajic, (UK)

Kathryn Marchbank, (UK)
 Karin Roy Andersson, (SE)
 Laura Bradshaw-Heap, (UK)
 Laura Brannon, (UK)
 Lana Crabb, (UK)
 Mah Rana, (UK)
 Maria Hanson, (UK)
 Mia Maljojoki, (DE)
 Milena Vizuete-Courtes, (UK)
 Nanna Grønberg, (DK)

Natalie Smith, (UK)
 Nuala Clooney, (UK)
 Rachael Colley, (UK)
 Rachel Darbourne, (UK)
 Robert Goldsworthy, (UK)
 Sally Collins, (UK)
 Susanne Holzinger, (Germany)
 Suzanne Beautyman, (UK)
 Toni Mayner, (UK)
 Zoe Robertson, (UK)

At the last MAKING FUTURES conference in 2015 we presented our project **JUNK: rubbish-to-gold** as a project yet to be delivered and we talked about the complexities of thinking through the project and the much more challenging aspects of project management. Now we are back after the project was delivered, jewellery transformed, the website launched, it is time to reflect, disseminate and critique. We explore how

we as arts practitioners, educators and makers devise, develop, construct, display, perform and disseminate a live, collaborative, action-based research project, with multiple facets, intentions, layers and potential outcomes.

'I think there is a treasure hunter in all human beings - we are all magpies. When you discover something beautiful in what other people have discarded, there's a certain magic in that. And we are people that have worked in the industry for 30 years and still get excited with these pieces' Jivan Astfalck

JUNK: rubbish-to-gold is a playful exploration of community economies, exchange, giving, bartering, gathering, earning and harvesting. The project puts on display the process of creating the 'work of art'. We partnered with ten charities, which supplied JUNK jewellery, that is jewellery the charity shops regarded as non-sellable. During a public performance thirty-one jewellers 'gifted' their skills, (de)constructing and (re)constructing pieces selected from a mountain of JUNK creating reimagined artworks for our exhibitions and online auctions. The performance was live-streamed on screens in the Midlands Art Centre (mac) and the Museum of the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham and across the world via YouTube (1).

Reusing is often perceived as the up-cycling of one object to another, from unwanted to desired, consumer leftovers turned into new desirable luxury consumables to buy. This reuse is the cornerstone of jewellery as a discipline, with materials shifting form to adapt to the newest fashion and trend. Yet the reimagining of one object into another is infinitely more complex than it is often portrayed. By putting on display the entire process of creating the 'work-of-art' within this project, from material purchase and collection, through selection and (re)construction during the performance, then exhibition and auction, we playfully explored ideas of exchange, bartering, gathering, earning and giving, while shifting the focus from finished object to the processes and social interactions that create the 'work-of-art'. **JUNK: rubbish-to-gold** aims to foster and

develop multi-layered networks, challenging and extending jewellery as a discipline, expanding the jewellery audience and deepening our understanding of the impact of our activities.

Please watch this film, produced by Birmingham City University, about the project:

<http://rubbishtogold.com/about/>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqrcJQr3-1Y \(2\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqrcJQr3-1Y)

Collaborative projects by definition see the intersection between multiple ways of thinking, seeing and making. They continually evolve throughout a project as each collaborator brings their own studio methodology, aesthetics and concepts to the fore. A successful collaborative project results not only in these different approaches intersecting, but also in dialoguing and growing. It must develop its own identity beyond any one of its creators while still satisfying all involved and remaining concise and easy to understand to our audience.

'One of the things that surprised me the most was that within the 700 plus kilos of JUNK jewellery there was virtually no repetition of items.' Rachel Darbourne

By the end of the project's performance at the School of Jewellery, Birmingham City University in November 2015 we had a project that had partnered with ten charities, with a combined total of 126 charity shops, that between them donated some 730 kg of junk jewellery in return for a 50 per cent share of the silent auction profits. The performance and resulting exhibition attracted 583 visitors; the live streaming via YouTube and to the concurrent exhibition at the mac Birmingham attracted an estimated 13,421 visitors, and the online exhibition and silent auction hosted by CRAFTHAUS (3) had an estimated audience of 2,000 visitors. The project travelled to Munich in February of the following year as part of the International Munich Jewellery Week. The partnering charities also used their own established marketing tools such as subscriber newsletters and social media to publicise the project and their individual involvement, this extra activity reached another estimated 100,947 people.



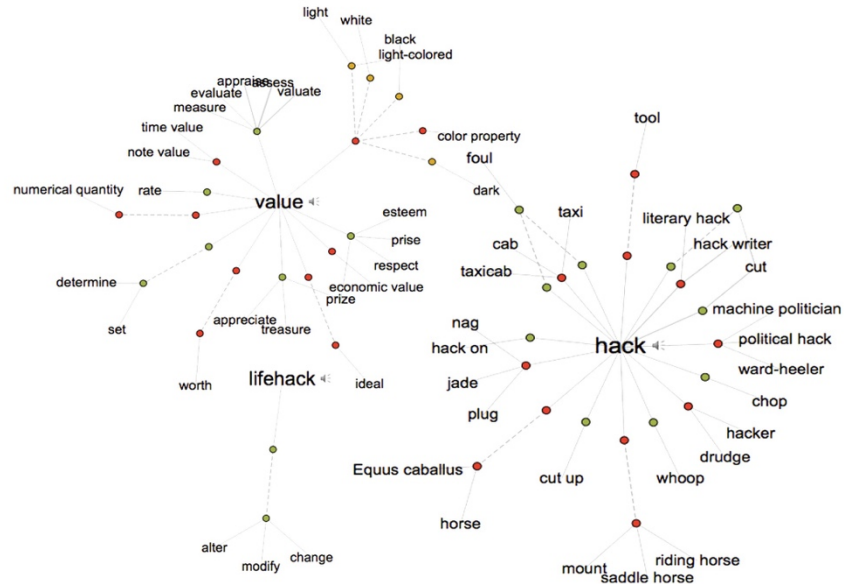
Mah Rana



Maria Hanson

In most simple terms, **JUNK: rubbish-to-gold** was a project about up-cycling, adding value to something tangible by investing time, skills and thought. Reflectively however, it was clear that many more complex layers existed in the project. It was a project about recycling material but also about the social interactions around it. It was an international project but it was also firmly rooted in Birmingham focusing on local community involvement. It questioned material value as well as the value of time and skill. It explored how we fund such research projects and the complex economies in which the things we make sit. It examined the role of the audience, shifting boundaries so they became participant, performer, supplier and supporter.

How do we articulate all of this to be able to effectively disseminate these complex layers? It is at this point where we would like to introduce the term 'value-hacker'.



The above image is the composite image-result of an online Visual Thesaurus search of the words 'value' and 'hack', resulting in an interesting cluster of associated and connected terms in relation to the notion of value-hacking. (4)

A value-hacker can be understood as someone who finds ways to intelligently apply their skills in a playful and exploratory manner to reveal, or put on view, the shifting values regarding materials, ideas and/or relational aspects, and in doing is searching for innovative ways to negotiate, represent and communicate. It might be the simple way of upsetting preconceived hierarchies of value or the more involved critical analyses of how we are interpreting making as cultural production, using cognitive tools from philosophy and psychoanalyses to think of ourselves within it and to skilfully contextualise making. To help our understanding, we adapted the concept of a hermeneutic circle (German: Hermeneutischer Zirkel), which describes the process of understanding a text or in our case objects and an interactive project hermeneutically (5). It refers to the idea that understanding is established by reference to the individual parts and the understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. Neither the whole nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circle. However, this circular character of interpretation does not make it impossible to interpret and create meaning - rather, it stresses that the meaning must be found within its cultural, historical, and literary context.

I found it fascinating to interact with other makers at different levels within their creative practice whilst they were making. It was eye opening to realise that essentially at any level we all go through the same ups and downs and it was inspiring to understand my own process through this a bit more.' Hannah-May Chapman

JUNK: rubbish-to-gold was born out of a strong desire to literally turn rubbish jewellery into gold. Laura had images of mounds and mounds of gold-plated JUNK running around her head for months before the project had become a reality; Rachel loved the treasure hunt and sorted through all of the 730 kg of JUNK, finding exquisite pieces worth keeping; and Jivan wanted to create and contextualise a project about 'delight' for a long time, but was wondering if there is such a thing as 'mindful' delight.

'During making some of the pieces I was thinking about drawing and quality of line, which is part of my work and ended up using a lot of strings of beads to 'draw' with. I am thinking about incorporating those materials into my own work, something I have never considered before.' Farrah Al-Dujaili

Alongside this, we wanted to find a way to draw in Laura's recently acquired anthropology skills to document stories that might arise as people interacted with the discarded jewellery. This interest was sparked after we introduced a bag of discarded broken charity shop jewellery to some colleagues and students at the School of Jewellery. Immediately, people were drawn in and they began talking, sharing stories and memories with each other, and for a long time it felt that this was to be the focus of the project. While we came up with a simple but very effective way to gather these stories via our website, this section of the project was never launched. At an early stage we decided that donations of jewellery would come directly from charity shops, and therefore anonymously, rather than from individuals. This we felt separated **JUNK: rubbish-to-gold** from other jewellery recycling projects that had been done in the past, while at the same time enabled us to focus on specific questions around waste and community economies. This decision, however, meant that the opportunities to gather meaningful stories had been unintentionally sidelined. There was a real chance that by eliminating this initial idea of public gifting stories embedded in jewellery objects, we could have significantly reduced the complexity of the project rendering it shallow and over simplified. However, by shifting our focus to ideas of value-hacking and keeping the core principle of the project in mind at all times, that of putting on view the process of the collective creation as the work of art, we found ways to reveal more layers of meaning and value. Our solution was to live-stream the entire performance week, documenting the process of making as it happened, all thirty-five hours or so. By doing this, the audience could watch in real time as each maker chose their materials and then transformed it into something new. These new jewels were then photographed on the spot and uploaded to our online exhibition with CRAFTHAUS ready to be bid on in our silent auction at the end of the week. None of us envisioned the impact this live streaming would have on our virtual visitor numbers – by the end of the week we had over 1,000 views with a total of 186 hours watched from 50 countries.

Another aspect of the project was our initial Kickstarter campaign, where we raised funds to get the project started before we were able to apply for Arts Council funding. To begin with the rewards for our Kickstarter funding campaign were gold-plated junk jewellery pieces, which Laura had started working with before and which in the process of the project became reality.



© *Is this gold?*, 18 carat gold electroformed plastic JUNK

Sponsor gift for Kickstarter supporter

It became clear, however, that the initial concept of gold-plated mounds of jewellery would not visually represent our core ideas but would open up the project to a very different interpretative trajectory. Our planned making performance was designed to put on view the processes of the creation of the work of art and not to dictate the final outcome. Any alteration to the jewellery done during the project needed to be solely in the hands of the performers, the makers and jewellers we had invited.

'I hoped to see some sign of myself, my identity as a maker, in my finished work despite the restrictions of the project. I wanted to find out how much of myself is tied to my process, and how much could come through without it.' Jillian Moore

The aim of the live making performance was to highlight the fact that successful outcomes from creative activity are not necessarily dependant upon expensive equipment and/or materials. We wondered what would happen if we removed established practicing jewellers from the comfort of their own studios, practices and individual methodologies and gave them a huge pile of junk jewellery, very basic tools and materials and a communal space to make work.

Most of the invited artists accepted the invitation without question, a few asked if they could bring their own materials and tools and expressed unease when told that we would rather they worked within the methodology of the project. One artist was, for one reason or another, unable to adhere to the methodology and brought alien materials to the table, the result was a highly accomplished collection of work but it somewhat missed the point of the project. We debated our perception that this body of work was preconceived, but in the end decided that the work would not have come into existence without the

project in the first place, and was simply too good to be excluded. The addition of this alien material initially resulted in complaints from other artists who didn't bring their 'own' materials with them. However, at the end of the week the artists were saying how much more they had learnt, by having been removed from their usual comfort zone. One artist stated that when back in her own studio she felt invigorated with inspiration for new work and acknowledged that this would not have happened if they had stayed in their known comfort zone and which was part of their own studio methodology.

We had no idea what would happen in the space and how much if any work would be made. At one point it was posited that the artists might not make anything at all, they maybe get totally absorbed by the JUNK jewellery and rummaging through the pile as we had done on many occasions. In fact, all the artists became extremely focused generating an impressive number of pieces. This could have been due to the layout of tables, because of health and safety considerations and because students use the atrium of the school, we had to arrange the tables in five rows. This exam style layout was strange and we think impacted on the artists. Artists mentioned the tension of having to generate work in public view. One artist was due to work for two days and stayed for five, another worked under the table away from the cameras, and yet others were performing for the cameras. Most artists were highly motivated and this resulted in many tables being shared, more people stayed and worked well over hours and often had to be asked to leave so the school could be closed.

'While for this project edition of JUNK the focus was placed on the creation of the 'work-of-art', I wonder what might be revealed if the focus shifted - to the specific skills utilised, the materials chosen, or the conversations created. What type of project would we have then? What outcomes might we see then?' Laura Bradshaw-Heap

Apart from the sheer delight of making creative work together with other people, we are interested in layered intent of meaning and ambiguity of emotional investment in creative crafts objects (6). To articulate our new understanding in the context of reflecting on **JUNK: rubbish-to-gold** we suggest the use of the following quote from Kant's The Critique of Judgement as particularly helpful. He writes:

'The beautiful and the sublime agree on the point of pleasing on their own account. Further they agree in not presupposing either a judgement of sense or one logically determinant, but one of reflection. Hence it follows that the delight does not depend upon a sensation, as with the agreeable, nor upon a definite concept, as does the delight in the good, although it has, for all that, an indeterminate reference to concepts. Consequently the delight is connected with the mere presentation or faculty of presentation, and is thus taken to express the accord, in a given intuition, of the faculty of presentation, or the imagination, with the faculty of concepts that belongs to understanding or reason, in the sense of the former assisting the latter.' (7) (Kant, 2004: 23)

He goes on to say:

'Hence both kinds of judgements are singular, and yet such as profess to be universally valid in respect of every subject, despite the fact that their claims are directed merely to the feeling of pleasure and not to any knowledge of the object.' (7) (Kant, 2004: 23)

Ambiguity therefore is delightful, exactly because it has a fluidity that plays between the layers of beauty and the sublime, seriousness and amusement:

'An emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination.' (7)

A very fitting statement we adapt to articulate the core of our project with its entangled social relations, where a specific kind of commodity and its meaning and materiality transforms, shifting between sites of disposal, production and consumption, crossing and expanding upon the boundaries of rubbish, transient and yet maybe even durable as crafted art.

References

(1)

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(2)

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(3)

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(4)

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(5)

[Gadamer H-G., Hermeneutik I Wahrheit und Methode, Teil 2 II.1, Mohr Siebeck, Tuebingen 2010](#)

(6)

'Delight' is not a notion, which can be commonly found in the indexes of contemporary philosophical thought, neither *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* nor *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* list 'delight' as a notion worthy of including; neither Gadamer nor Ricoeur seemed to have been interested either, which is particularly surprising as Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, which informed so much of their work, is a rich source of reflection on the notion of delight.

(7)

Kant, I. (2004: 23) Book II. Analytic of the Sublime, Section I. Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement, in *The Critique of Judgement*, eBooks@Adelaide, available from:
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Key words

value-hacking / collaborative / dialogical / delight / materials

