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Creative Practice, Fold and Materiality

The three subject areas that I am going to focus on in this writing are Creative Practice, Fold, and Materiality, investigating the links between them to come to a final proposal for an independent research document. This proposal will be the culmination of my research into key thinkers such as Linda Candy, William Morris, Giles Deleuze, Catherine Dormor and Karl Polanyi, to name a few.

### **Creative practice**

Practice is described by Ian Buchanan as “A code word in Cultural Studies for what people do in the course of their everyday life. Such activities as dating, shopping, walking, watching TV, and the like are generally regarded as examples of practices” (2018). The more commonly used meaning of having a practice is a habitual honing of skills that is applied in many different fields such as art, religion, music, health and law. To “put something into practice” means taking action on something that has been learned and understood. For designers, or creative practitioners, this compulsion to create everyday in an iterative way forms the basis of their life works, though the outcomes and reasons for the undertaking of artistic practices can be diverse. In this section I will investigate the differing artistic practices of creative people, exploring the different approaches, purposes and outcomes.

Creativity can be seen in essentially human expressions such as drawing, dancing, thinking or singing, but as Linda Candy explains, “Creative works on the other hand, in the sense of art, take those activities further. For there to be art, a process that explores, reveals and exhibits creative acts and works is necessary.” (2020, p.1). The exploration of ideas and materials is an important process for most designers, but some go on to make this research led practice the main body of their work. This type of creative practice does not focus on the final outcome, but on depicting a journey or highlighting an issue or story in a way that makes the viewer see things from a different perspective. Peter Bodenham is a Welsh ceramic artist who’s work “sea vessels” (2020) is created from only materials deriving from one small area of Welsh coastline, reflecting his home and Welsh heritage, whilst also making reference to foraging, ancient craft/glaze technologies and the environmental effects of mass production. Reflective, research based practices (Schon, 1992) such as this, are important in the craft industry to feed material innovations, preserve heritage crafts and processes, and as a form of “Crafticulation”, meaning articulating ideas and knowledge through craft (Lahti & Fernström, 2021, p.133). Bodenham also supports his work with written articles such as *Ceramics and locational identity: Investigating the symbolism of material culture in relation to a sense of place*. The use of academic writing to underpin ideas explored within artistic practice is interesting as it brings a depth to the work, articulating more than can be said in an artist’s statement or gallery description.

Candy also explains that for some designers “creative actions can seem to come almost automatically from deep within, perhaps from emotional or aesthetically charged forces” (2020, p.3). Many artists use their practice as an emotional outlet, helping them to express feelings or tell stories about their lives, at times being extremely frank and confronting. These kinds of artworks have been observed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time before the internet was

widely used. In today's world, to confess your secrets publicly (online) would usually be met with a positive reaction - issues such as mental health are no longer taboo subjects, whereas when Tracey Emin created works such as *my bed* (1998) and *all the people I've ever slept with* (1995) it was seen to be shocking by the public.

With regards to what Candy describes as “aesthetically charged forces”(2020, p.3), lots of artists and makers also have purely aesthetic motives, though their art still has purpose as a decorative item. Historically, this type of design was referred to as applied art, which William Morris described as “the ornamental quality which men choose to add to articles of utility” (1901). The Arts and Crafts movement was prevalent in the late 1800s and focused on this highly decorative approach to what would otherwise be ordinary household features such as tableware, doors, windows, rugs and furniture. William Morris thought that adding decorative qualities to items was important for both the person using the object and the person making it, stating that:

The purpose of applying art to articles of utility is twofold: first, to add beauty to the results of the work of man, which would otherwise be ugly; and secondly, to add pleasure to the work itself, which would otherwise be painful and disgusting. (Morris, 1901.)

Although the original Arts and Crafts movement aesthetic has largely been left behind, it's ethos still echoes through our current aesthetically driven society. The majority of people no longer want purely functional objects and are primarily drawn to purchase objects due to their appearance. Mass production in the past 100 years has almost removed the need for “applied art” specialists, with companies such as Ikea creating objects of utility which are also aesthetically pleasing in factories all over the world. William Morris' quote seems a little out of place today, where the “painful and disgusting” work creating mass produced objects of utility *and* beauty is often outsourced to poorer communities around the world, at their detriment. For this reason, there now seems to be a resurgence of people rejecting the idea of mass production, wanting handmade and artisan products due to the lesser ethical implications and the particular essence handmade items have (Benjamin, 1936).

Collaboration can be another form of creative practice. Though often short lived, collaborations between artists often enable new visual and theoretical connections to be made, making interesting outcomes that is out of each party's complete control. Collaborations between artists and the general public also make for interesting expression of ideas, and can speak volumes in terms of highlighting real social or political issues as it gives a voice to those who may otherwise be overlooked in the art world. A great example of this is Lou Gardiner's *Cloud Project* (Fig.1), where she received hand embroidered clouds from women all over the world “to communicate their hopes and dreams for a peaceful world of equality and love” (2023). Gardiner's other projects also focus on women's empowerment through embroidery, such as *The cape of empowerment* (Fig. 2), which has travelled all over the world being photographed and worn by women of all walks of life.



*Fig. 1 – Louise Gardiner, cloud project*



*Fig. 2 – Louise Gardiner, The cape of empowerment*

## Fold

The fold as a physical entity has sparked the imagination of many artists and craftspeople. Andrea Thoma's 2020 work *imaginary landscapes* (Fig. 3) uses the physical forms of fabric folds to allude to landscape scenery. The colour and texture of the fabric are the only thing that give away the true, close up perspective of what is perceived to be vast expanses of rolling hills. Photographed whilst Covid restrictions were in place, these scenes have another layer of meaning and evoke a sense of longing for freedom.



**Fig. 3 – Andrea Thoma, *Imaginary Landscapes***

The act of folding is done for many reasons – to conceal, to protect, to make something smaller. Folding makes the 2 dimensional piece of fabric or paper, 3 dimensional. As Catherine Dormor explains:

Folding bends towards, encloses and multiplies at the same time and as such can be thought of as an ambiguous activity of secretion and revelation, excess and restraint. (2020, p.1)

This idea of “excess” in the purposeful folding of fabric is interesting – looking at clothing throughout history, such adornments almost always connote wealth and beauty and are considered to have great decorative quality (see fig. 4 and fig. 5) whereas to think of the opposite, an unfolded and “restrained” garment, it may be viewed as plain (yet perhaps less “restricting” when worn). The unfolded piece of fabric or paper can often never be the same as it once was, despite every effort to iron out creases, some will always remain; as Dormor states, “In many ways it is unfolding that announces the presence of folding” (2020, p.11).



**Fig. 4. 1880's French dress**



**Fig. 5. 1600s lace ruff at the V&A**

The fold can be studied not just in its physical and literal manifestation, but as a theoretical construct. Leibnez theorized that the universe is made up of folds upon folds, producing folds to infinity (Deleuze, 1988). This theory was studied and expanded on by Deleuze almost 400 years later in his book, which referenced Leibniz's fold theory in relation to Baroque art, its depictions of fabric drapery in particular. Deleuze notes that the baroque fold can be seen as two floors in a house - "the pleats of matter" and "the folds in the soul" - meaning that we are infinitely folded layers, like a labyrinth of folds. He applied his theory to many different areas such as mathematics and biology, with some believing Leibniz's Baroque fold to be an early iteration of fractal theory (Levey, 2008). The link between Leibniz's fold theory and the Baroque is that the natural folds and drapery of fabric, and the patterns and embellishments depicted in paintings of the Baroque era are in theory impossible to calculate due to their infinite nature, causing a "disruption of geometrization of space" (Friedman, 2020).

Materiality in art relates to the material, from which a piece of art is made. A material is described by Petra-Lange Berndt as "substances that are always subject to change, be it through handling, introduction with their

surroundings, or the dynamic life of their chemical reactions” (2015, p.12). Materiality can also refer to matter, which is used more broadly to describe physical substances. The difference between these two words is that for something to be a material as opposed to simple matter, it must have the potential to be used to make another object by human means, as Berndt explains, with the hand; for instance, wood can be referred to as a material but water is not, yet both are comprised of matter.

Polanyi writes of physiognomy (1966, p.6), which is the notion of reading into the inner qualities of a person from their outside appearance, particularly the face (Collins Dictionary, 2023). He explains that whilst we can recognise a face, or expression, and describe it as such with words or images, there is still an element of “tacit” knowledge of that face that cannot be put into words. The same ideas can be applied to that of objects or art; the viewer reads into the material qualities of the object in a tacit, subconscious way, perhaps to categorise it in terms of its function, purpose or value. A simple mug made of clay would not necessarily pique the viewer’s interest, but there is subconscious knowledge of its useable function, whereas the same mug made of gold is interesting to the viewer because of perceived value and it is subconsciously known that this vessel would not be used to drink out of. What is interesting to me is when designers hijack this tacit object knowledge, making recognisable objects out of unrecognisable materials. This plays with the viewer’s perceptions, bringing the unconsciously accepted “rules” of an object to the conscious mind. For example, Tatiana Troune creates casts of bundled up mattresses in concrete – initially appearing to be soft, the viewer is likely to be surprised at noticing their solid quality.

Petra-Lange Berndt, writing in her book *Materiality*, notes that although materiality within art and design was written about positively by modernist thinkers such as Clement Greenberg, modernist design generally overlooked medium and materials to “overcome any remnant of the everyday in order to arrive at pure *form* and transcendence” (2015, p.13), meaning that to notice the material would be to taint, or lessen the effect of, the final “art”. In today’s postmodern world, in particular that of contemporary craft, the works that are most valued are those which embrace and highlight the materiality of said piece and its handcrafted, artisan qualities. Artists like Halima Cassell (Fig. 6), who carves geometric forms from wood, stone and clay, or Simone Pheulpin (Fig. 5), who uses simple cotton cloth and pins to create solid sculptural pieces, are successfully embracing whilst also challenging the materiality of their work, encouraging humble materials to become something unexpected within the traditionally rigid field of “sculpture”.



**Fig 6. Simone Pheulpin's work**



**Fig. 7. Halima Cassell, Fleur noir**

Materiality in terms of use of material in art has become an artistic practice in itself, helping designers to break boundaries and create new materials and technologies to inform their own works and those of designers of the future. All artistic practice relies on materiality in that a material must be used to make the art, with some artists focusing purely on one material as the basis of their life's work, e.g. ceramicists. Artists that focus on reflective material research, (often as experimental mixed media works) in artistic practice allow new connections and materials to be made, and the experimental journeys of the practitioners are often more important than the final outcome.

### **Synthesis**

Materiality clearly relates to the nature of the fold - the action of folding can be done with any material as long as it is thin and pliable. The form of the fold has been explored in various media, from the obvious (paper, fabric) to more rigid, unusual materials (metal, leather, glass). Artistic practices like that of Simone Pheulpin and Andrea Thoma utilize the fold in very different ways – multiplied to give structure and strength to forms, or as an illusion to feed the imagination – which shows the multiplicity of such a simple form. The fold as a form is used to demonstrate materiality, as it's aesthetic simplicity versatility can be a vehicle to demonstrate different material explorations.

The amount of theoretical writing I have found on the fold alone is surprising, and for such a simple and ordinary form to be noticed and interpreted in different ways makes me curious what has been written about other forms. The way a form or idea can be perceived so differently by different people, subsequently becoming morphed into

something totally abstracted from the original idea is fascinating; Deleuze, Dormor and Thoma have very different interpretations of the fold as a theoretical construct, whereas Thoma and Pheulpin interpret the physicality of the fold in very different ways. Which leads me to my final independent research question, how does form and material affect our perceptions and receptions of visual art?

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