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MA Contemporary Dialogues : Textiles
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Material Practices - Materialities and Consequences

In an era of global awareness on climate change and the impact of humans on the environment, examine how the artists Alice Fox and Debbie Lyddon have addressed this issue and how the materialities of their surroundings have influenced their praxis?

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Introduction.

‘ The cost of large-scale production to the environment and the effects of mass consumerism has created an ever-present anxiety which has informed the cultural landscape of the 21st Century. As concerns for the natural world have grown; reflected in the art, politics and philosophies of the age, this has also impacted ideas on creativity and design...’ (Henderson,2021, pp80-81)

The purpose of this essay is to discuss how important the material qualities of the natural and rural environment has been an influence on individual artists and how it has impacted their approach to their praxis. Furthermore, how a reaction against the constant intrusion of technology and an ecologically driven upsurge in making hand made objects has caused a renewed personal investment into a hands-on approach to production. The renewed focus on the textile arts specifically has grown owing to the focus on humans' relationship with nature and how it has been fundamental to our survival for centuries.

In order to explore this idea the artists, and their practice, Alice Fox and Debbie Lyddon will be examined. Specifically Fox's *Plot 105*, and Lyddon's *Salt Works* and *Ground Cloths*. The ideas and views of P.L. Henderson, Warren Seelig, David Abrahams, Anni Albers, Tanya Harrod, Jane Bennet, Yi-Fu Tuan and also the work of artists Chiyoko Tanaka and Cecilia Vicuna will also be discussed in regards to haptic knowledge informing an in-depth materiality to a sense of place. As well as tacit knowledge of the traditional craft techniques used by these artists.

Tacit and Haptic knowledge.

Craft traditions which are connected to the environment have evolved through a crucial human instinct to survive and protect themselves from the world they inhabit. These basic skills have evolved to such a global scale that they have become unrecognisable to their original forms. Thus creating widespread devastation of our natural resources and fuelled the need for a more ecological and sustainable approach by artists and makers in the 21st Century. Craft itself has been derided over the centuries by the higher art forms. But it is through a return to the hand-on approach gained through these craft practices which has influenced the recent acknowledgement by the creative industries in the way in which they focus their

direction, especially in textile and fibre arts. In her introduction to *Craft : Documents of Contemporary Art, entitled Craft Over and Over Again*, Tanya Harrod discusses the changing role that the concept of craft has gone through and its relationship to fine art. Harrod suggests,

‘One reason craft has been marginalised in cultural discourse is that craft and making activities are difficult to verbalise. Explicit, written knowledge has obvious value, not least in art practice. But craft is dependent on knowledge that is tacit, practical or embodied, learned from watching other people practising a skill.’ (Harrod,2018, p15)

The process of practising creative skills gives us knowledge and understanding. There is a unique response by each individual to the material and the materialities of a form that is gained which may be driven by memory. The smell, look or feel of the material may trigger emotions and cause an expression of these emotions into the art which is being created. The tacit knowledge of these materials help the artist have a deeper understanding of how they may use them. Therefore instinct plays an important role in the whole experience and the relationship between the artist and the art.

‘Those that are practitioners of art, the artists themselves... for those of us who allow ourselves to be directly influenced by materiality and the physical world... instinct is a behaviour we especially trust.’ (Seelig.W 2012)

We cannot be expected to create sustainably unless we have gained sufficient knowledge of the materials we are using. For example, how long will the material take to decompose and what chemicals will it leave behind? These are all issues we must ask ourselves before we can begin to manipulate the material into our desired form. Maurice Merleaux Ponty suggests that there can be a silent conversation with inanimate objects. Once we have gained enough knowledge about a process it becomes a habitual process and we become practised in the craft. We begin to do things without really thinking and this is when we have gained tacit knowledge. It becomes natural to us. Therefore it is knowledge which can be passed on to inform other makers in the same field.

Furthermore, adjustments can be performed to manipulate the materials even further. The response becomes instinctive. ‘ Craft and material artists have always

understood this deep and meaningful kind of relationship between themselves and their physical world.' (Seelig,W.2012) We gain explicit knowledge through reading and research. But tacit or implicit knowledge can only be gained through practice, repetition and a physical connection. Our hands become our sensory tools.

When the materials and techniques used have been pushed to their limit, this is when we find the experience most exciting and sublime in our minds. An unexpected structure and how it interacts with its surroundings enhancing its physical form. By allowing ourselves to be open to experiencing a whole variety of creative knowledge we can greatly enhance our own practice. Until the material is picked up and handled we cannot begin to understand its potential.

'We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form. Our tactile experiences are elemental. If we reduce their range, as we do when we reduce the necessity to form things ourselves, we grow lopsided.' (Albers,2017,p44)

Materials can be used as a response to our environment. It is a natural instinct to be creative. It could be said that our modern materialistic world has become so far removed from this that when contact is made with the natural world emotions can be overwhelmed. Artists can use this experience and infuse it into their work because artists and makers are far more practised in making this connection with the physical world to create an emotional response. It is this engagement with our surroundings which gives us haptic knowledge and in turn helps us survive the world around us. We create to protect ourselves against the elements and hostilities. It is the respect of the world around them and the earth's natural balance which allowed our primitive ancestors to survive.



Cecilia Vicuna, *Brain Forest Quipu*, 2022 (fig 1)

Cecilia Vicuna is an artist, poet, filmmaker and activist who addresses ecological destruction in her work. *Brain Forest Quipu* (fig 1), exhibited in the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern, brings together Vicuna's exploration of the ancient Andean tradition of a quipu. A quipu was a method used by the Incas and other Andean cultures as a form of record keeping and of communication using knotted string. *The Brain Forest* is a collaborative work which saw Vicuna working alongside activists, artists and members of the local Thames community. Found objects, unspun wool, plant fibres, rope and cardboard were knotted together to create the gigantic, suspended, poetic sculpture which is surrounded by a soundscape of music and voice. It was this traditional, creative method of using knots for communication which has been an influence on Vicuna's work throughout their career.

In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram suggests that our primitive ancestors had a much clearer connection to the earth and the natural world they were living in. 'Humans, like other animals, are shaped by the places they inhabit, both individually and collectively. Our bodily rhythms, our moods, cycles of creativity and stillness, even our thoughts are readily engaged and influenced by seasonal patterns in the land.'(Abram,1997,p.267)

It is human nature to be inquisitive and explorative which in turn gives us knowledge and understanding. We use our senses to assess possibilities and discover qualities that might be useful to our needs. We learn and we teach. We give others the opportunity to gain knowledge. Tacit knowledge of a material process cannot be gained without experience just as haptic knowledge can only be gained through experiencing every physicality of a place through physical processes and explorations.

Debbie Lyddon.

Debbie Lyddon is an artist based in Wells-next-the-Sea in Norfolk, England. Her practice is inspired by her natural surroundings and local history of the area. Lyddon is a former professional musician and therefore the sounds of the Norfolk coast have also influenced her work in conjunction with the landscape itself. Lyddons mixed media work is a combination of cloth sculptures, installations and drawings which gives a multisensory interpretation of the seen, heard and tactile landscape.

' The North Norfolk coast... is a landscape in flux: a repeatedly changing horizon, birdsong, wind noise and the sea is continually shifting the sand and mud in a never ending push and pull - nothing's the same from moment to moment.' (Lyddon.D 29.01.16)

Her art draws attention to the landscape she inhabits by connecting the materiality of the work to the characteristics of the earth beneath. Lyddon explores the edge of the land and the tidal waters, picking up fragments from the sand and mud. She also records peculiarities and details in sketches and notes written as she walks in amongst this environment. Instead of making an exact or literal representation of her research Lyddon uses it as starting points and explores poetry inspired by the area to make connections to different aspects of her pieces.



Debbie Lyddon, *5 Blue Salt Pots #2*, linen, wire, saltwater, pebbles from Cley beach, found driftwood plinth, 2015 (fig.2)

Salt has become an important ingredient in Lyddons process. Its effects on cloth have been observed to demonstrate the passing of time on the environment. The salt bags (fig 2) are saturated with salt water and left to dry naturally. A process which can take weeks or months to complete. The resulting salt deposits evoking the conversion of matter into time. This phenomena is happening continually in the coastal environment and Lyddon has captured it in her work by introducing intensive amounts of salt to the pieces to exaggerate the effect. Yi-Fu Tuan (1930-2022) discusses the relationship between time and space and how it can be observed in his book *Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience*. 'Space exists in the present; how does it acquire a temporal dimension? Consider the possibility that the environment itself may have an effect on the elaboration of a spatio-temporal world.' (Tuan,1977,p119)

The Japanese artist Chiyoko Tanaka has influenced Lyddons Cloth pieces. Tanaka is a weaver in Kyoto, Japan who uses the act of weaving, specifically the accumulation of weft threads, to represent the passage of time. The woven cloth is then laid down on the ground and scoured using bricks or white stones. Soil, mud and charcoal are also added to create their mud-cloth artworks (fig 3)



Chiyoko Tanaka, *Mud-Dyed Cloth - Ochre, White Mud Dots* 2018 (fig 3)

The cloth Lyddon uses in her work takes the form of tarpaulins, sails or boat covers. They have a functionality to them and Lyddon introduces this element into her work by using traditional techniques such as sail making and knotting, therefore emphasising the qualities and the essence of these traditional traits of the coastal environment. This attention to detail is gained through her close observation and tacit knowledge of her surroundings which she has attained. She coats her cloths in substances which would have been used to preserve the sails and ropes and adds earth pigments to patina the work.



Debbie Lyddon, *Ground Cloth: Chalk*, Linen, wire, hand-collected and hand-ground chalk, linseed oil, beeswax, sea-water, found threads, 120 x 197 cm, 2018 (fig 4)

Ground Cloth : Chalk (fig 4) was one of the artworks shown in the *62 Group Exhibition, Ctrl/Shift* in July 2018. The surface patina was created by layering chalk, beeswax and sea water into the cloth. Lyddon calls them 'large sail fragments'(Lamb,2019, p108), which have been coloured by using rocks and soil from the local beaches. The theme for the exhibition was to consider shifts and changes in the artist's work and how their work had moved on and transformed in any way. Lyddon does this by introducing new materials and consequently new processes into her Ground Cloths.

The introduction of hand collected materials; yellow ochre, sea coal and chalk meant that Lyddon spent time researching, exploring and experimenting before she could produce the final work. The new elements to her work were combined with the fundamental aspects of her practice which, could be said, allowed a continuous flow into her new approach and not a leap into a completely new direction. The materiality of the sails and tarpaulins remained with the addition of reef points to emphasise the coastal aesthetic which is an ongoing theme to Lyddons work. Through Lyddon's praxis she has made a connection between the historical, coastal landscape by using the

materials found in that environment and exploring and exaggerating their qualities in her artworks. Therefore, it could be said that Lyddon has made the connection between haptic and tacit knowledge.

Alice Fox.

Alice Fox is an artist based in West Yorkshire, England whose praxis is concerned with natural processes and also utilising found gathered and grown materials in her local area and her allotment. Plot 105 is a body of work undertaken by Fox on her Masters Degree in Creative Practice at Leeds Arts University. The focus of the work is practised based research on her allotment where she grows and forages for her materials. By combining these with found objects she has allowed herself to maintain a self sustaining praxis which she feels is important to her as an artist and as a human being.

It could therefore be said that Fox has gained a deep haptic connection with the allotment and a tacit knowledge of the materials she gathers ensuring that as much of her resources are responsibly sourced. In a short film by Sarah Mason in 2021 Fox states, 'The materials I use from the allotment are a combination of found materials, things from the shed, then it's also about using the grown plant materials that grow there.' She views the allotment as a long term residency as she begins to engage with the site.

The plants that are grown are used for natural dyes, botanical inks, printing and also cordage from the plant fibres such as flax. The flax plant is used to make linen thread. Fox sees each new material found as a creative challenge. An accumulation of tacit knowledge and experience is gained with the repetition of the use of materials. Not only has the experience given Fox a physical understanding of the allotment she explains how, 'sensory stimulation, reflection and personal experience all become tied up in the making process so that the material is somehow imbued with these aspects.(Fox. 2022)

Fox's aim is to look at her allotment as a whole. She views it as a complete source of sustainability. Some of the found objects consist of tools from the previous owner of the allotment. The history of the gardener demonstrated in the broken spades

and trowels which have been left to decay and disintegrate. The flaking paint leaves a trace of use and hard work.

A piece of cordage made from old newspaper and linen thread has been worked into the tools. Fox has used a woven and a looped technique similar to the one used by Ruth Asawa who Fox sees as an influence on her work. Holes have been drilled into the metal and the vessel form is shaped from these anchor points. The tool has therefore been re-invented from a hard metal object into a soft mixed media sculptural shape.



Alice Fox, *Plot 105, Found Objects*, 2019 (fig5)

When digging in old garden soil it is common to find bits of pottery which have been embedded into the earth over years (fig 5). Fox has collected these small fragments of ceramics and laid them out like artefacts in a museum. The display creates a timepiece and an anthropological account of the previous owners of the allotment. Small detailed drawings have been done of these pieces using botanical inks provided by the plants on the allotment continuing the theme of her practice and her interest in sustainability.

As with all artists and makers Fox has to firstly gain the knowledge of the materials she is using. Her process of foraging gives her the opportunity to gain greater understanding of the plant fibres she uses. Fox describes how she creates small scale experiments with the purpose of gaining confidence in her ability and skills with the materials to eventually create much larger finished pieces. Her techniques involve looping, weaving, binding, stitching and wrapping the plant material which has been made into cord.



Alice Fox, *Hybrid 2: Trowel* (2020). Looped daffodil leaf cordage with found tool. (fig 6)

The daffodil leaves are gathered in the Spring after flowering, dried and stored until she is ready to use them. Fox describes how she began to create *Hybrid 2* (fig 6). 'To attach the cord to the trowel, I need an anchor point. I use a pillar drill to make a row of holes around the edge of the metal trowel. This gives me the starting point for attaching the cordage to the object.' (Fox.A. 2020)

By incorporating found objects into a piece it can create a historical link to a particular place. By using materials which have been foraged from that place it can combine the past with the present. 'Recording that sense of place is all important. I mean that really runs through everything and through that engagement with materials...' (Fox.A. 2022)

Fox's observation of every detail of the allotment by her haptic knowledge of the area gives her the opportunity to create unique sculptural art which reflects the space and the natural cycles of the year. When Fox began Plot 105 she wrote a manifesto to keep her focused on her intentions for the work and her practice in general. In it she states to 'Be experimental . Always consider potential use of objects, materials and substances, especially before discarding anything.'(Fox,2022,p9) This has the potential for an unending cycle of sustainability. Once an object has been displayed and recorded it is possible for this to be reused again in another form. The organic matter begins to decompose and can be composted back into the soil. The work is ephemeral which means its longevity is unknown and will disintegrate into fragments over a period of time.

'Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells...' (Tuan,1977,p159) It could be said that Fox has created her own material monuments and landmarks by using foraged and found materials. The familiarity and attachment she feels towards her allotment and with the objects she has created are small pin points in her memory of that place. When she sees daffodils she will think of the pieces of cord she made using daffodil leaves that she twisted and shaped. Furthermore the objects she made will serve as a reminder of the daffodils in her plot.

Conclusion.

Overall, it may be said that material knowledge gained through craft practices have played an important role in the upsurge in the need to understand the materiality of the world around us. To be able to connect and engage in order to find new ways to be creative and which may have less impact on the ecology of the environment. It is also a means to learn the skills to respond to a material through an individual's practice and by the deconstruction of a process to gain tacit knowledge and haptic knowledge of an environment.

It has been shown that creative people have an instinct for discovery and experimentation when using materials found in their surroundings in order to express themselves and their beliefs. The suspended sculpture, 'Brain Forest Quipu' was a

response to an ecological atrocity by Vicuna. Her utilisation of an ancient Andean tradition was combined with the use of locally sourced found objects and materials to convey the message Vicuna wanted to impart on the world.

Abram suggests that we are shaped by the places we inhabit. This has been shown in the analysis of the artists Lyddon and Fox. Lyddons praxis is inspired by the natural and historical features of her coastal surroundings. Her 'Salt Pots' replicates the effects salt has on materials and how it has been used to evoke the conversion of time into matter. The influence of the Japanese artist Tanaka on Lyddon led her to creating the 'Ground Cloths' series of work. The traditional techniques combined with the local resources has demonstrated Lyddons haptic and tacit knowledge in the work.

Fox has also acquired this knowledge by sourcing her materials from her allotment plot. The practised based research involves Fox cultivating her own materials and using found objects discarded by the previous owners of the allotment. Similarly to Lyddon, Fox is working with the flow and cycle of time on the materials. There is a ritualistic quality to the work and also a transient consequence to the use of these materials. But whereas Fox's work is signifying an acceptance of the natural decay of the materials, Lyddon is using substances whose purpose is to delay the degeneration of the materials.

In summary, it is the materiality of the materials relinquished by their surroundings, which may be seen by others to be debris, which has sparked a creative response by the artists discussed. The atmospheric effects and the passing of time bring the creative response of the encounter to life. A response which Seelig describes as 'instinctive' and is summed up by Jane Bennet in her book *Vibrant Matter* when she describes an encounter with a glove, dead rat and a bottle cap.

'But they were all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, ... as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contents in which (humans) subjects set them.' (Bennett,2010,p5)

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