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Charlotte Mary Goldthorpe
Senior Lecturer (PhD)
University of Huddersfield
c.m.goldthorpe@hud.ac.uk

Collaborative Making

Storytelling, Saving Skills and Preserving Memories

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand how collaborative making is used as not only a means of production, but an exercise in storytelling. Through dialogue between craftspeople, skills are developed, shared, and maintained. Craft practice is communicated, and memories are preserved. This paper explores how, through a case study of producing an artefact from start to finish, collaborative making leads to creating more than just an object, but also a connection between all involved. 'Watch' is part of a wider doctoral study in which nine artefacts were made from collected stories of lost love and then through encounters with several craftspeople. The paper considers the relationships between craftspeople and how we work together to develop hybrid skills by utilising traditional practice to create new ways of crafting.

Keywords:

Craft practice, collaborative making, craft artefacts, narrative, storytelling

INTRODUCTION

My grandpa died when I was 13 which at the time was the first significant family death I had encountered. It was heart-breaking, but the stories my father has since talked about him, such as his wartime escapades, have kept his memory alive for me. Each story has made me admire him more, which has subsequently enshrined him for me in what writer, Lisa Appignanesi might describe as “an aura of imaginary perfection” (2011, p. 36). I cherish these stories and replay them in my head, keeping his memory alive and ready to pass on. Objects associated with these family narratives have become embodiments of, and embedded within, his memory.

He taught me how to make origami birds from Breakaway biscuit wrappers. Sitting next to him whilst working the paper, gently folding and creasing, I would replicate his every move. The repetitive haptic experience led to the knowledge and the memory of making becoming embedded within me. Through these educative yet bonding encounters, I have gone on to teach the skill to other fascinated

onlookers and every time I begin to fold, I am transported back to the memory and sense of that smooth paper passing through my grandpa's fingers.

Within my practice it is important for me to work collaboratively with older generations of craftspeople for several reasons. Fundamentally to learn new skills and retain knowledge that could be potentially lost in near future, but importantly to experience stories told by craftspeople whilst making which become embodied in the finished artefacts. The haptic experiences also lead to the knowledge and the memory of the making experience becoming embedded within me, that can then be relived again through my own craft practice, all stemming from those early making memories with my Grandpa.

As part of my doctoral study, I produced a series of nine artefacts based around a group of participants individual memories (presented at BICCS 2021). I collected memories from nine people relating to lost love, be that of a mother, father, or romantic connection. I then used these stories / narratives to inform the making of an artefact for each person that would encapsulate the memory of the relationship they shared. I developed relationships with and worked alongside a series of craftspeople, blacksmiths, textile artists, wood turners and engineers, mostly retired, who helped to teach skills and create additional elements of the artefacts I was producing. They showed me skills and guided me through the production of metal turned frames, forged handles, and woodturning. I developed a methodology titled "narrative-led making" that allowed the narratives of the memories I had collected to inform materials and processes throughout the making process. According to Sennett (2008, p. 53), "The workshop is the craftsman's home" and I was privileged to be invited into several to learn skills that could not be taught elsewhere due to restrictions with tools or machinery. Through these interactions, I learned techniques that may not already be documented in craft literature; therefore, elements of practice have been passed on through intangible craft heritage.

The completed artefacts for my doctoral study can be seen in figure 1. Different materials such as wood, leather, silicone metal can be seen clearly, and I found I required the help of several different skilled craftspeople in order to fulfil all the additional elements that the individual artefacts needed. During the duration of the project, I worked with and alongside two blacksmiths, a seamstress, two engineers, a wood turner, a graphic designer and three CAD technicians. It was important that the relationship between the craftspeople and myself was a collaborative one, not dictatorial on either side so the craft provided an open dialogue and feedback loop, one that mirrored my internal monologue when independently making. Social scientist, Sarah Pink and scholars, Creswell & Creswell argue that the ethical approach to working with participants in this way is to engage them as part of the Research rather than exploiting them as objects, or source material (Pink, 2015, p. 68; Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 94). Once involved, craftspeople were invested in achieving a common goal, of understanding whether narrative could be re-articulated through a crafted artefact.

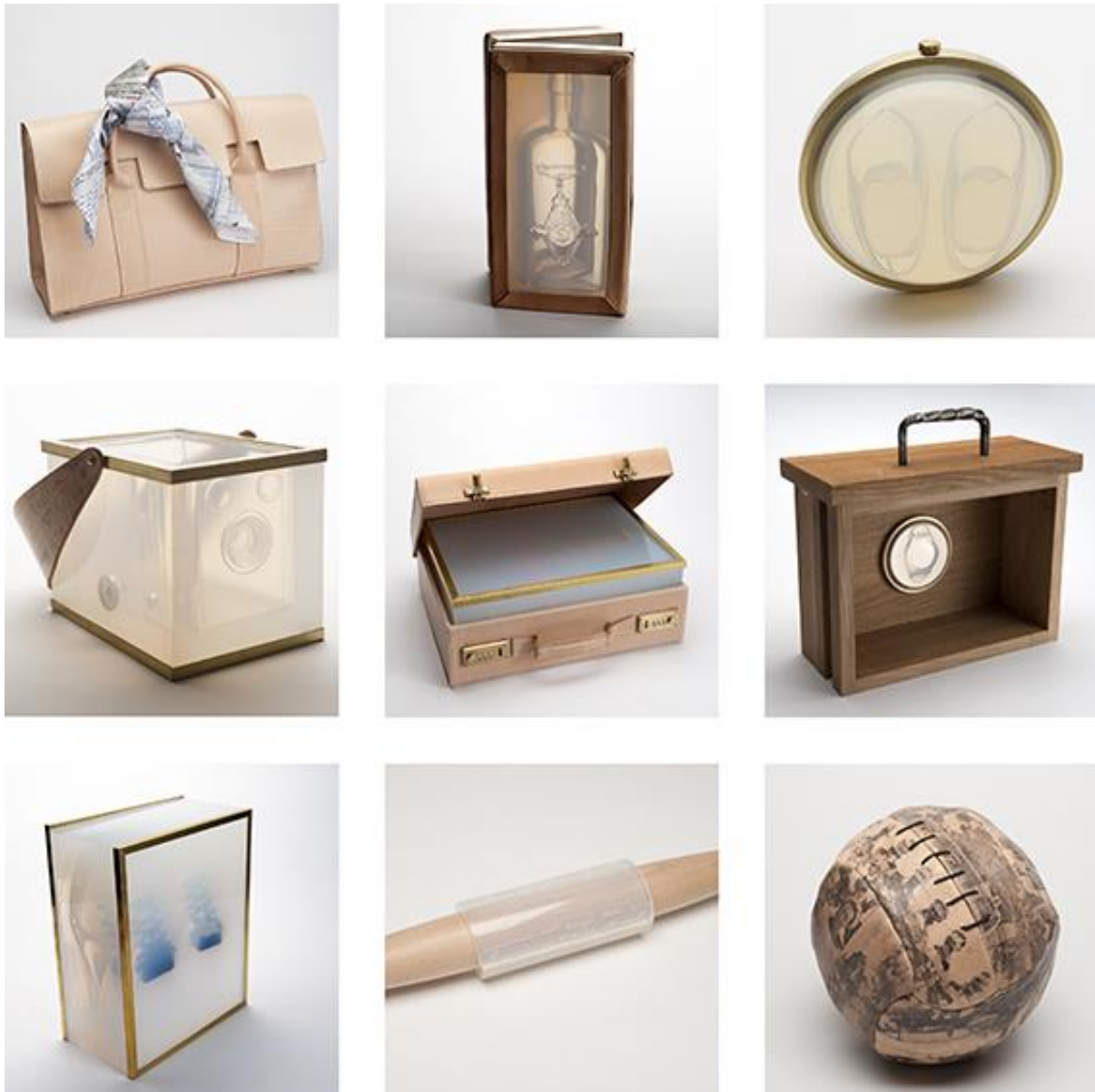


FIGURE 1. The Artefacts (R to L) ‘Handbag’, ‘Medal’, ‘Brass Shoes’, ‘Camera’, ‘Toilet Dolly’, ‘Watch’, ‘Running Shoes’, ‘Rolling Pin’, ‘Football’.

Philosopher, Walter Benjamin emphasises the relationship between storyteller and craftsman, by using craft as a metaphor and describing how “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way hand-prints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 91). This idea suggests that through the processes and environment of making, stories can be told, retained, and passed on, and in turn traces of the craftsman become embedded in the crafted object. The rhythmical nature of spinning yarn or passing a weaving shuttle back and forth is repetitive and becomes hypnotic, but also a mindless task. Within this process, Benjamin suggests that workers can become “self-forgetful” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 91) as they are embodied in the making experience. However, within a workshop, or environment with two or more craftspeople, this mindless crafting allows conversation to flow and subsequently become part of the process.

Like the use of narrative in the process, the choice of materials and techniques play a significant role within the process of creating the artefacts. The techniques and materials I select are driven not by practical concerns, but by emotion and feeling. Peter Dormer in *The Art of the Maker* builds on this

concept, explaining that unlike, for example, industrial design with its pre-set attributes, craft is a process that can evolve and “tell us about the process of the work itself” (Dormer, 1994, p. 88).

According to Professor Richard Sennett (2008, p. 53), “The workshop is the craftsman’s home” and I was privileged to be invited into several of them when skills could not be taught elsewhere due to restrictions with tools or machinery. Establishing relationships with craftspeople from whom I would learn skills was reminiscent of the traditional hierarchical connection between the craftsman as the master and myself the apprentice. Sennett proposes that “in a workshop, the skills of the master can earn him or her the right to command” (2008, p. 54), and this was somewhat true of my experience whilst working with craftspeople as it allowed me as the apprentice to acquire the basic skills needed in a number of different craft contexts.



FIGURE 2. Roy working on his lathe.

LEARNING AND MAKING

Learning and making did not have the traditional master-apprentice dynamic that comes with learning a new skill, but more of an equal collaborative practice, with an established reciprocity between myself and the craftspeople. Combining the craftsman’s skills with my own, we were able to establish new methods of making and thereby further our own individual skillsets through and ongoing dialogue and collaborative making. This is discussed further in the case study of making *Watch* that follows.

Through these interactions, I learned techniques that may not be documented in craft literature, such as the use of wood shavings from lathe work to polish the wood. These skills were a joy to

learn and the feeling that I had been inducted into a craft by a craftsman, made me appreciate the value of the skills that – like the collected narratives – may become lost without being learned and passed on. The idea of also experiencing stories told by craftspeople that they shared whilst I learned from their skills created a further link between the artefacts and the crafts used in their production. This strengthened the idea that the craftsman is a powerful storyteller within and through the processes that they use and the knowledge they impart.

CASE STUDY

The following case study shows the process of making of the artefact *Watch* (figure. 3). This is to demonstrate how I use narrative-led making to work with participants and craftspeople to create a material memory. Firstly, it provides an overview of the oral history I gathered from the participant and created into a narrative. Secondly the making experience including working with craftspeople and the participant. It concludes with a second interview with the participant and my own conclusion of the process. Here I provide an edited overview of the co-productive experience.



FIGURE 3. The finished 'Watch' artefact.

The Narrative

Beth's father was a prisoner of war for three years and eventually found himself in the Auschwitz hospital just before the liberation in 1944. When he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's he began to talk more freely about his experiences; "being taken on a death march around Europe so prisoners would not be found by the allies" (Beth, Personal Communication, December 1, 2016). From his experiences he was a keen supporter of Water Aid having been witness to the devastating effects dehydration had on his comrades and the sense of relief when villagers had given the prisoners water whilst on the march, as such Beth continues to support Water Aid in her father's memory.

She remembered her own experiences with her father through things such as visiting the library to find out what words were in Latin such as ‘earth worm’ with a nod to his embarrassing but colourful dress sense in the 1970s. When she was older and his Alzheimer’s had begun to take hold, she remembered how he would use humour such as witty puns to get over his confusion and to stop his family worrying about his failing mind. One skill that never left him was his ability to do maths; in the early stages of Alzheimer’s, whilst creating a floor plan to move house, he proved his ability to convert centimetres to inches in his head without the use of a calculator.

She remembered him through a radio-controlled watch that no longer worked that he had bought from the ‘Chums’ catalogue. He had always enjoyed taking apart ‘tech’ to see how it worked and the watch was no exception – he had once taken Beth’s mothers hearing aid to bits and could not get it back together – it never quite worked the same, but it reminded her of a time that his mind was starting to fail yet there were still glimmers of his charm and inquisitiveness. She now keeps the watch in a drawer for “mis-purchased objects” (Beth, Personal Communication, December 1, 2016) in her bedroom dressing table as she still cannot bear to get rid of it.

Use of Materials and Techniques

Watch (figure. 3) became a mix of collaborative making methods and included the input of three craftsmen. Initially I cast the watch face in a domed sphere of silicone to emphasise the shape. I worked alongside Roy (figure. 2), a metal worker who turned a small brass frame that would hold the silicone cast, however, whilst preparing the plans for Roy to follow, a significant experience occurred that tied both the narrative and production together.

Beth discussed her father’s skill of converting centimetres to inches in his head when drawing up plans to redecorate his living room. Roy had asked if I could change my plan drawings from centimetres to inches, which I did with the help of a calculator, however, when we next met all my measurements on the drawings had been changed to the exact size in inches, using a pencil in the same way Beth’s father had done in his head (figure. 4). Roy had thought it was funny that I didn’t understand how to measure in inches and whilst visiting him on another occasion, he taught me different methods of using inches such as how to use a micrometre and read digits in thous (One thousandth of an inch, used mainly in engineering). Roy and I always chatted whilst we were making. We developed a rapport where he would stop and check the frame he was making which allowed me to be involved. His reasoning for working with me was that it challenged his expertise.

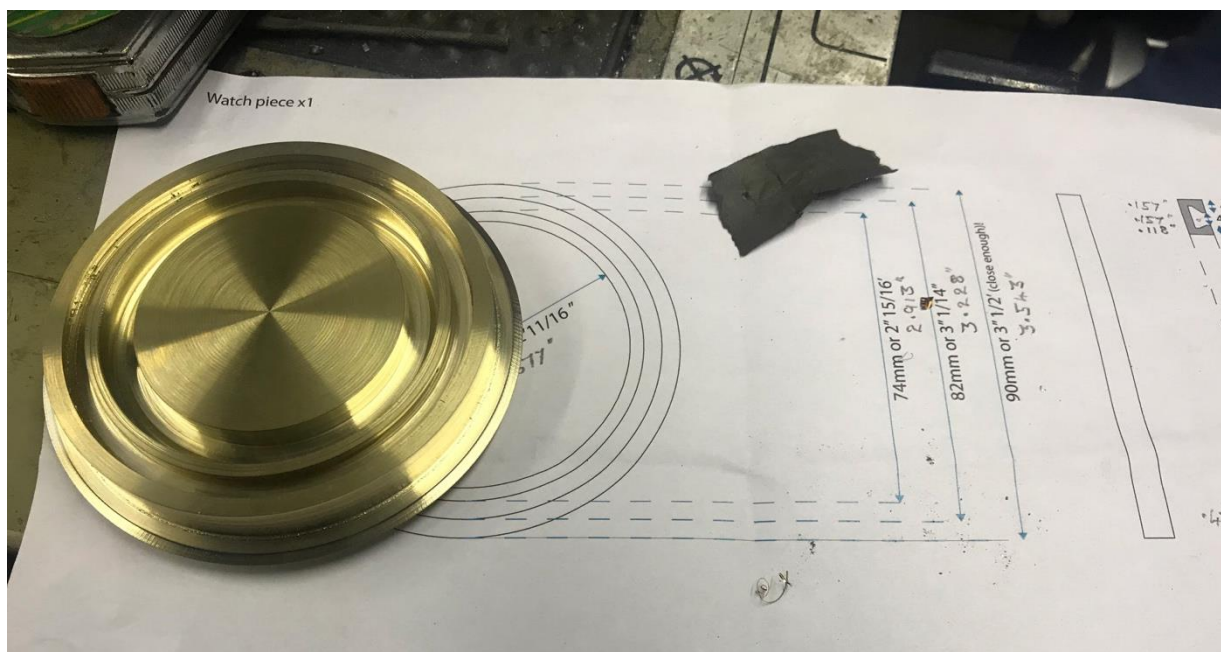


FIGURE 4. Roy’s measurements in inches.

People often left wooden objects they no longer needed outside the forge across the road from my house for Peter the blacksmith to burn. On this occasion someone had left two wooden drawers that I found whilst visiting him to discuss making a drawer. The drawer I found was too long and tall but the circumstances of its presence being 'there' when I needed it meant I could adapt the pre-existing object to become fit for purpose.



FIGURE 5. The found wooden draw when it had been resized.

I resized the drawer by shortening the length and the height to make the watch feel contained but not overpowered. When the drawer had been glued back together it was sanded and oiled and the watch and frame was attached to the base to allow the light to permeate through it (figure. 5). I wrote all the measurements onto the drawer using a pencil, in the way Beth's father had converted centimetres to inches when redecorating and the way Roy had changed my plans, which I left on the finished wood, rather than erasing them.

Alan, a retired blacksmith who often helped at the forge wanted to teach me how to make a handle for the drawer which added a further collaborative relationship to the production of the artefact. In her story Beth had described her father's spontaneity which fitted with how this piece was beginning to take shape, working on impulse, rather than a fully planned idea. I had previously watched Alan forge horseshoes, railings, and pokers and so to suddenly gain the opportunity to learn how to forge from a skilled craftsman was exciting.

Alan demonstrated the technique of hammering a hot steel bar into shape which I then replicated using the same piece of steel (figure. 6). We passed the steel back and forth between us, shaping it through hammering, which made the experience feel like a fully collaborative endeavour. Through the repeated hammering it felt as if the narrative was being embedded into the metal through the manipulation of the bar into the shape of a handle.



FIGURE 6. Forging the drawer handle.

Throughout the process Alan talked of his own experience of learning to forge and recognised my novice techniques but gave me confidence by explaining that as my arm got stronger my technique would improve. As the piece took shape, he did not correct any mistakes I made, but guided the piece to keep it on track. Craftsman Peter Korn (2015) remembers his own experience as a novice woodworker with each step being “conscious deliberation” (p. 51), questioning the materials, tools and techniques throughout the process. I deliberated the same elements Korn suggested whilst forging; when the steel was hot enough, how to use the bellows, and how to brush off the oxidised muck before hammering. I learned how to lengthen a piece of steel and the rhythm the hammer needed to achieve an even strike on the metal. The handle was fitted into the previous drawer handle holes seamlessly, which completed it (figure. 6).

Alan continually encouraged me throughout the whole process, like a father would his daughter and like Beth’s father had encouraged her. The complete making process took just over an hour, and in that time, I developed skills using a material I would not usually choose to work with. I did however enjoy the spontaneity of the whole process and how the finished handle embodied the experience within the physical form that was produced. Since the experience of forging. My relationship with Alan

and Peter has continued to be collaborative and they have both worked with me to make bespoke tools that I used to complete other artefacts and other crafts projects.

CONCLUSION

Through establishing a collaborative relationship with craftspeople, learning from others is an intrinsic part of my research. Working alongside skilled craftspeople encouraged further dialogue that became embedded within the finished artefacts creating complex memory objects. Learning new skills for the purpose of this study was not a process of becoming a master of a craft or understanding the technicalities or rules involved in applying a certain skill, but more about the experience of working collaboratively. The dialogues created meant I was continually learning from people and they were learning from me, we experienced not just each other's stories, but our rituals, beliefs, skills and knowledge; we became enmeshed through our craft practices.

I do not claim that I am now able to use these learned skills in the ways in which they are meant in the wider context such as forging or wood turning, but they have formed a basis of understanding for making in the context of the artefacts I produced and offered the opportunity to exchange stories and experiences. I see the finished, newly-crafted artefacts as the provider of a richer and more complex embodiment of lost love memory owing to the constant presence of the haptic and the collaborative nature of the process.

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