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Text, texture, textile: Conversations on a diptych

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In his essay on conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s Michael Corris (2006) claims that during those decades the spectator was deliberately alienated. Artworks themselves were merged so much with the everyday and banal, that they became deliberately invisible, indistinguishable from the environment within which they were produced. In order to rehabilitate the spectator, Corris argues for the reclamation of conversation, and for an aesthetic that facilitates engagement by an audience of perceivers who bring their own social and cultural knowledge with them into the conversation about an art work. It is the conversation that morphs the moment of engagement from an idiosyncratic response to one that is socially transformative. Thus through conversation, works of art not only evoke emotional responses, they are also provocative, providing a means for the community of perceivers to actively and continually [re]construct their relationships with each other in uncharted territory.

It is with this ideal in mind that we approached these two works of art whose material is cloth, particularly the fabric of Laura Ashley. We both read through the submission a number of times, gathering our thoughts about the work before coming together in conversation over coffee. Our intent was to privilege our role as the spectator and discuss these pieces in the same way we might talk about any other visual or performance-based art work. However, as spectators practiced in the art of research, our social and cultural knowledge as *researchers* was brought to the fore, shaping our reading of the piece. Indeed, our discussions circled around our dual and seemingly uncertain and ambivalent roles as both scholars reviewing an academic submission and observers conversing about a piece that had captured our interest.

Our uncertainty about how to begin was resolved by the piece itself. Our conversation turned quickly to the role of the participants, their silence, voided in order to privilege the work of the artist and implied audience. By questioning the veracity of the participants' stories, the author (perhaps inadvertently) absented their stories and privileged her own. While the author felt secure in the knowledge that 'there must be some sad stories behind the nostalgic recollections of happy life events', we were left wondering what this revealed about the author herself. One of the ways the artist reveals herself and tells her story is by offering a map of cotton, a chart which speaks of commodification, industrialisation, corruption and most potently, slavery. At this point in our conversation it was the notion of slavery that prompted us to see the two works of art — the visual and textual — as a diptych; two pieces but one work of art hinged by common themes. We began to question how one informed the other and, indeed, we wondered about the space(s) between the author/artist and the participant/quilt maker.

In the process, we paused on the aporia of “cloth ... so tightly wrapped round the lives of women that we can hardly breathe”. How is it so that women are *enslaved* by cloth, we asked? If fabric is so central to human existence, how then does it rob women of their agency? And what of men?

Perhaps, we concluded, Laura Ashley is not the primary focus of this art. But what mystified us were the ways in which both works slip sideways from the multiple narratives of women and their relationship with textiles to the role of Laura Ashley in constructing and constraining gendered identity. We were left wondering about the untold stories of the participants, set alongside the notion that life, and by implication the story of cotton, as tragic and painful.

The fragility of human experience, and of relationships, is represented by cotton. A single thread that constructs the warp and weft of our collective lives, held together by two knots which, if not treated with care, will unravel. And yet in spite of this compelling metaphor, the spectre of Laura Ashley evoked in the cartouche offers a dissonant counter-narrative to the tale which the artist wishes to tell. And yet, again we came back to the participants, the women who inspired this diptych. Here, their absent presence is, at once, in the shadows yet revealed in their unspoken stories.

Revealing these silent stories, we think, requires that the artist in some way privileges the agency of the participants who prompted the creation of the artwork. The participant, then, is not just a catalyst but also an agent in the construction of the work. For as de Certeau (1984) asserts, a map provides the means whereby the individual creates their own itinerary and in so doing “metaphorize[s] the dominant order [making it] function in another register” (p. 32). But for an artist to embark on this journey is replete with risk, because the itinerary may lead the artist to “unfamiliar territory and in unfamiliar languages ... permeated by the unknown” (Lancaster & Young, 2011, p. 147).

Although stories of tears and sorrow were untold, we found ourselves in conversation revealing them, for they are *our* stories. Our separate relationship with textiles manifest in the clothes we wear that simultaneously reveal and conceal our identities became a further aporia on which we dwelt. Does our cloth make us or do we make our cloth? How do we express our agency by creating our own itineraries? Our conversation moved toward the embodiment of clothing and the multiplicity of meanings that exist between a wearer and his or her clothes — meanings that are renegotiated at the moment of each articulation, moments of remembrance or moments of dressing. And so we turned from the ways in which ideal notions of womanhood are wrapped, towards how we have reshaped the textures of our own lives, as a woman and a man. How have we embraced flexibility and ductility as well as resisted, sometimes in vain, the restrictive wrappings of our world?

When we began, we considered that missing from both works are space and irony; space that draws the viewer/reader in and fosters engagement, and irony to destabilize and disturb. As we finish, we wonder if the lack of space does in fact generate space for irony — and conversations that continue beyond this commentary, inviting further insights into the work. And moreover, we wonder if perhaps the silenced stories of the women who prompted the creation of this piece are not as silent as we first thought, becoming present to us in the wider community of perceivers who engage with this work.

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