

Beneath the Skin: revealing the research that underpins the object

Maria Hanson MA (RCA)

Reader in Metalwork and Jewellery
Art and Design Research Centre
Sheffield Hallam University

*'Ideas give me a queasy feeling, nausea, whereas objects in the external world, on the other hand, delight me.'*¹

Francis Ponge

In *The Cultural Biography of Objects* Gosden and Marshall write 'people have realised that objects do not just provide a stage setting to human actions; they are integral to it'.² They present the idea that as people and objects gather time, movement, and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and objects are tied up with each other. The notion of transformation, like alchemy, is one that has always obsessed jewellers and metalworkers. The physical and emotional agency generated through material change is both powerful and profound.

The academic researchers invited to participate in *Beneath the Skin* were selected because the work they are undertaking has been ongoing for a number of years and as practitioners and teachers they have all made significant contributions to the field of Contemporary Metalwork and Jewellery. All trained in the specialism of goldsmithing, silversmithing and jewellery but many have blurred the boundaries of their practices, working in a multi-disciplinary way, engaging in projects that involve material and social science, public and architectural space, product design and fine art. The successful collaborations and ability to cross traditionally recognised boundaries I believe stems from the rigours of mastering a single discipline. It is grounded in what Michael Crawford terms as the 'intellectual engagement of manual work' and is undoubtedly connected to experiential knowledge through a dedicated and often obsessive work ethic.³ The work presented in the exhibition is not finite. Although it explores and presents (in some cases) research which led to doctoral completion and specific AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) funded projects, it is essential for these to be understood in a wider context of creative activity.

The motivation to take on the curatorial role of this exhibition resulted from the earlier KeyPiece project which was a combined exhibition and research event held in the SIA (Sheffield Institute of Art) gallery in 2009. KeyPiece was instigated by Dr C  il  n O'Dubhghaill and co-organised by myself and Professor Christoph Zellweger. It developed an alternative method for creating critical and theoretical dialogue outside of the traditional symposium/conference; constructing a creative situation where the event itself was a research activity for eliciting knowledge for further dissemination.⁴ The two-day research event which involved the ten artists who had contributed work to the exhibition was held in the gallery space which had been transformed into a white cube with the material (text and diagrams) generated during the event becoming part of the exhibition.

Through post-reflective evaluation and subsequent co-authoring of a conference paper it became clear that the outcomes from the KeyPiece project needed to be substantiated further and therefore some of the knowledge elicited formed the basis of dialogue in the first stage of the curatorial process for *Beneath the Skin*. The extended discourse with individual exhibitors, (through semi-structured interviews) was significant in the framing of this exhibition and catalogue. It provided the platform to negotiate a set of issues surrounding creative research, focusing on methodologies, philosophy, materiality and making.

Do we need to complicate things with theory?

In his essay on '*Thing Theory*' Bill Brown asks if there is something perverse about complicating things with theory wondering whether they should be allowed to rest somewhere else unmediated.⁵ The conversations that I had with this group of academic practitioners revealed the collective struggles and challenge that they all face in relation to the perceived need to surround the made object with theoretical discourse in order to systematically reveal all that it embodies. Even those who undertook doctoral research (after years of working professionally) expressed some frustrations about

the methodological structures they needed to negotiate in order to frame their practice-led research within the theoretical construct of academia. However from the external curatorial position (which was undoubtedly informed by my own practice-led research in the field) it was very apparent that certain methodologies were being used even if the exhibitors did not always recognise and articulate them explicitly. All utilise models usually associated with social science research involving conversational learning and experiential knowledge. As Laura Potter notes, 'The finished object is an accumulation of activity between the head and hand'

This accumulation of knowledge which although from the creative perspective may not be seen as systematic, connects to Pask's (1975) methodological framework of conversation theory, where the researcher through internal creative conversation takes both the position of *self* and *self as other*.⁶ Of course some of this internal conversation is not possible to illustrate in physical tangible material so from the strict social science perspective may be disputed as an accurate term. It encompasses what many of the exhibitors describe as the intangible (Knight, Callinicos) or the intuitive (Astfalck, Cunningham, O'Dubhghaill) and to try and articulate through non-material methods can reduce it (Potter). Although some of the material and process research is more systematic in the way it has been conducted, the application of the knowledge gained in studio based work is less structured; balancing rigorous lab based work with experience and intuition was cited as being 'key' in the making of successful artefacts.

'Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project', is how Leo Stein schematically puts it in the A-B-C of Aesthetics; although he adds that the experience of an encounter depends of course on the projection of an idea.⁷ All the work in this exhibition are projections of ideas, as Elizabeth Callinicos states, 'Story telling doesn't just belong to the narrative artist but belongs to anything that has materiality'. The notion of encounter, of reception, function, meaning and interpretation are issues that bind this group of researchers together. It (the exhibition and catalogue) presents some of what lies beneath and alludes to things that are not explicit; by not revealing all, not messing with the unverifiable and intangible, by allowing the objects to speak for themselves enable those who encounter the objects to bring their own experiences and perspectives to bear on their interpretation.

- ¹ Ponge, F. (1972) 'My Creative Method,' *The Voice of Things*, trans. and ed. Beth Archer (New York), p. 93
- ² Gosden, C. & Marshall, Y. 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', *World Archaeology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1999, pp. 169–178.
- ³ Crawford, M. (2009) *The Case for Working with your Hands; or Why Office Work is Bad for us and Fixing Things Feels Good*: Viking; Penguin Books.
- ⁴ Hanson, M. & Wood, N (2010) '*KeyPiece: creating a critical dialogue in contemporary craft*', Design and craft: a history of convergences and divergences, 7th conference of the ICDHS
- ⁵ Brown, B. (2001) 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 28, no. 2, pp. 1-22
- ⁶ Pask, G. (1975) *Conversation Cognition and Learning*. Amsterdam, Elsevier.
- ⁷ Stein, L. (1927) *The A-B-C of Aesthetics*, New York, p. 44.