

Ex:Change. Validating conversations about waste and sustainability through craft.

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Section III

Relational Making

Collaborative and Community Approaches

9

Ex:Change – Validating Conversations about Waste and Sustainability through Craft

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Abstract:

We met at a Print Fair: a lecturer interested in packaging waste (Joanna) and a PhD candidate interested in clothing waste (Wendy). Recognising common concerns within our work we wanted to talk more. An idea formed to share a relay-style visual project crafting confessional data about our consumer habits onto second hand artefacts. Titling the project ‘Ex:Change’ describes the artefacts’ past lives (‘ex’), the transformation of their identity and value through our creative interactions (‘change’), and the swapping and conversations about them (‘exchange’). It was conceived as a practical project, but the benefits to confidence, knowledge, friendship and resilience in the face of a challenging topic, continue to be exchanged. Our chapter demonstrates the surprising number of ways this has developed beyond the two artefacts.

Keywords:

Data Visualisation, Consumerism, Relay project, Creative collaboration

Introductions

To set the scene for this chapter we provide a brief background about ourselves:

I am Joanna Rucklidge, an artist and educator. I have worked in design education for over 25 years, consistently interested in pedagogy and environmental awareness. My practice tackles issues around the visual identity and value of waste, often working with collections of disposable objects as visual data and surfaces for printmaking.

I am Wendy Ward, for the last 20 years I have taught clothes-making in community settings, authored five bestselling craft books and developed a creative practice around issues of sustainability and waste in fashion. My PhD explores the role of wearer-garment relationships in building more sustainable clothing practices.

We are both affiliated to the Art & Design department at Sheffield Hallam University, but we first met at a Print Fair in Sheffield in 2021 as the world was emerging from the Covid pandemic: a printmaker interested in doing a PhD (Joanna), and a PhD candidate interested in printmaking (Wendy). Having both been grappling with themes relating to

consumer culture we realised common concerns within our work and research and agreed to meet again.

At that first encounter, with limited knowledge of one another, we exchanged contact details to talk more about the printmaking facilities at the University. What actually followed was the co-creation of a practice-based craft project. The project has evolved to include multiple forms of 'exchange': Instagram comments and inspiration sharing; email correspondence; Whatsapp chats; Padlet collaboration; café conversations; co-writing and recorded discussions; in addition to crafting artefacts together.

Neither of us anticipated the emerging benefits to our wellbeing from the project, which did not start as a tool for self-care, but purely as a vehicle for exploring common research interests and sharing creative practice. Years after that first chance encounter, we meet regularly as practitioners, academics and now friends. Confidence, habits, resilience and knowledge have been exchanged and the project is ongoing. The mutual support and encouragement throughout the project have also resulted in Joanna joining the PhD programme and Wendy using printmaking more regularly in her practice.

This chapter captures the breadth of our 'exchanges' as they have unfolded: an initial email correspondence; descriptions of the interactions we shared via a Padlet when we traded artefacts; and excerpts from an in-person discussion about the project's value and impact on our wellbeing. In the spirit of the project's evolution, these extracts directly capture the organic nature of the exchanges and demonstrate the evolving intellectual and emotional benefits of working creatively together.

Initial E-mail Exchange: The Difficulty of Getting Started

Although we agreed to meet again after our initial encounter, arranging an open-ended conversation outside of academic timetabling proved to be a difficult commitment to orchestrate. Despite developing a creative dialogue online via Instagram, it still took us seven months of email correspondence to find a date to meet:

December 2021

Wendy: We met at the print fair at the Millennium Galleries a few weeks ago. Would it be possible to come and see you?

January

Joanna: It'd be nice to meet up & chat about your work & research...

February

Wendy: I'm sure we'll meet at some point

April

Joanna: I'd love to arrange a meet up...

Wendy: I'm itching to chat to you about stuff!

May

Joanna: I've just got too much on at the moment.

June

Wendy: Are you free for that chat / coffee?...

July 2022

Wendy: just checking we're on for meeting tomorrow

Joanna: sounds good.

Wendy: Great to meet up with you yesterday and have such a good chat... I love the idea of some sort of relay / to & fro joint project.

Joanna: It was so lovely to meet & chat... As for a relay... I'm definitely up for that.

First In-person Exchange: Setting Out Intentions

We finally met up in the café of a garden centre on a sunny morning in July. Our hour-long conversation confirmed the affinity we had previously suspected, and an idea was spontaneously formed to share a relay-style visual project. The premise of this kind of project is for two or more artists to work in correspondence with each other, swapping or passing creative responses on artefacts. Over time a narrative or dialogue emerges which can be directed to a greater or lesser extent by the artists involved through prompts or use of an overarching topic. Some notable examples are: 'I send you this cadmium red' by John Berger and John Christie (2000); 'Dear Data' by Georgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec (2016); and 'Conversations' by Christoph Niemann and Nicholas Blechmann (2020). What emerges can also be revealing about, and for, the artists involved, as demonstrated by the Dear Data project which the artists describe as a "personal documentary" (Lupi & Posavec, 2016, p. xi).

We began our relay project with two secondhand artefacts: a jacket and a tablecloth, representing basic human 'needs' (clothing and food) and corresponding to our areas of expertise and interest in waste. We agreed to meet monthly to discuss and swap visualised data about our consumer habits via the artefacts. Whilst recognising that some habits might be uncomfortable to share, we were prepared to confront them in order to explore experimental visual languages about the experiences. We condensed this into a four word manifesto: 1.exchange 2.explore 3.respond 4.confess.

Creative Exchanges & The Importance of Location

We chose venues off-campus for our swaps, often including time for lunch or a drink. These meetings added to the wellbeing impact of the project by bringing an added

sense of pleasure and excitement every time we met. We used these neutral locations to take photos of the evolving artefacts, capturing them in a range of cafes. This became part of our repeated ritual and we now have a series of photos of the changing artefacts, in various venues around the city.

The crafted interactions have included: stitching; printing; appliqué; beading; frottage; patching and badge making. Such diversity in practice has meant a shared appreciation for each other's skills, but beyond skills and practice, much like the 'personal documentary' aspect to the Dear Data project (Lupi & Posavec, 2016), we have shared insights into our respective consumption habits through amusing and confessional conversations. Titling the project 'Ex:Change' describes the artefacts' past lives ('ex'), the transformation of their identity and value through our creative interactions ('change'), and the swapping and conversations about them ('exchange').

What follows are edited commentaries on our interactions with the artefacts. We shared these descriptors on a collaborative Padlet as the project evolved over a period of 2.5 years after our first meeting. Each entry is in response to the artefact, the previously crafted elements and data collected from our month of consumer habits. They all begin with a title and a short 'alt text' style description of the crafted interaction followed by a personal commentary and reflection.

Some of the crafted interactions on both artefacts can be seen in image 9.1.



Image 9.1 The denim jacket and tablecloth in South Street Kitchen café, Sheffield, UK.

Exchanging The Tablecloth

Joanna: Embroidered Wine. Blue stitched circle.

Looking through the recycle bin for evidence of my recent consumption habits, I found an empty bottle of Argentinian wine. I realised we drank the contents on Sunday when Argentina won the World Cup. In honour of the co-incidence, I printed the bottle base and used the marks as guidelines for embroidery.

Wendy: Winter Foliage Garland. Black monoprinted foliage.

The ritual of using tablecloths seems to return around Christmas and New Year when people take more time to lay out their tables for family and friends. I used foliage, dried flowers and seed heads from my garden to print a garland design around the wine bottle print.

Joanna: Blooming Plastic. Hand-stamped pale pink bottle bases. (See Image 9.1)

Inspired by the printed flowers, I was reminded that bases of plastic drinks bottles resemble floral forms. I extracted some from our recycling bin, using them to directly print new 'blooms' onto the garland.

Wendy: Recycled Flowers. Appliquéd flowers. Contemporary tablecloths tend to have little in the way of embellishment. I like that ours is becoming the complete opposite. I added flowers cut out from old curtains that were found in my parents' garage while clearing it out a few years ago. Initially I put the damp dirty curtains in the skip but had second thoughts and retrieved them. After a good wash, they are a perfectly usable textile again.

Joanna: Chain Reaction. Blue, green and pink pastel rubbings of plastic tub circumferences.

Responding to the fabric extracted from the skip, I selected a batch of tubs from our kitchen bin – evidence of processed food packaged in plastic. Conscious of the 'ugly' truth of this waste, I wanted to respond decoratively. I made rubbings of each vessel, linking the circular shapes like a chain and added decorative drawn elements to echo the hand stitched embroidery.

Wendy: Recycled Flowers 2.0. 3D plastic flowers.

I wondered if I could make a textile embellishment from plastic packaging waste, a kind of 'alternative sequin'. It seems the height of capitalist madness to decorate a garment likely destined for a short life with tiny pieces of plastic produced from fossil fuels. I tried a milk carton which worked perfectly. One of these milk cartons lasts myself and my partner around two days.

Joanna: Oat Milk Month. Hand-stamped cartons in white ink.

The subject of milk consumption compelled me to monitor how much oat milk I consume in numerous cups of coffee every day. I tallied my use in one month, amounting to eight cartons. I printed directly onto the tablecloth by inking up a carton, creating a repeat pattern.

Wendy: Fancy a Brew? Stitched data of tea-drinking habits.

During 31 days I drank 184 cups of tea, an average of 6 per day. I represented this with a written approach rather than a creative visualisation, probably due to the limited time I had to execute it rather than a conscious design choice. I have never really considered the social, economic or health implications of tea in any depth, so I did some reading around tea this month.

Joanna: Stop Wine(ing). Swirls of white ink in square shapes.

In the spirit of confession, I documented how much wine I drank in a month! A guilty declaration of an unhealthy habit, whilst contributing imported glass to the local waste infrastructure. Using the base of each bottle, I swept the corrugations across wet ink on a gelli plate, creating a unique viscous patterned print for each one.

Wendy: Free Flowers (or were they?) Black monoprinted flowers.

On a late-night visit to the supermarket, one of the staff asked if I would like some flowers that were about to be thrown out. I took two bunches and had two vases of colourful flowers for the next three weeks. I made a rough repeat pattern printing directly from the flowers once they had reached the end of their life. I printed one flower for every day I had been able to enjoy them and keep them out of the household waste.

Joanna: Memorial Flowers. Black prints of flowers overprinted with packaging in white.

I received a bunch of carnations and printed them and their packaging onto the tablecloth once the flowers had died. I used gelli printing for the flowers and overprinted directly from the clear plastic wrapper and the rubber bands that hold the stems, blending organic and man-made.

Wendy: Who Made My Food? Letterpress prints of brand names.

I made a note of all the brand names I encountered in my food at home during one day. Of the eight brands, four were owned by different multi-nationals, three by UK based family-owned businesses and one whose ownership was unclear. When we met to exchange items, we observed that uniformly printing all the names in the same font rendered the brands unrecognisable.

Joanna: Potato in Plastic. Black printed typographic list of potato products.

‘The Big Plastic Count’ is a Greenpeace initiative inviting households to collect and count all their plastic packaging in one week. From a large bag of packaging I extracted

wrappers from convenience potato products – considering that potatoes are easily grown in the UK and arguably could be sold unpackaged. I cut the words from the flexible plastic to create a series of ‘ready-made’ typographic stencils, to print through.

Exchanging The Denim Jacket

Wendy: Printed Skip Toys. Monoprints made from soft toys.

I saw some soft toys in a skip, dirty and rained on. After checking with the skip’s owner I took them home and printed them directly onto the jacket. There are several conversations about the value of textiles in these prints: the jacket categorised in the kilo sale where I bought it as “vintage” bearing the marks of wear and tear so aesthetically pleasing on denim; contrasted with two children’s toys, laden with branding, perhaps loved by an unknown child with no visible signs of use but not considered worthy of being taken to the charity shop by their previous owner.

Joanna: Label Sticking Out. Pink trimming and underwear label.

Whilst considering my response to discarded toys, my son gave me a pair of holey pants to throw away! This steered me towards capturing a record of this tiny garment, in recognition of the connection between children and waste, especially as they grow. The pants still had intact trimmings, so I used these to embellish the jacket. From something private, to public, I left the label visible, capturing the size, manufacturer and materials that the pants were made from.

Wendy: Wardrobe Audit. Hand stitches to represent data from wardrobe audit.

A ‘sufficiency wardrobe’ for a four-season climate, such as we have in the UK, is 85 garments (Coscieme et al. 2022). An audit on my own wardrobe, to my horror, totaled 205 garments. A visual representation of this on the jacket seemed like a good response to the pants. There are 205 red stitches, with 120 crossed out in black stitching, leaving the ‘sufficiency wardrobe’ of 85.

Joanna: Zig Zag Tally. Yellow zig zag stitch.

I did a tally of all the clothes I own (over 500!) and shamefully represented this data using one machine stitch per garment. I created a parallel pattern to the pre-existing decorative zig zag stitches on the jacket to integrate it subtly and secretly into the denim. I left the thread loose at the end to either unpick, if I got rid of clothing, or add stitches if I gained any.

Wendy: Wardrobe Tally. Additions to the hand stitched audit.

I recorded how many of my garments I wore during May. It totaled 41 different garments, representing just 20% of my total wardrobe (205). I updated my previous stitched wardrobe audit and highlighted the 41. This made me think that the ‘sufficiency wardrobe’ of 85 garments might not be so difficult to achieve after all.

Joanna: Beaded Bar Chart. Small blue beads on long parallel stitched threads.

I audited my clothes use and created a beaded bar chart. The thread showed first use, and a bead was added for each additional wear. Once finished, it reminded me of an abacus or medals on a uniform - brandishing achievements. I wore 58 different items during one summer month. Adding just 27 more for the other eleven months of the year, would be a significant challenge!

Wendy: Updated Wardrobe Audit. More additions to the hand stitched audit.

I went back to my stitched wardrobe audit, after realising I had removed 10 garments (donating to charity and removing for repair/modification) which was not represented in the remaining 205. I updated this in the stitching to leave 195 'active' garments.

Joanna: Button Badges. Photos of garments on button badges.

I guiltily acquired four new garments, since we last met. I wanted to create an adornment that could be removed. Each garment is represented by an individual badge; one is a firm favourite, one is not a great fit and two have never been worn! Did I really need them?

Wendy: Fabric 'Badges'. Appliquéd circles of fabric.

I created 'badges' using fabric from the garments I removed during my earlier audit for alteration / modification. I cut circles from parts of the garments that I had already removed as part of the alterations and hand sewed them onto the jacket.

Joanna: Holes in the Crotch. A holey patch of denim stitched with yellow thread.

This month, I threw away a well-worn pair of favourite jeans with holes in the crotch because this type of repair is difficult, bulky, and unsightly. I cut out the damaged crotch and stitched it directly onto the jacket sleeve, to brandish my disappointment in the weak fabric.

Wendy: Rubbing Off. Frottage on a fabric patch.

I thought about ways to repair Jo's damaged denim. This didn't feel right, instead I took a rubbing of damage that I had repaired in one of my own pairs of jeans. This makes an interesting commentary on the differences in material quality between men's and women's clothes: Jo's women's jeans were lightweight with a high elastane content; making them less durable. Mine are men's jeans and 100% cotton denim which is easier to repair when damaged.

Joanna: Three Ribbons. Three small ribbons printed in red.

In contrast to heavy weight repairable denim, I found three neglected items in my underwear drawer, each unworn because of holes. These needed to be disposed of, but I wanted to capture an impression from them first. I inked and pressed the shiny

polyester ribbons from the waist bands. Having printed them, I started to see them as 'X' shaped - three crosses – three wrong answers to sustainable fashion and longevity.

Wendy: Circles of Life. Drawcord stitched into 10 loops.

I have been collecting mine and my partner's 'waste' clothes for almost a year, clothes that are damaged, misshapen, and unwearable. These clothes are a problem, no-one really knows what to usefully do with them and too many are ending up in the general waste stream, destined for incineration or landfill (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2019). I stitched the drawcord from a 'waste' pair of leggings onto the jacket forming loops to represent the 10 years that I owned them.

The series of interactions across both artefacts prompted us to confront our own consumption habits, enabling us to have frank conversations about the ways globalisation, supply chains and waste infrastructures are removing consumer agency and choice, impacting our everyday lives. Although the collection and use of our uniquely personal data initially provoked feelings of guilt, over time it made the overwhelming scale of the topic feel more manageable. Learning through objects, materials and each other's data we can take time to recognise the impacts, explore the possibilities to make different choices, and find hope, albeit on an individual level.

A Reflective Exchange

After these initial observations on the significance of the project for our respective research and practice, we decided to capture a reflective conversation about the potential impacts on our wellbeing to date (three years after we first met). An 'object interview' format with an agreed list of questions to ask each other seemed most appropriate with the artefacts in front of us serving as 'object elicitation' tools (Woodward, 2020). Our 'interview' proved to be rich and looking over the transcripts, some potent words and phrases relating to self-care and wellbeing were apparent, for example: space; therapeutic; play; provocative; low-pressure; value in mistakes; connection; open; honest, accepting; kind; confidence; passion; empowering. This is not vocabulary we typically associate with our everyday academic work.

Edited excerpts from the interview follow:

Why did we make space for this project alongside our academic work?

Wendy: "Even though I'm doing a practice-based PhD, it's quite easy to overlook practice and get bogged down in theory. The accountability of a shared project gave me a space for practice. It sounds like it's also been a space where you were able to be creative amongst your teaching responsibilities?"

Joanna: "Definitely, like you, being creative in amongst theoretical activities, just having this space and place and obligation regularly to do something. Do you think some of this was therapeutic for you?"

Wendy: “Yeah, it felt like a nice safe space to try things out and just play, a way of making time for practice, which I’m really glad I did, because it does have a tendency to get squeezed out. In a way, the practice is what I know, it’s familiar and it’s what I do, but that whole other side of a PhD of how to research, learning about ethics, that’s what I perceive as high-level academia and feels like a space where I’m learning and demands focus and attention, which eats a lot of my time....I’ve treated the artefacts like sketchbooks, a place to try out ideas. Have they been like that for you?”

Joanna: “Yes, although I was probably a bit repetitive and using familiar tools, methods, devices that I could lean on quite quickly. Some of those things I hadn’t tried before, I didn’t always like the results. But I love relay projects because they always inspire me, provoke me, foster better time management within me and push me creatively...”

What impact has sharing the objects had on our practice?

Wendy: “I think it offers a non-judgmental, low-pressure space to just experiment and play around with stuff. It’s hard sometimes to just let yourself make mistakes, to allow things to be imperfect. There’s something valuable about a small regular project, that doesn’t take up a huge amount of time and builds up gradually. It’s a nice reminder of how we are capable of doing bigger things, but also recognising some value in the mistakes and being more accepting of them.”

Joanna: “Yeah and they’re diluted, aren’t they? They’re in amongst a whole medley of other things.”

Wendy: “Exactly, would we have spotted them? What we might consider less successful or that we’re not that happy with, the other person may have seen quite differently. Actually, I sometimes thought of it as our play project.”

Joanna: “Hmm, and actually something that’s striking me now is that they’re jointly ours, as in, we both have a connection to them. I’ve definitely got a fondness for them now. A question I have is: have we added value or have we ruined them?!”

Wendy: “In what you’ve just described, that’s definitely added some sort of value. But is it aesthetic value? And how is aesthetic value different to the more emotional or artistic value we feel that they’ve now got?”

Joanna: “I think they’ve got some artistic value, and I think they’ve got some emotional value, because they’re our shared diaries.”

What role do you think our conversations had on the project?

Joanna: “I think we were lucky because we’re both of a similar age and stage in womanhood. I think probably that helped make me think that there’d be space for us to be quite open and honest about different areas of our life that these artefacts represent

such as consumer habits or body changes. I felt when we first met, there was a nice openness and an ease of conversation.”

Wendy: “Yeah an ease of conversation without any pressure, but I liked how we questioned each other’s thinking during those meet-ups when we swapped the artefacts.”

Joanna: “I think our friendship has grown because it’s been based on trust and openness and, for the most part, talking about creativity. I found it a safe space to talk about things we may not be able to talk about or feel totally comfortable sharing with others who aren’t as tuned into these subjects as we are. It was a confidence booster to be able to bounce ideas around, theoretically and practically. I probably pushed myself more through the conversation about what we’d done and why we’d done it.”

Has the project affected how we see ourselves within academia?

Wendy: “Doing my PhD I’m in this new space of academia again, after a long time being out of education. I’ve definitely been plagued by a lot of self-doubt and feelings of being an imposter. This project has felt like a very accepting, kind space to do things and to try stuff out, things that, would I have tried them out on my PhD? Probably, but I think this project gave me more confidence. Yeah, I’ve not really realised any of that until now!”

Joanna: “It definitely was good for my wellbeing to hear you talk about your PhD, which then made me feel more confident that it was something maybe I could do. So that’s been really good in terms of confidence boosting and making me feel like I can progress with that [applying for a PhD]. And also just to believe in the validity of inquiring into this stuff and it not being a solo pursuit. You know, we’re talking about stuff that’s all quite demoralising. “

Wendy: “And not glamorous! A lot of the time we’re dealing with materials that maybe aren’t aesthetically beautiful or pleasing to look at, yet we both are in a world where visuals are important.”

What unexpected ways has the project affected our wellbeing?

Joanna: “The project is quite a morale boost in a space where it’s possible to get quite bogged down with what we were trying to deal with, what we were trying to do.”

Wendy: “And I think a lot of the stuff that we’re dealing with, it can be dispiriting, a bit demoralising, yet we’ve made it aesthetically pleasing and it’s been playful, just taken a bit of the doom and gloom out of it.”

Joanna: “I think that the other thing that we’ve overlapped with is a passion for the subject area broadly and subsequently quite uplifting conversations about the things we’ve learned and understood, the things we’re trying to counter and the things we’re trying to draw attention to. Actually that shared objective is empowering.”

Conclusion

The 'exchanges' within this project have helped us flourish and embed creativity into our academic lives in a breadth of ways. Multiple forms of correspondence through online and in-person conversations have offered intellectual stimulus, knowledge sharing and have maintained our momentum. Developing a mutual admiration for each other's creativity and craft skills has enabled us to discuss and describe practice-based research in-depth and with more relevance. There has also been value in appreciating each other's 'mistakes', as described by David Gauntlett in 'Making is Connecting' (2018).

Being off campus and accountable to one another encouraged us to explore new venues, take a break, enjoy a change of scene and treat ourselves. Companionship and having enough trust in one another to pose difficult questions has instilled a strong sense of solidarity. Through this validation of our mutual concerns our confidence, resilience and commitment to the topics of waste and sustainability has deepened. As set out by ecophilosopher Joanna Macy and resilience specialist Chris Johnstone in their book 'Active Hope': "By seeking out encouragement, aid, and good counsel, we create a more favorable context both for our project and for ourselves. Doing so is especially important when we are facing difficult or hostile conditions." (Macy & Johnstone, 2022, p.201).

As mentioned at the start of our chapter, this project did not start as a tool for self-care or wellbeing it was purely a personal project undertaken in our own time. As we have reflected on the evolution of the project, the benefit to our academic wellbeing is clear, but it has also emerged as a rich source of care: for the planet, for one another; and for self.

As passionate advocates of creative relay projects we recommend them as a transformative way for academics to start exchanges about shared interests. Our advice before starting your own: find some common ground; agree methods, materials and frequency of swaps; and keep an open mind.

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