

KeyPiece: Creating a critical dialogue in contemporary craft.

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**KEYPIECE: CREATING A CRITICAL DIALOGUE
IN CONTEMPORARY CRAFT
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1. INTRODUCTION

Theoretical and critical dialogue in contemporary crafts has a short history. As Pamela Johnson¹ states,

“During the rise of critical theory, particularly in the 1980s within visual studies, craft makers and mediators remained outside the debate.”

Since the 1990s an increasing number of publications have connected crafts to a wider cultural debate, which presents thinking that goes beyond describing craft technique and maker biography.² Although most of these texts have been written and edited by craft theorists/critics, the increase in practitioners as academic researchers has provided new opportunities that enable makers in the field to locate their work within this theoretical framework.

A seminar in 1998 at the University of East Anglia was initiated to develop critical writing in the crafts and resulted in the publication ‘Ideas in the Making’¹. This was an important point of convergence, where the language of making and that of mediating were heard in the same forum through critic and practitioner sharing a platform, with 60% of contributions from makers.

Recently researchers and practitioners in this field have developed alternative methods for creating critical and theoretical dialogue outside of traditional symposiums/conferences³; constructing creative situations where the events themselves are research activities for eliciting knowledge for further dissemination.

Keypiece⁴ was one such project, combining research seminar/workshop with public exhibition and ‘key-talks’ at the SIA Gallery, Sheffield in November 2009. It was a window for academics, researchers, students and the public to see cutting edge studio work from leading jewellers and metalworkers, and to follow the accompanying research discourse.

¹ Johnson, P. (1998) ‘Ideas in the Making: practice in theory.’ Pub Crafts Council p15.

² e.g. Dormer, P. (ed) (1997). *The Culture of Craft*. Pub Manchester University Press; Adamson, G. (2007) *Thinking through craft*. Pub Berg; Sennett R (2008). *The Craftsman*. Pub Allen Lane.

³ e.g. ‘Intelligent-Trouble: A curious exchange’ [online] <http://www.caa.org.uk/exhibitions/archive/intelligent-trouble.html> accessed May 2010; ‘Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Revolution’[online] <http://www.craftspace.co.uk> accessed May 2010; Fabian, A. (2001) *A field of silver-silver in a field* (event publication ISBN 1 899764 259)

⁴ Sponsored by Arts Council England, Yorkshire, and the Art & Design Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University. Website <http://www3.shu.ac.uk/keypiece>

2. THE EVENT

The two-day research event was speculative and open-ended with the organisers creating an intimate, intense environment to afford in-depth discussion and elicit a personal level of knowledge about the practice of makers/researchers. It was structured to encourage a gradual disclosure, so participants would increasingly make more public what they revealed.

Three researchers from the Art & Design Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, initiated and participated in the project; Dr C oil n   Dubhghaill (Research Fellow), Maria Hanson (Reader) and Professor Christoph Zellweger (Workshop Leader). The other participants, invited due to their shared research interests, were: Dr. Lionel Dean, Dr. Sara O'Hana, Dr. Grace Horne, Antje Illner, Drummond Masterson, Tine de Ruysser, and Lucian Taylor. Observation and documentation was by M nica Gaspar (writer/curator) and Dr. Nicola Wood (multimedia designer/researcher).

Objects

Each participant was initially asked to submit two 'Keypieces' for public exhibition, with no definition other than they should be "original works of major importance/significance to the makers practice"⁵. In addition, a week before the event, the Workshop Leader asked each participant to bring two additional objects they considered to be Keypieces, for use in the workshops but not for exhibition.

Gallery space

To enable engagement with the public whilst maintaining the seminar situation the exhibits, displayed on one long plinth, provided a divide of the gallery. The additional objects were placed on the floor behind the plinth, away from public gaze but where participants could interact with them.

Contrary to many exhibitions, the work was not behind glass cases, which was important for both workshops and audience participation. Also, it was not labelled, showing participants what the objects alone might reveal. However, this gave the public little information to help them understand the work or workshops, raising issues about how objects communicate to a less informed audience.

The workshop side of the gallery was transformed into a white cube with the walls and floor lined with paper for use during discussions. Whilst the participants were on view, they were sufficiently distant from the public to hold private conversations. This intimacy was further facilitated by very low chairs which allowed participants to sit comfortably and write on the paper on the floor. Gaspar⁶ observed that;

"The exhibition became a fine line that separated physically and metaphorically the two moments of articulating the event: the protected (although fully exposed) time of discussing and

⁵ From the invitation document sent to participants.

⁶ Gaspar, M. [online]. *Keypiece* website <http://www3.shu.ac.uk/keypiece/> accessed May 2010.

testing ideas with the colleagues and the time of making statements, transmitting results in front of the audience and getting ready for a debate with the public.”

From an observer’s point of view, the effect was visually dramatic. The contrast between the neutrality of the white cube next to the participants, dressed largely in sombre colours with shoes removed so as not to mark the paper, gave the feeling of improvised performance art.

Time

Activities were organised to create an intimate, intense environment in which participants could feel confident discussing the more personal aspects of their creative practice. The aim was also to focus discussions on the selected topics and ensure that most of the discourse occurred within the gallery where it could be documented.

Before the event, the project initiators avoided detailed discussion of the workshop content or their own views on the Keypiece concept. The event started the evening before the workshops, with the focus away from the gallery to allow informal social time for the group. During the workshops participants spent the entire day on public view in the gallery, including refreshment breaks. The group also had dinner together on the evening between the two workshop days; offering private time for the group, but limited personal time.

It was also important that documentation of the event did not intrude upon the workshops⁷. The observers, Gaspar and Wood, have both worked extensively within this field of research and were known to a significant number of the participants beforehand. In addition, their being part of the social activities enabled the group to feel comfortable with their presence.

Dialogue

The workshops were led by Zellweger who posed a series of questions centring on how a ‘Keypiece’ can be identified and defined (more detail below). The exhibited pieces functioned as both a physical reference and a catalyst in the development of the discussions.

Initially participants worked in groups of three or four. Formative experiences, influences, and recognition of a layer of knowledge underpinned the philosophical nature of the debate. As discussion developed, ideas began to emerge through text and diagrams on the paper on the floor. These were tentative at first, with most written in pencil then, as confidence grew, ideas were committed to paper in marker pens.

At times the group came together to share findings, but this took place after they had placed their thoughts in the public space on the paper on the wall, allowing them to formalise the content first. This breaking down and building back up allowed initial thoughts and ideas to take a further iteration through the action of transferring text

⁷ Wood, N. (2010). *A good record? The use of video in practice-led design research*. Reflections 13 (Research Training Sessions 2009) pp114-125. Brussels: Sint Lucas School of Architecture.

and diagrams from floor to wall, prompting another, more refined layer of discussion, clarity, or in some cases further questions.

Each day was punctuated with more formal presentation to the public; the KeyTalks, facilitated by Gaspar. Participants were not told the subject of the talks in advance, and the resultant improvised activity was somewhat performative; a first attempt to make public the private thoughts expressed in the workshops, allowing the audience to discover a hidden layer or story.

After the event, the whole gallery became accessible to the public; the text and diagrams on the walls and floor providing greater insight into the exhibited objects.

3. WORKSHOP QUESTIONS

It is not possible to present a full account of the discussions⁸ but, to give insight, author and participant Maria Hanson relates them here from her perspective.

Question 1: What distinguishes a Masterpiece from a Keypiece?

Introduction of the more established concept of Masterpiece enabled comparisons and opposites to be constructed. Considering what one term was, helped to define what the other was not.

Hanson's group initially attempted to define a Masterpiece by drawing in references from outside the gallery, citing examples such as Caroline Broadhead's 'Veil' (1983), Gijs Bakker's 'Rose Neckpiece' (1983) and Otto Künzli's 'Wallpaper Brooches' (1983). These works appear in "The New Jewellery: trends and tradition"⁹, one of the seminal publications that marked contemporary jewellery as an applied art/craft activity. The group recognised it was the published, iconic photographs which positioned them within the domain of Masterpiece, as has the controversial image of Hanson's 'Body Piece#5' (1993)¹⁰. Other criteria identified as being important were endorsement from a third party, the ability for a piece to stand alone, hit the right note and/or mark a moment in time.

In contrast, criteria for identifying Keypieces were dependant on the maker, and relied on reflective evaluation of concept and idea, often done in hindsight. They could represent the start of an elongated enquiry, and generally belonged to a collection of objects, thus enabling identification.

Question 2: What in your opinion identifies your colleagues' piece as a Keypiece?

⁸ More in-depth reports by Gaspar will appear later this year in *Objects* contemporary applied art magazine and *The Journal of Crafts Research*.

⁹ Dormer, P. and Turner, T. (1985). *The New Jewellery: trends and tradition*. Pub Thames and Hudson

¹⁰ Turner, R. (1996). *Jewelry in Europe and America; New times new thinking*, Pub Thames and Hudson.

Participants worked in pairs, taking it in turns to select an object belonging to their partner to discuss, then moving around the group engaging with a new person.



‘What identifies the Keypiece?’ (photo credit: Dr Nicola Wood)

Hanson noticed an initial politeness during this intimate interaction; asking if one could pick up the object, feel it, handle it, wear it etc., then the process of ‘reading’ the object began. This concept draws on Norman’s¹¹ appropriation of Gibson’s theory of affordances¹². Norman proposed that perceived affordances ‘suggest’ how an object may be interacted with based upon the ‘actors’ values, beliefs and past experiences, furthering Gibson’s original definition of affordances as “all action possibilities”.

Dialogue moved quickly through materials used, possible means of manufacture, scale, weight, form, and potential use. The atmospheric values of objects were considered; the physical and psychological effects of using certain combinations of materials¹³, how they look and feel, associations that could be made; trying to reveal something of the hidden narratives. Dialogue was punctuated by statements that were in fact questions; seeking some kind of endorsement from the maker about what was being said.

Question 3: Are there different categories or characteristics of a Keypiece?

Working in larger groups of five, this question led participants to re-iterate previous dialogue with Hanson’s group searching for a different approach to it. Writing became more vigorous and voices at times rose. This debate created a chart which analysed what a Keypiece is and what it does. This in a sense created categories and characteristics, and resulted in a construct where the content of one column affected the other (see below):

A Keypiece is
(maybe / possibly / most likely)
A reference point on a journey
A lodestone (compass)
Significant

A Keypiece does
(might / possibly / most likely)
Define a direction
Guide you
Prove something

¹¹ Norman, D. A. (1988). *The psychology of everyday things*. Pub Basic Books.

¹² Gibson, J. J. (1977). *The theory of affordances*. In R. E. Shaw & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing*. Pub Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

¹³ Baudrillard, J. (1996/1968). *The System of Objects*. J. Benedict (Trans). Pub Verso Books.

A confirmation of something	Provide tangible evidence
Confrontational	Challenge the norm
A device that provides insight	Provide insight
A placeholder	Frame the space to work within
An answer to previous enquiries	Pose questions
A link (stepping stone)	Make statements
Something to evaluate success and failure	Make connections
	Confirm assumptions
	Suggest new openings

4. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

On reflection it was observed that, within the recorded text, there was no use of words relating specifically to the field of metalwork and jewellery. The outcomes / statements / manifestos suggest that the methods used and the abstract nature of the words 'Keypiece' and 'Masterpiece' do not belong to any one field or discipline.

In order to further evaluate the concept, the organising group are planning further Keypiece events to extend participation beyond the field of metalwork and jewellery. These will include practitioners from other creative disciplines and also potentially become multi-disciplinary events.

The success of Keypiece as a project and method for eliciting the research embedded in 'objects' relies on collaboration between research practitioners and appropriate mediators. Through multiple viewpoints, ideas diverge and converge and redress the balance of the singular voice.