

## ***Making Stuff***

**By Françoise Dupré, Axis Dialogue published in 2008.**

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Françoise Dupré discusses her ongoing concerns about the nature of the creative process and the condition and location of art production within the context of her collaborative-participatory and community-based art practice. Using *Project B: sebilj* as a starting point she first reflects on the use of digital technology as a making tool then argues that in her collaborative-participatory practice, the experience of making and viewing of the art object and participants' and artists' intersubjective relationships have to be both part of the same practice.

*Project B* is a Birmingham-based trans-national collaborative public art community project referencing the functionality of ornament and its transformative quality on architectural space. It is a collaboration between artists Françoise Dupré and Dr Myfanwy Johns in partnership with architect Sabina Fazlic and participants from the charity organisation the Bosnian Cultural Centre-Midlands (BCCM) [1]. Following the successful introductory project *avlija* and its exhibition (New Generation Arts (NGA) Festival and Architecture Week, Birmingham, 2007), *Project B* launched in November 2007 its main stage: *sebilj* (2007-2010). Its aim is the fabrication of 'Sebilj' a large portable flat-pack type public structure influenced by traditional Bosnian design and inspired by the famous public fountain and landmark 'Sebilj' in Sarajevo. *Project B: sebilj* research and development work was exhibited at *Digital Utopia?* (NGA Festival, Birmingham, 2008).

*Project B* has a unique and exciting hybrid approach that combines two distinct artistic practices: Mine, a collaborative-participatory and community based trans-national textile practice that explores the concept of the art of making in the everyday [2] and celebrates invisible creative skills; Myfanwy Johns': whose research focussed on the cutting edge applications of new technologies to develop ornamentation in architecture [3]. What makes *Project B* different, from any of my previous projects is the use of digital technology as a making tool. Through digital technology *Project B* transforms and combines traditional craft techniques and Bosnian design to propose new designs for a Birmingham 'Sebilj'. In contemporary art we often associate the use of digital technology with web-based art, film/video, photography and temporary large projections/ installations. Contemporary makers and designers do as well use digital technology, it is applied to the design and fabrication of objects, architectural ornamentation and textile [4]. *Project B* follows this later practice, and its concern with materiality.

The use of technology as a means through which to engage participants and audiences with art activities is not new [5]. The day event *On the Margin of Technology* [6] (Space gallery, London, 2008) provided an insight and thoughtful context for anyone concerned with the social implications of technology when working in the public domain. The event coincided with the exhibition *The Not Quite Yet* (Space gallery, London, 2008) which included artist Loraine Leeson's project: *Geezer Power* [7]. With a group of senior East Londoners: The Geezers, Leeson has worked on a project that explores technological innovation tapping on the group collective and extensive life experience. Space's event prompted me to think further about the role of technology as a meaningful tool for BCCM participants. The concern, here, was about the nature and degree of participants' involvement with technology. There are of course logistic issues around access to computers and fabrication machines. For *Project B*, participants' access to digital technology was possible because of the use of the teaching media suite at

Birmingham City University (BCU), School of Art. It meant that everyone was able to use Photoshop as a tool in the process of developing designs for 'Sebilj'. However, laser cut and etched designs based on participants' samples and 'Sebilj' architectural models had to be done elsewhere by model makers Dragonfly Models. Samples were brought back to the workshops and discussed. Dragonfly involvement with the project through model making workshops and follow up visits allowed continuity between process and fabrication.

The transformation, through digital process, of a hand made crochet sample into a machine etched pattern displaces the intimate and tactile relation that one has with the original object. There is a sense of loss as one's original seems to be disregarded in favour of the slick machine finished hard edge product. Within the context of a diasporic community, this sense of loss cannot be dismissed. Ownership of the "new" object can however be claimed by involving participants in the digital process. Tactile experience can also be restored by inserting, for example, hand made elements, thus bringing together the hand made and the digital. The question, therefore, is not one about choice of tools (technology versus the hand-made) but one about the nature and depth of participants' engagement from process to artwork and public viewing. The "new" object has to become part of the larger and more complex narrative of tightly interwoven relationships between process, artwork and a context of social, cultural and creative network [8].

The invisibility and marginalisation of the stitched and the hand made object, traditionally associated with women, are concerns that I have explored through previous collaborative-participatory projects [9]. These projects have engaged with traditional textile-based practices and women's creativity. Beside the idea of reclaiming and celebrating undervalued art forms, there is, however, my aim to develop a significant engagement with participants. I have therefore used textile activities because they are easily accessible and highly social activities. Known for their restorative value [10], they can be practiced in many different kind of contexts and survive migration [11]. Often, time consuming, these activities encourage long-term commitment and the end product always brings a sense of self worth and pride. It is this process of identity formation and the performativity of making activities that I wish to further discuss in relation to participatory and relational art practices.

With its intersubjective aspects, my practice can be located within the contemporary context of practices that favour the setting up of situations and dialogues, with audiences and participants. In the last decade there has been a renewed interest in participatory art practice [12]. One of the most influential model, has been Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) [13]. Valuable critical questions have been raised about art practices associated with relational aesthetics [14] and relevant to our present discussion is the issues around nature and depth of the human relationships and the loss of the art object. In our postmodern condition, Bourriaud argues, it is impossible to make new art objects with independent and new meanings because they are automatically consumed. However human activities that are also transformed into products of consumption, can be rematerialised by the artist. Art becomes a relational experience to live in, a context for human relationships, encounters and dialogues generated and organised by artists. For Bourriaud it is this interhuman relationship that is considered the *aesthetic object in and about itself* [15]<sup>1</sup>. But, what is the nature and depth of the social connections that relational aesthetics artists aim to restore? Conviviality does not necessary create a context where participants engage meaningfully with the other [16]<sup>2</sup>. Relational aesthetics is also problematic because it appears to exclude altogether the art object and the experience of art making and viewing. Although I agree with Bourriaud that the

contemporary work of art does not need to be a finished product to be contemplated, I nevertheless do question its inevitable state of transformation into *infinite chain of contributions* [17]. Bourriaud's context is a "our" privileged western postmodern society that consumed everything it creates. Is this an unavoidable and universal context? Is this relational model helpful to a collaborative-participatory and (diasporic) community based practice? Does one need to choose between a relational practice that offers and recognises and favors a context for intersubjectivity and a practice that is still concerned with object making? Relational aesthetics goes further than claiming the redundancy of the modernist aesthetic object, it implies the repudiation of all types of physical and material art objects and as a result it denies us of their sensory experience, restorative quality, social and cultural worth as well as our *joie de faire* (Ellen Dissanayake, 1992) [18]. Art objects, crafted objects are things, material culture all part of our physical and metaphorical world. For me a meaningful and ethical collaborative-participatory practice is one that engages with participants' identity, taps into their experience and history and provides a context for participants to become active social subjects. Integral to the process is the production of some kind of tangible object where individuals and community can, through the making and experiencing of the object's physicality and materiality, translate emotions, desires, experiences, create new meanings and shape their identity [19]. One can therefore argue that, within this type of practice, it is difficult to separate participants' and artist's relational experience from their experience of making and public viewing of the object.

Of course, the art object's reduction to commodity remains a concern but I believe that the complex narrative of a participatory approach with its tightly interwoven relationship between process, artwork and public viewing and its context of social, cultural and creative connections and dialogues, can provide resistance. These networks take time (and money) to develop and a successful and meaningful, collaborative-participatory practice requires time and commitments from artists and participants alike (and funding partners). Dublin based artist, Louise Walsh recent project, the *Hybrid Love Seat*, (Luas, St. James's Sculpture Project, Dublin, 2004-2007) [20] begun as a modest public art commission to be sited at the Light Rail stop at St James' Hospital and grew into an ambitious long-term and multi layered project involving local communities and institutions.

The artist created a network of social, cultural and human interconnections which became the necessary structure and context for the artist to develop an intersubjective engagement with participants, communities and places. Built within the project was a programme of workshops that provided participants with opportunities to develop their artistic skills and have a considerable input in the final public artwork. We are, here, once again reminded of the empowering role that making has in developing one sense of identity and how significant it is against the globalisation of culture.

## Notes

[1]  
The Bosnian Cultural Centre-Midlands (BCCM) is a registered company and a charity organisation which brings together Bosnians who live in the Midlands. It was established in 2003 and seeks to provide practical and psychological support for people from a Bosnian ethnic background. It provides a number of social and cultural activities including a women's club, care for the elderly and disabled, supplementary schools, community events, children's activities and the Bosniak Newsletter. Previous projects include *First Bosnians in the UK* in 2006, an oral history project. For more information visit: [www.firstbosnians.co.uk](http://www.firstbosnians.co.uk)

' The 1992-95 war caused over a million Bosnians to become expelled and dispersed around the world. Western Europe was in most cases the first and final destination of many Bosnians who fled from war atrocities. Some of them found refuge in Great Britain, which had a government programme to accept a certain number of these refugees, medical evacuees and former detainees from concentration camps. The city of Birmingham welcomed more than fifty families. This number would, in the following years (1995-2004), increase up to one hundred.' (From [www.firstbosnians.co.uk](http://www.firstbosnians.co.uk))

Between November 2007 and May 2008, artists and participants met for practical, digital and model making workshops. Participants made samples, developed designs and created patterns inspired by traditional Bosnian designs, iron work, carved wooden panels, embroidery and participants' own and family needle work. Participants' samples were scanned and transferred into computer design programmes, then transformed into laser etched or cut designs that were applied to the acrylic and ply veneer panels of two architectural models of 'Sebilj'. *avlija* was funded by Arts Council England; BCU and UnLtd. *sebilj* (research and development stage 2007-2008) was funded by Arts Council, England, Birmingham City University and Oxford Brooks University. Twenty five BCCM participants and three generations of Bosnians were involved in *sebilj* research and development stage. 'Sebilj' final location will be the newly acquired BCCM's community centre in Birmingham.

[2] de Certeau, Michel (1984) *The practice of everyday life* vol1 University of California Press, Berkeley

[3] Myfanwy Johns' recent commissions include a glass balustrade for Gloucester Docks regeneration scheme in 2007. For more information about the artist visit: [www.myfanwyjohns.co.uk](http://www.myfanwyjohns.co.uk)

[4] Today, knitters use digital machine such as the Shima Seiki Whole garment® used by artist Freddie Robin to create seamless three-dimensional knitted forms.

McFadden, David R., *Radical Lace & Subversive knitting*, Museum of Arts & Design, New York, 2007

[5] In the 1980s, Copyart Collective used to push around large and heavy photocopy machines into the Brixton Art Gallery (Atlantic Road) to lead community workshops. For more information about the Brixton Art Gallery visit: <http://brixton50.co.uk>.

[6] For more information about the day event *On the Margin of Technology* and the exhibition *The Not Quite Yet* (Space gallery, London, 2008) visit: <http://www.thenotquiteyet.net>

[7] Lorraine Leeson's practice is centred around the concept of art as catalyst for social change and she is well known for her collective, collaborative and participatory artworks in and for the public domain. For more information visit: <http://www.cspace.org.uk>

[8] *sebilj* exhibition included preparatory samples as well as larger hand made pieces, a slide show documentation of the workshops as well as photographs taken during Johns' and Dupré's research trip to Bosnia & Herzegovina. *Project B* has also included social events, meals and cultural visits.

[9] In 2006 I become the second recipient of the Alexandra Reinhardt Memorial Award. Titled *joie de faire (the making of stuff)* the award consisted of an art residency at the Feto-Maternal Medicine Department at the Oxford John Radcliffe Hospital, followed by a one person exhibition at the Menier Gallery, Menier Chocolate Factory, London (2007). The project was managed by Paintings in Hospitals. A publication about the whole project is published by Article Press. For more information visit my *axis* pages, <http://www.alexandrareinhardt.org.uk>, [www.paintingsinhospitals.org.uk](http://www.paintingsinhospitals.org.uk), [www.articlepress.co.uk](http://www.articlepress.co.uk).

*Fujaan* (London, 2005) was a collaborative French (spool) knitting project with the London-based Somali women's group *Back to Basics* and group leader Rakhia Ismail. The project was commissioned by Crafts Council, England and part of its international touring exhibition *Knit 2 Together*. For more information visit my *axis* pages.

*fil en aiguille... snáth nasc* (Ireland, 2003-2004) was a collaborative knitted project and exhibition I lead while artist in residence at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. For more information visit my *axis*

pages and commissioned article: Dupré, F. (2005) 'de fil en aiguille... snáth nasc' in *CONTEXTS Arts and Practice in Ireland, The Art Work Issue*, Vol 4, issue 2/2005, pp 60-67. ISBN 16492676

[10]

Reynolds, Frances (2004) 'Textile Art Promoting Well-being in Long-term Illness: Some General and Specific Influences', in *Journal of Occupational Sciences*, Vol 11, No2, pp 58-67.

Howell, Dana and Pierce, Doris (2000) 'Exploring the Forgotten Restorative Dimension of Occupation: Quilting and Quilt Use', in *Journal of Occupational Science*, Vol7, No 2, pp 68-72.

[11] BCCM participants have a rich collection of family textiles, brought back from Bosnia. *avlija* and *sebilj* designs were directly inspired by some of the textiles pieces.

[12] For further reading on participatory art practices and art in the public sphere:

Bishop, Claire, ed., (2006), *Participation*, Whitechapel and MIT Press

Doherty, Claire, ed., (2004), *Contemporary art: from studio to situation*, London: Black Dog Publishing.

Douglas, Anna, (2006), *New Thinking in Public Art: Habitat. Community. Environment*. Birmingham: Article Press.

Finkelpearl, Tom, (2001) *Dialogues in Public Art*, MIT Press

Franzen, B., Konig, K., Plath, C., (2007) *Sculpture projects Muenster 07*, Verlag der Buchlandlung Walther Konig

Kerster, Grant H., (2004), *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morgan, Jessica, ed., (2003). *Common Wealth*, London: Tate Publishing

[13] Bourriaud, Nicolas, (2002 English translation) *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du réel

The term, Relational Aesthetics was first used by Nicolas Bourriaud to discuss a heterogeneous group of artists and artistic practices from the 1990s including Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan.

[14] Bishop, Claire, (2004), 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, pp 51-57.

[15] Bourriaud, Nicholas, (2000), *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, p.27.

[16] Baqué, Dominique (2004) *Pour un nouvel art politique de l'art contemporain*, pp143-173.

[17] Bourriaud, Nicholas, (2000), *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, pp13-14.

[18] Dissanayake, Ellen (1992), *Homo Aesthetics: Where Art Comes From and Why*, Free Press

'Joie de faire' (joy of making) is a term used by American scholar Ellen Dissanayake when discussing the role of art in human society. For her, humans have an inherent 'Joie de faire' and pleasure in art-making; 'making special' are 'hardwired into human nature'.

[19]

Lawrence, Kay (2002), 'Weaving: An encounter between the Ngarrindjeri, the British and the French' in Sharrad, Paul and Collett, Anne, *Reinventing Textiles Postcolonialism and Creativity Volume 3* Telos Art Publishing, pp 123-139.

Wood Conroy, Diana, (2002), 'Between Colonial and Postcolonial: Tiwi Design: An aboriginal Silk-screen Workshop on Bathurst Island, Northern Territory' in Sharrad, Paul and Collett, Anne, *Reinventing Textiles Postcolonialism and Creativity Volume 3* Telos Art Publishing, pp 141-158.

Butler, Sally (2004) 'Disorientation: The affect of Lockhart River's Indigenous Art', in *Eyeline Contemporary Visual Arts*, No 54, pp 24-28.

[20] For more information about Louise Walsh visit: <http://www.louisewalsh.org>