

# Material Memories in Storage: the Aftermath of Site-Specific, Collectively Made Textiles

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## Abstract

Site-specific, collectively made textiles are particularly effective producers of histories that entwine place and people. More than simply a means to an end, the process of making collectively foregrounds the potential of textiles to transform and be transformed beyond their materiality. The material-making process mirrors another kind of making process: that of a certain kind of social integration or a sense of being and belonging somewhere, however temporary and changeable these might be. Once completed, however, these material artifacts can provoke difficult questions concerning the responsibility for their storage and display, succumbing to a fate in semi-permanent storage and eventually relinquishing their material presence to a form of visual or textual representation. Although it is not the fate of all, given the widespread practice of collective textile-making, there are inevitably some. Using the example of a collectively made hooked rug project which I coordinated and participated in thirteen years ago, I will explore in this article the transformed status of collectively made textile artifacts through memories of making in order to open up new understandings of these types of site-specific collective textile-making projects as a different kind of creative practice: as a narrative performance of experiences of being together.

**Keywords:** collectively made textiles; site-specific; storage; materiality; memory; narrative; performance; rhapsody

## **Introduction**

Textiles, through their modes of production, the materials used, and invented motifs, are particularly effective producers of histories that entwine place and people, especially site-specific, collectively made textiles (Robertson & Vinebaum 2016). Regular meetings with time set aside for stitching, hooking or piecing together, and the ensuing candid conversations encourage connections between people and the sharing of past histories (Gordon 2011; Freeman 1997). In the process of making the work, the intimacies generated by close physical contact with the materials and tools knots these past histories together. Through the act of being made the artifact, in turn, forms what will in time become a new history: the history of the group and its activities in and around that specific place.

More than a means to an end, with the end being the made artifact, the process of making together as a group foregrounds the potential of textiles to transform and be transformed, thereby acquiring new meanings as part of this transformation (Dupré 2014). For example, collected pieces of cloth are transformed from scraps, offcuts, and discarded clothing into a new artifact, such as a banner, a quilt or a rug, acquiring thus a new status and new meanings for the group that made it. A preoccupation with the making in large part motivates the group to convene and continue working on the project; a pleasure and satisfaction found in the making process steadily transforms into an anticipated sense of achievement acknowledged by the completed work. Each individual, in turn, is transformed by their experience of joining the group and taking part in the project. The banner, quilt or rug comes to embody and represent this transformation.

Yet, once completed, the live connection and stimulation promised by the sensations of handling the work fade. The physical connection to both people and place made real through the making of the artifact becomes political; one of strategy and logistics. The difficult problem of having to look after the artifact emerges: what to do with it now, where to keep it or display it, who will take responsibility for storing it? We are left with all that is in excess of the material

artifact—the stories exchanged, the celebratory events, the tensions in the relationships—eventually accessible only through memories.

Although it is not the fate of all textile artifacts to end up in semi-permanent storage, in lofts or cellars, given the widespread practice of collective textile-making, there are inevitably some. As a textile maker, I have been involved in site-specific collective textile-making projects in various roles with various communities, and I recognize in this the fate of some of these works. As a researcher, I am interested in the shared endeavor of collective making: I use my making skills to make connections with people across different contexts in order to learn more about the nature of the relationships revealed or enabled through textile-making. Although making the artifact is evidently central to the making process, in these projects my interest in it is as a residue of another kind of making: the making of a certain kind of social integration or of identity-making. I am therefore intrigued by the uncomfortable absence of the material artifact in the leftovers of collective endeavor.

Recently, two instances have provoked me to think again about the problem of what to do with the "residue" artifact—or more precisely, what to do with my memories of it. Firstly, in relation to one project, I had been asked what I wanted to do with the artifact by participants storing it in their cellar. I realized that, years later, it no longer held significance for me. The experience of making it with the other participants and what I had learned from it are still precious. But the artifact itself had somehow outlived its purpose for us all and had become a bulky burden. I didn't want to have to keep it any more than the others did. Secondly, revisiting the location where another project took place, I found it completely transformed. The visit reminded me of all we had experienced as a group during the two years we worked together. I wondered where we all were now, how our lives had transformed and how those original strong ties had loosened. I realized that, even if it was still there somewhere, the artifact on its own could no longer have, or represent, the same sense of belonging in that particular place.

The artifact, as well as the participants, appears to develop its own journey and its status within the collective making experience evolves and transforms over time. The problem identified concerns the tension between the artifact as material object and its agency within the group, its consequent uncomfortable absence if or when it ends up in storage and its continued existence in our memories. This raises questions that challenge ideals of site-specificity and forms of identity-making activities:

- If the material artifact is abandoned in storage, how does this transform the connections to a specific group of collaborators and a specific place? What form do our faded memories of it take?
- Is it possible to revive the sense of site-specificity?
- How does the absence of the material artifact transform its status, and what is the nature of the transformation?
- What might this offer for identity-making initiatives built on a sense of belonging to a particular place?

This article will explore the particularities of the transformed status of collectively made textile artifacts through memories of making, using the example of a site-specific collectively made hooked rug, “Déroulez le tapis rouge!,” a project I coordinated and participated in twelve years ago with a group of women from the Belleville district in Paris (see Figure 1). It will consider the nature of these material memories in the absence of the collectively made textile artifact and in relation to the performance of social integration and identity-making.



Figure 1. *Déroulez le tapis rouge!* 2004–2006. Collectively made hooked rug, Belleville, Paris XI, France. Photograph by the author.

### **Encountering Memories**

Encountering the artifact some time after a project's completion can be quite a powerful experience. All the various elements of the project are reunited once more, momentarily, in its materiality. It evokes a medley of sensations, emotions, and sounds that, like flashbacks, appear close at hand but immediately move out of reach. Its forceful physical presence is literally felt: its weight, its density, and compactness; its smell, the richness of its color, and the subtle variations of materials used—all impossible to fully capture in photographs. I am reminded of connections between individuals, between motifs and individuals, and of topics of conversation.

But those encounters are rare. If in storage, there are no easy opportunities for physical encounters with the artifacts, and even less for them to be shared. Most of the time we only

have memories of it and the experience of making it, and we make do with edited representations of this.

Much has been written about the potent force of memory exerted by textile artifacts. For the most part, this concerns personal memories of individuals or events rather than memories made collectively by a group. Clothing in particular, as it moulds to the shape of a loved one's body and absorbs their familiar smell, has been selected for its important role in accompanying a person through grief and mourning, for example (Spivak 2014; Stallybrass [1993] 2012; Dasté 2011). On a different register, stains on a shirt as a result of a fleeting encounter at a party are transformed through embroidery for the memory of that event to be recalled as all the more poignant (von Busch [2005] 2012). Catherine Harper's examination of collective, national memories embodied by textiles is an exception: stains on Father Edward Daly's handkerchief are reminders of the political significance of personal tragedy (Harper 2017). As for collectively made textiles, shared memories are often the subject rather than the leftovers of the work, as in the examples of the much celebrated AIDS memorial quilts, Chilean arpilleras or the "Troubles Textiles" that have emerged in Northern Ireland as a means to both remember and heal communities affected by the sectarian conflict (Nickell 2015). Furthermore, these examples concern the memories triggered by or symbolized by the object's physical presence, whereas I am interested here in how memories of people and place created by the making process itself are transformed in the absence of the artifact.

My motivation for being involved in these collective making projects has been to focus on the processes of making, in particular of making by hand, to better understand the agency of the emerging artifact in building networks of social relationships (Shercliff 2015). A focus on the making process highlights the role played by the constant flux of activity. This kind of project in fact consists of a series of micro events that steadily make both the artifact and those involved in its making. The exchange between participants, tools, and materials is reciprocal; in this evolving process of making and being made an imprint of the experience is left behind,

inscribed on the bodies and memories of those making the rug and into the rug itself. Agency, whether enacted by the participants or the rug-making materials, is, according to Lambros Malafouris (2008),

a temporal and interactively emergent property of activity not an innate and fixed attribute of the human condition. The ultimate cause of action in this chain of micro and macro events is none of the supposed agents, humans or non-humans; it is the flow of activity itself. (Malafouris, 2008: 35)

As the rug takes form, so do the other components of the project, including the participants as rug-makers; the social entity of the participants as a group, and their knowing how to be part of this group (Shercliff 2015). Our lives have enmeshed in a particular place for the duration of the project and a part of this is inscribed into the work. The individuals' stories give way to the forging of new collective ones; the making of the rug is also the making of new connections, new histories, and memories to come. The artifact comes to symbolize this process.

### **The Making of "Memories to Come"**

The "flow of activity," as described above by Malafouris (2008), vital as it is to the group's coming-into-being, is almost impossible to capture in the heat of the moment. In its place stand a collection of roughly pieced together memories. Aside from the more obvious memories of the location and the individuals involved in the project, I find most of the memories I have are associated with states of mind, feelings, and emotional responses to certain key moments: the ease of using certain materials and the satisfaction this brought, or the frustrations of not having the right skills; the nature of the friendships or acquaintances made and the poignancy of shared intimacies; the tensions and disagreements, both those resolved and those left unresolved; my ambiguous relationship to our meeting place. This seems to resonate with Yeseung Lee's examination of handmade production techniques: "The implicit result of making

is thus the effect this experience has on the maker's psychological, physical and emotional state" (Lee 2016: 49). She continues, "this mode of production changes the maker more significantly than other modes of production" (Lee 2016: 49).

The physical experience of making the artifact by hand therefore plays an important part in forming these memories. The rug has been made by a number of people; the making has therefore entailed a good deal of handling. Handling, and thereby the sense of touch, are fundamental to the real experience of the making. The immediacy of touch and the physical proximity to tools and materials worked by hand like this momentarily blur the boundaries between skin and tool or skin and material at the point of contact. Despite the collective endeavor, within the micro event of hands working the tools and materials, each maker merges with the artifact, making this an entirely singular and subjective experience (Pajczkowska 2010). However, these sensations do not continue to exist in memory for long after the act of making. In place of the touch sensation, unable to recreate it, we remember the emotions or feelings it gave rise to, as Susan Stewart reminds us: "Of all the senses, touch is most linked to emotion and feeling" (Stewart 1999: 31). Recalling the otherwise collective making experience can therefore only ever be partial, filtered through a subjective account of memories founded on emotions.

### **Excavating Memories**

The status of the artifact now is as a collection of memories. Already these memories are narrowed through each individual's subjective experience. Then, with the project at an end and as the group disperses, no longer part of the same community, we do not have occasion to share these memories, to compare notes, as it were, and revive them as a group. Furthermore, as time passes, memories of the shared experience of making the rug are buried more deeply. Some are even erased. Digging them up now, I uncover disassociated fragments, bringing to mind Walter Benjamin's reflections on memories of the past:



He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand – like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery – in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. (Benjamin [1928] 1979, 314)

Memories brought to the fore once more are as exhibits of the activity itself: frozen, partial and viewed anew from a different perspective, “like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery” (Benjamin [1928] 1979, 314). And, in the process of excavating the memory something is lost, scattered, diluted, “in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding” (314).

Literary theorist Paolo Bartoloni, writing on memory in the writings of Benjamin, states that “Memory is pure performance ... insofar as its communication and transmission can only take place as a form of narrative, be it through storytelling, music, painting, cinema, poetry or prose” (Bartoloni 2006, 148). Through memory, the original potency of the materiality of the process of making the artifact therefore gives way to its representation, either visual or textual. Its status may now be considered “as a form of narrative” (148).

### **Representing the Narrative**

However, representation of the process of making necessarily occurs after the event. It cannot speak for the material artifact nor bridge the gap between past and present to revive one's experience of making it in all its multidimensionality as it happens. As with a memory, a (re)presentation of the event is limited. But unlike a memory, which, as I argue above, sits somewhere inside a buried interior and subjective landscape of emotions and feelings, a representation sets the experience of making as a group outside of the self. A representation is typically an objectification, a standing-in for the “real” event (Bolt 2004), and offers a different

yet equally incomplete picture, literally a different perspective on it. As an objectification of the experience existing outside the subjective memory of it, it cannot convey the physical immediacy of handling cloth, which, as mentioned earlier is absolutely integral to the experience of making, however short lived it might be. The representations of the project I have and use from time to time are typically in the form of photographs and written notes that condense these remembered fragments into flattened and fixed versions of events, omitting the multidimensional experiential qualities, such as reaching out to grasp and to tug the cloth. For example, the photograph in Figure 2 can only partially convey what it was like to be in the room making the work. Gaps become evident. One has a sense of the scale and layout of the room in which we worked; I can recall and describe some of what I felt while sat there (the heat of summer air in the city; my hands sweating and slipping on the rug hook handle; sitting on sticky, plastic, institutional chairs), but even so I am more aware of all that I don't remember. Bartoloni (2006) suggests that

If it is true that we often lose ourselves in order to find ourselves, it may also be true that we expose our forgetfulness to allow it to surface in someone else's narration. The exposure of forgetfulness is its absence, its not-being-there; it is those areas of emptiness which might appear to the eye as part of an incomplete picture. What we see, what we narrate as memory, represents itself, but it also gestures to what is missing. It does so in a continuous performance in which there remains something that can only be implied, evoked, speculated upon, but never seen or articulated. (Bartoloni, 2006, 150)



Figure 2. *Déroulez le tapis rouge!* 2004–2006. Collectively made hooked rug, Belleville, Paris XI, France. Photograph by the author.

### **A Speculative, Poetic Narrative Performance**

We are therefore left with an incomplete picture composed of fragments and clippings, partial memories of personal and subjective experiences, emotions, and feelings, perhaps triggered by snapshot images and shadows of physical sensations stored deep in the body. The artifact has now transformed into a kind of speculative, poetic narrative.

The activity of making the artifact in the first place is already a material presentation of a reconfigured meshwork of fragments and partial memories. Together with the participants, I came to the project with memories of prior experiences and parallel conversations that continued to weave a way into the rug, thereby acquiring new perspectives, additional verses and extended clauses. Later, in the absence of the actual artifact, these experiences are again reconfigured with some of the pre-existing fragments alongside the newly created ones;

fragments remembered and scattered or rearranged anew each time its narrative is re-presented. As a form of speculative, poetic narrative, the rug project (and no doubt many others like it) has transformed into a kind of rhapsodic song.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a literary work described as rhapsodical means it “consists of a medley of narratives” and is “fragmentary or disconnected in style” (OED). Although not literary works, these collectively made textile artifacts do consist of “a medley of narratives” and are fragmentary both in style and in the methods of production. The Greek origin of the word "rhapsody" is in its compound formation of the verb "rhaptō," to sew, to stitch, and the noun "aoidē," meaning song. In Classical literature, rhapsodes are defined as the "stitchers of songs," performing the traditions of re-telling (re-presenting) the epic narratives to each new generation. A rhapsody is the poetic act of sewing the song. Walter J. Ong (2012) explains that at the time of reciting the Homeric epic poems

There was no list of the episodes nor, in the absence of writing, was there any possibility even of conceiving of such a list. If he were to try to proceed in strict chronological order, the oral poet would on any given occasion be sure to leave out one or another episode at the point where it should fit chronologically and would have to put it in later on. If, on the next occasion, he remembered to put the episode in at the right chronological order, he would be sure to leave out other episodes or get them in the wrong chronological order. (Ong, 2012, 140–141)

Plunging in and piecing together the episodes of these great narratives was the only way to conceive of reciting them, hence the "stitchers of songs."

A rhapsody implies a creative intervention that re-configures or re-presents the tradition in a new form each time it is presented. The meanings are relived with each new telling, and in this

case, re-made with each new making. Participation in these kinds of collective textile-making projects is an informal performance of an unrecorded/unwritten process: a blend of doing, watching, listening, making, talking—and remembering. In so doing, memories of making are hooked or stitched back in to a new artifact, making them available again to be dug up and re-performed, re-made once again. With each "re-telling," the performance is made relevant anew for new participants using different materials and motifs, and in a new place.

## **Conclusion**

One way of understanding the transformed status of the collectively made textile artifact from its coming-into-being through to its abandonment in storage is as a pattern to inspire new performances of "re-telling" or, more appropriately "re-piecing," the fragmented memories of a sense of belonging to a place and a group. It is precisely because textile-making activities are such effective producers of histories that entwine place and people that this form of collective making has such potency for creating narratives about specific places that are so relevant to the people involved. However, as time passes and the physical, material reality slips from our grasp into memories of the experience, themselves incomplete and half-buried, the narrative of the making process as a performance embodying sensations and emotions endures.

These kinds of collective creative endeavors often seem to evade easy definitions. Sometimes artwork, sometimes hobby craft, sometimes community celebration, co-designed or participatory art, but never entirely one of these and more likely a combination of some (Shercliff & Twigger Holroyd, 2016). To consider the artifact as a residue of another kind of ongoing making process that might produce a certain kind of social integration or a sense of being and belonging somewhere or identity-making, however temporary and changeable these might be, opens up new understandings of these types of site-specific collective textile-making projects as a different kind of creative practice: as a narrative performance of experiences of making collectively. The artifact itself, and indeed the place, are therefore agentic components in a process of performing this practice, whereby continuing the practice takes precedence.

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