

The Artist Book: making as visual method

This paper will consider how the act of making through embodied activity can enhance levels of knowledge of complex theoretical frameworks. This is very much a 'work in progress' and I welcome any and all comments and feedback to my ungainly attempts to pull together a coherent link between methodology and method.

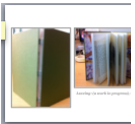


BACKGROUND

I moved to Manchester UK in December of 1996 for personal reasons in my late 20s, arriving with all the naïve baggage emigrants carry with them to weather the cultural divide. I left a nomadic political life which included years of working in industrial garment shops and then finally in a small radical print shop where I led the pre-press department. It was there that I became interested in the influence of visual language and the joy of working with paper -- the power of its engineering potential. Within three years of arriving in Manchester I enrolled on a degree course in Graphic Design at Manchester Met, gaining a place without a Foundation Year due to my industrial experience. Over the years of building a lecturing career in the North West my design practice has centred on visualizing and representing memory of place.

My industrial experience with paper and making objects with my hands (folding, stitching, cutting, gluing) has brought me to investigate at doctoral level how the act of making through embodied activity can enhance levels of knowledge of complex theoretical frameworks. These multi-disciplinary frameworks include memory theory with influences from psychoanalysis, cultural studies and human geography; theories of material and visual culture; and theories of embodiment and pedagogy.

This paper will examine the journey undertaken to develop a hand-stitched artist book of collaged photographs taken on a final farewell walk and consider the tacit understanding of the theoretical concepts which developed into explicit knowledge through the making of the book. Through examining the book as a material artefact this paper will consider how the various visual and embodied methods employed to create the book – photography, walking/movement through space, collage, bookbinding, linguistic narrative appropriation – might add meaning to the artefact itself.



Memory Studies

My practice-based project at MA level was an ethnographic oral history-based study of a central-Manchester working class community destroyed in the post-WWII municipal practice of 'slum clearance'. With that project I was interested in visualizing the memories former residents had of their neighbourhoods; I chose to utilise the medium of the 'memory map' to tell their stories. With that project I engaged fully in notions and theories of cultural memory and broader notions of memory of place – how communities and cultures find and utilise places to create and maintain identities. With my current doctoral study I will focus more on personal memory of significant places and whether making hand-made artefacts narrows the gap between Freud's two-tier 'systems of memory' and the tacit/explicit knowledge divide.

The 'place' of concern to me is Manchester where I lived for 13 years and which I made my adoptive home through choice. An uncomfortable place – wet, cold, unfriendly, layers of unknowable history, culture, common experience – I made 'my own Manchester' through graft, determination, and great respect for its industrial, political and popular culture narratives. Living by the Oxford Road Corridor in an Ardwick council estate I experienced the many layers of Mancunian life. I was always very interested in the fact I had to make Manchester home in a way that I never had to in the States. This is what spurred me on to understand the layers of history and meaning in the places of Manchester, as an emigrant I was more interested in the place than those who lived their all their lives, more interested than I ever was of where I and my kin had come from in the States; I had to decode the signifiers to understand what was signified. I recognised the layers of meaning being produced around and was interested in the past layers of the city itself. This inspired my Mapping Memory project and my study of the urban palimpsest which emerges from theories of human geography.



The Urban Palimpsest: the historic narrative of place



Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center...The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes ...The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding (de Certeau, 1984:91).

The notion of the palimpsest is literary in nature; the concept being we are able read the layers of past incarnations contained in the strata of the city.

The trope of the urban palimpsest suggests the trace of the past is in the present and the fundamental temporality of all urban spatial endeavours. Mark Crinson (2005) notes that the 'city as palimpsest' is testament to the reality of constant change within the city, that there is "no static moment that enables inventorised description...urban time is not like a line, as architectural historians often would have it, a continuous sequence of monuments and events" (Crinson, 2005: 67-8). Instead, in urban time, past and present, some elements of the palimpsest can get jumped over, forgotten. The solid material state of the building, the modernist example of the stability of capital, stands upon the shifting strata of previous demolition and blight revealing the uneven development of a city's historical narrative.



I propose that the palimpsest is the repository for the cultural memory of place and it is the metaphorical and material narrative of place. Crinson (2005: 66-7) suggests that the palimpsest's role is that it allows for additions to the 'originating moment' of a place, is respectful of the past, and contains dislocations within it.

Memory of Place, Urban Space and Narrative

W.G. Sebald's chapter "Max Ferber" in his 1993 novel *The Emigrants* is of central importance to the narrative of the collages in my hand-bound book. There is an uncanny familiarity to the narrative for me for a few reasons. Firstly the narrator of the text and the character of the chapter's title emigrate to Manchester as I did. Secondly the narrator wanders the streets of a bleak post-industrial Manchester during the time of the clearances of which I investigated at Masters level and puts in prose the memories shared by my project's participants. Thirdly the narrator returns to Manchester during the next wave of demolitions of council estates built on the rubble of the clearances and which subsequently fail due to poor planning, architecture and materials; it is at this time that I arrived in Manchester. Fourthly I deeply empathize with Ferber's deep attachment to Manchester as an uncanny home from home,

"Inexperienced as I was, I imagined I could begin a new life in Manchester, from scratch; but instead, Manchester reminded me of everything I was trying to forget." (Sebald, 1993:191)

My parents were born in Lowell, Massachusetts, a post-industrial city 50 miles north of Boston designed and built by Francis Cabot Lowell, a textile merchant, who visited, admired and studied Manchester and was inspired to build a town dedicated to textile production in its likeness. My Quebecois maternal grandfather was born in the mill town of Manchester, New Hampshire. My first industrial textile job was in a Lowell mill on the shop-floor preparing cloth for cutting. The industrial landscape of Manchester was thrilling, it made sense to me, I understood it and knew it on an unconscious, tacit level.

Gilloch and Kilby (2005:5) note that, "In *The Emigrants*, and particularly in the figure of Ferber, Sebald presents and articulates the intricate and ephemeral constellations formed by memory, urban space, exile and individual and collective



loss...". The narrator stumbles upon Ferber's artist studio along the Manchester Ship Canal during long walks attempting to avoid the tedium of a late 1960s Sunday in Manchester. Regular contact is made between the two characters. The narrator is fascinated by the daily creation and destruction of paintings by Ferber, layers of paint are added to canvases to only be scraped off and started again the next day. While all around him the narrator sees the palimpsest of Manchester being at once destroyed and rebuilt through the clearances and subsequent building of council estates, he also witnesses Ferber's private battle against permanence and stability. Like so many of Sebald's characters, Ferber's life trajectory was formed and disrupted by the Holocaust; his attachment to Manchester and desire to make a new, anonymous life emerges from that trauma. Gilloch and Kilby (2005:5) note that real German-Jewish émigré writers such as Walter Benjamin (1985) and Siegfried Kracauer (1987) have also been concerned with the 'city-based existence'.



Esther Leslie (1999:113) notes that Benjamin concluded that the native and the tourist experience a city differently. The tourist seeks the artificial, strange, scenic. The native seeks the corners and crevices where long-lost memories have been left to accumulate. I approached my own, individual narrative of Manchester as a native, twelve and a half years of consciously marking the streets as my own leaving footprints in the puddles and on the paving stones.



I will now discuss the visual methods I employed to develop the hand-stitched book and in doing so attempt to tie notions of embodied practice with the material production of the book to draw together method and methodology bound within the book and its contents.

Leaving (a work in progress)

With this work I attempt to explore ways of representing the memory of place and portray the melancholy and sense of loss felt by those leaving a place adopted through emigration and developed into 'home'. The photographs layered through collage technique were taken during a farewell walk in Manchester City Centre on the eve of my relocation to Chester. These collages utilise metaphors of memory's instability and unreliability, the material palimpsest of the city and the ghosts of past flaneurs and flaneuses to represent the walking of the city as the writing of personal history. W.G. Sebald's(1993) words from *The Emigrants* are carefully chosen to represent the physical and emotional attachment the emigrant can have to their adopted 'home'-land and the deep sense of loss I have felt leaving the place I had made home by choice.

The Photographs

As I've noted the photographs in the book were taken a few days before moving from Manchester to settle in Chester where I had a new post at the university. I walked the rain and windswept pavements and streets early on a weekend morning; the city was quiet, the only inhabitants about were those who had to be. I had, quite literally, the place to myself. I walked and wandered and took photos of places of little consequence to anyone but me. I wanted to somehow capture the layers of the life I had made for myself over the years and I realize now I barely scraped the surface.

The photos I took on that rainy weekend morning were of both the oldest and the most recent wanderings I had undertaken in Manchester: the door on Store Street now boarded up that, on my arrival in Manchester, had been a shortcut to the narrow, crowded and uncomfortable main platform at Piccadilly rail station and the long path along London Road I had walked three times a week at an



unsociable hour to board the hour-long 'fast train' to Chester while still commuting to my new post.

Elizabeth Edwards (1999) notes that "The photograph infuses almost all levels of memory, even those of which it is not directly part...its tentacles spread out, blurring and constructing memory in its own insistent image" (1999:221). She argues that it is in its materiality that the photograph contains its ability to be a conduit for memory, that as Barthes suggests that "the image and its referent are laminated together" (1999:222) so she argues that "the photograph and its materiality, the image and object, are brought into a single coherent form" (1999:222). The material form of the photograph and its contained representation of a moment past are in dialogue with each other to create meaning and memory of that event. Edwards notes that the photograph is one of the few media developed specifically to aid remembering and for this reason they "express a desire for memory and the act of keeping a photograph is, like other souvenirs, an act of faith in the future" (1999:222). Edwards suggests that there is a connection between the body and, what she terms, "the photo-object", which demands physical engagement through touching and handling them (1999:227). But she also notes that the photo-object also "retemporalizes and respatializes the photograph" (1999:230) and quotes Barthes' famous phrase from *Image, Music, Text*: the "there-then becomes the here-now" (1999:230). The photo-object retemporalizes the photograph through the possible narratives it contains for the viewer and respatializes through offering imagined places and spatial points of reference. The traces of narrative and imagined places within the photograph, according to Edwards, open "the object further to the imaginative projection of making histories" (1999:230).

The photos attempt to 'capture' my known and experienced Manchester but more importantly my own story of making Manchester my home. I had no idea 2.5



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years ago how I would use them; indeed I'd not looked at them again until two months ago – the mourning was still too acute and my desire to settle in Chester meant I didn't indulge myself in reminiscence.

It was the embarking on my practice-based PhD, attending a collage course at Central St Martins in August and seizing another opportunity to further my bookbinding skills at a weekend workshop in September that encouraged/**forced** me to consider the photographs as viable material for visual work. I suggest that it is in the reworking of the photographs utilising collage technique that the photographs as souvenirs become collages of memories of place -- democratised, liberating the sign from its referent, signification open to individual interpretation, each unstable and unreliable as different views of the same city crash and clash in one imagined frame.

The Collages

With the collages I wanted to make the viewer look twice at the constructed view of Manchester to trigger an uncanny and uncomfortable sense of place, just as John Stezaker's "Marriage Series" (2007) and "Mask Series" (2006) as well as Joachim Schmid's "Photogenic Drafts" (1991) evoke in their re-working of portraits. Edwards (1999) notes that photographs in every day life stand for two things, firstly the focus of the memory but also for the moment in which the photograph was taken. She notes that Barthes argued that "to reject a photograph and thus the memory-value it holds out demands its physical removal: destruction engages with materiality" (Edwards, 1999:226).

I suggest that the material act of appropriation and re-creation with collage technique neutralises the possible indexical lesions and permanent wounds felt when a photograph, and therefore, by association its referent, is destroyed.

Sanda Iliescu (2008) notes that collage has much to offer as a design method due to its use of ordinary objects, unfinished or barely recognisable materials and their unfinished aesthetic represent a defiance of inflexible boundaries between art and the everyday. She notes that,

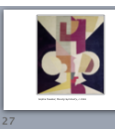
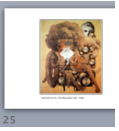
"Narratives of salvage are thus but one manifestation of collage's more general capacity to connect what is disconnected. In so doing, collages may evoke the conflicts and tensions, as well as the potential for reconciliation, that we associate with real life.(2008:68)



Ruth Hemus' (2009) revelatory study of five key women artists central to the Dada movement suggests that one theme that ties the artists' work together is the search for new ways of representing and using the body creatively. Her study includes the multi-disciplinary work of the performance artists Emmy Hennings and Sophie Taeuber in Zurich, the artists Hannah Hoch in Berlin and Suzanne Duchamp and the poet Celine Arnould in Paris. Hemus notes that the work of each of the artists at some stage in their careers "questions the body as subject, as object, as artist, as the site of expression, representation or resistance and around which questions of agency, passivity, identity, threats, gender, sexuality, politics and technology revolve." (2009:197).

Hemus proposes that with the fine art practices within Dada, the process of collage and assemblage brought everyday materials to the frame. She notes that the artist as body is a key point of debate in avant-garde art, questioning how the artist's hand effects creation (2009:200-1).

I suggest that the collages within *Leaving (a work in progress)* contain traces of embodied creativity that my hand has effected through the materials and processes I utilised to construct them. The viewer has access to knowledge about the process of their construction through following marks from the scalpel blade and folds of paper. The act of layering and cutting and gluing attempts to tell others' stories as well...the ghostly wanderers have no face, no definite permanent shape. Inner space and outer space are represented within the same frame.



The Book

Materially, *Leaving (a work in progress)* is a cloth-covered, single-sheet hand stitched book, A5 in size, containing paper-based collages developed from digital photographs, 14 pages of 120gsm cartridge paper. The quotes from W.G. Sebald's 1993 novel *The Emigrants* were typed onto glassine and glued into the book after being bound. I admire the purchase of the typewriter, the debossing of paper through the pressure of the keys hitting paper fibers. The narrator of Max Ferber's story would have typed his narratives of walks, wanderings, observations and avoidances on a typewriter in 1966 when we meet him. Symbolically and materially the typewriter was the right transcription tool.

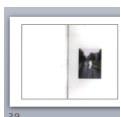
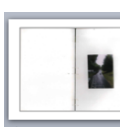
Johanna Drucker (2004) in her text *The Century of Artists' Books* notes that the development of the artist's book as an idea and a form did not exist before the 20th century, and even then in its current form, developed only since 1945.

Drucker (2004) defines the artist's book as,

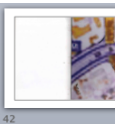
"a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of a preexisting work and ... is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues" (Drucker, 2004:2).

Drucker argues that there is a concept of 'bookness' – a shared conventional form (two covers and a spine) and "the idea that through thematic unity a book may establish its identity" (Drucker, 2004:327).

I suggest this book utilises sequence to tell a story through a photo-narrative. The collages of digital photographs record a walk of anonymous and ghostly flaneurs and flaneuses from Store Street under Piccadilly rail station to Ardwick, walking down London Road's sloping hill. The wanderers look backwards from time to time to check their progress and ensure their places of significance remain.



Susan Stewart (1993) writes about the attraction to the Victorian miniature book by both makers and consumers and notes that, "The social space of the miniature book might be seen as the social space, in miniature, of all books: the book as talisman to the body and emblem of the self; the book as microcosm and macrocosm; the book as commodity and knowledge, fact and fiction" (Stewart, 1993:41).

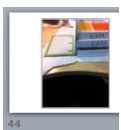


Embodied Practice – or why practice practiced this way?

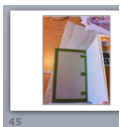
“The difficult and the incomplete should be positive events in our understanding; they should stimulate us as simulation and facile manipulation of complete objects cannot” (Sennett, 2008:44).



This is my first artist book. While I have attended many workshops on bookbinding I have never bound a book of my original artwork; I have yet to develop what Richard Sennett (2008:174) terms “the rhythmic skills of a craftsman” which entails training our hand in repetition. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes...(this experience) as “being as a thing” (p.174). Sennett suggests that at this level the craftsperson has become one with the object on which she is working. He proposes that at this higher level of skill “...there is a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective” (Sennett, 2008:50).



I, however, am at the exciting and frustrating stage of the “difficult and incomplete” (Sennett, 2008:44) with much of my visual practice. My medium of choice is paper as my fingers and hands have for decades known and admired its flexibility, structure, limitations, and malleability – its ability to morph in moments from a two dimensional plane into an engineered object through the act of folding. I am interested in how embodied creativity supports knowledge development and understanding of critical theoretical frameworks. For me, embodied creativity means working with my hands with paper which involves tactile experience. Susan Stewart (1999), in her Prologue to the edited text *Material Memories*, articulates my instincts when she notes,



“To experience the roughness or smoothness of an object, to examine its physical position or come to understand its relative temperature or moistness, we must move, turn, take time. Visual perception can immediately organize a field; tactile perception requires temporal comparison” (Stewart, 1999:32).



Stewart proposes that touch is a "...threshold activity – a place where subject and object are quite close to each other" (p.35). This idea mirrors well my experience of creating *Leaving (a work in progress)*. I've given some indication here about the interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks which underpin the visual narrative in the book from memory theory to human geography and cultural studies. It was in the printing of the contact sheets of the photographs, the repeated photocopying of the originals to create 7th and 8th generations, in the choosing of the images and the ways to disturb understanding of them that I began to understand what the story was that I wanted to tell and how Max Ferber's voice would support that narrative. I needed to experiment, to physically test the visuals, to try combinations and sizes of my ghost walkers. I knew collage might be able to support a narrative and would create layers of new signifiers from shattered and displaced signs, but it was in the act, the causality, the tactile shifting and moving, that meaning came to be developed.

I have titled the book *Leaving (a work in progress)* because I shall never leave Manchester for good, nor shall Manchester leave me. I still haunt the streets in my memories; I have left footprints and ghostly shadows that will be guides to other emigrants who carry their hopes of a new life with them. But this work is also a material and an aesthetic 'work in progress'. It is one of many attempts I will create to explore visualising memory of place and explore the possibilities that, through persistence, practice, and thoughtful repetition of skills development I may develop Sennett's (2008:174) 'rhythmic skills of a craftsman' and Merleau-Ponty's 'being as a thing'. For now I am enjoying the uncomfortable but very stimulating place of "difficult and incomplete" (Sennett, 2008:44).



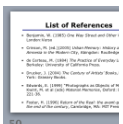
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