Artefact Life History: Digital intervention, conceptualisation and the notion of recycling in the communication of archaeology through digital craft practice.

An object’s biography is dictated by the journey it has taken and though the myriad interactions it undertakes. Over time, raw materials can be perpetually transformed through human contact and varied technologies. I explore the post depositional life of the artefact and how through site-specific knowledge, conceptualisation and digital intervention, I engage with a new dimension to the object biography.

Using traditional and digital tools and technologies I produce concept led works, which aim to communicate archeology and renegotiate the artefact life history.

Helen Marton

Senior Lecturer Contemporary Crafts

Falmouth University

AHRC 3D3 PhD Candidate

My name is Helen Marton. I am both a senior lecturer in Contemporary Crafts at Falmouth University and an AHRC PhD candidate with the 3D3 consortium, engaging in an interdisciplinary practice led PhD exploring the communication of archaeology through digital craft practice. My paper today explores Digital intervention, conceptualisation, and the notion of recycling in the communication of archaeology through digital craft practice.

It was writer and critic Peter Dormer who said ‘*it is not handicraft that defines contemporary craftsmanship; it is craft as knowledge that empowers a maker to take charge of technology.’* There are myriad opportunities for makers to embrace a range of digital technologies such as digital printing, CAD, 3D modeling, CNC cutting and milling. The recent crafts council Makeshift conference at Manchester’s Museum of Science and Industry delivered presentations that exposed the stories behind collaborations which produced liquid lighting, 3D printed hearts and robotics that communicate feelings. Indeed a wide range of 21st century materials and technologies expand the notion of what craft objects are or might become. Current research drives to identify and evaluate the ideas, procedures and techniques that give access to the knowledge that exists between maker, machine and material.

We understand that craft practice relies heavily upon tacit knowledge, which resides within any individual maker. In addition makers continually generate new knowledge through practice. According to Richard Sennett, what seems to distinguish craft from other disciplines is that it relies upon process, materiality and the tacit made explicit through critical reflection (Sennett, 2009). Professor David Gauntlet in his recent publication, ‘Making is connecting,’ identifies two essential dimensions of craft: the inherent satisfaction of making and the sense of being alive within the process. He considers that ideas, learning, and knowledge come from within the practice of making, however, it is increasingly the case that ‘making’ in its broadest sense, also allows for distinct and nuanced connections, engaging imagination, contextualisation, and conceptual representations.

I produce individual traditionally crafted objects that retain the soul of the material and the skill of the human hand. Conceptually, I increasingly turn my focus upon the domestic. I am interested in the repetition of use, the beauty of a vital tool, the meditation in the everyday task and the rhythm of doing. I reinterpret and translate what I consider to be significant; I often produce things alluding to function but purposefully fraudulent. In spite of the fact that I am largely the conceptual director of these works, it is increasingly the case that elements of my digital practice are co authored.

Historically, archaeology has been communicated in many ways, through museum display of artefact, academic publication, conferences, lectures and public talks. More recently there have been many exciting developments in the utilisation of digital tools, which greatly enhance audience experience. My practice led research assumes exhibition as the agent for dissemination, I hope to track the impact of creative thinking upon the understanding of archaeological finds and practices by members of the public.

Tremough in Cornwall is my case study; it has been a long-standing site of ‘making’ evidenced through archaeological investigations, proving that this is one of the earliest sites of metal casting in the UK. My reinterpretive works are responses to the prehistoric Tremough finds, which are stone moulds, bronze jewellery and ceramic sherds & vessels. Working together with Cornwall archaeological unit, Cornwall museum services, and the myriad varied technicians within Falmouth & Exeter Universities, has meant that I have been able to access and scan objects, reproduce finds and manipulate the results to produce unique artefacts. In the development of my conceptual framework, and in order to promote a less autobiographical approach, I interviewed archaeologists who had been involved with the various digs performed at Tremough. With only one publication available, and this being purely factual and archaeological in format, I needed to establish a greater understanding of the site. I used this as an opportunity to collect the thoughts and feelings of those involved, not necessarily contained within the pages of the publication.

I explore the engagement between digital craft practice and archaeology and how this might enhance the communication of archaeological finds to the public. I will be exhibiting many of the Tremough finds alongside reconstructive and reinterpretive works. Of course reinterpretation of archaeology through artistic practice is well established; and studies have investigated contemporary sculpture as an interpretive resource for archaeology. Cordula Hansen developed a methodology through which the communicative impact of sculpture and specific artworks were assessed; this was however restricted by the lack of data relating to the visitor experience.

Experimental archaeology explores tactile understandings of material engagement and is primarily concerned with reproduction. The value of experiential and experimental research has widely enhanced the communication of archaeology. I speak from experience when I say that reconstruction engages directly with the path of the original maker, it is fascinating to take the same journey, through trial and error it is possible to experience a partial transportation in time.

The use of the digital within archaeology enables reconstruction as both *virtual* and *physical*. There are an increasing number of exciting reconstructions through the *virtual* recreation of scanned sites and artefacts, there are also excellent examples of digital technologies being used in *physical* craft reconstructions, such as Jennifer Gray’s Pictish drinking horn fitting (2013).

I approach the *reinterpretation of* archaeology uniquely through digital craft practice, engaging prior knowledge and a tacit understanding of my chosen materials. I place equal consideration on context and material selection in support of my concept. Matt Ratto, Associate Professor and director of the Critical Making lab at the University of Toronto (2011) called for ‘*critical making’*, highlighting material and conceptual exploration to promote novel understandings by makers themselves. Digital processes used in conjunction with craft practices enable me to push boundaries and physically manifest works that would be impossible to visualise otherwise.

The concept of object biography, suggests artefacts as a sequence of activities and interactions travelling through a suggested lifetime. This might involve the procurement of raw materials, the manufacture or making process, and a final resting place in deposition after record, however this suggests that a life history framework might also include the reuse or maintenance of an object. Ruth Tringham went further and sought to understand the way in which objects are invested with meaning through social interactions. What I find most interesting is that this implies that meanings change and are renegotiated throughout the life of the object. Daniel Miller, in his warm introduction to the anthropology of material culture,’ The Comfort of Things,’ and similarly Shelley Truckle in Evocative Objects both attest to the power of inanimate attachment, we bestow particular significance to everyday things, but also revere those objects, with which we attach as a general means of remembrance.

Walter Benjamin uses the term ‘aura,’ to describe that which may be potentially lost in the age of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin related the rise of the mass produced commodity form to new understandings of aura and suggested that it might refer to the sense of association surrounding an entity; correspondences and myriad relationships provoked by an object. Although there is great potential for digital reproduction, and I usually start in this way, I begin to reinterpret by moving from the digital to the traditional, back and forth. In this way I hope to retain the ‘aura,’ of a find.

As you can see from the previous few slides, the 3 pieces of stone mould have moved through a transformative process with an influence exerted from the digital. Moving back and forth, from actual to virtual, hand to machine we now have an exact copy of the Bronze Age dress pin.

In the case of the enlarged dress pin shown here in blue foam, it is an exact upscale replica of the small-recreated pin, we never had a pin, only broken bits of stone mould. This piece will now be cast in plaster of paris, creating a mould suitable for ceramic production. Using Gabbroic clay found on the lizard in Cornwall and used throughout prehistory, I will make several large pins. One of them will be ceremonially broken and the sherds documented and then buried on site. Each burial point will be tracked by GPS (like geocaching). This will then be the work displayed in exhibition. This means, of course that anyone might seek out those sherds and remake the pin, taking the archaeological process full circle.

The use of an object biography or life cycle is key in expressing how materials move through the hands of the maker to form objects through tacit knowledge. In the recycling of the object through observance of the fragment or remains, it is possible to reanimate aspects of this process. Anthropologists Schiffer & Hollenback proposed an extension to the life history framework to include technologies and associated material practices and the reconceptualisation of the object as a complex arrangement of interactions. By using digital tools it is possible to further enhance the material and work into it on a new level, allowing in some cases for the invisible to be made visible as part of the journey, as is particularly evident in the case of the petrographic oven glove. To negotiate the place and use of the digital tool within this enquiry I strive to understand the relationship between people, technology and place over the longue dureé. In the case of the site at Tremough, the final objects have a unique biography, stretching out over time but ultimately reinterpreted using only site-specific tools. I am affecting the post depositional life history of the Tremough finds through a further contribution to this sequence of interactions. Reanimating objects or engaging a ‘transformation,’ means that in a sense I am now recycling. I consider how people ‘interpenetrate’ in their understanding of the past through objects produced in the present. I propose that the influence exerted from the digital, combined with more traditional craft techniques and processes, might reconceptualise archaeological finds to enhance the communication of this incredible site over time.