

Diary of a Well-maker: a note on crafts as research practice

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Stitch Encounters: Craft-based Knowing

This paper signals the value of making for well-being as a reflexive research activity. It focuses on a series of short reflective diary entries created by artist and researcher Mah Rana during her daily encounters with people, spaces, places, and things. The entries are personal and incidental, involve memories and snippets of conversation but, crucially, they are all positioned from her perspective as a self-identified ‘well-maker’. Someone, that is, who is alert to the particular values, benefits, qualities, and characteristics of creative making for mental and physical health: who takes note of how these manifest in our everyday lives, often in the quietest of ways (Hackney 2013; Hackney et al. 2016).

The work builds on participatory research Rana has undertaken with design historian Fiona Hackney, most recently on a stitching and well-being project with her mother, who was diagnosed with moderate Alzheimer’s. This consisted of a series of what we term ‘stitch encounters’ (Rana and Hackney 2018/19), an immersive process of making and filming that involves experiential ‘being,’ reflexive ‘doing’, and the acquired knowledge that emerges from both. Keeping ‘stitch diaries’ to record feelings, intuitions, and observations was a central element in the research and Rana became a habitual diarist as well as a habitual stitcher. John Dewey (1916), for whom meaning was associated with the practical act of doing and derived from one’s capacity-to-do, foregrounded the importance of habit when theorising a process of experiential knowledge accumulation through iterative modification. He argued that this made one particular experience available in subsequent experiences, forming a predisposition to easier and more effective action in the future. The cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986: 12) went further. Arguing that learning is about uncovering meaning, rather than abstract notions of seeking the truth, he proposed that the central question we need to ask is ‘how do we come to endow experience with meaning?’, a question that underpins our ongoing experimental work with making and well-being.

The specificities of working with textiles and stitch are a central concern in terms of process, embodiment, and materiality, and also stitch as a metaphor for social relations. Katie Collins, writing about textile terminology, noted the inclusiveness of such needlecraft metaphors as knitting, weaving, tapestry, embroidery, and quilting, which convey notions of kinship, identity, complexity, time, structure, and style. She argues for an understanding of research as a 'decentred' activity: an inclusive 'piecing together' of fragments that can integrate all sorts of sources, responds to experiences that are both 'everyday and exceptional,' and has depth and intensity rather than individuality and competition as its goal (Collins 2016). Collins' observations encourage our experiments with a 'pieced together' research process (diaries, stitch encounters, filmed reflections, memories, song) and help us locate it within discourses of material craft, experiential learning, linguistics, social relations, and the particular forms of knowledge these generate.

The idea of 'craft-based ways of knowing' or experiential knowledge in practice (Prior 2013) is particularly important and, while our work might be conceptualised as a mode of embodied co-production rather than ethnography per se, we were influenced by the ethnographic approach that Sarah Desmarais (2016) employed with groups to examine the value of crafts for health. Ross Prior in his work with actors used 'reflective sketchbooks' as a method for capturing 'those moment-by-moment thoughts and reflections that unconsciously spring from the improvisation of working in process' (2013: 165). Our 'stitch encounters' aimed to expand that method through an integrated process of making and filming to capture something of the material, sensory, and temporal engagements, as well as the conversations that take place when making together (Rana and Hackney 2018/19). It is generally accepted that arts can play a social role in health and well-being, albeit one that is hard to evidence (Chatterjee and Noble 2013). Through its staging of a shared, immersive, iterative process of making and filming 'stitch encounters' propose an expanded, performative version of the reflexive sketchbook, which reveals small moments of change through interchange, and involves forms of embodied knowing that are at once collective and highly personal.



Figure 1: Stitch Activism: Embroidered Ethnography. Hannah Maughan for Co-Producing CARE: Community Asset-based Research & Enterprise. Photography Bryony Stokes (2014).

This ongoing research develops outcomes from a number of Arts and Humanities Research Council UK-funded projects that have interrogated creative making as: 1) a means of community co-production and asset-building; 2) crafts activism for well-being; and 3) a mode of being through connecting (Hackney 2014a; Hackney 2014b, Rana 2011) (Figure 1). In addition to generating research data, Rana edited the ‘stitch encounters’ film footage into a final piece, One Day When We Were Young (Rana 2016), which both operates as a artwork in its own right and a piece of arts research that evidences and disseminates our methodology (McNiff 2008).

Unlike research on professional arts practice, our work is broadly located in amateur creativity and the sensory world of the everyday. As such, the work of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart is extremely useful. Writing about affect, Stewart proposes the twin concepts of ‘worlding’ and ‘bloom spaces’ as a means to help us understand how we can operate affectually in the world (2010: 340). Worlding refers to the condition of being in the world: a condition that is understood and lived through the senses and is particularly sharp at times of individual and communal tension and transition. It involves the emergence of bloom spaces: spaces where the senses come to the surface, new lessons are learnt, different priorities emerge, connections and adjustments are made: where we understand ourselves and others with new depth, clarity, and calm, despite the circumstances. Looking through the lens of worlding helps us paying attention to what it is to be in the world, our embodied reactions, how we live (physically, emotionally, neurologically, socially, psychologically) in the orbit of people, things, animals, processes, and habits. Our lives become a series of daily, lived minute adjustments as we draw on our resources,

learn new skills, address challenges, survive and even thrive, despite the stuff life throws at us.

The extracts below show Rana worlding as she pays attention to life around her through the sensibilities of a well-maker and finds bloom spaces in a hospital corridor, a community hall, memories of a school playground encounter, and while sewing in her mother's living room. These short excerpts are suggestive rather than conclusive. They, nevertheless, speak volumes about the insights, priorities, and re-orderings that can emerge when challenged or during times of stress and how, if we take time to be open and allow it, we can find new value in the world by quietly paying attention to the actions, stories, memories, experiences, and words of others, as well as ourselves.

These diary extracts span over a timeframe of four years. Three of the extracts reflect on events from previous years and remaining two extracts reflect on events recent to the time of writing. However, all five extracts highlight moments in time where challenges become opportunities to discover a new sensitivity to situations that elicits alertness to others and in oneself.

Extract from the Diary of a Well-maker. 8 December 2014: 'Thank you very much to hear my story'.

I am in a community hall in the East-End of London to run a one-off craftivism event about health and wellbeing with a small group of local residents. Amina¹, who lives nearby, is a regular visitor to the community hall. She quietly joins in the crafting activity, and I can just about hear what Amina^[i] is telling me. Her voice is soft and the conversations around us are loud. I watch in awe as she crochets a flower without having to refer to a crochet pattern. Amina carries the knowledge in her head and in her hands.

As a young child she was fascinated watching the woman, who was the school caretaker, crocheting lace. So, she went home and found a piece of old wire and fashioned it into a hook, she found some old wool and from memory copied what the old woman was doing. This is how Amina crocheted her first a single chain.

Amina moved to England when she was twelve and at school the headmistress taught her how to knit. At the age of fifteen she met a woman from Bangladesh who made beautiful crocheted gifts for friends and family, and Amina asked her to teach her. Amina also was soon able to make loads of crocheted gifts for her family and friends.

She would go to the library to borrow books to get inspiration and to teach herself more techniques. She tells me that she is happy making things for others, and rarely making things for herself.

‘It’s given me a sort of joy and my depression has gone’

For some, craft learning is very much a social process, but Amina’s story reminds me how learning craft can also be an individual pursuit.

What is also compelling about Amina’s story is her commitment to learn not only what she has seen; but also taking that wonderment of someone’s skill and make it her own. Amina’s bending of a piece of old wire into the crochet is an act of volition. The novice learns from the expert, even when that expert is observed from a distance by a curious young child.

Extract from the Diary of a Well-maker. 27 July 2016: Transformational, bloom spaces.

The living room is a living room 99.9 per cent of the time, but when I turn off the TV and transfer the contents of a sewing kit onto a small blue wooden tray the semiotic interplay of people and spaces change.



Figure 2: ‘Blue tray and haberdashery’. Photography Mah Rana (2016)

These well-rehearsed actions signal that the living room is now (temporarily) a well-making space: ‘a bloom space’. My mother adjusts her position, turning away from the TV and towards the blue sewing tray. I sit next to

her and continue with my needlework project, and she continues with hers. She begins to sing - 'One day when we were young that wonderful morning in May...' - words from **Strauss's** Viennese waltz with a 3/4 time signature, a tempo that perfectly complements the rhythm of her stitching. This musical refrain is an announcement and an accompaniment. It underscores the worlding process that results from our sewing as my mother's living room transforms into a well-making space. It's as if she sings the well-making space into being, declaring that we are here, now, together.

Extract from the Diary of a Well-maker. 4 October 2017: Transitional flows and rhythms of being. The job of waiting becomes a job of making.

I sit in the corridor and crochet. This particular corridor organises the flow of transit of hospital staff and visitors. It also doubles as a waiting room. I'm half way through crocheting a coat hanger cover, an item that seems incongruous in this setting.

My sense of hearing travels down corridors and across thresholds. Snippets of other people's conversations fade in and fade out:

'...I get anxious about things...'

'...can I be cheeky; can I ask you to check?....'

The crochet pattern code becomes a mantra that I repeat in my head so that I can monitor and audit my progress, map out the waiting time in my head and gain some sense of control – One, two, three. One. One, two, three.

Turn.

My mum looks over to my hands and is concerned. "Are you undoing it?"

I reassure her. 'No, no I made a mistake, just undoing this section and I'll start again'.

I reflect on how the soft wool and wooden crochet hook contrast with the hard, smooth, shiny, wipe-down, spatialised presence of the hospital corridor. Geographer Nigel Thrift (2006: 102) discusses space in a relational

context, arguing that it is a product of activity that takes place in it, and that ‘rhythms of being’ establish and reaffirm spaces into places where humans can thrive.

In this sense, the job of waiting becomes a job of making, and through ‘making’ comes the feeling that it will be ok.



Figure 3: Red and pink crocheted coat hanger cover. Photography Mah Rana (2018)

Extract from the Diary of a Well-maker. 21 March 2018. Someone to watch over me. Making meaning.

In the film Fences the female protagonist Rose sits on the porch in her back garden. I cannot tell for sure, but it looks like she is crocheting. Her hands are busy at work. Is this the life that she has chosen for herself, or have consequences have chosen it for her?

Rose reminds me of my mother.



Figure 4: circa 1972_ One of many jumpers knitted for me by my mum.’ (Mah Rana’s private collection)

September 1977. It’s my first day at secondary school and a group of black girls, sixth-formers, approach me in the playground.

‘Did your mum knit your jumper?’

Hesitantly I reply, ‘Yes.’

They all smile at me and come closer. ‘Aah, isn’t she cute.’

They coo over me and stroke my face, my hair in plaits. One of the girls looks at me directly, ‘If anyone gives you any trouble, you come to us.’

I nod and tell them that I will. And as they walk away I feel protected in the way that you do when you know that you have someone to watch out for you, to protect you from trouble.

I don’t think I owned a shop-bought jumper until I was about seventeen.

But the excitement I had of owning a jumper that was shop-bought was short lived.

I held the machined-knit, shop-bought jumper in my hands. The disappointment I felt is still with me to this day.

Every stitch and every row felt soulless. It felt of nothing, it had no meaning.

Today, my mother still knits things of comfort for me, albeit the knitting instructions also serve as a reminder, safety-pinned to the work in hand.



Figure 5: 'This is a scarf for Mah...continue knitting in 3 x 3 rib until all the wool is finished' Photography Mah Rana (2018)

Extract from the Diary of a Well-maker. 29 January 2018. An invitation: places of potential.

My heart beats faster with excitement and anticipation when I look at knitting and sewing patterns. Is that weird? Surely, I'm not the only one who feels that way.

I've often thought of haberdasheries as well-making spaces of sorts; purveyors of well-making potential. Even saying the word 'haberdashery' makes me feel good. As a small child it represented a dichotomy of the magical and the practical for me. The haberdashery was always a safe place which manifest a sense both of reassuring order and liberating pleasure, where I could inspect rolls of fabric, gaze at multi-coloured walls of balls of wool, and investigate drawers of ribbons, lace samples, fastenings, thimbles, needles and pins, at my leisure.

Simplicity pattern 7831, I'm pretty sure that I wanted to make a handkerchief top because I saw the actress Kate

Jackson wearing one in an episode of Charlie's Angels, an American crime drama television series aired in the UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I picked design number 2 and took inspiration from the cover image and choose a red, white and blue striped cotton fabric. I bought the fabric in Bentalls, it isn't there anymore, it's a McDonalds now.

Constructing and sewing the inverted and acute corners were challenges that still I remember now. It was a struggle to keep the corners flat, but being able to wear the finished top felt like a testament to my perseverance.



Figure 6. Simplicity sewing pattern 7831

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/511228995192299177/>

photograph accessed 9 July 2018



Figure 7. Wearing my red, white and blue striped handkerchief top to a Silver Jubilee street party 7 June 1977, (Mah Rana's private collection)

As an adult, a visit to the haberdashery section in a department store is still guaranteed to make me feel calm and content. It is a sensory world that is familiar and comforting, it is the haptic experience that draws me into these places of potential.

There is a certain rhythm of being that I slip into when stepping over the threshold of a haberdashery. No matter how small the space or its location within a shop or department store, it invites me to imagine what might be.

The affective material touch of the haberdashery buffers me from the negative physiological and psychological effects of daily life.

Concluding thoughts:

These diary entries reflect moments in time in the embodied, emotional, and interactional ebb and flow of life.

The commitment to and the process of writing diary entries opens opportunities to reflect on feelings and thoughts, give meaning to experiences and actions. Both Amina's story and Rana's account of sewing as a child are examples of self-reflections of how acts of autonomy shape a sense of self, and how reliving simple acts of making from childhood shape an embodied sense of being in the present.

Meanings and attributions help us to understand what we feel and what we do, and in turn new lessons are learnt from emergent new knowledge. Crafting in hospital corridors revealed that when anxiety is re-interpreted as an invitation to slow down, it is then that we can connect with what is actually happening. With reflexivity brings clarity to understand confusing and unexpected situations and access a sense of calm, and acceptance despite challenging circumstances.

The photographs that accompany the diary extracts bring distant and recent events into the present; they act as aide memoires, and enable subtle details to be foregrounded for closer attention and consideration. Their inclusion in the text allows the reader to share some of the mental imagery that that has motivated Rana to reflect on events in a meaningful way as a well-maker.

Bloom spaces emerge in everyday lives and actions that deliver moments of acuity, unveiling connections and attachments within ourselves and with others. At a time of confusion and passivity associated with dementia, embroidering for my mother is an example of 'worlding'. In those moments when she is threading a needle or

choosing stitches best suited to the drawn motif, she is present and participatory in the world in new ways. The living room becomes a 'bloom space' for her but also for me. The haptic awakens cognition and connection. Such moments of acuity can be present in unexpected situations and at unsettling times. Whilst the activity is archetypal and familiar, waiting in a hospital corridor can be unnerving. Perceiving crocheting as an act of worlding, a well-making act, helps us to better understand how it can help us manage our lives more effectively, and do this affectively by way of small, strategic adjustments. Crocheting a coat hanger cover in a cold institutional environment, for instance, can evoke a sense of warm domesticity, comfort, and reassurance; the activity serves as an imaginary act of protection, a sensory shield. An improvised crochet hook made from a piece of wire or a hand-knit jumper respectively become a tool and an object of attachment to help the individuals to orientate themselves, and buffer themselves against physiological and psychological vulnerabilities. The improvised crocheted hook and hand-knit jumper are representative of the transitional and relational objects that furnish and conjure up well-making spaces as places of transformation where we can connect with others, things, animals, ourselves, and find new ways of being in the world by our own volition.

[i] Name has been changed for anonymity

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