

# Making and Unmaking, Repair and Repetition

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Curated selection by **Helen Carnac**

## Presenting:

**Catherine Bertola, Andrew Burton, Julie Cook, Shelly Goldsmith, Amy Houghton and Jill Townsley**

Searching the Axis website, with the broad idea of finding innovative or contemporary approaches to craft and object making, has been an interesting process. The Crafts may be seen to be in a state of flux – the teaching of material based subjects is in upheaval, subject to budget cuts and in some places seen as an outmoded form of practice, and its need to be understood as a thinking process is somewhat denied. For me what cannot be denied is that making does offer both maker and viewer crucial ways of thinking, and that contemporary craft and object-making is acknowledged as important in the visual arts world and beyond.

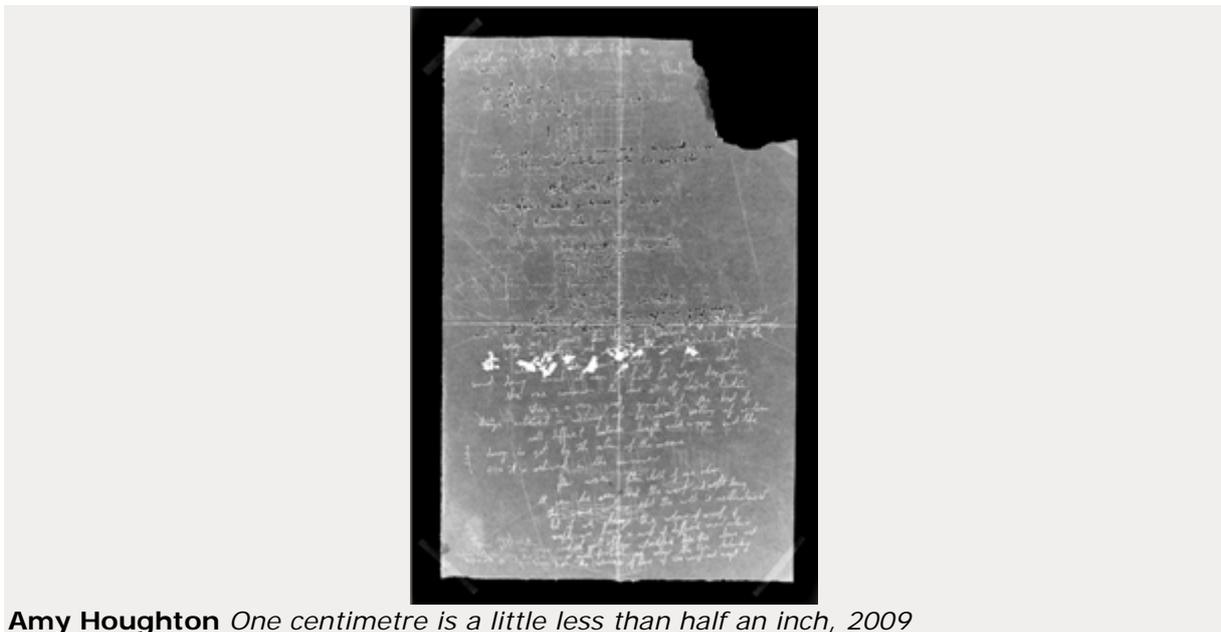
As an artist who makes things, objects, exhibitions and ideas, I am engaged with thinking critically about the reasons why we make and the necessity of making as a thinking process. That the 'process' is a crucial but often hidden stage has been a key issue for me over the last ten years. In curating this online exhibition I have looked for artists who explore concepts of repair, making, unmaking and repetition - all as ways of thinking. Repair in making is complex, it takes the understanding of how something has been made by its original maker to then repair or restore it. The making and unmaking processes that take place in order to do this involve a layering of knowledge and sensibility in the handling of material that develops through time spent, and an appreciation of changing technologies over time.



**Andrew Burton** Things Fall Apart, 2008

'Things Fall Apart' (2008) by Andrew Burton is a process-based temporary structure made from brick components which are later dismantled and broken up, the constituent fragments forming part of the artist's next body of work.

Burton's works are made and unmade simultaneously, gathering evidence of the previous works they encapsulate. Collaboration has formed an important aspect of the work, in particular through the projects that he has undertaken in India such as 'Sculptures from a Land of Ants and Bees', Delhi (2006) where Burton worked with bamboo and ladder workers - traditional craft workers whose skills are increasingly challenged by a burgeoning industry. In the UK it is Industry that is currently being challenged and sculptors such as Burton can suggest ways for us to think about this cycle of decline and regeneration through the objects that they make.



**Amy Houghton** *One centimetre is a little less than half an inch, 2009*

The process of unmaking is explored in Amy Houghton's 'One centimetre is a little less than half-an-inch' (2009). Here the artist takes a pseudo-forensic approach to understanding a piece of historical text. Taking apart and x-raying a letter, sourced from the Dovecot Studios' archive on the Isle of Bute, she began to understand something about the person who wrote it.

When I spoke to Houghton about this work in 2009 she told me that knowing how to unpick a textile enabled her to think through other objects - to take them apart, physically and metaphorically:

*'I like the idea of going backwards – the unmaking; in going backwards you have a sense of what the person has been through. At points you will see things that only that person would have seen at the time of making, and there is a real sense of physical connection'.<sup>1</sup>*



**Shelly Goldsmith** *Outpourings on an English Landscape*, 2009

Shelly Goldsmith also uses a layered process and knowledge of materiality in the handling of complex scientific processes, particularly human biology, in her investigations into worn garments. In 'Outpourings on an English Landscape' (2009) Goldsmith worked collaboratively with the Forensic Science Service to explore the parallels between 'forensic methodology and the methodology of her practice'.<sup>2</sup>

Goldsmith's work can give us new perspectives and knowledge about the objects that she reclaims – how do we understand these garments, their former life and the person who wore them? What is there left of the person in this evidence? For me they offer a way to view objects anew, a new perspective on the day to day and an insight into the way objects somehow have the ability to become a part of us. In Jane Wildgoose's essay *Reviewing the Data, Charting the Flow* (2008) she eloquently articulates this:

'Shelly's metaphors of flooding, staining, and seepage may also be applied to the processes of the unconscious she explores. Shelly's work offers opportunities for the viewer to participate in a stream of consciousness that may bring fresh perspectives – not only to traditional skills and processes (the textile media she employs), but also to a fundamental understanding of ourselves, our relationship with the world we inhabit, and the residues we leave behind.'<sup>3</sup>



**Catherine Bertola** *After the fact, 2006*

The everyday residues of another kind form the material with which artist Catherine Bertola constructs and creates installations, objects and drawings that respond to particular sites, collections and historic contexts.

In 'After the Fact' (2006) Bertola quietly interacts with dust that is found at the site of installation, reminding us that things left hidden still quietly exist and can provide an eloquent material in which to mark human presence. This engagement with the material detritus of human existence and the making of it into a tangible presence seems a poetic and humane response to place. The presence of those who have walked through the space is evoked through the dust collected and the subsequent marks left by Bertola and the visitors to the space - a layering through time and space.

Time, repetition and a sense of inherent materiality in the making process are immediately apparent in 'Satie 840' (2007.) Here Jill Townsley attempts to 'experience what 840 repetitions feels like - by chalking numbers on a blackboard.

'Starting at one, each number was drawn and rubbed out by hand then replaced by the next number in basic numerical sequence. The whole process is repeated until the number 840 is reached'.<sup>4</sup> Through a process of mark making, erasing and repetition, the artist builds an appreciation of rhythm and time systematically.

As the process develops the chalk surface grows and the numbers, at first difficult to remove by hand, begin to disappear seamlessly into the build-up of chalk on the blackboard. This simple repetitious exercise holds the meditative and repairing element of the making process within it.



**Jill Townsley** *Satie 840, 2007*



**Julie Cook** *Duende A Time for Healing - Siguriya Lamenting Place, 2006*



**Julie Cook** *Therapeutic Appliances for the Injured - Melancholia, 2002*

The final works I have selected are Julie Cook's 'Therapeutic Appliances' (2002) and 'Duende A Time for Healing' (2006). Cook's constructed textile works are collections of wearable objects that intend to provide comfort and 'enigmatic therapeutic solutions'. Here again we encounter an aspect of repair – perhaps the repair of the human condition? The found objects that Cook uses in her work - pillowcases, wool blankets, goose down duvets, bolsters and cotton sheets - richly contain or embody something of their previous life: they hold memory.

She transforms them into pieces for the body that, through use, may offer a panacea; we may find comfort and solace in these objects. Just looking at them on the computer screen with nothing physical in my presence, they appear, by their very nature and making, to contain some sort of comforting, human presence.

In putting this selection of works together I have found a rich seam of thinking through objects; a glimpse at what such objects and their makers offer to wider considerations about why we make, both literally and metaphorically, and perhaps ultimately to the human being that these objects and their making tangibly make present.

Helen Carnac, March 2010

[1]. Helen Carnac, *Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Revolution*, Craftspace, London 2009

[2]. Shelly Goldsmith, artist statement, Axis

[3]. Jane Wildgoose, *Reviewing the Data, Charting the Flow*, 2008

[4]. Jill Townsley, artist statement, Axis

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## Biography

Helen Carnac is a maker, curator and academic who lives and works in London. Drawing, mark-making, the explicit connections between material, process and maker and an emphasis on deliberation and reflection are all central to her practice as a maker and thinker.

Carnac was awarded a Cultural Leadership Fellowship in the crafts in 2009 in order to develop ideas about how the crafts are communicated. She curated the National Touring Exhibition, *Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Revolution* (2009) which has recently opened at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. In 2006 she was co-chair for the Association for Contemporary Jewellery's conference *Carry the Can* and she is actively involved in developing dialogue within the crafts having developed numerous talks and events for makers over the past five years. Her work is held in both national and international collections.

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<http://www.axisweb.org/atSelection.aspx?AID=2418>