

walking, talking, making **Project report**

Introduction

Walking, talking, making was a partnership between Alias and Art Quest. Independent maker, curator and academic Helen Carnac was involved as collaborator and facilitator.

This report will describe the event and offer some critical reflections. It will conclude by considering how we might build on the experience.

The overarching purpose of the event was to bring together a group of people who are actively concerned with the crafts, whether as makers, writers, academics, or interested observers, or all of the above, and to have a conversation.

8 people were invited, and each was asked to invite one other. In this way, we would be starting from our knowledge of the field and drawing on our own networks, but expanding those networks. Participants were predominantly makers, but represented interests including design history, teaching, writing, and curation.

The thinking behind the event came out a growing dissatisfaction with more formal fora, such as academic conferences and panel discussions. We felt that even the most successful of these was never quite as sustaining, or agreeable, as the conversation around the kitchen table. There was also a sense that the kind of exchange that is facilitated by these gatherings, takes place within a cloistered community that is comfortable with the conventions of such platforms. We want to build a different platform for the diverse voices that represent the crafts, a space where an inclusive and enriched discourse about the fundamental importance of the crafts can take place.

Walking, talking, making was an experiment. The intended outcomes were simply to engender a feeling of community amongst those who attended and to get a sense of a way forward. *Walking, talking, making* is part of an on-going, accumulative project.

At Monkton Wyld we wanted to create an environment in which an open and responsive conversation could take place. The residential nature of the event would allow for a more expansive dialogue. During 24 hours we would work on a collaborative making activity, eat and drink, and walk in the Dorset countryside. In this context we hoped that conversation would naturally take place. The content of this conversation would be reviewed and ideas prioritised as it developed. Whilst wanting to be open, we established a clear focus by setting an

agenda during our first session on Thursday afternoon. However, in order to prepare the participants we circulated some statements and questions that had come out of previous projects:

What are the barriers to an inclusive community of shared interest in the crafts, and (how) can they be overcome?

What sort of language might be adequate to support an authentic discourse on craft? Can a language be rich and descriptive without resorting to jargon or obtuse terminology?

One of our central assumptions is that craft is understood as not only a genre of object, but as a practice that is set within a continuum, and that has to be understood in context

If we accept this assumption, what is the role of the craft exhibition?

How is practice communicated in the crafted object?

Does textual interpretation interfere with or enhance the viewer's ability to 'read' an object in this way?

Does the viewer engage with the sensual and intellectual experience of the maker through the object?

What kind of space might best facilitate this engagement?

What is the relationship between the individual maker and the collective craft knowledge that they embody?

Is this relationship diminished or expanded by globalisation and hybridized practice?

How can we develop a better understanding of process driven practices within the outcome driven culture of our institutions?

These were intended as possible starting points and were not intended to be prescriptive.

The programme

Although the event was residential and the conversations were ongoing to some extent, the programme was divided broadly into 4 distinct sessions:

Outline Schedule

Thursday 18th March

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| Arrivals | 3.00 – 4.30 |
| • Welcome and introduction to the event | 4.30 – 6.00 |
| Dinner | 6.00 – 7.00 |
| • Making | 7.00 – 9.00 |

Friday 19th March

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|---|--------------|
| Breakfast | 8.00 – 9.00 |
| • Walking | 9.30 – 12.30 |
| Lunch | 1.00 – 2.00 |
| • Concluding discussion and documentation | 2.00 – 3.30 |
| Disperse | 4.00 |

Session 1

The opening session was intended to introduce the participants, review the structure and identify key themes for focus. In the event, we quickly became immersed in discussion of our individual understandings of craft. A dominant theme was the importance of subjectivity, the experience of practice. We found common ground between our various disciplines based on an understanding of making and the complexity of the relationship between thinking and doing.

Session 2

For this session we picked up the discussion from the first session whilst we made tools for mark-making using a variety of materials. We worked sometimes all together and sometimes in smaller groups, talking as we worked. Although the conversation at this point remained focused on many of the issues raised in the first session, it inevitably became more dispersed. The activity required that we self-consciously considered the process and planned the outcome. On

reflection, it would perhaps have been more effective, in the time available, to have devised a simpler making process that could have been carried out whilst we sat together at a table. This could have been as uncomplicated as folding paper, or moulding material such as plasticine. However, we finished with an interesting collection of objects and images.





Session 3

Before walking, we reviewed the discussion so far and identified 4 key areas for closer focus. These were:

- Materials
- Community
- Curation
- Language

We elected to walk in loose groups that would each deal with one of these areas. Within the groups individuals would walk sometimes all together and sometimes in couples. The rhythm and pace of the walk helped to establish a flow of

conversation that was remarkably purposeful. This was probably the most effective activity of the event, in so far as it facilitated a clearly directed and satisfying conversation.

The walk ended by the sea at Lyme Regis, where Sue Lawty encouraged us to contribute to her 'World Beach' project, collecting stones and making patterns. Despite the rain we became happily engrossed in this activity.



Session 4

In this session we fed back from our various discussions on the walk and attempted to pull together some key points that would form the basis for the 'provocation' that would be presented at the craft rally. The sense of a collective 'we' in the crafts was constantly challenged and undermined in the course of our conversations. What emerged was a notion of a field that can only be described in terms of contradiction and divergence, but which nevertheless persists as a gathering point for a huge range of practices. This paradox was seen as being essential to the richness and dynamism of the crafts. The provocation became a series of contradictory statements, all of which could be argued as being true, despite being opposed or in conflict with each other.

The Group

The group was broadly representative and balanced, in terms of gender, age and stage of career, the range of practices and perspectives. The format enabled everybody to have a voice although, inevitably, some contributed more than others, some were better able to generalise their own experience and to discuss the field in broad terms.

Although the relatively small number felt luxurious, over 24 hours it was difficult to achieve the inclusiveness that we wanted. This could be addressed in one of two ways: to have a smaller group, or to give participants a more clearly defined role. This latter might have been achieved by asking everybody in advance to lead the discussion around a particular issue, perhaps also preparing by producing a short position paper or presentation.

The venue

Monkton Wyld was in many ways an ideal venue for the event. The spaces were comfortable and functional, and we were able to focus on our activities, whilst our hosts stayed in the background. The location allowed for a good choice of walking routes. However, working to the meal times prescribed by the kitchen meant that we sometimes had to cut short the flow of discussion. We also felt that making our own meals might have provided another opportunity for engendering the sense of collaboration and community that we were aspiring to.

Next steps

We now propose to build on the experience of *walking, talking* with a series of 5 small events over a period of a year, starting in autumn 2010. These events will use walking, making and similar strategies to facilitate discussion. They will be based on a smaller group, with participants committing to at least 4 of the series. Participants will be asked to prepare, through reading and by contributing short (no more than 500 hundred words) position papers. Discussion will be focused

on key questions and will be strictly time tabled. The idea will be to create an ideal balance of conviviality and rigour. These events will feed a reflective blog and will lead to towards a publication.

It is anticipated that the publication and developments beyond these next steps will be the subject of funding bids.



Budget

Costs

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| Research and development – 3 days @ £150 per day for researcher / promoter | £450 |
| Venue Hire – including accommodation and catering | £1000 |
| Facilitator's fees, including expenses and travel | £550 |
| Startup funds for peer dialogue | £500 |
| Total | £2500 |

Income

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| Apd FYP | £2000 |
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Alias
Total

£500
£2500