

Joining in and dropping out: Hand-stitching in spaces of social interaction Emma

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This version is the author's accepted manuscript. The citation for the published article is:
Shercliff, E. (2015) Joining In and Dropping Out: hand-stitching in spaces of social interaction. *Craft Research*. Vol. 6.2. pp.187-207. DOI: 10.1386/crre.6.2.187_1

Abstract

The scale and pace of hand-stitching match those of the body, grounding cognitive and emotional experiences of solitude or sociality in a tangible process. The hand–eye–mind coordination required cultivates a distinctive form of attention to the self. On the one hand, as a private, contemplative activity, the slow rhythms of hand-stitching allow an individual to carve out time and space for introspective reflection. A collective stitching practice on the other hand, with fragmented tasks of short duration and frequent changes of colour, structures a very different space. In this article I draw on my experiences of joining an embroidery group to explore the simultaneity of social, cultural and physical processes in stitching practices, speech patterns and group dynamics. Finding that embodied knowledge of the craft includes patterns of social and physical interaction – or separation, I propose that hand-stitching practices can suggest alternative ways of thinking about how we create and occupy personal and social spaces.

Keywords

hand-stitching, rhythm, speech patterns, social interaction, space, self-reflexivity

Introduction

Hand-stitching is a slow and rhythmic craft that describes both functional and symbolic dimensions of joining and being attached. It surpasses its functional attributes when considered as a material practice that offers particular metaphors for other processes of collaboration and integrity – or even separation and isolation. Drawing on examples from my doctoral research, this article explores ways in which hand-stitching processes share characteristics with these social modes of interaction and separation.

My doctoral research grew out of my prior involvement in community art projects facilitating collective textile making activities. I felt that the practical knowledge of hand-stitching I shared with participants enabled us to know more than the technical skills of the craft, but that this type of knowledge was not articulated through conventional forms of instruction like speech, text or demonstration. The research investigated the nature of embodied knowledge articulated through personal and social experiences of hand-stitching activities. One of the aims was to reveal ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group might be constructed through their crafting skills.

The research presented here compares two of these experiences. The first discusses my participation in a village embroidery group working collectively on a commemorative set of embroideries; the second concerns the contemplative activity of stitching alone on an individual piece. Aware that these contexts differ, I focus in particular on the dynamics of the handstitching processes – manipulating the materials and handling the tools – to explore how the rhythms and patterns of hand-stitching skills reflect an embodied knowledge of the rhythms and patterns of social interaction and self-reflexivity, in order to propose new ways of thinking about creating and occupying personal and social spaces.

Stitching collectively

Collective stitching has a long history; the eleventh century Bayeux Tapestry comes to mind as a well-known example. Motivations and production techniques vary widely. Design history, crafts history, art history, anthropology and the sociology of housework have thoroughly analysed the different contextual parameters of hand-stitching as industrial and domestic production and consumption (Burman 1999), leisured past-time (Parker 1984; Hackney 2006; Prichard 2010), essential chore (Dalton 1987) and artistic, expressive medium (Parker and Pollock 1981; Barnett 1995; Jefferies 2000). Furthermore, hand-stitching as a social practice increasingly features in the broad categories of participatory art, political activism, co-design and occupational therapy.

The efficient production of large-scale works necessitates recruiting large numbers of participants, often with the added benefit of reaching out to wide audiences, inviting visitors and spectators to collaborate in and learn from the processes of making. Many museum and artist initiatives exploit these aspects of participatory art¹ and craft.² Moreover, the scale of work, coupled with the numbers of people involved, ensures a high level of visual, social and/or political impact, if that is the intention. For instance, embroidered banners were an important feature of the early twentieth century women's suffrage campaign (Tickner 1988).

Contemporary examples inspired by feminist activism include 'Desconocida', a global collaboration of stitchers protesting against the continued murders of women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, initiated and coordinated by artist Lise Bjørne Linnert, begun in 2006 and ongoing (Linnert 2014) and the 'Craftivist Jigsaw #imapiece' campaign, consisting of more than 600 embroidered cloth jigsaw pieces made to raise awareness of child malnutrition, initiated in the United Kingdom in 2012 by the Craftivist Collective (2013).

Co-design extends user-centred design approaches to include participants as partners in the design process – as co-designers – often of experience-based products (Sanders and Stappers 2008), but nevertheless echoes its industrial and marketing origins in its focus on new

'products' over familiar 'processes'. In contrast, emphasizing the therapeutic qualities of familiar 'process', public health initiatives use social stitching activities (among other crafts) to provide remediation as part of occupational therapy programmes (Howell and Pierce 2000; Reynolds 2004; Arts For Health Cornwall and Isles of Scilly 2012).

However, as an ordinary activity integrated into a regular weekly routine, stitching also acts as a congenial binder for community groups in local neighbourhoods wanting to create a specific commemorative project or to make social opportunities available for individuals from mixed social classes and ages with a shared interest in the craft. This type of work might share the need for a team of workers with other large-scale participatory art events, the motivation of social cohesion with craftivism, decision-making strategies with co-design, and offer occasions to take time out and relax from otherwise busy schedules, but in my experience stitching does not wholly or uniquely fit into any of these categories.

Methods: thinking through making

As a practitioner-researcher I have found there is a tension between theorizing the context of stitching and experiencing the practice. In practice, elements from the different categories and contexts of stitching overlap. Textile making is, as Sarat Maharaj describes, 'something that seems to belong to one genre, but overshoots its borders and seems no less at home in another' (Maharaj 2001: 7). For example, many people who stitch in groups also stitch alone on their own artworks, gifts or other creative projects – as do I. The satisfactions offered by hand-stitching are felt to be worth pursuing for their own sake as personal experiences enjoyed by the individual, as well as a means of initiating social exchanges.

Although these could be studied as two distinctly different practices, my view is that when absorbed in the process of making, its specific social or cultural context slips out of focus and other more immediate and personal priorities takeover. The sensory qualities of the craft are

common to both, experienced as cognitive responses to the handling of materials and tools and as an intuitive awareness of the space inhabited by the body. When I stitch, I am familiar with the sensation of how the world I make and occupy seems to centre around my hand movements; it feels important in the moment of making and I focus my attention on this instead. Informed by studies of tacit craft knowledge (Polanyi [1966] 2009; Pye [1968] 1995; Sennett 2008; Ingold 2013) I therefore concentrate on examining the material and gestural characteristics of hand-stitching such as repeated and coordinated hand movements, and the skilled precision of tool use and fingertip manipulation. In so doing, I find an alternative context for exploring the nature of embodied knowledge acquired and practised through the rhythms and patterns of hand-stitching processes. It was through my close observation of this micro context of fingertip manipulation and the different types of concentration required – or lack of it – that I came to consider the possible relationship between an individual and a social stitching practice.

Hand-stitched textile making was central to the research project. I worked on a variety of pieces, collectively and independently. This approach was combined with ethnographic methods of participation, conversation and observation in order to examine group – and individual – stitching activities from different perspectives. Video and photographic documentation aimed to capture what the stitching experience or activity looked like. To try to capture what it felt like to be physically and emotionally engaged in the process, I recorded conversations and unstructured interviews with participants, and reflective journal writing documented my own thoughts and reactions.

As a naturalistic enquiry I wanted to study what stitchers typically do (Snape and Spencer 2003) and it was important to the project that participants made work independently from my interest in their activity. Moreover, to begin with I did not want the responsibility of designing and managing a project to skew my experience of joining in. To this end, I chose to work with an existing group of embroiderers. Early in my research I made contact with an embroidery group

local to where my family live. This broad familiarity made it relatively straightforward for me to initially observe the group working together and to later join in as a participant stitcher. The group consisted of seven core members including the project leader and had been formed to make new embroideries to commemorate the 750th anniversary of their local village church. Reflecting a gender bias, evident across textile crafts more widely, the participants were all women. Sessions were held regularly on a weekly basis over two years and participants – including myself – came when they could, fitting around other family and work duties. We met in the village church rooms, a publicly available but semi-private room used for community activities.

Parallel to my participation in the embroidery group's commemorative project I also stitched on my own, making individual pieces in order to study stitching as a private activity. I used the same photographic, written and audio methods to document the making processes. One such piece was a large piece of linen covered in rows of red running stitch worked on from time to time over a period of three years. I deliberately kept the motif minimal in order to be able to concentrate on the sensations of the simple rhythms and patterns easily learnt by the hands and enabling my thoughts to issue a commentary on the process as I stitched.

Stitching socially

As I grew more acquainted with the group and the project, taking part in some of their social events as well as making the embroideries, I began to consider the different ways in which the relationship between the social functions of the group and the embroideries was articulated in practice. Key components of a social stitching practice include conversation, or gossip and a continuous flux of coordinated hands and bodies. I note, in my written reflections, that:

A lot of chatter goes on in the sewing group. It is as essential an ingredient to the group meetings as the stitching work. On each occasion that I have visited the

group, the noise of voices has been more or less constant. The level and tone varies, descending to a conspiratorial whisper and rising to shrill exclamations [...]

The stitching work advances at a slow pace. It cannot be described as intense production. Instead a fluid interaction of bodies, gestures, tales, suggestions, advice, and somehow a few more beads are applied, background stitching filled, tacking stitches removed. (Author's notes 2008)

I could sense a rhythm of practice emerging between our conversation and the practical tasks undertaken that suggested a tacit relationship between them. I turned to feminist linguistics to gain an understanding of women's speech patterns (Coates 1988; Jones 1990) and drew theoretical insights from anthropology (Verdier 1979; Douglas 1995) and the cultural history of myths and folk tales concerning informal female gatherings (Warner 1995; Classen 2005a). In my analysis below, I first draw out the connections between gossip and informal gatherings of women to then discuss the social functions of gossip that I believe reflects the social function of the embroidery group, to finally explore the ways this was performed through their stitching practices.

The word 'gossip' originates from 'godsibb', an Old English word denoting the relationship between a god-child and god-parent (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). According to Marina Warner, a 'gossiping' in Early Modern England was a christening feast; a gathering of mainly female friends and relatives to congratulate and bless the mother and new-born baby (Warner 1995: 33). The use of gossip as it is now commonly understood to mean, 'idle talk; trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle', dates from the early nineteenth century (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). This etymology connotes an aspect of parental caring traditionally designated as feminine, which transfers beyond biology into society and culture, to appear in speech patterns.

Held to be a symptom of idleness, an unbecoming tendency to tell tales, or evidence of a malicious streak, women's gossip has, since classical times, been at best disapproved of and hence disguised behind other household activities or informal gatherings (Warner 1995).³ These informal gatherings might consist of prostitutes, midwives or wet-nurses for example; guardians of particular types of knowledge, usually unwritten (Alcoff and Dalmiya 1993; Warner 1995; Classen 2005a). Sharing the connotations of emotional labour and caring with the origins of gossiping, these professions typically relied on knowledge gained from first-hand personal experience and transmitted orally and practically in the company of other women, as opposed to objective, scientific, propositional knowledge found in books (Alcoff and Dalmiya 1993).⁴ In her study of female roles in traditional French village life, anthropologist Yvonne Verdier (1979) adds seamstresses to this list of occupations,⁵ associating sewing rituals to traditions of women's oral cultures and knowledge networks.

These links draw attention to the ways in which the embroidery group I was working with perpetuated some of these social constructs and functions, reinforcing traditions pertaining to the oral transmission of knowledge coupled with practical activity.

'A continuous chorus'

'Chatting' and 'house-talk', defined by linguist Deborah Jones (1990: 248) as 'a continuous chorus and commentary on the incidents of women's daily lives', is the most common function of the embroidery group's conversations. Topics consisting of useful tips, local or family news and information exchange are introduced and laid out like small motifs. Interruptions in the form of questions seeking advice on next steps for the embroideries or decisions to change colour are frequent, so a thread of conversation is usually of short duration and moves on rapidly to the next.

The embroideries are abstract, colourful designs of shard-like shapes of organza applied onto a base cloth using a variety of embroidery stitches, beading and couched threads such that 'a continuous chorus' of individual styles of stitching and colour choices are easily and deliberately absorbed into the whole design without causing discord to the intended overall effect (see Figure 1). I describe the stitching tasks in my notes as:

Broken down into short and simple, or repetitive and monotonous tasks. Both methods require only a minimal level of attention. They are easy-to-remember, automated sequences of gestures: thread winding, cord making, seeding, background filling in a uniform colour, tacking, finishing loose ends. The start and stop points for the tasks are either tightly contained in a small space, or a short time lapse. Alternatively it might be a section of a larger, tedious task that is easier to work through with frequent interruptions that break the monotony. The design of the working method takes into account and allows for the distraction of conversation. (Author's notes 2008)



Figure 1: Detail of one of the embroidery panels showing the medley of layered colours, embroidery stitches, beading and embellishments: 'a continuous chorus' of short tasks that allow for frequent interruptions without disrupting either the visual effect or the modus operandi of the project. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

Reciprocity

The conversation and the embroideries are jointly produced. The rhythms of one influence the rhythms of the other and the design of the process makes possible these parallel activities.

Jones describes the reciprocity of women's speech as 'contemplated, rather than argued' (Jones 1990: 246), where each participant contributes to and takes from a shared pool of common experience. This mutually supportive function of women's speech is reflected in the design of the embroidery project. The different components are considered in such a way that tasks allotted to each participant can be adapted to their varied amounts of disposable time, their varied skill levels and the probability of them acquiring new skills and improving as they work. For instance, thread winding always needs to be done; it is a quick and simple task easily done by participants with less time to spare or limited ability (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Thread winding: preparing skeins of embroidery thread to be used by several stitchers. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

The embroidered panels can be worked on by two or more people interchangeably at the same time, or consecutively (as in Figures 3 and 4).



Figures 3 & 4: One participant works alone on her panel, and during a different session works together with another participant on the same piece. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

Skills are pooled and used collaboratively. It is possible to add a few stitches to a panel and feel that a contribution has been made, without having to commit to finishing what has been started as in due course someone else will continue the task (see Figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 & 6: One participant contributing to a panel that is later taken on by another, who continues alone and completes it. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

Like women's speech the project is cooperative, built upon through multiparty discussion, and reflected upon collectively (Coates 1988). What is produced together has greater significance than an individual contribution: "it is very much a joint effort, with individual speakers concerned

to contribute to a jointly negotiated whole [...] working together to produce shared meanings' (Coates 1988: 112–13). 'Speech' and 'speakers' could easily be replaced here by 'stitching' and 'embroiderers'; the embroidery project accommodates the different abilities and experiences of each participant in a 'jointly negotiated whole'.



Figure 7: 'Multiparty discussion': participants working together on the same piece of work. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

There is a compatible relationship of form and purpose between meeting to chat and meeting to stitch whereby the patterns of one are reflected in the patterns and processes of the other. The work of crafting mutual cooperation through speech is mirrored by the embroidery work and is simultaneously represented by it. As with speech, the embroideries build the space of social interaction progressively and openly as a joint production.

Stitching alone

Whereas stitching socially reflects patterns of speech, stitching alone is sometimes associated with the release and freedom of silent introspection and contemplative thought; the occupation of a private space.

Hand-stitching inspires ambiguous images of acquiescence and rebellion, of constraint and independence, of the effort of manual labour and private pleasures (Parker 1984). These unusual associations are also familiar themes in early twentieth century feminist writing and I draw on examples (Woolf [1921] 2003; Colette 1970) to elucidate my own sensations of handstitching alone. Linguistic concepts of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003), and positive psychology concerned with instances of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) offer explanations of these phenomena.

The focused hand–eye coordination required for the precision and repetition of needlework can engender an almost trance-like state of mind. I note that once started on the evenly spaced rows of running stitch (shown in Figure 8):

There's something calming about pushing the needle in, pulling it out, and pulling the thread through. Like breathing. A rhythm. Like a beat. It's quite slow. There is comfort in the simplicity of it. The plainness of it. The boringness of it. I'm looking at my stitches. I'm trying to keep them even. All the same length. And straight [...]

Drawn in by the rhythm, I forget what I'm doing [...] My thoughts move independently from what my hands are doing, and what my body is doing. Which is still. My hands are slowly moving to a rhythm. The rhythm begins to play a part [...] of being still, being in one place. (Author's recorded commentary 2008)

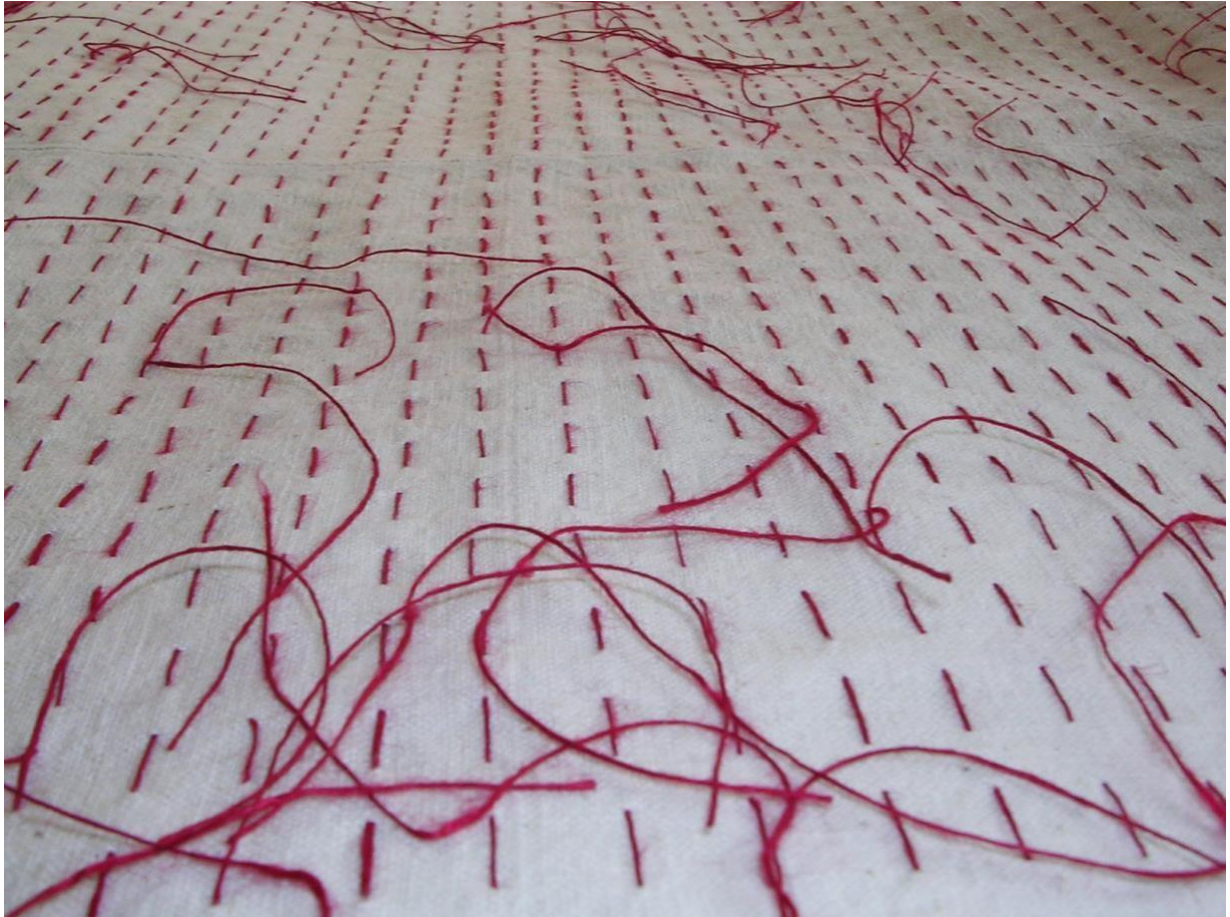


Figure 8: Emma Shercliff. (2008). *Monologue*. Stitching alone. Running stitch on linen cloth. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

I find it hard to stop and I allow myself to be absorbed by the activity. Virginia Woolf ([1921] 2003), although not writing about stitching, evocatively describes this seductive state of sinking into oneself and closing off the outside world, of self-subsisting within a quiet stillness and keeping all else at bay. She writes:

I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. (Woolf [1921] 2003: 61)

Words used to describe this kind of experience include phrases like 'drawn in by', 'lose myself',

'disappear' and 'sink', which suggest the sensation of being merged with or swallowed up by the work. These are all metaphors that imply a physical movement of the body transgressing some sort of boundary, as Woolf writes: 'to slip easily from one thing to another [...] deeper and deeper, away from the surface' ([1921] 2003: 61). Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson ([1980] 2003) note that a clearly delineated physical experience grounds a conceptual understanding of a mental or emotional experience (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003: 59), arguing that 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action' (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003: 3). Accordingly, experiences can be understood through the structures of learnt and practised body movements and gestures as well as language. Actions, like words, can carry a symbolic transfer of meaning.

Positive psychology offers another explanation. The heightened sense of self-awareness and the losing track of time triggers a pleasurable sensation described by the American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as 'flow'. Csikszentmihalyi identifies 'flow' as a state of optimal experience that arises from total absorption in an intrinsically motivating activity; an experience worth having for its own sake independently from any other type of external reward. According to Andrew Jackson (2011), this intrinsically motivating experience, although valued for its own sake, is not solely derived from the moment of the act of making, but is integrated with experiences of wider social contexts and patterns of behaviour. He also suggests that to achieve this quality of experience practitioners will demonstrate a 'careful control and mastery' (Jackson 2011) of and within their space of work. Jackson's research concerned highly skilled amateur practitioners who disposed of time and space to practise their crafts in well-organized and well-equipped home-based studio-workshops. My experience differs in the disposal of time and space: I do not have a studio-workshop and time is not always set aside but grabbed between and around other demands.

However, losing oneself in repetitive hand-stitching generates a sense of being able to stop time and dissolve boundaries, demonstrating a different sort of 'careful control and mastery' of

space. One can metaphorically detach oneself from one's surroundings; time and space that is otherwise filled can thus be retrieved for the self. Hand-stitched work can easily be contained to the scale of the body; the work is usually within easy reach of the hands. Held against the torso, drawing the eyes downward, stitching shapes the body into a studious, inward-looking posture, with the head bowed over the work (see Figure 9). Containing the activity within this manageable scale of the body helps to restore a sense of control over larger, rambling, greedy external events. Thus absorbing the individual's attention, it feels possible to reorder time and space.



Figure 9: Head bowed over the stitching work held close to the torso. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

To some this inwardly turned reverie might appear self-indulgent, as this attention, that might otherwise be paid to a partner or other family members, is directed towards the self. The shutting-out of the outside world in search of an uninterrupted calmness signifies a self-reliance sometimes experienced by an observer as threatening or suspicious. The writer Colette, in her

chronicles *Earthly Paradise* (1970) observes the hostile feelings she has when watching her daughter:

I shall speak the truth: I don't much like my daughter sewing [...] Bel-Gazou is silent when she sews, silent for hours on end, with her mouth firmly closed [...] She is silent, and she – why not write down the word that frightens me – she is thinking.
(Colette 1970: 206–07)

The silence, stillness and concentration effected by the sewing suggest a containment of the self. Here again the metaphor indicates an occupation of space. In this instance, clear boundaries are sensed by the observer. Bel-Gazou wholly occupies her own world with an autonomy that signifies her unavailability to attend to others, resulting in her mother anxiously resenting her inaccessibility and willing her return to their shared social space.

This 'careful control and mastery' of space may be contrived by the slightly bowed posture bent over the work and the stillness of the body as it is focused on and drawn in by the rhythms and patterns of stitching. It is an effective means of making, and signalling to others, a private space for contemplation, for introspection and for suspending responsibilities; a space without distinct physical borders but with boundaries built by focused concentration.

Relationships between the two modes of stitching: Rhythm

At first view the two modes of stitching are in contrast. One appears closed to others, is sustained and contemplative, while the other is open to collaborative construction, with fragmented bursts of constantly interrupted activity. However, the role played by the rhythms of the hand-stitching gestures suggest a link. The patterns of these rhythms provide a structure to the experience; the rhythm of the hands moving acts as a bridge between tactile and visual sensory perceptions and language. In the above examples, a steady repetition props up a

monologue of thoughts in one instance, and a succession of short bursts of activity support multi-party conversation in the other.

In both instances, focused attention is required to start the process and remind the body of the necessary hand–eye–mind coordination. This is prompted by following a design, or given instruction, which guides the hands into stitching out the rhythms. Once settled into the rhythm, concentration lapses, or changes its focus, allowing the mind to drift off into introspective rambling thoughts, or to join the conversation and participate socially. The repetitions and rhythms of hand-stitching build ‘a place of concentration that allows the hands to takeover from the mind’ (Hemmings 2006: 64).

Pattern

I note whilst stitching the rows of running stitch:

I’m paying attention to the rhythm of the stitches, and the gap between the rows
[...] I have to think about it. I have to work to merge with the piece. I find my way
into the piece by paying attention to what I’m doing. (Author’s recorded
commentary 2008)

Paying attention to a particular rhythm conjures up the memory of the sensation of the stitches I want to make. Each time I repeat the gesture I reinforce my knowledge and strengthen my skill. The rhythm is timed by the poking of the needle and the singing of the thread as I pull it through, and is recognized by my body as part of a pattern. My body knows the pattern tacitly (Polanyi [1966] 2009) and repeats it seemingly without effort, normally without giving it much thought. The pattern is in the series of small gestures I make, coordinating my left and right hands to hold and manipulate the fabric, placing the needle and pulling the thread taut, gradually moving it along the surface of the fabric. To some extent it resembles a dance routine.

In *Socrates' Ancestor*, Indra Kagis McEwen (1993) explores the relationships between the ancient Greek 'kosmos' (order) and craft, proposing that the regular movements of a making activity invoke a visual pattern of the 'kosmos', the order of things. She writes:

The discovery of a pattern seems to me to be an inherent feature of the human experience of making. Whether he or she thinks about it or not, or is even aware of it, a person who makes something implicitly assumes the existence of an order or standard of rightness that transcends all recipes and rules of composition: a standard, a pattern, or – to use the Greek word – a *paradeigma* which both measures the work and is measured by it. This pattern can be thought of as a single, immutable template to be traced or copied, which appears to be how Plato understood it, or it can be thought of as a mutable rhythm governing a pattern of movement, like the figure of a dance: a rhythm or order (*kosmos*) that is rediscovered with each new tracing of the figure. (McEwen 1993: 41–42, original emphases)

McEwen is proposing that the 'kosmos', the order of things, does not have a fixed form but is manifested differently with each new making. As with each time that I repeat the pattern of hand-stitching, I rediscover it, making small adjustments with my hands to accommodate the infinite subtle variations of environment, materials, weight and pressure. In becoming a pattern, the technique is consigned to memory. As an ordering of hand movements knowledge of the practice becomes embodied.

Conclusion: Embodied knowledge through direct participation

This research has drawn out the strengths of an adaptable stitching practice as a means to explore structures and spaces of social interaction and provides evidence of a way in which a material practice such as hand-stitching can inform and structure a form of social practice. The

characteristics of hand-stitching, evident in the rhythms and patterns of the craft, sought by practitioners in order to experience sensations of participation, belonging, interdependence – or separation and isolation – suggest that to possess this practical skill is itself the acquisition of knowledge as a mode of interaction.

I have identified that conversation is a key component of the rhythm of practice between the social function of the group and the practical tasks undertaken by its members. Part of mastering a manual skill such as hand-stitching is recognizing the patterns of the whole craft and understanding the ways in which they interconnect. This includes its relationship to language as well as sensing the necessary coordinated movements and adjustments of the body. These different components of the craft of belonging are learnt and practised as a whole process, which typically can only be known by practising and passing on through direct participation.

However, participants do not always want to contribute equally and repeat the same stitching tasks. In this kind of collective project the type of stitching task undertaken corresponds to the level of participation desired. The group leader's embodied knowledge of the process and methods, patterns and rhythms of this kind of group activity is evident in the manner in which she has designed the project, making a range of tasks available to participants simultaneously. We might all contribute equally sometimes, both to conversation and to the embroideries, but an individual might also be released from our shared social space to occupy a solitary, quiet space even though throughout she is physically present in the group. For instance, seeking the comfort of being part of the group, but not wishing to fully interact, a participant might choose to continue independently a pre-arranged set of tasks on an embroidered panel (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Independent tasks mean a participant can be present to benefit from being with the group but work alone in a private space. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

Figure 11: Collective tasks mean a participant can be present and opt in to the shared social space. Photographed by the author. © Emma Shercliff.

Alternatively, a participant seeking to actively join in the conversation might opt to help others on a collective task or execute a series of short, simple tasks such as winding thread or sorting colours (Figure 11).

As for my own experience, I enjoyed going to the weekly sessions in order to stitch without having to make decisions about the project. I would find it relaxing to concentrate on my allotted embroidery tasks, and would continue on a panel for the duration, contributing intermittently to the conversations. I write in my notes:

It doesn't matter what I do in the same way as it does when I do my work. It matters that I do it, and that I do it well, but that is all [...] To sit and couch down cords, slowly, carefully and deliberately was a very restful thing to do [...] I did not necessarily join in the talk if I was stitching. I was looking at my work, concentrating on it, but listening. Occasionally moving out of the bubble when my own thoughts crept in. (Author's notes 2008)

As with other traditions of oral culture, knowledge of this mode of practice is transmitted through the whole performance; of turning up and joining in, helping to set up equipment and sharing

tasks. 'Knowing is not necessarily a matter of saying and representing what is the case but can also be a kind of practical involvement with the world' (Alcoff and Dalmiya 1993: 235). The craft of participation integrates within it a system of behaviour, ideas and practices that include a way of knowing how to function within and help maintain this type of mutually supportive network. My experience of joining the embroidery group was something I recognize from my previous experiences of working with groups. I bring with me prior knowledge of these practices, although this time, as a passive participant rather than a project designer or coordinator, I notice the mechanisms and structures that hold an individual within the group. This skilled process of cooperation as embodied knowledge (Sennett 2012) transcends the practical work of the embroideries but is performed through them and embedded within them.

The skilful crafting of stitches – practised both alone and socially – leads to a practitioner's careful mastery of and within his or her space of work, effectively nurturing a sense of being able to manipulate and control space as either shared social space or private personal space. I have found this allows a practitioner to adjust the type of experience sought: participation in a mutually supportive activity can therefore be exchanged for isolated contemplation and a sense of self-reliance: joining in or dropping out.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the embroidery group participants who generously accepted me amongst them. In respect of research ethics, names have been withheld, but this in no way diminishes my gratitude.

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Notes

¹ Now seen as a discrete sub-discipline of artistic practices. See Bishop (2012) for more on this subject.

² Craftspace, an organization based in Birmingham, specializes in pioneering approaches to engaging a diverse public with contemporary craft, recruiting practitioners to work with a wide range of communities and organizations producing ambitious new works (Figueiredo 2014). See also Hackney (2013).

³ And at worst feared or even forbidden. Warner (1995) maps a path through European mythology, folklore and fairy tales to reveal the origins and evolutions of tales and tale-tellers and in the process recounts incidents of prejudice against women's talk. Religious authority is one such example. Warner describes how for centuries Christianity has endorsed silence, obedience and discretion as feminine virtues, citing St. Paul's Epistle to Timothy as a source of particularly virulent sanctioning: 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submission (2:11)'. Another is the medieval 'brank', or 'scold's bridle'; an iron head brace forcibly worn by women in punishment for their gossiping or scolding. A Belgian iron scold's bridle (c.1550–1800) can be seen in the Wellcome Collection, London.

⁴ See also Classen (2005b) and Howes (2005) for further discussion about the historical influences behind such a hierarchy of the senses that sustained prejudice against domains of traditionally female knowledge, and Alcoff and Dalmiya (1993) for their argument against such 'epistemological discrimination' (Alcoff and Dalmiya 1993: 217).

⁵ The example of the seamstress illustrates clearly ways in which women's talk functions as knowledge transmission under the guise of a usefully practical craft that is otherwise considered benign. It was common in rural French communities until the mid-twentieth century for young girls approaching puberty to spend a winter season with a seamstress who would instruct them in the rudiments of sewing and 'sophistication': 'the reference to sophistication gained suggests that they learn how to look their best, how to deal with admirers, become wise about sex and avoid conception' (Douglas 1995: 4–5).