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## **Reflections on Bummock: The Lace Archive Symposium**

### **Abstract**

“Reflections on Bummock” explored and expanded upon issues arising from the residency and exhibition, *Bummock: The Lace Archive*, held at Backlit Gallery, Nottingham, in 2018. The symposium reflected on the work of three artists, Andrew Bracey, Danica Maier and Lucy Renton, and how they spent two and half years researching the Lace Archive held at Nottingham Trent University to catalyse the creation of new artworks. “Bummock”, which refers to the large part of an iceberg hidden beneath the surface of the sea, was adopted by the artists as a heuristic device to explore unseen or undervalued parts of archives to generate new readings, knowledge and responses. Discussions included the artists development of a “controlled rummaging” methodology to select items, and how the exhibited outcomes illustrated “the flipping of the bummock” to reveal the underside of the archive. The resulting artworks were idiosyncratic, referencing historical lace objects through traces of its supplementary documentation, as opposed to replicating the more seductive, aesthetic characteristics of the textile. Invited speakers, Amanda Briggs-Goode, Deborah Dean, Sian Vaugh and Pennina Barnett, contributed alternative insights to working with the materials (and politics) of archives, based on their experiences as a custodian, curator, historian and writer.

Keywords: Lace, textile, lace archive, heuristic research, artistic response



*Figure 1. Lucy Renton, Modern Adaptation, 2018, canvas, vinyl tablecloths, floor matting, acrylic, household paints, haberdashery, antique wallpaper.*

## **Introduction**

The Symposium, 'Reflections on Bummock' explored and expanded upon issues arising from the residency and exhibition, *Bummock: The Lace Archive* at Backlit Gallery, Nottingham over the period 2015-2017. Three artists, Andrew Bracey, Danica Maier and Lucy Renton, spent two and half years researching unseen parts of the Lace Archive held at Nottingham Trent University to catalyse the creation of new artworks in response to the archival materials. The symposium and exhibition served as a pilot for a larger research project *Bummock: New Artistic Responses to Unseen parts of the Archive* with further iterations scheduled at the Tennyson Research Centre in Lincoln, the George Boole Collection, Cork and the Stanley Kubrick Archive, London, (2018-2020). Following the definition of bummock, as "the large part of the iceberg hidden beneath the surface of the sea" ([Bummock 2019](#)), the aim of the residency was to create artistic responses to unseen or undervalued parts of archives to generate new readings, knowledge and artworks.

The reflections here focus on some of the themes raised by the speakers, the artists involved in the project and the audience, collectively gathered for the symposium on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2018 at Backlit Gallery, Nottingham. The introduction by Danica

Maier contextualised Bummock as a heuristic device for exploring what's hidden, the research design employed and the role of the Lace Archive within this iteration of the ongoing project. She referred to how archives (and researchers/visitors to archives) are often 'specific' in their focus, but that this creative research seeks to raise awareness of the "unseen, unknown aspects of archives... using a controlled rummage methodology." The dilemma of being overwhelmed and side tracked by archives and their contents, was turned into a positive by the "controlled rummaging" akin to historian Carlo Ginsburg's "euphoria of ignorance", (Ginsberg, 2012, 216) employed in the Lace Archive by Maier, Bracey and Renton. The group's artistic research practice over their residency involved the triangulation of "time together looking, rummaging, talking; time away (reflecting/ working individually); and then returning to work together". This culminated in an exhibition that illustrated "the flipping of the bummock [revealing the underside of the iceberg], in the form of new artworks alongside catalytic items."

### **Archival perspectives**

The symposium explored the ideas introduced above further through a programme of speakers representing the different roles, responsibilities and practices of archives, archivists and artists, in relation to how objects are conserved, accessed and interpreted. Amanda Briggs-Goode, custodian of the Lace Archive, referred to some of the Missing Persons associated with the collection, such as students who designed for the lace industry, for which the School of Art and Design was established in 1843 by the Board of Trade. She discussed how links between pedagogic and professional practices were established; by students copying and reworking classic designs, then gradually being allowed to develop their own 'handwriting'. A case study was made of William Hallam Pegg (1864-1946), an outstanding designer of hand and machine-made lace, who was awarded a medal in the 1905 Paris Exposition. Briggs-Goode also made reference to one of his later artworks, *Needlepoint lace and embroidery panel recording the abortive economic conference of 64 nations in London, 1933 with its concomitant orgy of destruction* (1942). The unique panel, referenced in *Lace Unarchived*, Bonington Gallery (Feb/March 2018) traced Pegg's trajectory, from a skilled designer to a craftsman, an artist and a political activist.

In a similar vein, Deborah Dean, Visual Arts Collections & Exhibitions Manager, provided a biography of Nottingham City Museums and Galleries historic collection of lace comprising 55,000 samples, 1,000 costumes partly or wholly of lace and boxes of lace bundles “that had not been Jenny’d”. (“Jennying” is a term used to define the process of winding lace edgings onto card ready to be sent out to retailers, as practiced in the Lace Market warehouses by teams of female workers.) Dean overviewed different artists’ interpretations of lace artefacts selected from the archive, citing work from exhibitions she had curated such as *Lace Works* (2012/13) part of *Lace, Here, Now* (Briggs-Goode and Dean 2013). For example, Theresa Whitfield meticulously applied the traditional “copyist” model, by drawing lace items using black and white ink, in a laborious process that replicates both the imperfection of the textile and the skill of lace maker. In contrast, Lucy Brown explored the “concealing and revealing” properties of found lace garments, textiles and trims in *The Secrets that we keep from Ourselves* (2012-15), recently re-installed in Byron’s dressing room for the Lace Unveiled exhibition, Newstead Abbey (March/April 2018). When asked by a member of the audience “why it was important for artists to engage with archives?” to which Dean replied that collaborating with artists “continues the legacy of creative thought and work.” Working with archives in this way reaffirms the craftsmanship encompassed in the making of the original artefact, while acknowledging the quality of archives as not fixed, but, following Derrida (1996, 68), always subject to new interpretations.

Art historian, Sian Vaughan reiterated the challenge and pleasure alluded to by Maier, of “never quite knowing what you’re going to find” in the archive at the start of her talk, *Artists working in/with Archives*. She also shared that such a practice has developed exponentially over the past 100 years. She cited Hal Foster’s, *An Archival Impulse* (2004) and the notion of ‘archive fever’, after Derrida (1996) (see Merewether 2006, 76 and 143) and some of the ‘archaeological and ambivalent’, factual and ‘fictive’ approaches involved therein. Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* (1974-87) provided an apposite example of the archival research challenge and infinite possibilities for analysis posed by collections – in this case of 589 boxes containing the detritus of the artist’s life. Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave* (2001) and *Brixton Calling* (2011) illustrated two contrasting modes of archival engagement; the archiving of a political event and community participation with archived materials. How to ‘reawaken and reanimate’

physical and material qualities, through “historical research and artistic practice” was the main question Vaughan challenged artists to ask of archives (Lebeter, N. 2013, 120-121). This challenge contextualised the domain that the artworks in *Bummock: The Lace Archive* exhibition inhabited – the artistic research process being one of responding to the archive beyond and through its lace artefacts, by elaborating upon diverse visual, tactile and sonic clues, informed by a sideways look at the collection (Fisher, E and Fortnum, R 2013, 70-87). This approach resonated with some of my own experiences of working in the Lace Archive, and Costume and Textile collection at Newstead Abbey, where acclimatising oneself to the scale of the collection and environment - the space, atmosphere and odour - influenced and in some instances, altered preconceptions of what I had imagined I was interested in scrutinising.



Figure 2. Danica Maier, *Score No.1*.

The process of (hand) designing lace and its technical manufacture were acknowledged by the artists through various means: calligraphic and musical notations (Bracey and Maier); drawn patterns (Maier); and 2D/3D material constructions (Renton). However, these were non-linear, individual responses to the Lace Archive

and Backlit exhibition spaces, concerned equally with 'precious' objects and their surrounding ephemera. As Bracey commented in the closing roundtable discussion, convened by Vaughn, he was "glad to find things that weren't lace also", while Renton actively sought out the "opposites about what lace was about", finding "wealth in the fragmentary and obtuse" and Maier, who had visited the archive before, was quickly able to affirm what she "didn't want to work with."

Inquiries and observations from the audience following the first three speakers included questions such as "why artists should have privileged access to archives - as surely every visitor would see something new?" and "whether artists were engaging with the archive or the archivist, and how this affects the archivist's practice?" Vaughan referenced the supposed 'material turn' in archives an enquiry from an American professor, on "what do you have that smells damp?" All of which reiterated that the explorer of archives knows things that the classification system cannot simply reveal. Another observed that: "cataloguing negates the visual aspect" to which Vaughan replied that "the visual is [just] the starting point", suggesting that the archival is both material and its classification.

### **Reflecting through remaking**

The final speaker at the symposium, Pennina Barnett spoke of Cloth Memories, on how cloth "receives and outlives us", which she emotively illustrated by examples of tokens from the Foundling Museum and the exhibition *Threads of Feeling: Textile tokens 1740-1770*, curated by John Styles in 2010. The process of sewing and the slowing of time as in 19<sup>th</sup> Century women sewing, reveals a quiet feminine action turned into a positive purposeful form of "subversive stitching" in feminists' (and craftivists') hands. Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (1670) – "an idealised trope of idolised femininity" – was compared with Cerruti's *Pillow Lace Makers* (1720s), which conveys a more physical sense of the labour required by hand and eye. Barnett shared on *Becky's Table Cloths and Napkins*, a collection of items made by her unknown maternal grandmother passed down to her, and how she tried to piece this blood relation's life together through her embroidery skills. Barnett also observed that, like in the archive, objects may be dated

and placed historically, but can only be sensed emotionally through other signs of material evidence, such as finding a stain on a napkin, revealing the human amid the collection. Her analogy of “looking for crumbs” amongst laundered, pristine and starched linen, in the absence of written evidence or “no-one left to ask”, provided a poetic analogy for the day.



*Figure 3. Andrew Bracey, WV1723, 2018, Indian ink on paper.*

Finally, a roundtable discussion gave the artists the opportunity to reconvene and discuss the project, in response to questions posed by Vaughn, and others including “how [does] the group share their discoveries?” Maier reiterated the group’s triangulation of working between “the archive, Bummock and [own] artistic practice” maintained the dialogue between them. Bracey noted that he would have liked to have met Amanda (Briggs-Goode) earlier on in the process to gain a deeper sense of the archive and enhance his ‘tip of the iceberg’ reckoning. He also recounted something others may have experienced when working in a group; “the excitement of finding something you want to use and fear of others wanting to also”; and the relief when this didn’t happen. He further reflected on getting “too close to his own work at one point”,

so put it up on the archive wall to review it, step back and take “time to develop it” (Bracey, A. and Maier, D. 2018). He later questioned the connections he was making between churning out drawings and their relationship to the archive, and how his works came to represent “encountering the archive as opposed to an image of (or from) the archive.”

Renton reinforced the need for “exploratory play, making holes, stretching” using found- and simulated- materials informed by her engagement with the Lace Archive and the Constance Howard archive. In response to Vaughn’s question around reasons for returning to the archive following experimental practice, Renton confirmed her desire “to check materiality, feeling” perceived to be the opposite of the digitalized archive, becoming first gate-keeping hurdle, because keywords such as “handle” or “melancholy” (which Renton and Barnett used) are not part of (textile) database language. Renton described her experience of falling in love with objects she was developing on screen and wanting to see them again while Maier spoke of “the enjoyment, of selection, of finding pieces that really spoke to her” and “from wonder and excitement to being with [a piece], getting to know and understand it.” These and other observations supported the importance of “encountering a material object first hand” (Dean), the “tacit sense of looking for something – the unseen, hidden, mirror that reflects back your practice” (Cocker), and need for “authentication, reaffirmation [and] confirmation” (Vaughn). Perhaps Bracey expressed this most effectively by stating Bummock’s aim to continue to “bypass the catalogue” and head for the hidden and yet to be discovered through re-engagement and re-animation of the archive through its deeper excavation and exploration.

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