

Soft Pictures - Re-making the Hattersley

Clare Lane

Leeds Arts University, Leeds, United Kingdom

clare.lane@leeds-art.ac.uk

Abstract

The exhibit 'Soft Pictures – Re-making the Hattersley at Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice, University of Bolton, 23rd-24th January 2019, comprised a collection of created work based on a site-specific investigation of the derelict weaving shed at Sunnybank Mills, Farsley, Leeds, United Kingdom (UK), from 2014-present. Specifically, it focused on two old Hattersley looms which were left in the space.

The work is a product of an exploration of thinking through practice. This has evolved around the relationship between my textile practice and the subject matter which preoccupies it - the transient nature of the derelict (both building and machine). This is investigated through the prism of making, un-making and re-making, as a means of opening up a dialogue between textile and place. Derelict buildings are deconstructed spaces, in a state of entropic transformation and open to many interpretations. The investigation of this perception of change (or decline) through textile practice aims to unpick ideas of entropy and alterity and how this is interpreted.

Time spent on the site progressed my initial documentary response of the 'Soft Picture' (Calderoni 2013) to a more active direct engagement with the space and machinery, resulting in the prolonged process of wrapping a loom. This was initially inspired by the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude but rapidly became more about the meditative act of binding the machine. Further experiments around the machine entailed making casts of machine parts, as if cataloguing for a museum, and then taking the parts themselves and re-coating them in bright colours, re-making them into Meccano-like toys. All are active processes of making and re-making as a means of striking up a conversation with the un-making state of the site itself.

The processes of making, unmaking and re-making have served to raise both physiological and philosophical questions for further exploration. The site is due for demolition in summer 2019 which will facilitate yet another journey of making investigations.

Key words: textiles; industrial dereliction; entropy; making; thinking through process; perception.

Introduction

The site is important. The site is the starting point (figure 1). This is the place around which all thinking and process starts. It is the investigation. It is the playground of lost opportunities. In its derelict transitional state, it is the embodiment of potential.



Figure 1: The Old Weaving Shed, Sunnybank Mills, with the Hattersley Loom (authors own photograph).

I have been exploring derelict spaces, as part of my practice since around 1998. It was initially concerned with a critical investigation of 'derelict' buildings, which form the post-industrial cityscape. My visual investigation of these more contemporary sites would primarily be documentary, using photography to trap key moments in the life of these buildings as 'derelicts'. My working medium has however always been through the textile and until recently, I had simply viewed this as the medium of choice in the technical production of the work. The printed and stitched textile was a means of documenting and re-presenting the derelict through a different lens. Sunnybank Mills is the site of a woollen textile vertical mill complex, dating back to 1829 (in its existing state). It produced fine woollen worsted suiting and remained in production until 2008, when it finally closed after many years of gradual reduction in scale and extent. My involvement with the Mill has been a more prolonged site study, and, over the past four years has provided the opportunity to become much more deeply absorbed in a specific space. Over time, my initial documentary approach towards the subject has extended into something more active with a more deliberate interaction, between the textile and the space. This in turn has challenged my thinking about the relationship between the textile and the space, as a means of exploring questions around definitions of 'entropy' and of 'alterity' through a developing conversation between the textile product and its subject matter - the derelict space.

'Soft Pictures' was the title of the 2013-14 exhibition of contemporary art explored through the textile medium (Calderoni 2013). This title was adopted for the exhibit described in this report. 'Soft Pictures' (brightly coloured and embroidered textiles), represents part of the product of my practice, which could be seen as the antithesis of their subject matter, the derelict space, and yet the two are now acting as a counter-balance to the thinking around practice.

The process of engagement (rather than the product) has become more pivotal to the discussion and as such the exhibition booklet documenting the site and my investigations was the primary exhibit, despite the dominance of the large 'tapestry' like work (figure 2).



Figure 2: 'Soft Pictures - Re-making the Hattersley' exhibited work, Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice, University of Bolton, 23rd-24th January 2019 (authors own photograph).

Documentation started with the archiving of the site through documentary recording. Photographs taken over the last four years record the process of decay or change across the site. My pre-occupation was with this specific time zone of the transitional space and the contemplation of the process of entropic transformation. Although the term Entropy relates to physics and the second law of thermodynamics, it has been widely re-interpreted and adopted in art and cultural theory. Robert Smithson emerged in the 1960's as one of a group of artists pre-occupied with this theory. Smithson used this definition: '...entropy is the measure of the disorder or randomness in a system – the higher the disorder, the higher the entropy' (Flam 1996: 15). Smithson views this through a nihilistic lens, with writings pondering on a sense of disintegrating meaningfulness in the existence of things, especially in contemporary life, where mass production leaves waste, detritus and the cast off structures of a fast-moving society. To him (Smithson), the entropic decay is representative of a declining society (Flam 1996).

However, in considering its definition in physics, entropy is essentially a process of energy transfer through the second law of thermo-dynamics. If decay is seen within this context, there is an active disintegration and degeneration in the derelict space which is at once both disturbing and invigorating. It might be a degeneration from its first form but what continuous new forms might be made through this constantly shifting process? This constantly shifting process forms the basis of the making, un-making and re-making practice that I have become engaged with on site. This has been documented in the exhibition booklet as a means of evidencing, reflecting on and disentangling the conversation.

The Soft Picture – Made

The Soft Picture is a documentary response to the derelict site, and the Hattersley loom within it. It relies on initial photographic imagery, recording visually framed information, which is then digitally re-painted, printed onto cloth, and embroidered. It is a work bound by process and the resultant piece contains an image which is both tactile and visual at the same time. It can be pliable, draped, folded, or stretched and constrained across a timber stretcher. It visually reflects a rigid structural subject matter but it is not. It is merely one visual response through one mind's eye and is a new object made. The process of making is laborious and physical. The stitched canvas has to be pressed and stretched as it progresses and then is battled onto its timber stretcher to flatten it in place. The sheer physicality of effort pays homage to the physical heaviness of the space it records.

The site recorded through this process could be seen as a counter to the actuality. Using Smithson's dialectic of site and nonsite (Smithson in Flam 1996: 143-53) this might be categorised as follows:

The Completed Textile Work

Soft
Clean
Pliable
Domestic
New
Neat
Crafted
Ordered

The Derelict Subject

Hard
Dirty
Rigid
Industrial
Worn
Damaged
Decaying
Disordered

The two might seem to counter each other and yet they also set up a conversation, but one which is more than two-way or circular, when the act of process is also brought into the discussion. Figure 3 records the process of making as an additional dimension to the conversation. Both object and site are in a state of entropy but so is the making process.

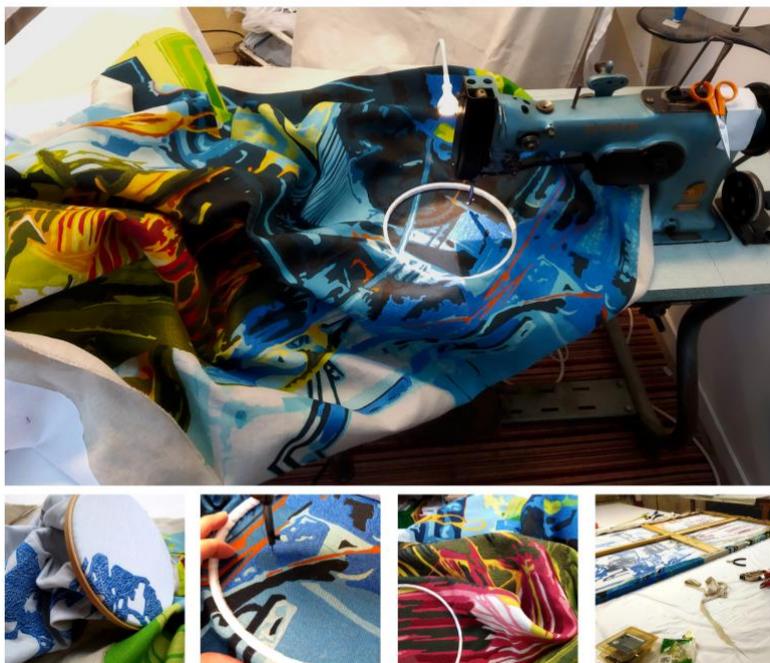


Figure 3: The Soft Picture – the process of making.

The Loom Components – The Un-made, Made and Re-made

The camera captures what you select. You point and shoot and there it is. But it is the image of the thing, not the thing itself. Figure 4 is a photograph taken on site, by the author, recording the transient state of the loom components. Re-representation of the un-made machine offers up the potential for enabling a re-acquaintance with these things on a purely material level. What are they once their purpose has gone? So the objects within these spaces and the spaces themselves start to fit neither a symbolic nor a practical ordering and are left open to imagination, play and conjecture and to the creation of new narratives.



Figure 4: The loom un-made – material objects.

The first re-imagining is archival. I'm the nineteenth century collector making casts of my ruins. But these plaster casts are not to record but to enquire. They become white objects, lighter than their counter-part, and more pristine. They have a soft white chalky feel and they are displayed in a gallery space, displaced from their source and inviting a sculptural identity. These pieces, made in 2016 became multiples, each new cast further distanced from its parent as patina marks. The mould was formed around the original in its dirty mill state so that the first cast was imprinted by the oil and dirt left in the mould. Figure 5 shows the casts on display in the Sunnybank Mills new gallery space, demonstrating the gradation of patina. As each new cast was made, fewer and fewer marks were left, with the final being pristine. The object, re-made has no function other than that which might be created by imagination.

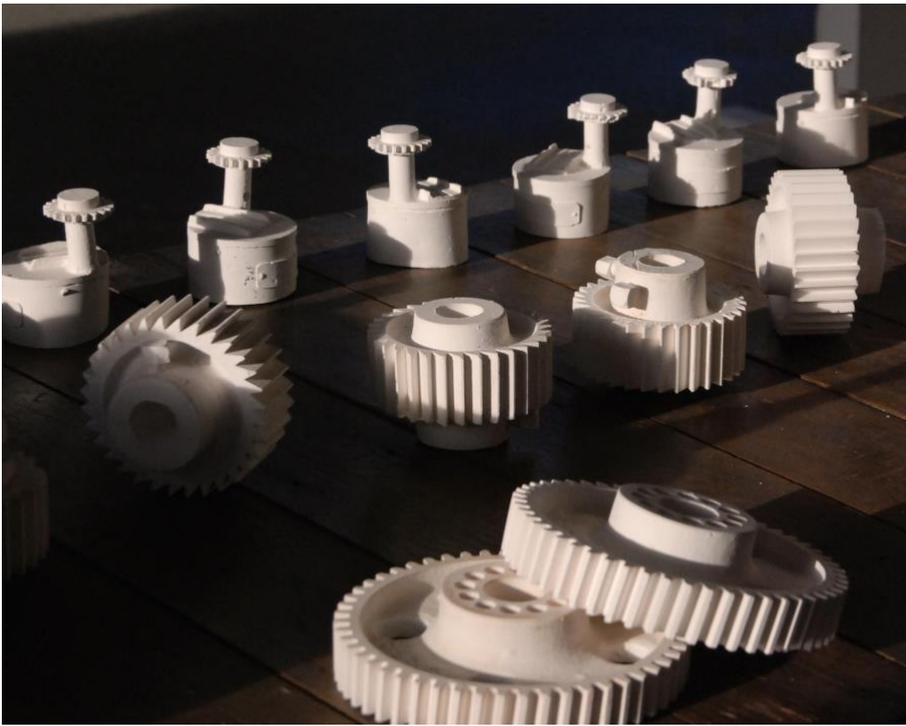


Figure 5: Casts – Object made.

The loom components have been re-cast in a new role but the original is back in the weaving shed, functionless by its own obsolescence. How might its identity be re-explored? What is this thing? Select pieces were removed from the site and with the kind permission of the owners, were taken for a make-over. They were sand-blasted and re-coated in bright colourful enamel coatings. Figure 4 shows the components as objects re-made, their tactile quality is new, shiny, soft even. They become toys for arranging, stacking and constructing - rather like Meccano.



Figure 6: Enamelled loom components – Object Re-made.

Wrapping the Loom – The Un-made, Re-made

It is our human folly to strive for order when there is none. Spending time in the Weaving Shed with long stays of silence, fossicking about amongst the old bits of machinery and then starting to physically play in the space, has facilitated an acceptance that it is without both order and meaning in any absolute sense, however, this can open up other investigations on practice. Inspired by Christo and Jean-Claude as an exploration of using 'fabric to soften what are imposing solid structures' and to physically engage the textile with its subject (Christo 2018). Like this artist duo, this was not about end product but about the

process. The wrapping of the discarded loom was slow and contemplative and allowed time to simply be in the space in the act of doing. Figure 7 is one of a series of photographs recording the loom wrapping, and shows an act of production once again occurring in this weaving shed and on this loom. The process was rhythmic and meticulous in a deliberate act of binding, folding and pinning strips of cotton muslin around the key component parts of the loom. The production process complete, the wrappings were left in place over the period of a year when they too started to unmake themselves. The bindings were eventually removed and the remnant strips (oil stained and rusted) will form the basis of another making investigation.



Figure 7: Wrapping the Loom.

The Installation – Unmade, Made and Re-made

In September 2017, work made both on and in response to the site, was installed in the derelict weaving shed space for the Make Unmake Remake exhibition held over the Heritage Weekends at Sunnybank Mills. The heritage event enabled the public to enter the derelict spaces as part of a guided tour by the owners. Textile pieces were hung in the shed and the wrapped loom and the re-coated parts placed back on their shelves alongside the unmade parts and their casts. Figure 8 shows the installed work. The derelict shed had become a curated space. The audience was initially confused by the space, which was now neither derelict nor occupied but after a few minutes, instead of just looking they also became more engaged on a tactile level. The re-made coated and cast objects were picked up and handled as clean, colourful and curious. The wrapped loom was touched as well as viewed as if the cloth covered oily, rusty areas presented something more domestic than industrial. The hanging embroidered textiles, which might be interpreted in a more pictorial sense also engaged a tactile response but in addition set up the conversation between the image and the space. There was little comment on imagery, meaning or form, just a

reaction to it. A small enamelled part was stolen. I took this as affirmation of its new potential!

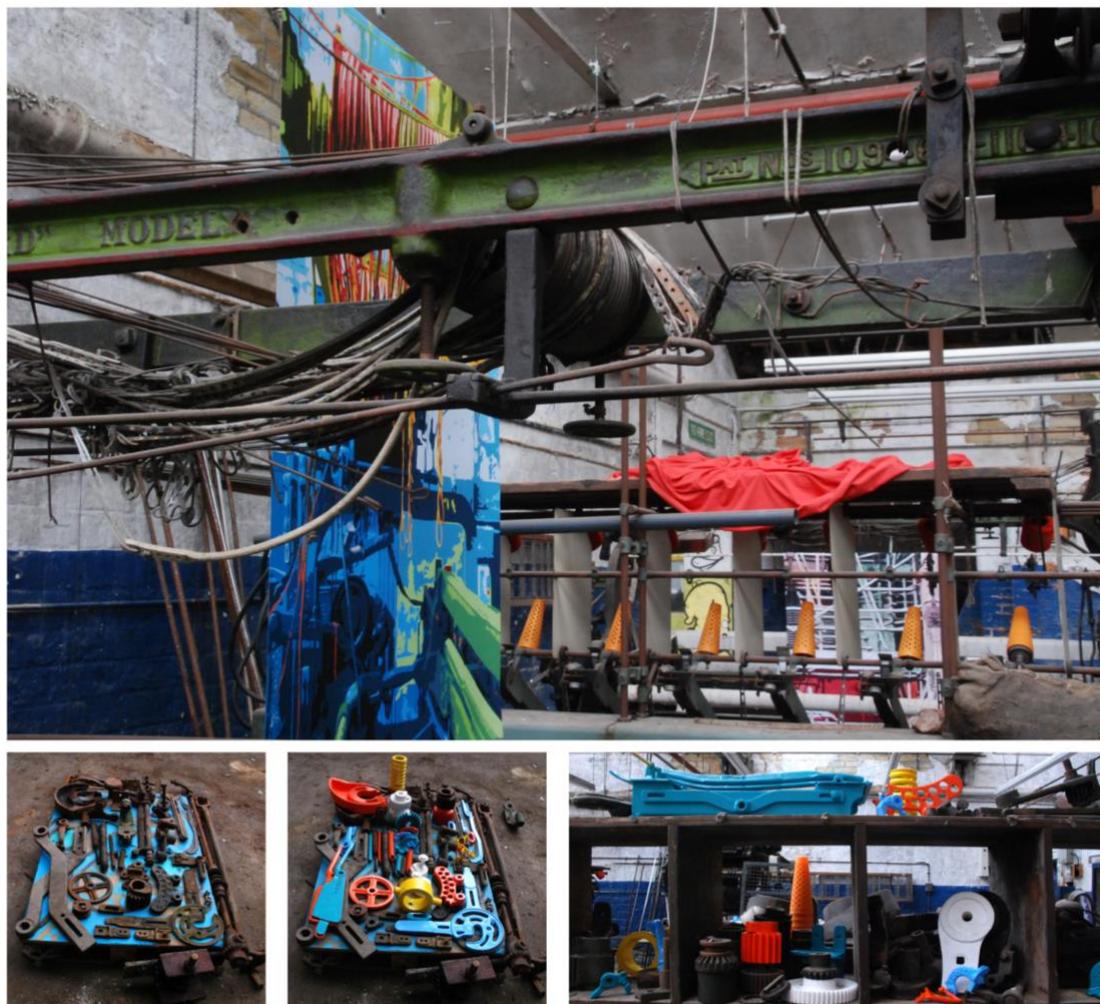


Figure 8: Installed work back in the Derelict Space.

The Weaving Shed and its contents are due for demolition in the summer of 2019, one of the looms has been transferred to the Bradford Industrial Museum, West Yorkshire, UK. My archiving of the weaving shed (through photography) has created a record of the derelict, but my occupations on site, and interventions with objects from the site have served to open up a different dialogue. The process of entropy in itself suggests that things are not static objects but happenings and my pre-occupation with process and re-making is aimed at exploring this dichotomy. Nothing is really what it seems and this opens up ontological questions about things. It also questions our perception of things and how we identify and label what is around us. Is something either/or? Or is it nothing and everything? This connects to so many debates around us at present, but for me the issue of sustainability, which comes right back to the derelict space in the first place.

The loom has been unwrapped and the strips of cotton muslin collected and stored. These will form the basis of another investigation, a re-making into something or nothing. Some pieces have already been dyed as the start of a new process, both physical and thinking. The demolition of the shed will be documented and both site and remains will form the basis for another investigation. Just because the site is demolished does not mean it ceases to exist. This is starting to enter the realms of quantum physics which is what the

next phase of material experiments will be attempting to explore through making, un-making and re-making and as a means of opening up a wider discussion on our environment and how we see it.

References

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