

Emma Shercliff

A Poetics of Waste: Evaluating Time and Effort Spent Sewing

Waste v. 1. To use to no purpose or for inadequate result. 2. To fail to be appreciated or used properly. 3. To treat as valueless. 4. To be expended without useful effect.
n. Unwanted or unusable remains or by-products.
OED

As makers in Britain today, we usually strive to limit wasted time and effort in the production of craft objects. The result of our labour – a unique object or a series of products - is of primary interest and must be seen to encompass and reflect the high premium placed on our time and effort. Its value, both commercially and culturally, is calculated accordingly.

This paper will examine this understanding of waste as fault or weakness when applied to the labour intensive making processes of patchwork quilting. In particular it will reconsider assumptions that 'wasted' time and effort compromise the experienced value of making an object, and will suggest alternative approaches for addressing 'wasted' time and effort as productive and constructive.

To illuminate these issues I will draw on findings from a case study that forms a part of my doctoral research, which investigates the experience of stitching both as creative practice and as social relationship. Over the course of a year I observed and conducted in-depth interviews with participants from a group of amateur quilting enthusiasts in South London, and compare these findings with the methods I employ in my own textile practice as an art-school trained studio maker.

The motivations and rewards for quilt making are at first glance as invisible as the stitches that hold the work together. However, the time and effort invested in quilt making has multiple outcomes alongside the material production of the work. 'Other' work, of a social and relational nature, is generated that has significance for the maker as an individual, for the individual as part of a group, and for the collective as part of a wider community. The slow, fragmented nature of the stitched work mirrors the gradual piecing together of human networks and support systems.

This makes heavy, 'wasteful' demands on the time and effort of these makers. Our common understanding of efficient production values, failing to account for this invisible 'other' work, will assess the time and effort invested to have failed to be appreciated or used properly, or to have been expended without useful effect. Undervalued in this way, it will have been 'wasted'. On the contrary, might it be possible to propose that this 'other' work, serves a primary purpose, is an effectual use of assets such as time and effort, and produces wanted and usable remainders?