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Performative Textile Gestures

Ann Newdigate

*Moving between the bubbles
of memories not your own,
are you sure that it is really
you in the photo?*

*Evidence of thread has been found
in Paleolithic sites, images of string
surface in dreams and nightmares,
metaphors of yarn persist in language
even after the knowledge of the skills
that bind are lost.*

I wrote that in 1996, when a photograph that I had abandoned 30 years before came back to claim me. The image, of myself and three other young white women on camels in front of the Egyptian pyramids, acquires timelessness because all cars in the large parking lot are artfully invisible. I also wrote that "in the year 2000 I will have been **here** longer than **there**". I speak from a constituency that has no continuity with tradition, and which is removed from ancestors. It was the moment when I began to seek a visible format for the complexities of ambivalence. My ambivalence is probably shared by millions of people who have left their country of birth because political events, for better or worse, have overtaken their expectations. Not growing old with your siblings - **there** - having a new family **here** - are but a part of the immigrant experience. ". I speak from a constituency that has no continuity with tradition, and which is removed from ancestors. This dislocation is a condition that affects most artists working with contemporary concepts, and it demands a negotiating of personal iconographies for each individual.

A prolonged illness on arrival in Canada jolted me into turning away from my degree in African Studies and into becoming an artist, although I did not realise in 1966 that I was performing a redemptive ritual of recovery. Then, going against current art school formalist domination, I went even deeper into ritual by extending drawings into the labour intensive age-old technology of tapestry. The acquisition of skills and knowledge was a prolonged tapestry pilgrimage of necessity outside any institutions except for a post graduate year at the Edinburgh College of art in 1980. I did not think of it as performing mourning and recovery when I went to my loom each day to be immersed in an interface of repetition with intense concentration.

In 1988 I completed my MFA, with a dissertation titled, "Love, Labour and Tapestry: unravelling an Edwardian legacy". This research brought me back to the cerebral when I learned that politics, power, and the stereotyping of value and identity were as prevalent in the art world as they are in the governance of a wider community. Thereafter my work addressed issues of power and authority, and I started to add new technologies, that

resonated with the ways in which advertising borrowed the codes of textiles to sell subliminal meaning. A good example is the image of a small town rendered in simulated stitcher on the cover of Time Magazine to reinforce their article on the movement of people from large centres to small towns. I incorporated photo transfers, xeroxes and finally digital printouts with traditional drawing and tapestry in my investigations of technology, value and identity. My main source, the Bayeux "tapestry" was, however, ancient in process and timeless in intention. A 200 metre long embroidery, The Bayeux narrates the official history of the Norman Conquest of Britain through the wide central panel, while the marginalia run concurrent alternate versions from a low life perspective in which gender politics is explicit. This historical record has particular resonance for me, and my itinerant psyche, since an ancestor of mine accompanied William in his conquest of Britain in 1066.

My Normandy journey resulted in "Ciphers from the Muniments Room", an installation with three parts. (A cipher = a code or person of no account. Muniment = an archive in which documents of privilege and status are kept).

(1) Drawings with dual narratives and mixed technologies.

(2) "Arrival",

a 19 ft. institutionally framed series of tapestries with found text from a primary school text book, "The Romance of Canada", depicting the arrival of the brides in Canada, had a motion-detector activating a collage of sound. This component consisted of a French Canadian woman reading my research about the provenance of the Bayeux tapestry, an official travel guide read by a authoritative typical media male voice, and a big band version of a fifties song lodged in my memory. All were occasionally drowned by the sound of the sea.

(3) In dialogue with "Arrival" was "Letter", a 22' long digital printout on canvas, derived from eight "pages" of shorthand woven in a Gobelin style. This uncensored letter to the author of "The Romance of Canada", was conceived through a diary I kept in the secret language of Pitman's shorthand when returned to South Africa at the end of apartheid. After High School I was trained in stenography and learned Pitman's, but later, needing revision, I found only second hand books frozen in time from the fifties. Images of presumably the ideal secretary on covers of the manuals reminded me how difficult it had been to love my work.

By 1996, when I started the WOUND work, I had decided to move, after 30 years, to my current studio on an island in the Gulf of Georgia. Another major move meant another re-examining of my life, and my work, and a return to the sea. Not surprisingly I had, by this time, developed a certain ambivalence about working in tapestry and the mental gymnastics required in moving between the various art discourses the medium touches upon. Then another kind of reverse unravelling began when I turned to winding, an ancient textile process, which is not invested with years of skill acquisition. I set up a large colour wheel of yarn and, in an act of collaboration, invited people to enter the circle and lend me an object as surrogate for an ambivalent or problematic memory or experience. In exchange for winding the object I received the narrative of ambivalence and I did not use recording devices, but relied on listening and remembering. To fix the

visual memory of each of about fifty objects, through my hand and eye co-ordination, I first drew them with ink on paper. Meanwhile participants typically began their story, and continued it while either they or I wound the object. Some windings took as long as five hours and, after scanning the object directly in the computer, I returned it to its owner. With my body as an extension of the technology, I was revisiting the function of stenographer (an early computer), whose brain, hands and eyes record the invisible words of another person through shorthand for transcription into a visibly written code.

It was in the Banff situation of virtual retreat that I became aware of the work of Peggy Phelan, head of a department of performance art, who has a deep understanding of psychoanalysis. In particular, her book "Mourning Sex: Performing public memory" showed me a way in which I might formulate the WOUND process. Despite the affinities, the word "Performative" is distinct from the word "Performance", and I interpret it as I understand Phelan's reference to "performative writing" - a private pursuit with the promise of a public outcome. This concept revealed that the gradual unfolding of my WOUND work has been something like a book, in which each chapter is a process of mourning that is often not without celebration, containing and contained, that opens a space for respite.

Performing the everyday, the mundane experiences of decision making, of change and yearning, loss and hope, of uncertainty and containment, led to my developing WOUND II at the Banff Centre last year. I was able to resolve the dilemma of what to do with ten years of accumulated copies of the Weekly Mail. This South African newspaper covered the period from the height of apartheid's atrocities to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that followed its demise. Old issues of this dissident paper were not of value in any collection since the advent of electronic storage, but the readings, the images, and the courage of the reporters held rich personal archives that go beyond its historic significance.

I set up a reading booth in a public passageway at the Banff Centre, and I learned how many other people value and mourn newspapers from their homes when they move. I heard of someone who, after 25 years in Canada, still keeps every copy of an Irish newspaper, and someone who gets Brazilian newspapers sent regularly.

Referencing the surveillance that was prevalent in SA, I mounted a digital camcorder behind a one way mirror on the booth. I learned that, even though it focused on the hands of the reader to allow anonymity, the footage became a surprise metaphor for public commitment because it recorded feet approaching, hesitating or walking straight by.

I put out different copies twice a day, and thereafter wound them into a tight circle that I bound with string. What was revealed on the surface could not easily be controlled, and sometimes an advertisement, a rugby game or someone murdered by government employees, was visible. Not surprisingly, the image of President Nelson Mandela frequently appeared. A ban on publishing his photograph after he went into his 28 years

in jail meant that the public had been left with the image of him as a young pugilistic lawyer and had not seen the grey haired statesman until he walked free in 1990.

WOUND II continues to develop the tension between a textile gesture and digital authority as an investigation of the codes inherent in each. The position that I have chosen between technologies addresses the dilemma of most people, and artists in particular, who are confronted by the impact of the cyberspace on everything that is familiar and reassuring. I find that, working from an independent and fairly isolated situation, always outside institutions now, the new pilgrimage for me to acquire skills and knowledge about computers, requires vastly more patience than it does to make a tapestry. The ease of reproduction and manipulation, the general respect, and the cyber excitement provide a reversal of advertising's borrowing from textile imagery by giving textiles an expanded audience where the codes proliferate and inform one another. In the contradictory position between technologies and codes, as a self trained artist drawing with a computer as well as in tapestry, I now find that I am having quite a good time persuading my computer to sing for me as responsively as my loom or pencil.

Ann Newdigate is an image maker who works with digital manipulations of her textiles and drawings as a means of addressing issues of power and value through differing visual texts and codes. She received a BA in African Studies and English Literature from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and a BFA and MFA from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. She completed a post-graduate year in the Tapestry Department of the Edinburgh College of Art, Scot Visiting Fellow for 1990 at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia to inaugurate their tapestry program. Her works have been exhibited internationally, including a solo show at the New York Centre for Tapestry Arts. Her recent series, 'Ciphers from the Muniments Room' was shown in Toronto, Halifax, Vancouver, Regina and Saskatoon. Her 16' x 12' mixed media artwork was commissioned for the Council Chamber of Moshe Safdie's new Ottawa City Hall. She has written for many art journals and taught or given lectures and workshops in places as diverse as Tasmania and London, England. She now lives on Hornby Island, British Columbia, Canada.

To see examples of Ann Newdigate's work, including a "letter" woven in Medieval style tapestry using Pitman's shorthand which was put through an inkjet printer onto a 22 ft canvas banner, visit her website at:
www.island.net/~newdigit/index.html.