

Fantasy Antiques Roadshow

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My parents loved to watch BBC Antiques Roadshow on a Sunday. They sat in silence with cups of tea, while an expert explained how important other people's possessions were. The highlight of this ritual was when the expert revealed how much a treasured object would fetch at auction, at which point my parents would suddenly become highly opinionated. As a child, I found this routine excruciatingly boring. I scarcely understood why people found objects interesting, and could not comprehend why anyone would sit at home and consume this spectacle on a weekly basis.

Later I became an art student, and it turned out I was extremely interested in what people had to say about objects. I embraced Contemporary Craft discourse through a range of academic texts, each unravelling the world of objects using a discrete specialist vocabulary. Conference papers, edited journals, artists' statements and museum captions offered legitimised knowledge, and were therefore serious. TV chat was domestic entertainment featuring ordinaryⁱ people, and therefore wasn't. Through education, I became elitist.

My relationship to Antiques Roadshow changed when I came to suspect I was not hearing the full story. Academic dissection tends to strip an object of intimacy. Within this context, things are offered up as sanitised and complete; isolated from the murky network of social, political and economic events that weave an imperfect world around them. But the artefact is a concentrated lump of invisible interactions, animated by virtue of the complex conditions through which it has emerged.

Acknowledging that my own practice had failed to engage with objects as relational signifiers, I finally understood that Contemporary Craft discourse was too hygienic to fully embrace the disorder of the real world. The unavoidable task was to decide whether or not I cared about how and why ordinary people came to value things, and to this end Antiques Roadshow represented an artificially engineered version of reality I could comfortably inhabit. The reliable interplay between regular characters acted as a framework through which to reposition my practical aims and aspirations. I began to narrate an imaginary episode, from an unspecified point in the future.

The Proud Owner: *So as you can see my great aunt collected jewellery [points to the table full of objects]. She called this "art jewellery", but we never really knew what that meant. Some of this doesn't really look like jewellery to me at all, it's not very beautiful and there isn't a great deal of gold or silver... We think it's mostly from Europe. But we're not sure about this one [points to an object]. There's no signature. We thought it might have been made by [a well known jeweller from Switzerland].*

The Expert: *This is a fine array of what we would term 'Contemporary Jewellery', and many key artists are represented. Much of it is indeed European in origin, and you would certainly be forgiven for thinking this piece was by someone like [a well known jeweller from Switzerland]. It is actually by a lesser-known British artist, who worked in London from the late 90s onwards. Her work is difficult to identify, because she didn't have a particular 'style' or 'theme'. There's a lack of continuity. Perhaps she was easily bored, or had a short attention span [everyone smiles]. She was not a terribly prolific maker, and so this work is hard to come by. The piece is made of lead, with details in 24 carat gold [raised eyebrows from the owner and onlookers]. It might seem strange to mix pure gold with lead, but this was all part of this artist's avant-garde approach. It does mean bad news in terms of value I'm afraid. This piece is obvious and clumsy, whereas later works were far more sophisticated, and of course these are more popular at auction. I'm sorry to say, this piece is practically worthless [close up of owner's disappointed face].*

The Viewer: *Well I've never seen jewellery like that! It didn't look like you could wear most of it. I'd never go out in a paper necklace... What would happen if it rained? [woman sips tea] And why would you make a brooch in lead? It's ugly, and it's poisonous! You'd have thought those bits of gold would be worth something though. I hope there's some nice jewellery on soon, like that colourful French stuff with the precious stones.*

This inner dialogue conducted by my imaginary friends who were neither theoreticians nor critics, afforded more insight than I was expecting. I learned that the viewpoint I was best placed to articulate had not been expressed at all. Despite having made the object under discussion, I had not actually been invited to take part in the programme. The stories missing from Antiques Roadshow, indeed missing from craft discourse in all of its incarnations, are those only the maker can tell.

The maker's voice is most commonly devoted to a generalised overview of practice, and we rarely become acquainted with the intricacies of a specific piece. Many practitioners actively employ silence, perhaps because they fear to explain a thing, is to dismantle and potentially destroy it. The idea that the object alone speaks for the maker is a romantic notion, and whilst making is intrinsically a form of material communication, narrative disclosure could amplify rather than suppress an object's meaning. Makers have a tendency to regard words as the prerogative of those better qualified to use them, although there are many useful ways to deploy language. Eloquence can be achieved without theoretical or philosophical referencing.

The maker who engages in dialogue generates the conditions for sustained self-reflection. Over time the history of any piece can be revised to include newly discovered, previously unpublished material. When accounting for previous works, I am aware that I have reformulated what I once thought was important, gradually overwriting the autobiography of my practice. I digest and assimilate other people's attitudes and ideas. I slowly embellish with extraneous detail and

afterthought. Sometimes I lie. Talking and writing illuminate the darker, more secluded spaces of self-awareness.

As an object enters the world there will be multiple ways to explore how and why it came to exist, and what it actually means. Material discourse should embrace as many viewpoints as there are viewpoints to embrace, and makers must be encouraged to traverse uncharted, perhaps currently uninhabited, discursive territories. Their voices could be collected and preserved, with the same care and respect as their physical works, so that their stories might be told in future episodes of Antiques Roadshow.

This text was originally published in the catalogue which accompanied Crafting Narratives: Storytelling through Objects. Curated by Onkar Kular, Crafting Narrative documents twelve artists, makers and designers that challenge and investigate the narrative potential of objects.
<https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/shop/product/823/crafting-narrative-storytelling-through-objects---exhibition-catalogue>

ⁱ The use of the word ‘ordinary’ is in no way a suggestion that any such person exists. It is used merely to separate those who know they are engaged in the discourse surrounding contemporary material culture, from those who don’t.