

Entanglements: Georgina Sleap's weaving of making and meaning – reflections on a conversation across time and space

Derek Horton

"The present is continual and everywhere and there to be shared," you wrote. "To live is to improvise," I once wrote, in an essay that you have read during the ten years or so since we last met. And it seems that our thinking and talking about improvisation (conversation is itself an improvisatory process, of course) is the space in which we can most usefully share the continuing present.

As I reflect on a recent day with you at Cable Depot, we met, it seems to me, in a place and in a way that profoundly unsettles fixed notions of time and space, and of the internal and external. In a simple practical manifestation of the global local, or the localised global, you have brought a small corner of working-class Cairo to a small corner of post-industrial London. Your invitation to me to meet you there, in Woolwich, involved a compression of time (seemingly no time at all since our last meeting) and, even more significantly, a compression of space that places us both in two spaces — locations, social milieu, sound worlds, climates — simultaneously. Each is somewhat alien to me, but each is 'home', even if temporarily (one much more temporary than the other), for you.

You have adopted strategies to bring the outside in – both the immediate and the distant external world. A simple system of mirrors allows the outside light into Cable Depot's enclosed space, including ways of seeing the otherwise invisible tree that is just beyond the building's wall. A much more complex system of live audio recording and digital transfer relays in real time the sounds of your Cairo neighbourhood. Through the all-seeing eyes of Cable Depot's webcams, both of these worlds are exposed to a wider, unknown and unseen external audience who choose to spectate via their computer or phone screens.

Any sense of voyeurism that might otherwise pervade this set-up is alleviated by your control over how much is seen and when. The inside into which the outside intrudes, by your invitation only, is an intimate space, its intimacy emphasised by the small and personalised ways through which we experience it (on headphones that shut out localised distractions; through tiny photographic

images that we can project for ourselves with a small hand-held torch; by being in a small and enclosed dark space that provides the comfort of having been invited and welcomed in).

None of this description of the space has so far mentioned its focal point: both an object (a custom-made loom, that we might regard as a sculpture), and an act of physical labour (back-strap weaving, that depends on traditional craft skills and might – actually should – be regarded as a sculptural practice). This is fundamentally important to what you are doing here, demonstrating a pragmatic and ethical commitment to art as a process. The physicality of making is not a separate activity to imaginative thinking. Creativity involves a constant loop between the two; thoughts and decisions are sustained and modified by physical processes and material possibilities, and vice versa. To try to define them separately is futile in the face of the inevitable entanglement (or weaving together) of levels of perception, awareness and physical engagement with materials.

There might be documents that relate to your moment-by-moment creative practice – recording, memory, end product – but they will be not so much documentation (which would be superfluous) as the residue or the by-product of the essential process. Any attempt to make meaning before or after the fact is subsumed by your doing in the moment, and the doing is what generates the meaning.

Perhaps I'm trying to say too much, but one more parting thought about time in this process... This project, like your whole activity as a sculptor, is one that allows and even demands that you take your time; something in cultures other than ours that might be related to meditation. In a culture dominated by the values of acquisitiveness, competition and entrepreneurship, taking time can seem like rebellion. It might be argued that there is a gendered dimension to this culture, and consequently to the rejection of it, but the haptic, sensuous and intimate aspects of your practice constitute a feminism that is implicit rather than declarative. They allow you (and us, your observers) to put aside, or perhaps entirely forget, ideas of success and failure, and to proceed experimentally (improvising, to return to this reflection's starting point), following your interests and enthusiasms, abandoning what Rousseau called "the frenzy to achieve distinction". The refusal of some spurious ideal of excellence and achievement, a return to making and doing (and thinking) entirely for its own sake, is the refusal that makes us human[e].

The squeak of a body in a bathtub

Niamh Riordan

Here:

My body is a host on the day that G visits, and the surface of my belly ripples from some interior kick as she unpacks a huge bag of things that she's brought to show me. I am too far gone to make the journey to Woolwich, so she has assembled this portable show-and-tell version, hauled it cross-country on tube/train/bus, bringing to me: tiny projectors which we test by the coats in my hallway, slides wrapped in tissue paper, a prototype of the four-sided loom, sewn up with yellow thread. I listen, my ear cupped by a tin can, as she speaks about moving sound and light around, using mics, mirrors, holes and tin cans connected by a length of wire which now stretches taut across my living room. She hides behind a wall so that I can't see her speak into her can, and her voice sounds booming but distant.

There:

A memory: Groggy, deep in the night, I shift between my sheets and hear the squeak of body moving in a bathtub: a moment of confusion as the sound and my movement don't correlate, before I understand that, next door, G is taking a late-night bath. We are in our early twenties, sharing a flat which is mostly corridor, and she bathes near the head of my bed. She's listening to the radio – she usually is - I can hear muffled clipped voices of the World Service through the thin wall separating us.

Now:

Sounds from G's Cairo balcony play through my laptop in Liverpool. Block out the sounds from my own street, a fly buzzing, and the tap of my fingers on this keyboard. Shuffling footsteps pass by, followed by the insistent tat-tat-tat trill of a jackhammer? Birds peep, squeakily, like bath toys. A slicing sound, something mechanical and metallic. A cockerel crows, kids yell and a man shouts, interrupted by that hammering again. My belly suddenly jumps – my silent companion is listening too and maybe the jackhammer has broken through their whooshing soundscape. As usual the jab from my inside takes me inside: a mind-boggling contortion in which I curl up within my own watery interior, to poke at the walls which hold me.

Together with the Project

Farida Youssef

May 2023

Cairo

My aim is to limit myself to the ingenuity of innate action, to be awed by it, and not to try to clear up its mysteries.¹

The task of defining something is not always easy. Sometimes a definition can be too restrictive. Sometimes too general. Then there is the risk of being too conclusive, racing towards having the last word when there shouldn't be a last word. At times, however, the thing itself fights back against being defined. For months, Georgina's *Now and here and there together* has been eluding the pressure of being defined. How then could I start thinking about it? There wasn't room for cartesian and systematic thinking. Instead, I watched the project find a way of simply being itself.

Before meeting Georgina I had seen her looms on social media. They seemed like a waterfall of white threads hanging from a lilac wall. Then, last fall, we started speaking about them, her weaving practice and the technical apparatus that sustains them. By winter, I had finally met the loom. She seemed to have taken over the room. Like a spiderweb, she touched many corners. Suspended was the intention of the loom becoming a carpet, of the sculpture becoming a surface. Until today, the loom hasn't materialised into a carpet and I wonder if that matters. The twentieth century French experimental educator and philosopher Ferdinand Deligny was very attentive to the ways children learn by simply acting, without clear intentions, without being conscious. For him, the spider also does not have a thought-out project. The spider's weaving is innate, instinctive. Deligny saw the spider's mode of being, the Arachnean mode, as a metaphor for growth and relation. The Arachnean loom does the same. One day Georgina said the spiderish loom "was behaving properly". The loom is not part of a thought-out project, as Deligny might say. The being of the loom is in her growth.

There were other forms in search for their form. Drop shaped glass, a Raspberry Pi and a torch. Glassblowing, sound recording and experimenting with projected images. The physical remnants of each of these activities seem unfinished. All of them started out as attempts. In fact, the entire project is conjugated to the mode of an attempt. All the project is an attempt. It takes seriously this nature or being. It is never about certainty. If anything, it is about developing a sensitivity towards and perhaps an appreciation of hesitation. Interestingly, I was never left with the feeling that its unfinished quality was disruptive. Sensibility towards the uncertain, towards the attempt replaced the faculty of understanding. Each attempt lent itself to new realisations, new trajectories that open up the project to itself. Indeed, Georgina's project is not simply a static noun. It takes on various grammatical properties. It is a grammatical subject, capable of self-reflection. A noun, used to describe. A verb that acts. And more importantly, an adverb, a mode of being. Here is an attempt in all its forms. A project whose project is about being a project!

In the absence of representation, understanding and the thought-out, all the objects and forms in *Now and here and there together* always exist in the present tense. The project developed through relationships between the objects, when they were here, in Egypt, where they are now, in England. The project is the attempt of their relationship. As for my attempt, I think I became a friend of the project. As if we are both there together.

¹ Ferdinand Deligny, "The Arachnean" in *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015), 46.

witness me in my absence while I move between the threads / begging
for additional weeks to accommodate the weight that resides in my hips

the days are getting longer but I only live at night

I dance between the layers of time / I soak the thread with my sweet sweet
sweat / move with me / roll with me / swallow the dust

I set off into the dark by walking along the thames / on an empty stomach /
empty womb / I am at home here yet not / privy to the customs I will never
call mine

I strap the harness on / the weight feels like a safety net / the loom hugs my
flesh in all the strange ways

the days are getting longer but I mostly live at night

where I dance between the layers of time / soak the thread with the sweet
sweet sweat / swallow the dust

through the leather ears listen to the birds she said to me / my nipples pierced
with sound / I used to speak on the telephones made of copper pipes /
between fight and flight I have chosen to cry

the days are getting longer but I only live the night

the loom asserts its claim / whispers turn into shout / who would give a fuck /
you only live twice //

release is made of tears and condensed milk

I dance between the layers of skin / I soak the thread with my sweat / it is sweet

