Manchesters United: Transnational dialogues in contemporary crafts.

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Abstract.

The paper presents an overview of a ten-year programme of engagement with the traditional crafts and cultural heritage of India. This ongoing MIRIAD research project aims to address the decline of traditional Indian crafts skills in the face of globalisation, rapid modernisation, and the loss of traditional markets. Our project ‘manifesto’ aims to preserve and revitalise cultural heritage (epitomised by the crafts) through a sustained programme of contemporary engagement, international dialogue and cultural collaboration.

The presentation will outline the chronological development of this initiative, beginning with the Here and There (HAT) project (2003-2007) www.hat.mmu.ac.uk which established a model for international crafts research exchange. This led to collaboration with the Ahmedabad International Arts Festival (The Pol Project 2010 www.thepolproject.blogspot.co.uk) and the establishment of a MIRIAD research centre, Arts Reverie, in Ahmedabad.

The paper will focus on the case study, Cotton Exchange: A Material Response 2012/2013, a collaborative project involving Indian and UK makers, a consortium of NW UK museums and the Centre for Heritage Management at Ahmedabad University. This project examined the shared legacies of cotton manufacture between Manchester and Ahmedabad (the ‘Manchester of India’) and concluded with ground-breaking installations in the heritage location of Rajnagar Mill, Ahmedabad.
Introduction.

This paper will describe the processes and outcomes of a decade of applied research around the sustainability of traditional crafts practice, which has focused on establishing cultural exchanges between makers and institutions in the UK and India. It will describe how an ongoing collaboration between MIRIAD\(^1\) at MMU, A Fine Line cultural practice, and a growing network of organizations and institutions in India, has created a model for transnational collaboration in the crafts.

As collaborators, we share a common interest in the histories and traditions of crafts practice in India and the UK, and in the problems faced by contemporary makers in the face of globalisation, rapid modernisation, and the loss of markets for traditional crafts products. We share a belief that Craft is fundamentally organic, ever changing and evolving according to its social, cultural and economic environment. Our hypothesis is that contemporary crafts-makers from the UK and from India will benefit, culturally and economically, from opportunities to engage in dialogue: primarily with one another, but also with each other’s practices, processes, support networks and markets. Our project is therefore an ongoing experiment, which aims to preserve and re-vitalise crafts practice, through a sustained programme of contemporary engagement, international dialogue and cultural collaboration.

The first section of this paper presents a chronological overview of the development of this model of collaborative practice, and illustrates the importance of building and maintaining collaborative relationships and networks. The second section examines a recent project, *Cotton Exchange: A Material Response*, in more detail.

Developing a model.

The collaboration between MIRIAD and A Fine Line originated in a research exchange project, which created residencies for contemporary jewellers from the UK and Australia, within HEI’s in their respective countries. MIRIAD’s Johnny Magee was engaged as the documentary artist for the project, producing short films of the

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\(^{1}\) MIRIAD (Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design) is the research institute for Manchester School of Art, at Manchester Metropolitan University.
Building on the successful model of the Australia/UK pilot, a more ambitious project was conceived in 2003, the *Here and There (HAT) project*, which expanded the residency model geographically (to include India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) and opened up the project to makers from a wider range of crafts disciplines. Individual makers were provided with a stipend, accommodation, and access to workshop facilities and mentoring within a host institution, (usually a HEI, Museum or Gallery) for a three-month international residency. The residencies carried an open brief for the makers: to respond to their ‘dis-location’ in their new and unfamiliar environments, and engage with new opportunities. No specific outputs or outcomes were demanded. By 2007, 20 individual research fellowships had been completed, and these collectively formed a study of the effects of cultural dislocation on crafts practice.

MMU’s role in HAT was significant, acting as a residency host to three makers from South Asia: Masooma Syed (Pakistan) Sumedh Rajendran (India) and Rashid Rana (Pakistan). MIRIAD organised the interim project conference and an associated publication *Migratory Practices*, and MMU staff members took up residency opportunities themselves: Peter Chatwin at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, and Professor Stephen Dixon at The Jam Factory in Adelaide. Dr. Jane Webb was writer in residence and Magee was film-maker in residence for the project.

The HAT residency programme concluded in 2007 with an exhibition of residency outcomes, many in the form of work-in-progress, at the Queen’s Gallery, British Council, New Delhi, and a week long conference and workshop event, called cHAT week, at the Sanskriti Foundation, New Delhi, which provided a platform for participants to extend their international dialogue and networks.

**Arts Reverie, Ahmedabad, AIAF.**

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3 www.hat.mmu.ac.uk

An unexpected, though highly significant outcome of the HAT project was the establishment of Arts Reverie as an artist’s house in the old city of Ahmedabad. The house was initially rented for 6 months, to provide accommodation for two UK makers on HAT residencies at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. Indian writer, critic and gallerist Anupa Mehta had attended the *Migratory Practices* conference in Manchester as a delegate, and as a result became actively involved with the HAT project. It was Mehta who found the house, and she subsequently purchased Arts Reverie in partnership with A Fine Line, with a view to establishing Arts Reverie as a base for artists, designers and makers visiting and working in Ahmedabad. The house has become a focus for numerous MIRIAD research projects in Ahmedabad, and in 2012 was formally recognised as a MIRIAD research centre.

In 2009 the Ahmedabad International Arts Festival\(^5\), a multi-arts, multi-venue city festival, was conceived, following an Arts Reverie ‘think tank’ event, chaired by Susan Benn and attended by local arts/environment organizations and MIRIAD Professors John Hyatt and Dixon. The festival was initiated by Anupa Mehta, with a single event at a heritage site in 2009. For AIAF 2010, Dixon instigated the participation of MIRIAD researchers, working with local textile designer Lokesh Ghai to create and install the opening event. Large, digitally printed flags, based on traditional Gujarati wood-block prints marked the original gateway to the city, flanking either side of the historic Ellis Bridge, a bridge which significantly links the old and new cities of Ahmedabad. A digital artwork by Hyatt was beamed from Ellis Bridge onto the river Sabarmati below.

Another outcome of the 2009 Think Tank was *The Pol Project\(^6\)* A Pol is a gated enclave, where inhabitants traditionally lived on the basis of segregation of religion or profession. Pol living is community based living with clear areas of shared experience. In 2010, MIRIAD researchers worked in collaboration with the people of Dhal Ni Pol, Ahmedabad, to create temporary site-specific artworks, events and workshops which explored the social aesthetics of the Pol, in order to raise local awareness of its unique and endangered architectural and cultural heritage. Based at

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\(^5\) [www.aiaf.in](http://www.aiaf.in)

\(^6\) [http://thepolproject.blogspot.co.uk](http://thepolproject.blogspot.co.uk)
Arts Reverie, ceramicist’s CJ O’Neill, Dixon and visual anthropologist Amanda Ravetz developed a close collaboration, running workshops and exploring everyday rituals within the Pol through conversation with the community, photography, film and ceramics. Participatory events engaged community members in performing daily rituals around a notional ‘doorway’ and these were documented through film and still photography, resulting in the film *Entry* (Ravetz) and a series of ceramic installations in the Pol.

**Cotton Exchange, a case study.**


*Cotton Exchange* examined the shared histories and legacies of cotton manufacture between Manchester and Ahmedabad\(^8\). The project commenced with a research trip to Gujarat, attended by the UK Museum curators and some of the residency participants. The visits ranged from industrial heritage sites and new, state-of-the-art cotton mills in Ahmedabad to the workshops of traditional weavers, printers and dyers in rural Gujarat.

*Cotton Exchange* specifically created four new residency opportunities for Indian and UK makers, in locations with significant industrial resonance in the North West of England. Indian textile artist Lokesh Ghai explored the regions historical connections with Gandhi during a residency at Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, creating a shrine populated with flags created by visitors to the museum. Gujarati Weaver Shamji Vishram Siju worked at Platt Hall Museum of Costume, Manchester, and

\(^7\) *Cotton Exchange: A Material Response* formed one part of the North West based *Global Threads* initiative, one of Arts Council England’s *Stories of the World* projects for the Cultural Olympiad in 2012.

\(^8\) Ahmedabad is known as the ‘Manchester of India’, and the post-war rise of the Ahmedabad cotton industry was largely responsible for the subsequent demise of the Lancashire cotton industry.)
tested new patterns and colourways through a series of open workshops and selling events. UK artist Liz Rideal worked with the Whitworth Art Gallery, exploring the legacy of the Forbes-Watson pattern books\textsuperscript{9} through experimental film and video projection.

MIRIAD was offered the fourth residency, in partnership with Lancashire Museums Service, and it was decided to ‘share’ the residency between a research team of five makers; an embroider, a weaver, a fashion designer, a ceramicist and a media artist. The residency venue, Queen Street Mill Textile Museum, contains the last steam driven weaving shed in the UK. The mill’s three hundred looms, packed row after row into the cavernous weaving shed, are strikingly atmospheric. The clatter of the machines and the smell of the cotton fibres and machine oil provide a unique multi-sensory experience.

*Cotton Exchange* was actively concerned with the human as well as the material experience of the cotton industry, and Queen Street Mill provided an ideal exhibition space to explore this human connection. Each of the MIRIAD makers responded to the location to create site-specific installations. The installations themselves blended organically with the physicality of the mill to create a haunting and evocative link to place. The exhibition established a conceptual ‘dialogue’ with the absent workers, with a shifting temporality that conjured an echo of lives lived, not just in Burnley but also in India, creating a liminal space between continents and between creative experiences.

Fashion designer Alison Welsh’s installation of shirt-forms were suspended from the ceiling in the tape sizing room, in harmony with the aged strips of cloth hanging all around. The garments are based on those worn by mill workers in Burnley and Ahmedabad, traditional shapes which are exaggerated and elongated to stretch from ceiling to floor. The garments make use of the elaborately decorative Indian selvedge stamp, often in vivid blue and gold, which marks the end of the bolt (roll) of cotton. They represent a fusion of old and new, a reinvention of old shapes that echoes the evolution of the cotton industry between Britain and India.

\textsuperscript{9} *The Textile Patterns of India*, 1866.
Textile artist Alice Kettle worked with Rabari women in Kutch to create a response, through traditional pattern and motif, to the Rules and Regulations, which plaster the walls of the mill. A series of embroideries were exhibited between the original notices, evoking a dialogue between past and present creative practices, a narrative which continued with a series of decorative loom belts installed in the loom shed. These were digitally embroidered with workers’ memories from the mill ledgers, creating a transcript of voices long-gone, rearticulated in the nostalgic environment of the weaving shed. The installation also included a series of chandeliers, comprised of cascading cotton pirns, suspended in the weighing area. One chandelier made use of the neutral, pale Lancashire spools and thread, the other presented a flood of vivid colours using vibrant wooden Indian pirns.

Lesley Mitchison created a series of textile hangings, inspired by the global reach of Lancashire’s cotton industry. The pieces combine past and present craft skills and technologies, revisiting historical connections between Lancashire and India through contemporary methods. Mitchison studied the works of Ethel Mairet and Barron and Larcher, referencing their investigative observations of traditional Indian weaving and dying techniques from wood block printing to natural dyes. Using Indian cotton, dyed with vivid indigo and woven using digital technology, the hangings explored the boundaries between tradition and innovation.

Inside the weaving shed, Dixon’s installation of ceramic billycans and tiffin-boxes presented an amalgamation of British and Indian everyday traditions, using these extremely personal objects to evoke the communality of experience within the cotton industry. The ceramic cans, decorated with the names and numbers of past mill workers, conjured up the everyday lives of the weavers, arranged carefully in a circular shape to represent the wheel of the factory clocking-on machine.

Andrea Zapp also focused on the relationship between past and present technologies, and the challenges of combining analogue and digital processes. Her work reconciles the creative forms of textiles and media together in one installation, making use of cotton as a backdrop for video but also as an integral part of its content. The installation also includes a Rabari-style garment, which referenced the Queen Street Mill pirns as a starting point. Zapp photographed the objects, which were translated
into wooden printing blocks by a Gujarati block-maker, and then printed onto the fabric that made up the garment.

The installations animated the spaces in Queen Street Mill, and were instrumental in bringing new audiences to the Museum. At the close of the Burnley exhibition, the team began to discuss how we might bring the installation works to an Indian audience, and our thoughts returned to the derelict Rajnagar Mill, which we had visited in Ahmedabad at the start of the project. This was an ambitious and challenging location for an exhibition, with vast spaces full of rusting mill machinery bearing the names of manufacturers in Manchester, Burnley, Blackburn and Bolton.

At this point we were able to draw on the network of contacts we had built up in Ahmedabad, in particular Debashish Nayak, director of Ahmedabad University’s Centre for Heritage Management. Nayak was instrumental in negotiating the official approvals and permissions that were needed, both with the Rajnagar Mill owners, and with the National Textile Corporation as government custodians of the site. Ahmedabad University became an active and enthusiastic collaborator in the exhibition project, providing invaluable local knowledge and expertise, manpower to assist in the installation, volunteers to lead guided tours of the mill site, and additional resources to publicise and promote the exhibition.

The scale of the Rajnagar Mill site meant that the second, Ahmedabad showing of Cotton Exchange could feature the work of all of the Indian and UK makers, within the same exhibition. Locations were selected, in consultation with NTC officials. Each of the five MIRIAD makers was able to re-locate and re-contextualise their installations in this new space, and some, Kettle for example, added completely new works to the exhibition.

Ghai re-created his ‘shrine’ to Gandhi in the time-keepers hut at the entrance to the mill. Rideal’s sculptural light installation was projected onto cotton sari-lengths in the screen-printing shed. Siju showed a collection of newly commissioned woven textiles, interspersed between the carding machines, which clearly demonstrated the new developments in colour, pattern and narrative achieved during his UK residency.

Two additional Cotton Exchange makers (who had participated in the project but not undertaken residencies) the wood-block printer Khalid Amin Khatri and the Bandhani
artist Ali Mohammed Khatri also contributed new and exciting works to the exhibition. The Rajnagar Mill exhibition was regarded as a great success, received extensive press and media coverage, and this was reflected in the visitor numbers, over 700 visitors signed up to take the ‘heritage tour’ of the mill during the four days of the exhibition.

Conclusion

The impact of such intercultural collaborative engagement can be profound, yet its effects are sometimes subtle and often intangible. It is clear that the participants are affected by their international residence exchanges, that their practice is firstly challenged, and secondly enriched by their experiences, and that new opportunities are opened up. Ghai is a case in point. As we have seen, Ghai became involved with MIRIAD in 2010, collaborating on the Ellis Bridge flag project for the second AIAF, and his continued involvement with MIRIAD projects in Ahmedabad led to the invitation to take part in Cotton Exchange as a residency artist. Whilst in Manchester, Ghai delivered a presentation on his research into historical Indian costume, which in turn led to the award of a MIRIAD studentship, to research traditional Gujarati kediyun garments.

MIRIAD’s ongoing enquiry into collaborative craft practice has recently achieved academic impact, with the Berg publication Collaboration through Craft, edited by Helen Felcey, Kettle and Ravetz, which investigates current theoretical debates about the collaborative and social significance of craft. The papers collectively “argue for craft as a field of knowledge and a socio-cultural concept poised between models of expertise, possessive individualism and collaborative labour”.

We can see clear evidence of cultural impact, through the continued success of the AIAF: the festival was initiated by Mehta, on a shoe-string budget, with a single event at a heritage site in 2009, and is now in its fifth year; the 2013 festival included 50 artists, 14 venues and 20 events.

Social impact is demonstrated by the continuing legacy of the Pol project: for AIAF 2013, MIRIAD photographers Gavin Parry and Jacqueline Butler have taken forward the original objective of the Pol project to a poignant level by engaging closely with the people of Dhal ni Pol. Parry’s exhibit of portraits Silent Dialogue documents the
shopkeepers and street-traders, while Butlers ‘kites’, also a celebration of life in the Pol, bear testament to the joy of life that still flourishes within an increasingly marginalized strata of Indian society.

In reflecting on the experience of this ten-year period of collaboration, this paper demonstrates the importance of a number of key principles:

• Firstly, the importance of instigating, building and maintaining collaborative networks, based on shared interests and agendas.

• Secondly, the developing of personal and professional relationships between partners, nurtured over time, strengthened by regular contact and built on trust and equality.

• Thirdly, the importance of clear and transparent dialogue between partners and participants; the sharing of issues, problems, ambitions and successes.

• And fourthly, at all stages of a collaborative project, the ability to think on your feet; to adapt, to compromise, and to improvise.

At MIRIAD we aim to continue to develop this collaborative model further in the future.