

'If I don't do some couching I will burst'

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Abstract

If I Don't Do Some Couching I Will Burst' was the explanation I gave to Dr. Amy Twigger-Holroyd to explain my need to make in order to feel more balanced due to work commitments generally, and during the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, and why I drew on couching as a stitch to achieve this. It was not until writing this essay about 'The Piece' I stitched in 2021 to stop me from 'bursting', that I realised the centrality of the work to expanded meanings of self-care. 'The Piece' links my claims for psychological space, physical making space, camaraderie with like-minded makers and a quest for wholeness, all taking place within my home, in order to achieve the space that Louise Bourgeois refers to as being "a metaphor for the structure of our existence" (Lorz 2015).

Keywords

couching, self-care, making, space, time

Making 1. a. The action to MAKE v. in its various senses: fabrication, production, preparation; institution, appointment; doing, performance (of a specified action); conversion into, causing to become something; etc. . . . Also occas. the process of being made.

(The Oxford English Dictionary)

I need to make. I stitch intuitive pieces, knit, clothes-make, can darn and bake. This is one aspect of me. While a fashion and textiles student at Ravensbourne College of Art and Design in the 1980s, I learnt to balance and rely on the connective rhythm between

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making clothes and writing, which, of course, is another form of making. This system and my need to make became acute when I entered academia, and more so when I became a professor in 2014. Currently, to gain a sense of balance, I make during time syphoned from the impact of academic thinking and responsibilities. Making is where I go to claim space, to distil the intensity of critical thinking, to work intuitively, to just be.¹ More recently the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made this more acute. I agree with James Otter that the need to make is part of getting ‘back to myself’ (Otter, 2020: 7).

Claiming time

For Robert Poynton (2019) to ‘pause’ is to claim time. The need to make, particularly as a means to sustain and care for the self,² is a form of ‘pause’ that in turn acts as a balm against more intense aspects of a life. Poynton (2019) explains,

A pause is an opening. It acts as a portal to other options and choices, giving more dimension to your experience . . . Experimenting with pause gives you a way to play around with the rhythms of your life. It gives you a way to give shape and texture to your experience, weakening the sensation that your life is driven by external forces over which you have no influence. Choosing where you put your pauses makes an enormous difference to what your life feels like and what you do as a result . . . You might pause to rest and regenerate, to become more creative, connect with other people or yourself . . . There are many possible reasons to pause, ways to pause and lengths of pause. There are many different practices to adopt . . . It is a subtle, powerful, life-giving idea . . . (pp. 17–18)

In light of this, what is produced, completed or not during a ‘pause’, *is* that time that translates as a quiet narrative on time (Tulloch, 2017: 5), and symbolises the possibility of gaining rather than losing time (Tulloch 2018b: 132). As the designer-maker Jessica Ogden (2017) says,

You have to make that first stitch. That propels you. When you look at a piece that’s been darned, you know that that’s somebody’s time. Those stitches hold that time. What you can get from that simple magic, It’s not so simple because it is magic, is a whole identity. You literally can make an identity. Which is something incredible, and I think that’s the Empowerment. (p. 17)

I have referenced this quote several times, for its lyrical elegance echoes the rhythm and ‘internal song’ of making which captures the necessity and power of stitch for the stitcher.

Making time

I invite you to join me, for however long you want to make whatever you want – I may well be the only person there! We don’t even have to talk. It is just a time to be. (Carol)³

On Tuesday, 10 November 2020, I sent the above Microsoft Teams invitation to eight colleagues based at CCW⁴ at the University of the Arts London (UAL), to join this online group. I originally decided to create space for me during the week, to stop at 5.30pm

every Tuesday and make until 6.30 pm. This was primarily triggered by becoming aware that I was not caring enough for myself to counter the impact of working during the Covid-19 pandemic, a concern that colleagues also voiced, which led to the invitation. The 'Making Time' group is now a close knit, supportive band of seven black and white women in varying posts within UAL.

The range of activities engaged in has been: knitting, darning, baking bread, baking cakes, embroidery, crochet, making an alternative Christmas tree, sharing of references, reading excerpts from books, playing a single note on a recorder. When I filled a dresser with fabric while the group did their own making, talking and watching me fold and place cloth on the shelves, a group member said it was like watching a performance piece. The impact of 'Making Time' has been the way it helps to recalibrate the week, as the consensus of the group state: there is work before Tuesday and then there is work after Tuesday, such is the balancing impact of our sessions. Some group members have stated that when they miss a session they feel out of kilter for the rest of the week.

Tools for making: the needle

The 'Making Time' sessions' call to pause and focus on making heightens the significance of everyday gestures to have restorative qualities. This was an experience I had while threading a needle after a particularly stressful day. I focussed on pushing the thread through the eye of the needle, pulling it through the other side, the decision about its length to secure the position of the thread, and the decision of the length of thread I wanted to sew with. The affect was calming. It was an engagement with the reassurances of everyday gestures, practices and patterns of life that contribute to the elongation of presence and belonging. This experience of 'simply' threading a needle in a time marked out to just be connects with a statement by Louise Bourgeois:

When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive. It's not a pin.⁵

When I originally read this quote, I thought of two women who have worked with needles in different ways.⁶ The Jamaican artist Laura Facey and Edith Shelton, my mother-in-law. Laura produced large-to-giant needles made of Lignum Vitae wood for her sculpture 'Plumb Line' produced in 2010. In 2017, Laura related to me that her needles symbolised repair of the self, following violence. While I have a needle case that belonged to Edith, some of the needles have thread hanging from the eye 21 years after her death. Edith was not a proficient sewer, but an excellent knitter. Yet, she enjoyed darning the clothes of her family. Another form of repair of the self.

Memories of making

A memory emerged in January 2021 of my elder sister Doreen, my mother and me making clothes in the attic of our house in Doncaster during the 1970s. It came while writing the lecture '... and Breathe. Style Narratives, Composing a Life and Wellbeing'

presented at ‘Gender, Subjectivity, and Everyday Health in the Post-1945 World’.⁷ I remember vividly a maxi navy-blue sweetheart neckline dress with short, puff sleeves that my sister made. Doreen embellished the corners of the neckline with small cloth flower motif. During this period, I made a pale green tweed hobble skirt, with about three knife pleats at the centre back. I cannot remember who produced the pattern, probably *Simplicity* as this was my go-to pattern at the time. I adored the skirt as it enabled me to connect with the 1940s fashion ethic in the 1970s. I cannot remember any of the clothes my mum made, only the memory of her at the sewing machine. What is significant is the recall of this shared dressmaking time with my mum and sister. Such memories, those fragments of a lived past remembered, are quotations pulled from the past that reinforce, in my example, the longevity of personal making valued in the present.

Time to reflect

This essay of reflection on my making practice is on the one hand a time to think about what making, notably hand-stitching, means to me now, and on the other hand connects to my academic research practice conducted through the prism of making – significantly making the self, making things, making a life (Tulloch, 2016: 201, 2019: 86). Try as I might to separate these aspects of me, the entanglement of academic research and personal making persists as evident in the writing of this essay. The title of this essay, ‘If I Don’t Do Some Couching I Will Burst’, expresses this succinctly.

I first used the phrase on 25 June 2021 during an online conversation with Amy Twigger Holroyd⁸ to explain how much I craved couching as restorative stitching (Amy suggested I put the phrase on a T-shirt). The result of that need is what I have been calling ‘The Piece’. It is an example of my intuitive stitching devoted to couching. Gladys Windsor Fry summarised couching as: ‘the name given to the method of sewing down one or more threads by means of another thread’ (Fry, 1935: 120). For me to anchor strands of material resonates centring. To make the couching stitch, is to do this in front of you, aligned with the body, that conjures an invisible thread between, in my case, ‘The Piece’ and my body. The creation of the couching stitch is a point of support and equilibrium (*Oxford English Dictionary*) that diffuses feeling off kilter.

‘The Piece’: I

I began ‘The Piece’ around Easter 2021. I added more lines during ‘Making Time’ on Tuesday, 6 April (Figure 1). After that session, I couched another row above the original first couching line of green wool, red and white fine cord and red couching thread (Figure 2). Unusually, I did not date ‘The Piece’ or write any information about the process. A significant point was that I wanted to create ‘The Piece’ using remnants of yarn (Figure 3) from a scarf I knitted (Figure 4) as the lines to be held down by red couching thread, stitched intuitively.

Reference to the scarf is poignant. I began knitting it in Autumn 2020. It was an exercise to see if I could design a good-looking scarf that is, in my taste, from the balls of yarn, of different ply, I had at home. In order to make use of the different weights of yarn



Figure 1. ‘The Piece’, 6 April 2021.

© Photograph by Carol Tulloch.

into one accessory I made a ‘swatch book’ (Figure 5) to accommodate for the various tensions. Most of the yarn was chosen from my collection of materials, what artist Celia Pym refers to as having ‘a palette of materials at home’ to promote confidence in making.⁹ I did eventually buy two new yarns from different shops: a stone-coloured yarn in Brighton, to balance the rhythm of the scarf’s striped design, and red wool to sew the blanket stitch edging. The latter’s physical purchase at a wool shop disrupted my sense of ‘safe space’ that the act of making in my home provides me.

Buying red wool while black

In early 2021, I went to a wool shop in West Sussex to buy red wool for the blanket stitch. It was a shop I had used since moving to East Sussex in 2007 and had a good shopping experience. Physical shopping is, of course, different due to the pandemic. I wore a mask. My hair was covered with a headscarf. Although I had travelled to the shop with my husband, I went in alone due to the restrictions on the numbers of customers in the shop at one time. I took the scarf with me in a cloth bag to see which of the reds available would work best with its myriad colours. I did not think that this would be a problem. I was wrong. I found a red wool in a medium weight yarn. This was on a shelf near the shop counter where one of the two shop assistants was situated and could see me clearly. I also placed my bag with the scarf in a position that was visible for them to see. I pulled out a length of my scarf out of the bag and bent forwards to place the yarn next to the scarf. Immediately one of the shop assistants came over and asked if I needed help. From



Figure 2. 'The Piece' 5 July 2021.

© Photograph by Carol Tulloch.



Figure 3. Basket of wool remnants from the scarf.

© Photograph by Carol Tulloch.



Figure 4. Scarf 2021.

© Photograph by Carol Tulloch.

that moment on, the assistant never left my side and I was uncomfortable being in the shop. I yearned to return home that was, for me, a safe space I could ‘work towards becoming precisely who [I] wish to be’ (Ogundehin, 2016: 15).

Space to make

When I stitched ‘The Piece’, I did this in my new studio that I created at my home between August 2020 and March 2021. I now meet the ‘Making Time’ group here. It was an unloved, crammed storage space that I cleared myself. I designed the studio to accommodate what and how I want to make. My husband laid the new floor, insulated the ceiling and built shelves. The remainder of the studio was completed by local carpenters such as Mr. Dick Carey who made the new studio doors, a descendant of the family who built our house around 1802 and lived there until the 1970s. On reflection, the creation of my studio is a symbol of claiming a part of me that contributes to who I am and I needed to make this visible, notably to me.

Making in my studio exemplifies John Welwood’s (1977) thinking on the importance of psychological space, ‘space-as-experienced’, what he refers to as ‘affective space’ (pp. 98–99). This is in response to ‘feeling space’, ‘the physical objects and an environment “out there”’ (Welwood, 1977: 99) that



Figure 5. 'Swatch Book' 2019–2020.

© Photograph by Carol Tulloch.

is structured around a central point, a sense of 'me-here-ness' around which the whole affective landscape is constructed . . . Feeling space is like a field of energy that we create around ourselves, constantly changing and rearranging itself around us in ever different forms . . . In this sense feeling space is always in the process of becoming. (Welwood, 1977: 102).

Understandably, things made within this context bear significant meaning to the maker.

'The Piece': II

What do I see in 'The Piece' now? Experimentation and exploration of the use and combination of yarns and the myriad couching methods that has resulted in a stitch conversation between the materials, techniques and me. 'The Piece' represents another aspect of me – my liking for maximalist and minimalist aesthetic. This may spring from my reliance on collage. An aspect of collage that I am drawn to is the 'materialization of collage as "a de-centered patchwork, a montage of heterogeneous fragments"' (Groupe Mu, 2017 [1978]: 173). 'The Piece' makes use of the system of couching 'that underwrite the resonances of the fragment. A fragment is what is left behind as evidence that something once existed' (Tulloch, 2021).

The creation of pattern in 'The Piece' was an unconscious achievement. Pattern has not been a determined act of stitching or a means to claim space and time for me. Nonetheless, pattern is what I achieved here. In light of the points raised above, and

considered within the context of why and how this small intuitive couched sampler was made, I engaged with the possibility of pattern that ‘turns thought into ritual’ (Goldin, 2018 [1975]: 42). Soetsu Yanagi’s thinking on pattern focuses on its inherent beauty as its strength, the soul of pattern (Yanagi, 2018: 67–92). What has been revealed is that I unconsciously produced a layered depth of pattern through intuitive stitching made more experiential through the presence of stitched ‘mistakes’ that remain. These lines may be different weights of rhythm yet are an exercise in aesthetic choice that enables the right for individualised taste in personal practice of stitch that contributes to the definition of a life, ‘a concrete statement of presence’ resulting in what I call taste-aesthetic-being (Tulloch, 2018a: 270). This adds to a sense of self and the sites of day-to-day living. ‘The Piece’, like threading my needle, generated calm. It resonates with what initiated my need to make it, the centredness I gained while stitching it.

As I come to the end of writing this Cultural Commons essay, I feel ‘The Piece’ should be named ‘If I Don’t Do Some Couching I Will Burst’. To give ‘The Piece’ this name is to recognise the personal significance of why I stitched it, a material reminder to claim and make time to be me.

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Notes

1. <http://www.caroltulloch.co.uk/>
2. This approach was the basis of the ‘Sustaining Through Making’ conference panel that Susan Kaiser and I organised for the *Sustainability in Fashion* Conference (2019). See https://www.regents.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/Regent%27s-Sustainability-in-Fashion_Programme_2019.pdf, p.6.
3. Microsoft Teams invitation 10 November 2020.
4. CCW is Chelsea College of Arts, Camberwell College of Arts, Wimbledon College of Arts.
5. Bourgeois (2000).
6. The quote featured in the introductory panel of the exhibition *What Do I Need to do to Make it OK?* at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum (2017). I first presented this thinking on sewing needles; Louise Bourgeois, Laura Facey and Edith Shelton in the keynote paper ‘Unexpected Directions, Necessary Observations: Making Sense of the World Through Making’ at *Decorating Dissidence: Modernism, Feminism and the Arts* Conference Queen Mary, University of London, 3–4 November 2017.
7. I was invited by Professor Tracey Loughran, University of Essex to give the keynote. The event was the final conference of the project *The Body, Self and Family: Women’s Psychological, Emotional and Bodily Health in Britain, c.1960–1990*.
8. The conversation took place during the development of MAI-DAY Textile Elements—A Series of Conversations organised by Dr. Amy Twigger Holroyd, based at Nottingham Trent University, and me.
9. Celia Pym in conversation with Carol Tulloch during our *Stitching Holds Space Workshop Day*, 24 July 2019.

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Biographical Note

Carol Tulloch is Professor of Dress, Diaspora and Transnationalism at University of the Arts, London, UK. Her books include *Black Style* (V&A, 2004), *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life After Bourdieu* (Routledge, 2018). Her curated and co-curated exhibitions include *Tools of the Trade: Memories of Black British Hairdressing* (Black Cultural Archives, 2001) *Grow Up! Advice and the Teenage Girl* (The Women’s Library, 2002), *The March of the Women: Suffragettes and the State* (National Archives, 2003), *Black British Style* (V&A, 2004), *Handmade Tales: Women and Domestic Crafts* (The Women’s Library, 2010), *Syd Shelton: Rock Against Racism* (Autograph, 2015), *Jessica Ogden: Still* (Marylebone, 2017).