**A Round Table: Jewellery in a time of crisis**

At the School of Jewellery, Birmingham City University, lockdown formally began on 23 March 2020, with no workshop activities after this point. Since then MA Jewellery and Related Products (JRP) students have been working, for the most part, from their student accommodation in order to sustain their studio practice. Some of our 50, mostly international, students have returned home to the Far East, but many are staying put, committed to continuing their studies in Birmingham, waiting for our workshops to open up again. We have met up in virtual meetings and carried out crits and tutorials and explored ways of staying in touch the best we could.

Technology, of course, allows us to stay in touch, but making craft or design works with any degree of refinement is largely impossible. Students have been asked to work on the other aspects of project development (creating research report, researching and mapping the context to their work, focusing on design work and renderings) and, while overall standards have been maintained, assessment criteria have been shifted to accommodate a world in which virtual, digital submissions have become the norm. Despite the best efforts of the team, there is clearly a significant gap in the student experience. The MA JRP staff team felt it was important to confront the issues that are shaping our lives under our new covid-19 restrictions. By doing so, we hoped to bring some of our contemporary pressures to the surface and support each other while we consider what these might mean to us, and how we might respond. In the spirit of a pot luck supper, the MA JRP staff team decided to hold a Round Table event to bring everyone involved in the course together and, to this end, we proposed an extra-curricular activity made up of a series of quick fire 3-mintue lightning talks to raise key questions and opinions. A call for contributions for our event – *A Round Table: Jewellery in a time of crisis* – resulted in a programme of 12 talks presented by students, Artists-in-Residence and staff, interspersed with questions and discussion. The event took place using Microsoft Teams on Tues 28 April, and the panel of 12 speakers was accompanied by an audience of 40+.

The focus of the lightning talks was diverse: students spoke about approaching the topics of their own studio enquiries from a different angle, finding the ‘silver lining’ within subject matter that had been interpreted rather differently previously; a number of our Chinese cohort reflected on the experience of watching their homeland succumb to the pandemic as they attempted to support families from a distance, before being overtaken by its embrace in the West. They talked about the role of designed objects in sustaining hope and challenging ideas, and of the difficulties and necessary strategies for sustaining a creative practice in a time of lockdown. Two Artists-in-Residence spoke about the pressing need for practice that is both collective and socially engaged. Staff spoke about the jewellery mediated by screens, both worn by royalty and others simply trying to make contact with family and friends isolating themselves elsewhere. The need for pause and quiet was also noted.

The result was a melee of ideas, as befits a moment at which living and working are entwined and confused. Nevertheless, a number of key themes emerged, some familiar and universal and others particular to the university experience of our students.

* Many participants noted some very polarised responses – some finding the enforced isolation a fruitful time to focus on making, without interruptions, but others noting that they are hindered by overwhelming feelings of anxiety and fear.
* Many found the emerging sense of community uplifting, with people reaching out to support each other. The desire to retain what is enriching, supportive and collective after the lockdown ends was another theme. For our largely Far Eastern student body, this sense of community spans the globe, and there was a need to defend home communities and to challenge racist perceptions that accompanied the initial news of the virus in Wuhan, China.
* Strategies for making featured large, with all around the table sharing suggestions for maintaining their practice. Alongside this, there was a corresponding need to recognise this moment as a hiatus: there is nothing normal about our current situation, but it is possible to use practice to carry on, and here the idea of a maintenance practice arose in whatever shape we can manage.
* Also, there was a need to acknowledge the fact that we are a little more naked, with the outermost layers of social convention stripped away. One student reflected on the shift that had taken place in Chinese mourning rituals, with the ashes of the dead retained for their own quarantine period before they can be returned to families, and the impact on social life and movement. While some of these changes – however necessary – are experienced as constricting and restraining, participants appreciated the opportunity to redefine other rituals and ways of working. This was accompanied, paradoxically, by a sense of freedom: our behavioural field is well and truly open, and this has led to moments of re-imagining, as we seek to span the chasm between the global themes that make up the news and the hyper-local content that fills our social media. Our new world is tech-led and mediated by screens, yet shot through with an appreciation for craft making and material engagement; it is micro-social and very, very personal.

This time of pandemic will change us all, and this unique, collective moment is both raw and profound. We will all be impacted by this, although a number of speakers noted the sharp claws of capitalism and the fact that we will have to stand firm if we are not to be pulled back to our old ways of commuting, polluting and consuming after it is concluded.

By the time I write this, a week after our Round Table, around half of the participants have responded to a feedback survey. Students appreciated the opportunity to reflect and take stock: the event ‘allowed me to re-examine my thoughts’; it ‘changed my perspective, especially on whether we should force ourselves to pursue a normal state of affairs’ and was ‘uplifting and positive’. We are keen to roll out further student-led discussion activities that provide a moment to take stock and consider the role that individuals can play in shaping the way our fields of jewellery and adornment, art and design can move forward. Students seem enthusiastic for these opportunities, and suggestions for themes have spanned both the global (interpersonal relationships, relieving boredom, study and travel) and the discipline-specific (narrative jewellery, approaches to making, online display and consumption of jewellery, drawing, and colour). The breadth of the topics offered highlights the sense of excitement or potential inherent in this moment, and suggests that our students have much to offer in terms of shaping the discourses at the heart of our creative world.

Our current situation offers plenty of challenges to students and educators alike, but the collective action of spending time together in the absence of answers, in the hope of a different future was uplifting and comforting. I would like to thank the students, Artists-in-Residence for making it a success, and I very much look forward to taking some of these ideas forward in the final months of the course.

Sian Hindle

Course Leader

MA Jewellery and Related Products

Birmingham School of Jewellery