Weaving Emotion: Andrew MacDonald’s “Affective Relations”

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The transmission of affect [...] is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual.


In her book *The Transmission of Affect*, cultural theorist Teresa Brennan argues that emotions, even energies, are capable of being communicated between individuals and groups. At first, this may sound like something out of science fiction; however, it’s a demonstrated physiological dimension that commonly mediates our social relationships. Of course, how we interpret and respond to these energies is wholly subjective and open to a breadth of emotional responses. But what is particularly astonishing and, to some, even disarming about her work is that it proposes human energies are anything but autonomous, anything but independent; that we are, for all intents and purposes, interconnected with the energies of other individuals through our shared environments. In other words, we are all much closer than we may think.

In this sense, it is not a coincidence that Peterborough-based visual artist Andrew MacDonald frames his recent exhibition at the Norfolk Arts Centre under the fetching title “Affective Relations.” In April of 2015, MacDonald met with members of the Norfolk Fibre Arts Guild of Backus Heritage Village in Port Rowan, Ontario to discuss the aesthetic premise of his exhibition, in addition to the intersections (and animated debates) between weaving and artistic labour, between hand-made objects and machine-made objects, between craft and fine art. During this initial meeting, he was also instructed in the ways of traditional weaving techniques as well as a comprehensive history of textile production in North America with particular attention to Canadian operations. Considering that MacDonald is a self-taught weaver and knitter, the experience of meeting and interacting with the Norfolk Fibre Arts Guild provided invaluable information which helps to better frame his practice within the larger conversation of contemporary art in Canada. In his own words, MacDonald remarks that “My work has changed a lot since meeting with the Weavers Guild, and the notion of clothing and textile use has crept back into my work.” One needs only fleeting glance at the sculptural work *Knitting and Weaving* (2015) to find this to be true. It should come as no surprise, then, that the emotions and energies exchanged during that meeting has led directly to a significant change of direction in the artist’s practice; or, at the very least, a critical restructuring of the formal education and experiences that shaped his body of work to that date. To quote Brennan’s term, the Norfolk Fibre Arts Guild made a strong “impression.”

So, MacDonald’s selection of the title for his exhibition emerges as an apt metaphor for the kinds of interpersonal encounters that form (and reform) how we make art. In effect, it provides evidence to the idea that contemporary art, contemporary craft, and community-based projects such as the Norfolk Fibre Arts Guild are indeed composed and governed by “affective...
relations”; those little moments in the stream of talk and thought that move us in a certain direction. With this in mind, MacDonald’s engagement with the Norfolk Fibre Arts Guild represents a powerful distancing from sculpture as a solitary practice and into craft as a collective process. That being said, MacDonald’s exhibition is as much about social relationships and exchanges as they are about the autonomous creation and life of objects themselves; or, perhaps, they are really one and the same, bound up together in the helix of the exhibition itself.

For several years now, MacDonald has framed his practice within the long and rich history of sculpture, particularly contemporary sculptural production, which riffs on the Dadaist whimsy of Tony Oursler, the technical proficiency of Amanda McCavour, and the architectural adroitness of Anish Kapoor. Yet while his work continues and builds upon the discourse of sculpture here in Canada, it cannot exclude the spectre of craft production, either. His pieces persist at the precipice between sculpture and craft, attempting to reconcile the complicated condition of their discursive separation. But can’t they be both? MacDonald’s sculptural objects reside somewhere between the identifiable and the surreal, between the recognizable and the uncanny. In his contentious essay of 1919, “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud argues that the uncanny is a thing both fearsome and familiar. Taking his cue from Freud’s concept of the uncanny, MacDonald’s recent sculptural work explodes with contradictions: in one way, his are everyday vernacular objects that take the shape of industrial tubing, face masks, or pillars. For instance, the sculptural hand-woven busts that are Masks (2015) present a whimsical take on traditional sculpture busts, however they are traditional busts made unreal, made uncanny, through anamorphic abstraction. Other works, such as the sculptural installation Blue Axis (2016) features two separate tubes of heavy blue wool connected in the middle to create a large “X.” The work criss-crosses the space of the exhibition in a way reminiscent of postmodern industrial architecture—which often shows the inner workings of a building rather than hiding it behind walls—yet here the chosen material is anything but the cold surface of PVC tubing; instead, MacDonald emphasizes the surface texture of his tubes through woven blue wool to prove his object is hand-crafted and subject to the forces of entropy. One strip of tube is hung to the ceiling at its ends while the other is draped over the other and falls to the ground by way of gravity accordingly. The result is a strange but lovely questioning of how separate objects in space can respond and speak to one another.

Perhaps the most striking work in the exhibition is paradoxically the most understated. Flag / Shawl (2016) features a woven rectangular form in black held up by two wood poles, which casually lean against a wall. Again, MacDonald sets up a matrix of contradictions for the audience: is it a shawl or is it a flag? Is it fashion or is it patriotic symbol? Is it meant to be worn or is it meant to be paraded? Devoid of text, the black flag becomes a screen for the audience to project social and political discourses. Of course, history provides evidence for the fact that black flags have been used as a religious emblem, a rallying cry, a mode of identity, and as an icon of resistance. Commonly, black flags have become the chosen symbol of anarchists in their opposition to nation-states, yet they have also been employed by the Italian National Fascist Party from the 1920s to 1940s, and surrendering Nazi U-boats during World War II. More recently, the black flag was adopted by the revolutionary Californian punk rock band Black Flag for their namesake as well as socio-political organizations such as Black Lives Matter. The black flag’s presence in “Affective Relations” is both welcomed and sinister, emphasizing how fragile systems of signification can be in an unsettled world, but ultimately MacDonald
emphasizes the black flag as a charged symbol of identity politics whose meaning is as fluid as the wind that bends and ripples it.

These figures and objects and items are rarely unanimated, never static; even those that rest comfortably on the wall as gridded layers of raw yarn point to patterns and design elements heaving with colour. MacDonald’s dedication to the physical spirit of his process—-weaving, stretching, twisting, binding, and taming—-draws attention to the notion that the sense of touch occupies his work at its very core, as it does with most craftspeople labouring with textiles. In her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick maintains that there is a strong physiological linkage between textures and emotions; that the sense of touch present in us generates strong connotations towards feeling, hence we use the popular aphorism “touchy-feeling” to describe phenomena whereby the distinctions between touch and emotion are pooled into one comprehensive criteria. As such, one could argue that the intimate association between the hand, its fingers, and the fabric is as much an aesthetic pursuit as it is an emotional one; that the textures of materials employed by the artist may symbolize a breadth of emotion in the viewer. It represents a material imbued with a sense of warmth, of safety, of tenderness, which almost reaches out to us while simultaneously art gallery etiquette (and guidelines) quickens to quell our physical contact. It remains one of the extraordinarily strange and paradoxical lures of textile works in contemporary art and craft. To touch is to emote (and vice versa). Emotion is social. So too is fabric.

Endnotes

ii Ibid, 9.
iii Personal e-mail communication with the author (29 July, 2016).