

Artefact submission for Slow Technology workshop – Sara Heitlinger



The Talking Quilt is an everyday, domestic object that has been augmented with digital technology to encourage enjoyable and reflective engagement. It was produced as an intergenerational, eco-literacy art project that was part of a wider AHRC-funded Connected Communities research which looked at the connections between community and food growing.

The quilt was produced by staff, volunteers and visitors at Spitalfields City Farm in East London, and is intended to present a snapshot of the farm at this point in time. This took the form of a traditional English paper quilt consisting of over a thousand hexagonal fabric patches, many of which have been hand-printed and painted by participants, and with specific significance to their maker's lives. Oral history interviews were conducted with participants to record their thoughts and memories about food, food growing and community. RFID technology is embedded in the quilt in the form of hotspot buttons and an RFID-enabled patchwork oven-glove. Viewers can wear the glove to scan the quilt and trigger playback of the interviews.

Rather than aiming for a solely playful interaction, the quilt was designed in such a way that the socially meaningful themes integral to the quilt – i.e. food, food growing and community – could be communicated through the interaction. The format of a quilt was chosen for its role as a domestic object, its ordinariness, and its capacity for collective-making. New technology in the form of interactive buttons to trigger the interviews to play was used in an attempt to bring the quilt to life, to make it contemporary, and to augment the experience of interacting with it without changing its qualities as a visual, tactile, and hand-made object.

Interviews with audiences interacting with the quilt made reference to its reflective qualities, and to its durational aspects.

“Once I'd worked out how it works, it was nice, it slowed you down, it paid to interact with it in a slow gentle way. Normally I'd be, what's all this then, jumping around a bit.... But you can really pick up the meaning, the person talking about sharing, other people coming around to cook in their house, the woman whose mother was a dinner lady, the person remembering being in school....They stick in your mind. It is

playful to look at. But it's much nicer to not be playful in using it, to work through the stories, hear them and take time with them."

"Because the stories that are coming through are about inner warmth and inner peace, so you relate to the quilt in a completely different way once you've listened to it and you've used the glove to connect to it. So when you first see it you think visual and collective, when you listen to the stories you then relate to it much more individually, and much more to do with your body and your memory, rather than visually. It's about the before and after that's so intriguing. You look at it, and then you listen to it and it's a completely different experience."

"Somebody's idea about the seeds, not being able to see what seeds are doing, and not being able to see what's happening at the farm, I think that's visually really brilliantly reflected by the visual look of the quilt."

The quilt is a Slow Technology artefact because it allows for these reflective qualities in audiences, and because it was produced in a calm and durational way with different communities at the farm. The farm itself supports this – it is a respite from the hectic City close by, a place open to the public where people can get away from it all, and engage in the patient activity of growing. Both the farm, and the quilt do not consume time; rather they provide time for new reflective activities.

