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Crafting Experience in the Work of Daniel Halter

Conceptions of experience: historical truth, expressed in the present, become one of the central themes of the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin's philosophical project (Benjamin and Osborne 1994: xi–xiii). Benjamin's work considers how the past continually remakes itself in the political and social specificities of the present.¹ This concept is perhaps most clearly expressed in Benjamin's famed essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', which reflects in part on the potential differing forms of media offer for new forms of experience. Film is particularly capable, in Benjamin's reading, to delve deeply into historical material; in 'The Work of Art' essay he uses the metaphor of a surgeon penetrating the patient to more fully experience truth than a magician is able to (Benjamin 2002a: 115–16). While it seems odd to begin an analysis of craft and art with the technological advances of cinema, the haptic and tactile modes of working that Benjamin advances in 'The Work of Art' merge with the work of the craftsman that equally engages Benjamin within his body of work. By considering the haptic potential for experience each domain offers up, craftwork quickly becomes the dialectical pair to the technological.

The Marxist literary critic Esther Leslie reads Benjamin's work, in particular his reflections on Nikolai Leskov in the essay 'The Storyteller', as understanding craft through its hapticity; craft's relationship to storytelling, linked by the haptic, conveys historical knowledge through the practical knowledge of craftwork and the journeys of the storyteller (Leslie 1997: 21). The storyteller as Benjamin understands the figure was both a traveller, the journeyman who moved around the world, and a craftsman. As the journeyman returns home to begin working as a craftsman, these craftsmen equally find their home as storytellers; Benjamin argues that the peasants and sailors who are master storytellers find their university within the 'artisan class' (Benjamin 2002a: 144). Through this marriage of crafting and storytelling, Leslie notes that Benjamin uses two key examples to link the two practices: the potter's labour as aligned with the storyteller's narrative, and the relationship between text and weaving (Leslie 1997: 22).

The latter metaphor emerges in Benjamin's reading of Proust, where Benjamin reminds his reader that the Latin term for text, *textum*, refers to something woven (Leslie 1997: 22). Rather than making a pronouncement on the ontology of craft production vis-à-vis art or industrialised production, I wish to stay within Leslie's reading of Benjamin and the metaphors Benjamin further evokes in his explorations of history, memory, and experience in the social transitions of 19th-century Paris that anchor *The Arcades Project* (a work whose themes strongly relate to Benjamin's larger body of work from the mid 1920s onwards). *The Arcades Project* is itself a textile of sorts: a bricolage of texts that construct a dialectical image of the birth of modernity. Through this network, craft in my reading becomes a critical force, a historical voice that Leslie describes thusly:

Crafted objects, specifically the pot, provide a model of authentic experience, the experience of a person imprinted onto the objects that he or she brings into being, and tapestry offers a model of authentic memory, the weave of past and present experience and utopian possibility ... Craft as a mode of activity translates into craft as a power, an obscure power, nestling in the imaginatively conceived object. (Leslie 1997: 29)

Taking Leslie's reading of craft as a text, or a woven web of historical narrative in the age of digital experience begins to merge with an equally important question in Benjamin's work: recapturing potential in the outmoded, those objects discarded or overlooked because of their purported valuelessness (such as old technologies in the age of the digital). Outmoded forms of visual production have a strong relationship to haptic modes of making. For example, Benjamin was interested in the work of the Dadaists who incorporated tickets, spools of cotton, and cigarette butts into their work, each of these objects acting as a trace or fingerprint of everyday experience; through this network, outmoded forms of working become linked with the haptic functions that craft represents (Benjamin 2005: 774; Leslie 1997: 26). Reading craft through Benjamin's work constructs it

not only as a historical voice but also a critical one in terms of its capability to produce new forms of social value in an era of capitalism.

Recapturing the discarded ephemera and fragments of lived experience, particularly through the work of craft, is at the core of the Zimbabwean-born artist Daniel Halter's work, which interrogates the dichotomy between the mass-produced and the bespoke object, thusly reconceptualising value in traditional forms of African craft most commonly seen and consumed as curios. To use the curio as a commodified yet handmade work enables Halter to historicise the relationship between Africa and the West through craft, constructing a mode of history that represents how historical experience is shaped through the consumption of these goods.

Halter's work is explicitly framed through craft and crafting: he frequently uses the curio represented in woven mats, traditional soapstone sculptures, tartan-printed woven plastic bags, and beadwork to engage with a series of political questions surrounding southern Africa. Most explicitly, his work explores the politics of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's remaking of the nation. Specifically, Halter refers to the hyperinflation of the Zimbabwean dollar and the repression of freedom under the Mugabe government. Halter's use of craft becomes a mode of historical experience in the present following Benjamin's treatment of craftwork and historical narrative.

Through traditional modes of African craftwork, Halter explicitly reframes the movement of globalised flows through its consideration of the outmoded as a form of value. Furthermore, this becomes a rich intertextual investigation working with traditional African crafts including weaving and Shona (the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe) sculpture. Using these forms of crafting, Halter's work becomes a critical language to re-examine the emplacement of peoples and cultures transnationally. Craft in its specificities, often formed in the colonial encounter (as is the case with Kente cloth), constructs a model of experience that offers a nuanced consideration of the political materialities of Africa. This thinking runs counter to the perpetual stereotypes of the continent as a unitary whole and its existence as other to modernised western nations. As immigration alongside of the politics of Zimbabwe is a significant theme in Halter's work, this use of craft documents the flows of people within the continent itself. Craft becomes a language within Halter's oeuvre

to critically examine the modes of production and consumption that tie Zimbabwe to western perceptions of Africa.

Halter's *Yes Boss II* (2007) provides an image of craft turned towards a language of critique by representing the social tensions of Zimbabwe's political geography. *Yes Boss II* is a hand-woven work crafted by interlacing a map depicting a farming region of Zimbabwe with shredded \$1,000 Zimbabwean banknotes and gold thread, leaving the phrase 'Yes Boss' visible in the centre of the work. The woven image evokes a number of traditional West African ceremonial wraps that emerged when the British introduced silk to Africa. To give one example, its appearance resembles Kente cloth. This hybrid form of craft, rooted in colonial exchanges, is used in *Yes Boss II* to refer to two difficult aspects of Zimbabwe's post-colonial realities: inflation, and President Robert Mugabe's land redistribution policies.

The redistribution of white-owned farmland evoked in *Yes Boss II*'s map of former farming plots preserves traces of loss that were erased in the image of political revolution and anti-colonial rhetoric. While initially purchased for fair prices, in 2000 Mugabe supporters forcibly seized approximately 14 million hectares of land, resulting in the beating and murder of white farm owners. Despite redistributing in the name of giving land to blacks, the captured land has largely gone to Mugabe supporters. Because of the small size of the parcels, nepotistic redistribution policies, and a lack of expertise of those who now own the land, agricultural production has declined dramatically and led to malnourishment in Zimbabwe (Smith 2010).

The second, and related, issue is the Zimbabwean dollar's rapid inflation as the government printed the necessary currency to meet its needs, leading to estimated inflation of close to two trillion per cent a year and bread prices of nearly \$10,000 for a single loaf (Berger 2008).² In this endlessly expandable domain of inflation and the dispossession of production, *Yes Boss II* is a specific, crafted object made from something that is itself endlessly disposable. *Yes Boss II* as a work of art – and art and craft are frequently considered in frameworks of economic value – is made of currency that is, in essence, without value. This pairing of disposability and the handmade gives the work an ironic quality, holding the two in a dialectical tension. Working through the network of associations the devalued currency represents also recalls the loss of value in agricultural output in Zimbabwe, as the appropriation

of land led to declines in production. The drop in crop output is one factor that influenced the massive number of Zimbabweans and residents of a whole host of other African nations to relocate to South Africa, where Halter currently lives and works.

As a handmade object, referential to traditional forms of African craft, *Yes Boss II* imagines a politics of 'Africanness'. Halter's woven images do not just simply recall the loss of white farms, its 'yes boss' is suggestive of a farm labourer responding to the owner, documenting a trace of colonial power paradigms within the map's image that confronts the failures of Mugabe's land redistribution. It does not advocate a return to white control that is rendered in the criticisms invoked by the title but, rather, reveals the ideology of newness with which Mugabe has tried to remake Zimbabwe that has been catastrophic for both white and black Zimbabweans. It is impossible to return to a pre-colonial existence, and Mugabe's appeals to do so are made for political gain, resulting in further losses of vital goods. *Yes Boss II*'s form highlights this dialectical problem: its weft of reproducible currency and warp of old farming maps suggest a crisis emerging from this situation of colonial power and the ideologies of black empowerment expressed in the land redistribution policies. *Yes Boss II* speaks to two modes of exploitation addressing the colonial relationship without giving in to simple ideologies of the new expressed in Mugabe's politics. In this way Halter's work looks to the wider network of Zimbabwe's history as it is expressed in the present, making the textile a form of Benjaminian experience.

Halter repeatedly uses the textile as a main focal point of his work, as the theme of weaving that brings him in contact with Benjamin's storyteller is worked on in a variety of ways. This further investigation uses fabric by appropriating tartan-printed woven plastic bags that immigrants coming into South Africa use to carry their belongings. The bag has appeared in Halter's oeuvre as a garment, sculptural installations that make reference to the video game 'Space Invaders', and their display in a tattered and broken condition. Halter has traded new bags imprinted with a 'Space Invaders' logo for old ones from immigrants at markets in Cape Town and Pretoria, South Africa (Halter 2013). This body of work uses the textile in its literal and metaphorically implied historical abilities that, like Leslie's reading of Benjamin, speak about the condition of immigrants in South Africa today. This body of work becomes a fabric that functions in the literary critic Michael Rothberg's work as a mode of multidirectional memory. Rothberg

defines multidirectional memory as a force that is 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg, 2009: 3). If we consider the woven network of different modes of political expression that the textile engenders in Benjamin's treatment of Proust and also present within Halter's work, this kind of narration constructs a terrain of cross-referencing that treats these bags as textile and multidirectional memory – further treating the craft object as a device capable of writing history across temporal and geographical divides.

Kotoku tew a, na mmati adwo (2012) is one of the several tattered bags Halter uses in the series. Hung simply on the wall in its worn state, Halter has printed a phrase – 'when the bag tears the shoulders get a rest' – which references a work bearing the same title, *When the Bag Tears the Shoulders Get a Rest* (2010), that shows a torn bag wrecked under the weight of vast bundles of devalued Zimbabwean currency held within it. The bag works between the loss of value in the weight of the devalued currency and the mode of diaspora through the fabric of the bags that are used to transport the immigrant's belongings. Halter reveals that, in Ghana, the bags are referred to as 'Efiewura Sua Me'. Literally meaning 'help me carry my bag', these textiles make reference to the rapid expulsions of migrants in Ghana and Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1980s (Halter 2013).

The presence of this textile within Halter's work treats the fabric as a visible trace of the dislocations of migrants throughout the continent. The movement of the work between craft as a form of handmade value and the fabric as a form of detritus merge as a dialectical pairing that narrates visions of history in the present. Halter's work through the collection of this detritus becomes analogous to the rag picker, who carefully combs through the refuse of everyday life to locate treasures (Benjamin 2006: 108). This practice becomes aligned to the work of the artist within Benjamin's analysis – in particular, Benjamin references Baudelaire's poetry, thus making the rag picker and artist both witness to and storyteller of historical transformation and everyday experience (Benjamin 2006: 108–9).

These bags speak to memory and history through fabric, documenting the movement of peoples in Africa, constructing a specific language in Halter's treatment. A further work in this series is entitled *Ghana Must Go Quilt I* (2011), the mocking title West African immigrants give these bags (Halter 2013).

Ghana Must Go Quilt I uses the same tartan textiles, but constructs patchwork quilt patterns with these bags. The tumbling block pattern Halter incorporates in Ghana Must Go Quilt I constructs a specific language, making reference to secret codes placed in quilt patterns to help slaves in the southern US, who were escaping slavery by fleeing to the north. The tumbling block pattern, Halter notes, communicated that 'it was time for slaves escaping along the railways to pack up and go, that a conductor was in the area' (Halter 2013). This form of navigation signalling the moment of exodus, and moving to a new life, literally encodes a language through the labour performed by craft.

However, if we consider how Halter uses this language, transporting the discourse of slaves moving through the Underground Railroad to the political movement of a different set of migrants from West Africa to South Africa, it renders the quilt a text that narrates the political situations of migrancy, diaspora and slavery simultaneously. Ghana Must Go Quilt I becomes a mode of Rothberg's multidirectional memory; it speaks to different moments of diaspora in Africa within one tightly woven text. Halter makes explicit references in this series of works, *The Truth Lies Here*, to 'amakwerekwere', a pejorative slang term in South Africa for migrants from other parts of the continent, and the phrase 'go home or die here', a threat lodged against these immigrants in South Africa's 2008 anti-immigrant riots.³ The craft thus speaks to the urgency of the present political situations, but does so in the form of discarded, valueless (in terms of the currency) but also outmoded objects. Halter's interrogations of political memory in southern Africa, woven together, take on a second series of multidirectional considerations, between the geographic models of nation-state and continent and, simultaneously, reframing the networks through which the curio as craft circulates, but considers further how these modes of transmission frame narratives of political formation in the other geography in which it resonates.

This theme, between Europe and Zimbabwe, also touched on in *The Truth Lies Here*, is considered through the relations between British rave culture and the popularity of Zimbabwean pop-singer Rozalla's rave hit 'Everybody's Free (To Feel Good)', which takes on a tragic meaning when it returns to Zimbabwe. In a residency at Glenfiddich distillery in Scotland, Halter produced *Furry Boots ye Fae?* (2010), a work featuring the artist clad in a Tartan kilt fashioned from woven bags and wearing a pair of furry boots popular in new-rave culture. Thus the

two symbols of raving and exile speak to a language of expressing with one's feet, either in the form of dancing or in the process of emigrating from one's homeland. This interest in the relations between Europe and Zimbabwe explored through Rozalla's visibility also employ craft in the form of a curio, which in the age of the digital and mass-produced leads us back to the outmoded.

Halter's production of outmoded forms of visual culture turns towards the antiquated in its handmade form. His work belongs to a recent past (in opposition to the ancient, which is often modelled as eternal). Benjamin locates the outmoded in his short essay 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', a theme Benjamin would expand upon in *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin 2002a: 33). Benjamin's essay analyses Baron Von Haussmann's famed rebuilding process of Paris, where Haussmann undertook a project of widening the avenues, installing sewers, and breaking up old neighbourhoods (especially those of the communards). The widening of avenues gave rise to a new form of specular culture intimately tied to the rise of capitalism and most visible in the construction of the arcades that fascinated Benjamin.

However, Haussmann's political tactics not only opened the spatial terrain of Paris to a new radically consumable form of capital (itself tied to the mass-produced), but it also made going to the barricades impossible, thus blocking forms of political dissent within the city's terrain (Benjamin 2002a: 42). Haussmann's refashioning of social space for conservative political ends highlights a similar refashioning in Mugabe's ideology of land redistribution in Zimbabwe, a theme Halter represents in his woven works. In reality, land redistribution becomes an ideological screen for nepotistic control and a violent repression of dissent. The government in each instance opens social spaces while using that openness to facilitate a repression of resistance to its sovereign power. Benjamin's reading of Haussmannisation understands art as being put into the service of technology, removing traces of the everyday imprinted in Parisian social space; instead, Benjamin tells us, the citizen becomes estranged from the city, no longer feeling at home and becoming increasingly aware of the city's new inhumanity (Benjamin 2002a: 41–2). The imprints, preserved in maps like *Yes Boss II*, that recount a similar experience for Zimbabwean citizens under Mugabe are further preserved in this dialectic between Europe and Zimbabwe that was also explored through the form of the curio.

This relationship between the West and Africa is explored in Halter's video *Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of the Rave)* (2005). The video features Rozalla's song and images of British youths dancing at raves juxtaposed with pictures of riots and protests in Zimbabwe that are met with force by the police: precisely the same expression of dissent neutralised by similar tactics that Haussmannisation enabled in the streets of Paris. Both of these scenes are portrayed as dances, with people moving to the beat of the song that references the countercultural event of the rave but also invokes dancing through the *toyi-toyi*, a form of dance common in protests in both Zimbabwe and South Africa. Together these events raise the question of who is free to 'feel good'. Largely fuelled by ecstasy and other drugs, rave culture has been framed as a marginal and transgressive space in Britain, whereas the revolution for access to democratic representation, food, and land is met with violence. Few are free to 'feel good' in Zimbabwe as the access to safety and sustainability is controlled by Mugabe's regime.

A related project, evoking the legacies of rave culture, frames a clearer relationship to craft. Halter's *Stone Tablets/Bitter Pills* (2005) features soapstone sculptures (a Shona art form in Zimbabwe) upon which images such as a star, a skull and crossbones, the eagle (a national symbol of Zimbabwe), or the Mercedes-Benz logo commonly found on ecstasy tablets are carved. Unlike the pills themselves, these sculptures are about the size of a landmine (Williamson 2010). The allusion to consumptiveness (that is, as sculptures of things one ingests) is evocative of tourists on safari purchasing these curios. Markets found throughout Africa sell curios, such as soapstone sculptures, in endless numbers to tourists willing to buy them. These items lose some of their cultural impact upon their return to the West: it is debatable if those who purchase a mask, Basotho blanket, or Shona sculpture engage with their intended meaning. Instead, they most likely return to the western mantle as symbols of singular 'Africanness' despite both weaving and soapstone carving having developed from colonial encounters. Thus the act of consumption freezes history within these objects.

Likewise, Rozalla becomes a singular image of Zimbabwe in a world of consumptive 90s drug culture. This discord within Halter's imagery reveals the paradoxes that arise as kids in Britain dance in fields and other venues which have largely been co-opted by business ventures, while at the same time dispossession and violence rages in its former

colony's move to redistribute land. To 'take' culturally becomes sinister – the pill is no longer the guarantor of a 'good night' but a landmine: it holds the potential to destroy or maim. The ecstasy tablet as an image of excess and consumption turns the discussion back towards the rates of inflation and saturation. (In the UK ecstasy tablets for most of the past decade were incredibly cheap and pills could be bought for a little over 1£; see Owen 2006.) This market saturation, like the inflation of currency in Zimbabwe, has brought prices down, bringing one back to the conflict hailed by Halter's project: in the UK capitalism and democracy make it 'free' to feel good. The opposite is true for those in Zimbabwe, where the endless reproduction of money has priced Zimbabweans out of basic goods and services. The bitter pill left for Africans to consume is surely lacking any sustenance.

Halter's appropriation of traditional craft forms makes use of the outmoded but also calls attention to the flavour-of-the-month reproducibility of pop stars such as Rozalla and the culture of cheap drug consumption that accompanies it. This reproducibility and consumption within rave culture highlights the disposability of capitalism's desire to continually make things new, severing it from any use value or everyday function (Benjamin 2002: 41). Handmade crafts, as Leslie's reading reminds us, brings with them a history, thus providing a new form of experience through the work of craft in an era of late capital. The curio itself becomes a model that bridges this domain. Sold in massive quantities at curio markets and yet handmade, they become symbols of a synthetic consumption of Africanness. This consumption, much like the consumption of ecstasy as infinitely reproduced form, brings to bear endless disposability in capitalist economies.

Western nations also endured mass inflation in Europe and the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Halter enters into this question of reification, experienced through a loss of value, asking: when everything is endlessly expandable, how do people find worth in the work they produce? In Zimbabwe, the spiralling number of zeros attached to the dollar took on a life of its own, a function seen in the endlessly expanding set of zeros that are also used in Dadaist filmmaker Hans Richter's 1927 film *Inflation*. The swelling volume of zeros, a visual manifestation of inflation that results in a loss of value, expressed in both artists' work, examines the estrangement of the labourer from the value of their work as it yields less ability to provide sustenance, security, or stability. Mass production and the fluctuation of value change the imprints

of social relations upon these commodities when production becomes defined by money.

Halter appropriates the discarded or devalued, remaking it as a form of cultural critique (Leslie 1997: 29). This appropriation brings Halter's work into conversation with another Dadaist figure, in the appropriation of the everyday seen in the collages of discarded train tickets and other detritus explored in Kurt Schwitters' Merz works. Like Halter, Schwitters crafts his collages making explicit reference to value; the term 'merz' refers to the German for commerce. Furthermore, Halter and Schwitters turn to a form of witness and historical narrative again figured through Benjamin's image of the rag picker whose labour rendered him witness to the historical transformations of Paris. In this way the work of crafting returns to the hapticity intimately tied to Benjamin's search for modes of historical experience. Halter's haptic labour of crafting speaks to the history of dispossession and loss in Zimbabwe and the politics of immigration that impact so many people's reality in Africa.

Through Halter's appropriation, the Zimbabwean dollar is no longer tied to the swirling zeros that undercut its ability to provide basic goods for survival, nor does the Ecstasy tablet remain an endlessly consumed 'good night'. Instead, Halter's specificity in loss of farming land preserves traces of the human narratives of farms and farm labour – the historical specificities of immigration that in their multidirectionality speak to each other, and the loss of these histories through the denial of human rights amid the increasingly disposable approaches the West takes to Africa. The use of the map as a trace of the former agricultural infrastructures in *Yes Boss II* preserves the history present in the commodity while documenting the loss of these farmers' livelihoods. Production, through this conscious turn towards craft, gives the previously disposable loss in maps, curio craft, and even inflated money a sense of agency and value in narrating Zimbabwe's violence and dispossession.

As curios, Halter's sculptures, textiles, and woven maps change the notion of these relationships. Not only is it the intent of specificity and craft to counter the mass circulation of these items as curios and to revalue those peoples and histories that have been devalued, but to change how we think about these items. Halter's work makes traditional craft part of a political network, thus imbuing their production with a sense of agency.

Halter's repurposing of handmade craft objects preserves traces of past histories of loss and dispossession in Zimbabwe under Mugabe, and the lived realities of the dispersal of people from these contexts. To conclude, Halter's *Mealie Pip* (2008), an engraved maize kernel (a major staple of southern African diets) bearing the phrase 'When the belly is full, the brain starts to think', strikes at the crux of his work. The work provides the image of sustenance (and material production through its reference to farming) now figured as a kernel of thought as well. Thus *Mealie Pip* highlights the lack of sustenance inherent in Zimbabweans' life, but like his larger body of work insists that materiality, figured in my reading through the haptic, allows an intellectual and political consciousness to emerge from the material encounters the work of art offers up.

Notes

1. Benjamin famously uses a metaphor of blasting to refer to the potential to shake off the weight of inherited tradition in the present (Benjamin 2002b: 475).
2. Halter further notes in a related work, *One Dollar*, that in 2009 it took 300 trillion Zimbabwean dollars to exchange for one US dollar on the black market. The work is a similar form of weaving using 300 trillion dollars worth of 50 billion Zimbabwean dollar bank notes.
3. See Hassim, Kupe and Worby (2008) and Nyamnjoh (2006: 31) for detailed accounts of the 2008 riots and a detailed description of the term 'amakwerekwere'.

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