Balancing act: the inextricably bound book works of Salt + Shaw

Linda Newington

Amstel Dam is the first from a trilogy of book works by Salt + Shaw, each based on a city visited and explored – Amsterdam, New York and York. The books are similar shapes and sizes with gold, silver and copper leaf featuring on the covers and inside pages acting as specific references. Opening Amstel Dam in the Winchester School of Art library I noticed the gold leaf flaking and falling, it had sometimes been caught in the binding, a piece stuck to my hand, it was rather disconcerting for a librarian. I could also feel the cold snowballs made from newly fallen snow recovered from the tracks of trains and used as drawing tools for pages of colour and marks. The book has a life of its own, may not belong to a sole individual and is no longer shaped by the maker but out in the world, passing from person to person, open to individual interpretation and human impact.

Beginnings

Salt + Shaw are the artists Paul Salt and Susan Shaw, who produce work collaboratively and as individuals in their own names. Based in Sheffield, they both agreed during a conversation with me over their kitchen table, that Paul Salt was found by Sue Shaw in 1978 when they met at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology. The collaborative approach to making art did not start at that point, but developed gradually through working together on specific projects at a later date. Paul Salt told me that at the age of eighteen in the 1970s he had intended to become a flash graphic designer, until he won an art prize and reviewed the direction of his practice, leading him eventually to the Painting and Printmaking BA at Sheffield City Polytechnic. Susan Shaw meanwhile had been dealing with the competing demands of art, illustration and literature. As a child she had started making books that combined drawing and writing, she was also a committed weekly library user from a young age. This later generated some pressure to pursue English Literature or Illustration at degree level, but she resisted, deciding upon Fine Art. The practice of writing continued while she was at art college and developed through a Workers’ Educational Association writing group and in her dissertation entitled The significance of appearance. Museum conservation work in the 1980s included cataloguing artifacts, leading her to make a book using the objects and their descriptions as a means to combine image and text.

Sand

An MA in Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University in the 1990s became a two-year period of transition for Salt that gradually reshaped his practice from painting about place to the physical materials of place. An interest in land art provided the metaphorical bridge from the surface of painting to the sculptural potential of sand. Working outside, sometimes on beaches drawing and sculpting, was an experience he used for his first year show to create an installation in the studio from sand collected from the coast. The work took the form of an installation shaped as a map of Britain in sand from Scotland to England. It necessitated a walk through an environment which, whilst located in the studio space, referenced the beach; providing visitors with an unusual indoors outdoors experience of walking a path through the imported sand. Perhaps reluctantly the viewer had little choice, but for Salt that was an important aspect of the work, the participation of that viewer and their consequent impact on the work an integral component.

The first intentional book work made by Salt, Circle a small stone, 1996–7, comprises a small wooden covered book and a set of catalogue cards with notes made out on location, both made to fit into a small box.

River thinking

The River Don Project represents the earliest example of a mutually supportive approach to making work, although Salt led this particular project from 1998 to 2000, producing a total of five books, twenty four sets of photographs and a chest of water samples that formed a travelling exhibition to Doncaster, Hull and Rotherham. The pair set out to follow the River Don, walking and collecting samples along the way. Twenty three journeys were made from source to estuary, twenty three places where streams or rivers entered the River Don. This became a way of thinking and working together where exploring and testing ideas outside eventually leads to the making of physical objects, which have been negotiated into existence by the two of them. The River Don thus initiated both their commitment to collaboration and the further making of book works as conceptual artefacts combining many elements.

Looking for Mr Maxwell

Whilst working in arts development and community projects, Shaw completed an MA in Writing at Sheffield Hallam University in 2006. It provided an opportunity to examine and redress the balance between her art practice and the practice of writing.
She wrote a full-length book of short stories entitled *Looking for Mr Maxwell*, through which the importance of working away from home and using place as a resource took shape; changing the direction of her uniquely combined practice. The journey itself, whether local to café or further afield to wilderness, gives her the essential time and space to think, to look, to consider, to find, to collect, to travel and finally walk towards herself. The domestic features sometimes as that traditional and comforting place called home, it may also be the location not only for coming together but also potentially for tension and separateness; whether as individual artist or joint collaborator.

*The kitchen table*

The kitchen table is an important working space for Salt + Shaw, providing not only the traditional centre for cooking and eating but also the meeting space for serious conversation and discussion, sometimes drawing, note making and construction too. It is a space that sees the domestic merge with their working practice as artists. Its most obvious influence is seen in the book entitled *Domestic*, from 2006, when they intentionally set out to make a book about their kitchen. The cover is a pretend wood-engraved kitchen paper that could be considered tacky and inappropriate for a dust jacket, signifying to some, the classic, basic working kitchen of a bygone era. Paintbrushes in the kitchen sink, an avocado on the window ledge, the materials and images imply a tension, or is it a happy amalgam of their particular way of life? In their own words "Domestic dis (harmony) or open conflict? An ongoing drama in which boundaries are challenged and territory fought over." Together we looked at all the book works on the kitchen table, an ideal space and perfect surface for discussion, reading and viewing fifty book works.

A kitchen is frequently described as the heart of the home, the informal and practical essence of a kitchen is also a working space for other artists. Richard Long, for example, uses the kitchen table as a location for his practice, preferring it to the formality and historically laden traditional "artist's studio".

The Salt + Shaw kitchen is home too for some of the many ornaments and images of animals found all over the house, although there are no pets. Animals sometimes take centre stage in poems or short stories with images such as Crow, a solo work by Shaw. She explores the bizarre and inescapable human relationship with animals and is as interested in the crows that noisily fly over the house each day at regular times as those sighted on trips out to the wilderness or, more unexpectedly, in art exhibitions and museum collections when trapped and used for unnatural reasons and purposes. Her text is a harsh reminder of the easy cruelty that frequently characterises our relationship with animals.

In Crow we discover that they are not the mythical, cuddly, furry, soft friends symbolising tamed pets and toys; this is our mis-reading.

*Edgelands: taking the bus, days out, holidays and the wilderness*

The domestic kitchen table is not the only work space for Salt + Shaw. Out beyond home and garden, whether on the edgeland of an unknown city reached by a mystery bus journey to the end of a route, or on foot in a northern wilderness landscape, even getting lost, all provide environments for exploration and sources for their book works. The *unofficial countryside* by Richard Mabey, first published in 1972 and available again in 2010 as a "country classic" nearly forty years later, expertly and lyrically includes these edgelands of the urban environment to be found at the end of a bus route. Mabey brought such places to our attention as potential locations to experience nature as a part of the urban environment, a tradition that Salt + Shaw are exploring too, although from a different angle. Their practice is frequently linked to location, to finding objects, discovering stories and creating narratives in response to a particular place, whether man made or natural. Ideas become concepts through negotiation, which inform the construction of their book works, making inextricable the links between all the elements only made possible by their partnership.

Cafés are the second domestic style spaces that, although public and not private, provide recognisable features from the kitchen; the café table standing in as the negotiating arena for discussion, note taking and further thinking.
Using text and image gathered in Scotland from many visits to Dumfries and Galloway, 9 things to do on holiday is an example where the low-tech production may remind us of our own holiday projects and the sense of adapting to a new place with holiday clothes at the ready for the right weather conditions. Although on vacation, there may be a tension between anticipation and reality, through the possible fun experience of temporarily living in a substitute home alongside a feeling of dislocation from that home, the personal recollection at a later date attaining mythical qualities.

The historic cotton mill at Cromford in Derbyshire is the source for Mill. 2006. A detailed physical exploration of the building gradually shaped the book work. Salt + Shaw take an unusual approach, resulting not in a literal interpretation or sequential narrative. Instead, they discovered distinctive markings around the building, utilising them as impressions on plaster cast pages bound with calico that has pockets for the separate little books providing the guidebook text written by Shaw.

The dangers and pleasures of the seaside in winter
There is a sense of spikiness and danger to Ocean reveries from 2007. The metal construction attached to the cover means the viewer needs to open it very carefully. When the book is finally open and standing upright it becomes a landscape casting fine shadows reminiscent of the sea. The dangers of sea swimming, an activity Salt likes to pursue with a feeling of both fear and pleasure, creates a further tension between the soft, sandy beach and the potential dangers of the sea, and between the collaborators themselves. The book’s location is the Solent one New Year and is captured in a poem and short film on DVD so we can listen, see and bring our own sense of the sea to the work.

Back to the beginning: new work in progress
The duo first showed their book works as Salt + Shaw at the Artists’ Book Fair held at the Dean Clough Gallery in Halifax in 2004, where Salt had also shown as an individual in 2003. I first came across their work at the Small Publishers Fair, London, in 2004 when our talent-spotting for new acquisitions. They now have over fifty titles in their retrospective catalogue, with books in national collections at the British Library, the National Art Library and Tate Library. At Winchester School of Art Library we hold nineteen titles that enrich the collection with their variant forms, unusual constructions and the inextricable qualities of form, image, material and text. All are carefully balanced to perfection.

New work is in progress; some was recently shown at BARE, the Bristol Artist’s Book Event held in April 2011 at Arnolfini, Bristol, including No birds do sing in which Salt has returned to drawing. Weight was in progress when I visited Salt + Shaw at home. It is a chunky, very physical book work with padded felt covers that refer to the libraries of stately country houses, telling the story of the old English copper penny that serves as the Weight in a poem by Shaw. The duo agree that more time is going to be spent on making both new collaborative and solo works.
at home and out on location, so I look forward to seeing the Scottish Trilogy, having myself started walking for drawing and thinking in the great outdoors of Shetland over the past few years. Book number 20 beckons but which will it be?

**Bibliography**

Richard Long, *walking and marking*
National Galleries of Scotland, 2007

Jennifer Blessing, *True North*
Deutsche Guggenheim, 2007

Richard Mabey, *The unofficial countryside*
Little Toller Books, 2010

Linda Newington, *Print Matters*
University of Southampton, 2011

**Linda Newington**
University of Southampton Library

Winchester School of Art Library is one of the five libraries that together comprise the University of Southampton Library. The Artists’ Books Collection began in the 1960s and now numbers about 1,500 items. The focus is on books made either by hand or in limited editions that take many shapes and forms in different materials.

Rather than establishing a rigid collection policy, the emphasis has been on collecting relatively broadly to show the wide range of practice in this field. Exploring ways to engage and encourage students and researchers across disciplines to use the collection as a springboard for developing ideas and their own making is an essential component of this approach. Over the years, works have been acquired from both established names and new talent from book fairs, exhibitions, specialist bookshops and through a network of contacts.

An exhibition earlier in the year curated under the umbrella title *Print Matters* took place in the Special Collections Gallery at the University Library showing a small selection of the collection with the additional loan of key works by Ed Ruscha from the Tate Library. The exhibition *A visual journey through the Artists’ Books* was developed around four themes: beginnings, narratives, interventions and constructions. As the curator I aimed to show the diversity of approach and the relationship of content, form and physical material through the themes. Several works by Salt + Shaw were included in the groupings around narratives and constructions.

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