



**The "State of Flux!"**

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## Introduction

The 'State of Flux' was a contemporary jewellery design research project developed as part of the MA Design, Negotiated Project module, entitled 'Designing out Vulnerability'. The term 'state of flux' is often used by society to describe a period of change for an individual which will lead to a new direction. Flux is also a technical jewellery term and is a product used to enable a join to come together.

An earlier research project (Arnott 2015) investigated the relationship between wearing jewellery and the emotional support it gave people recovering from addictions. Early indications (appendix 1) of that pilot suggested that wearing jewellery did provide some level of emotional support. With this new knowledge the State of Flux project was developed in partnership with COMAS/ Woman Zone<sup>1</sup> to investigate if the process of making would contribute to the recovery of women from addictions.

## Inspiring Hope: The Language of Recovery

Since 1999 responsibility for health has been a devolved power from the UK Government to the Scottish Parliament. This had led to the development of distinctive policy (Bradstreet & McBrierty 2012) and enabled practice *"to follow new directions in relation to mental health"* (Smith-Merry et al. 2010:11). As suggested by Bradstreet and McBrierty (2012) this allowed policy makers, the Third Sector and activists to collectively reconsider their approaches to recovery and Mental Health services in Scotland. In 2014 The Scottish Recovery Network commissioned the report "Informing Recovering Approaches" (Stevenson 2014). Within this report Stevenson suggests that recovery should have a common language

*"Having a language around recovery is very important. There's a lot of words used that are useful for people experiencing mental health difficulties. Language around hope and empowerment and feeling connected. Finding*

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<sup>1</sup> COMAS is a mental health project based in Edinburgh [www.comas.org.uk/our-approach.php](http://www.comas.org.uk/our-approach.php)

*meaning and not being identified by a mental illness”*  
(Stevenson 2014:8)

On their website, the Mental Health Foundation UK describes recovery as;

*“Not about 'getting rid' of problems. It is about seeing beyond a person’s mental health problems, recognising and fostering their abilities, interests and dreams.”*

*(Mental Health Foundation 2015)*

It is within this policy context and shaped by these definitions that the State of Flux project was conceived. The project set out to build greater understanding of how the act of making could support recovery, enable the women to see beyond their mental ill health and strive to develop new skills. In the next section I explore the projects aims and objectives.

## **State of Flux**

The projects primary research question was ‘***How can the act of making contribute to the recovery of women from addictions?***’

The project aims where;

- To investigate the impact of the act of making in contributing to self-confidence and recovery.
- To develop skills in traditional metal jewellery.

The project used a variety of arts based research methods (Leavy 2009). The overall approach integrated craft research methodologies (Nimkulrat 2010) as well as data collection using both quantative and qualitative research methods (Thomas 2009). These included;

- Qualitative research approaches through questionnaires
- Quantative research methods through semi structured interviews which were filmed
- Photography to record the jewellery objects created
- Photography to record the process of making

To evaluate their experience I developed some cultural probes (Graves 1999) in the form of images of a diamond and a diamond ring (appendix 2). These enabled the women to reflect on where they were at the beginning of the session and if that had changed by the end. As Graves suggests that the use of Cultural Probes offers:

*“Glimpses into the rich texture of people’s lives. They allow us to build semi-factual narratives, from which design proposals emerge” (Graves 1999:9)*

These cultural probes enabled me to gather data based on reflection by the women on improvement in their mental health, self-confidence and esteem through the making process.



I also wanted their experience to inform the weekly sessions. Crabtree (2003) suggested the information should be *“treated as resources”*. Each week I reevaluated the women’s progress and through the making of their objects, I was able to ascertain how the project was contributing to the women’s recovery over time. In the next section I reflect on the women’s experience and how these new ‘resources’ shaped my own experience as a researcher.

## **I Feel Amazing!**

The research project was conducted over a ten week period for two hours a week (appendix 3). At the beginning of the project I explained to the women that the State of Flux project was not an art therapy project as described by the British Association of Art Therapists.

*“Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of communication..... It offers the opportunity for expression and communication and can be particularly helpful to people who find it hard to express their thoughts and feelings verbally”*

*(BAAT 2015)*

In contrast, my role within this research was as an artist and an educator. As described by Booth (2013)

*'The teaching Artist role (is to) seek to empower the encounters with the art works' (Booth 2010:13)*



I wanted to ensure that the women's experience of engaging with the materials and the workshop was empowering for them. Rather than providing the women with a note/sketch book which may have intimidated their skills of drawing or literacy I gave each one a box<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of the box was to enable the participants to gather objects or images of inspiration, to help them get ideas and to let me see what inspires them. However the box concept, despite being designed to break down barriers, in fact created barriers for some of the women (appendix 4). Placing items in a box when they have no home, or place to live was problematic and at that stage of their recovery was a challenge, one that was not identified by myself or the support worker.

This led to a reevaluation of the project methodology. Rather than focusing on a theme of 'Memory' over the ten week period the women were introduced to a variety of traditional jewellery making skills (appendix 5). Through these new skills the women were encouraged to create their own ring, earrings, bangle or necklace (appendix 6).

As part of the evaluation, the women at the beginning of the session, identified where they were at described in their own words. At the early stages they described feelings of anxiety, stress and often paranoia. For example:

*'I am anxious I don't know what to expect' (Participant 2015)*

*'I feel very panicked and anxious' (Participant 2015)*

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<sup>2</sup> As part of the process I too also kept a box gathering my own (Appendix 4). This also enabled me to reflect on the same process that I was introducing to the women. I also attended a series of making workshop developed by Maria Hanson which I used to reflect on my skills, see the note books.

For many of the women they had never made anything before. However as the weeks progressed the women talked about how the project was supporting their recovery. A sense of achievement, fulfilment, relaxation and enjoyment was identified as a result of participating in the project. Reflections from the women included:

*'I feel amazing! I finished my ring!' (Participant 2015)*

*'Fantastic! What an amazing sense of achievement,  
I am glowing with pride' (Participant 2015)*

The women all described how they became more focused, calmer and relaxed even with the pressure of making something new and for the first time. One of the participants stated:

*'Really enjoyed the class, felt creative even when  
making mistakes' (Participant 2015)*



As their confidence in making grew so did their approach to putting items in their boxes which as a result they found inspiring. It is becoming clear that the project was contributing to “designing” out the women’s vulnerability. All the women commented that the project has contributed to their recovery. It had broken their isolation, given them a sense of achievement and belonging whilst providing a therapeutic role within their recovery. So what did I learn from this project?

## **Lessons Learnt**

This report reflects my experience of the State of Flux project and I hope gives a flavor of what was achieved. This project has been successful and attracted positive feedback externally. Early conversations with the Mental Health Foundation (Scotland) who manage the SeeMe grants have suggested that the State of Flux project considers applying for funding (appendix 7). This would enable the project to develop further research, a model of practice, create opportunities to provide further training for women and develop a new creative arts service within COMAS/ Woman Zone.

This project has enabled me to reevaluate my role as an artist, a jeweller and as a researcher. It has enabled me to question my artistic role as a jeweller and the process of making within this context. Reflection on the overall project has confirmed the need for further investigation around the following questions;

- How can we evidence the act of making and demonstrate how it contributes to people's wider lives and lifestyles?
- How can making create opportunities for those recovering from addictions?
- Is there a role for jewellers as makers to support and empower vulnerable individuals within the making process to support individual and collective change?

Although the cultural probes created for this project were relevant and provided information related to the project. With hindsight I do not think I used this as a methodology to its full potential in relation to my personal work. As an artist and maker I am now interested in exploring what information should go into the cultural probes? Specifically, I think there is a need to examine aesthetically how they influence engagement and the information generated. From my experience of this project I also see a need to develop indicators of success in relation to the use of cultural probes in future similar research.

My involvement in this project has been helpful in offering a practical setting within which to explore the knowledge I have gained from the taught course and my broader study. It has been a tangible opportunity to see the value of using an art-based approach to research. These are a few of my thoughts which I will no doubt carry with me and continue to evolve and develop. As to where it leads me in terms of the development of my own work and practice, I have no idea, but I am trusting the process and as J.M Barrie says

*'All the world is made of faith, trust and pixie dust'*

(JM Barrie: 1904)



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## **Appendix**

**Appendix 1:** Fusion: During this project people made a bangle which enabled them to reflect on how wearing jewellery provided some emotional support

**Appendix 2:** Examples of the cultural probes which were used as a form of reflection at the beginning and the end of the workshops

**Appendix 3:** Workshop outline and weekly reflections. This enabled me to plan the workshops and also gave the women an idea of what to expect. The technical notes gave them a starting point and enabled them to return to them for more information if it was needed. The reflections enabled me to develop the workshops each week and to gauge if the project was contributing to their recovery.

**Appendix 4:** State of Flux boxes these were used to gather information, images and stuff!

**Appendix 5:** These boards were created to show the women what they would be doing and what they could create using the techniques available to them

**Appendix 6:** A film made to reflect the project experience

**Appendix 7:** The show the correspondence that took place between myself and key stakeholders. The final funding application will go in to the See Me funders by the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2015