

From Stitching by Candlelight to Crafting Online: Textiles, self-representation and continuing histories of subversive stitches.

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The stitch as a method of subversive practice can be found throughout the history of women's domestic needlework. These subversions were often slight to the point of being imperceptible to anyone (chiefly men) unfamiliar with the language of needlework. As Rozsika Parker outlines in *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), colour, choice of thread and stitch, as well as use of autobiographical subject matter, were all slight ways in which women were able to stitch the self into visibility. While these may have been micro-level actions, they served as a vital means by which women could express the self when other means of discourse, such as public speaking and writing, were inaccessible to them. Pre-twentieth century needlework is often viewed as simply conventional and passive, but it is fundamentally important to remember that women's lack of autonomy during earlier eras meant that the stitch had to be used covertly to remain undetected. Acts of 'vanity' and 'immoral behaviour' could have real and lasting consequences for a woman's social standing. To explicitly speak of the self, that is to speak of truthful thought and feeling that transgressed against the codes of femininity, could result in stigmatisation. Femininity was thoroughly subsumed within the practice of embroidery and as such a woman's needlework had to reflect and uphold the ideology of femininity (Parker, 1984). Through covert ways women were able to use subversive stitches to express the self, when other forms of communication were inaccessible or even forbidden by social norms.

While women have long used textiles to communicate subversively, it wasn't until the 1970's that these subversive stitches began to be used most explicitly as a tool within feminist politics. In the 1970's feminist criticism of patriarchal institutions brought into question the hierarchy of art which positioned the arts of painting and sculpture as the pinnacle of Western cultural production, while pushing creative activities gendered feminine to the periphery of culture. Needlework, with its historical associations of 'women's work,' was regarded with disdain and ridicule within the canon of Western art. The politics of second wave feminism sought to reclaim the denigrated position of women's cultural production, and needlework began to be used by many feminist artists as a tool for challenging gendered hierarchies (Jeffries, 2016). In challenging the patriarchal hierarchy of art, second wave feminism brought textiles out of the domestic private space and repositioned it within public discourse; exhibiting textiles as art in its own right.

Continuing this feminist history, contemporary feminist textiles should be seen not simply as a 'revival' of needlework but rather, as a new stitch in an ongoing narrative of women's crafty-work, used to critique and challenge oppressive forces (Robertson, 2011). Whereas these subversions in earlier histories of needlework were created in private, domestic spaces, contemporary feminist

textiles now utilise online space, the most public of platforms, to communicate. Contemporary feminist textiles refer to the history of women's needlework as a denigrated activity, and continues the dialogue of feminist textiles started in the 1970s, against the backdrop of the contemporary experience of life online. In contemporary feminist textiles, the past is alive in the present; a continuing conversation of crafty voices, through stitches and over time.

Contemporary feminist textiles reflect a range of issues and debates that are of critical importance within current feminist discourse. This discourse centres on conversations around intersectionality within feminism, race, identity, gender diversity and issues pertaining to late capitalism and its effects on social justice. Self-representation is employed by feminist textile artists as a way to create a voice for difference and diversity, and to challenge the agenda of neo-liberal politics which seeks to assimilate rather than include difference. Whereas women, prior to the advent of twentieth century feminism, had to communicate their subversive message covertly to the point of being almost undetectable; the subversive stitch now is a bold, unapologetic articulation of the self.

The work of Hannah Hill for example draws upon 'selfie culture' to articulate a feminist politics of difference through representing her identity as a young woman of colour. The act of taking selfies has often been looked upon as a narcissistic activity undertaken by vapid young women for mere attention seeking. However, it has also been argued, from a perspective of empowerment, that the selfie can be harnessed by young women as an important form of self-exploration and self-care, where the person creating the image is in charge of their own representation (Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015). This is particularly significant with reference to the self-determination of women from cultural backgrounds which have been colonised by the West. Hill can be seen to draw upon the power of the selfie as an expression of young, feminist, self-inquiry which enables the subject to determine their own image. Hill's work appears in audacious contrast to the over-saturation of conventional representations of women's bodies, and to the misrepresentation of people from diverse non-Western backgrounds. Hill's embroidered selfies challenge the determining forces of colonisation which have historically shaped women of colour as the 'exotic other.' As Hill articulates, "I want to uplift and celebrate women of colour and other marginalised groups because we've had to fight so much harder to be recognised." (Collins, 2016)

Hannah Hill's embroidered selfies are not only representative of self-inquiry; they act as articulations of difference which, when shared online, generate critical dialogue around embodied experience. The use of Instagram and other social media platforms has been harnessed by feminist textile artists as a way to share the history of textile traditions, while simultaneously disseminating important political messages. As much as the internet is viewed as an open space, it is likewise a space that has been colonised by individuals with anti-feminist, racist, homophobic and neo-liberal intentions. Feminists creating online spaces that are safe and supportive for marginalised

groups is a vital form of activism which is needed to challenge white-supremacist, patriarchal dominance, both on and offline.

Crafting online enables the feminist textile artist to communicate with a live audience and publicly discuss issues that are raised through their work. The antiquated stereotype of the quiet, passive needleworker who stitches at home alone is here dismantled, as crafty feminists actively share their work online. The work of Australian artist Makeda Duong illustrates the power of online crafting to generate important conversations about the body, stigma and difference. Living with the condition *provoked vestibular vulvodynia* made Duong acutely aware of the stigma and shame associated with conditions that affect the sexual body. Her work facilitates dialogue around the stigma of disorders which affect sexual function, creating a safe space for her Instagram followers to share stories of their own experiences. Duong uses highly decorative, stereotypically feminine embroidery motifs, which are then disrupted through the depiction of stitched illustrations of reproductive organs. Duong embroiders illustrations of the uterus, ovaries and vagina as a way to explore in visual means the pain she experiences living with this medical condition. As a woman of Vietnamese background Duong's work further crafts self-representation which challenges the sexualised Western gaze of the fetishised Eastern woman. Stitching her experience with *provoked vestibular vulvodynia*, Duong represents the complexity of the lived body as it relates to pain, stigma and difference.

Feminist textiles as a means of self-representation is further explored through contemplation of the complexity of love, relationships and sex against the backdrop of a contemporary world where women are now able to pursue a life that is not defined by heteronormative marriage. The work of Sophie King represents defiance against the ideology of passive femininity, in her subversion of stereotyped gender roles. Historically needlework was used as an indication of a woman's domesticity and to signify her suitability for marriage; a good embroiderer was said to make a good and submissive woman (Parker, 1984). King's work disrupts these historical associations of textiles by using the stitch to create positive affirmation of self-worth, which is not defined in relation to male attention. As needlework was often made by women as gifts of love for the domestic heteronormative home, King's embroidered affirmations such as, *Your first love should be yourself*, situates needlework as an activity which can be used to craft self-care. For woman to 'put herself first' is still regarded culturally as a selfish act. King's stitched affirmations disrupt cultural mythologies which embed shame and guilt into women who dare to define themselves as whole on their own, not simply in relationship to others.

King's sequined artworks demonstrate how creative processes can be used to challenge the normative narrative of cultural mythology which seeks to shape and assimilate individuals, particularly women and marginalised groups. Contemporary feminist textiles can be understood as

an act of crafting the self; creative actions at an individual level which enable the subject to defiantly represent their identity in the face of dominant, normative culture.

Feminist textile artists craft alternative online spaces for the building of community and self-representation, while existing concurrently within internet platforms that can be vocally hostile toward feminism. While textile artists create avenues for expressing difference and diversity, this is not always welcomed online. The work of Australian performance/textile artist Casey Jenkins reveals the dark realities of feminists crafting online. In 2013 Jenkins received violent online abuse after a video of her performance *Casting off my Womb*, originally performed in an Australian art gallery, was uploaded to YouTube by a television network. The performance involved Jenkins knitting from a skein of yarn that had been inserted into her vagina, over the course of twenty-eight days, thus recording the bodily rhythms of menstruation. As a queer artist Jenkins' performance meditated upon the social expectations placed on women to be vessels of heteronormative reproduction (Clarke, 2016). Thousands of comments flooded the comments section of the YouTube video, describing Jenkins' performance as 'disgusting' and 'depraved,' portraying the artist as merely an 'attention seeking whore.'

The violent nature of the comments directed at Jenkins reveals a public offended by the site of a woman presenting her body on her own terms, against societal norms and expectations. Jenkins describes the reproducibility of online abuse as indicative of 'patriarchal programming' that shapes individuals to respond with violence towards subjects which transgress against rigid gender stereotypes (Jenkins, 2016). In their violent commentary, the audience reveal themselves to be subjects programmed by patriarchal culture to punish deviation and difference. Jenkins performs textiles in a manner transgressive to the conventions of its gendered history; outside the home, inside the body and thoroughly queered.

Contemporary feminist textiles is of the moment while also remaining referential to its past. These subversive stitches are at once located in the present, in online platforms, while engaging in a dialogue with the work of past generations of women. Feminist textile artists bring into focus contemporary political issues and politicise the representation of self as a tactic of resistance, in the face of dominant cultural narratives. In stitching identities that represent racial, gender and embodied difference, contemporary feminists expand textiles beyond the narrative of Anglo-European 'women's work,' foregrounding difference and diversity. Across temporal locations crafty fingers guide deliberate stitches which speak a voice of disquiet.

References

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