

Introduction

Rozsika Parker's groundbreaking book, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, was published in 1984 (see plate 1). Parker's originality lay in her approach: she examined the history of embroidery in medieval England to the late 19th century¹, setting it alongside the changes that took place both in women's roles and in ideas about femininity, discovering them to be indelibly linked. The book influenced generations of women artists, curators and researchers, motivating us to explore the tricky and often subversive position of women and textiles within the visual arts and in society more widely.

Four years later, in 1988, *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions² opened in Manchester, two expressly feminist shows inspired by Parker's work: one at Cornerhouse, at the time a new arts centre with a growing reputation for showing contemporary art; the other at the Whitworth Art Gallery, a well established university gallery with a world class collection of textiles. Textiles had been part of the Whitworth's remit since it opened in 1889 – perhaps not surprisingly – since Manchester had been the global centre of cotton production for much of the 19th century, aptly named Cottonopolis, and the mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire were the cradle of the industrial revolution. Manchester was also the birthplace of Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragette movement (Balshaw, 2015); the first meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union – the militant organisation calling for votes for women – was held in what was already a politically radical city. Cornerhouse and the Whitworth were therefore perfect for *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions, with their analysis of the role of women and textiles in the gendered division of the visual arts.

Fast forward to *The Subversive Stitch Revisited: The Politics of Cloth*, a two-day international symposium held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013. Its aim was to explore Parker's legacy – in effect to look back to the art and feminist debates of the 1970s and '80s from which both her

¹ The final chapter of the original 1984 version of the book touches on the 1960s and '70s, but the book is predominantly concerned with historical analysis prior to the 20th century.

² A selection of installation shots of the contemporary exhibition in situ at Cornerhouse in 1988 can be accessed at: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/exhibitions>
The Subversive Stitch exhibitions catalogue (1988). Manchester: Cornerhouse and The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester, together with material about the 1988 *Subversive Stitch* exhibitions can also be accessed at:
https://www.academia.edu/11903782/The_Subversive_Stitch_exhibitions_catalogue_Cornerhouse_and_Whitworth_Art_Gallery_Manchester_1988

book and the exhibitions emerged. But also, importantly, to look forward: what might a politics of cloth look like in the 21st century?

Two years later, in 2015, partly in response to the ideas raised at the symposium, the Whitworth mounted *Art_Textiles*, a major international survey of contemporary art that employed textiles as medium and metaphor, curated by Jennifer Harris (2016). It marked a very different moment from the 1988 *Subversive Stitch* exhibitions, as one would expect nearly thirty years on. Collapsing perceived boundaries between art and craft, the exhibition confidently presented textiles as part of the currency of contemporary art practice, no longer on the margins. Yet of the 27 artists whose work was exhibited, 23 were women.

In this essay we reflect on these UK-based projects in which the relationship between women and textiles was given explicit focus: *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions, *The Subversive Stitch Revisited* symposium, and *Art_Textiles*. The *Subversive Stitch* was by no means the first curatorial project to explore these ideas³. Our concern here, however, is to recount how and why we came to curate these projects which, although decades apart, raise similar questions: has textiles shed its edgy position between art and craft; when absorbed into mainstream art practices can it retain a subversive political agency; might working from the margins be a strength; and what are the implications for textiles as a predominantly female area of art practice?

The importance of Rozsika Parker (1945 – 2010)

Rozsika Parker was a founder member of the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, launched in London in 1972; a feminist art historian and collaborator with Griselda Pollock on *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) and *Framing Feminism: Art and The Women's Movement* (1987); and, later, a psychotherapist who published widely in the field (Barnett, 2011). When *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine* was first published in 1984 its impact was immediate. A decade earlier Parker had written a short essay called 'The Word for Embroidery was Work' (*Spare Rib* 37, 1975) and later, together with Griselda Pollock, had exposed the gendered hierarchy that separated the fine and so-called decorative arts in 'Crafty women and the hierarchy of the arts', a key chapter of *Old Mistresses*. This offered a critique of the sexual division of labour that runs through the history of embroidery and which, ultimately, led to the devaluing of

³ For example, in the UK, *Feministo* (1977) London: ICA; Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979) San Francisco Art Museum; *Women and Textiles Today: Their Lives and Their Work* (1983) London: Battersea Arts Centre; and two exhibitions curated by June Freeman, *Quilting, Patchwork and Appliqué 1799-1982: Sewing in Women's Lives* (1982) Colchester: The Minories and Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth Arts Centre, and *Knitting: A Common Art* (1986) Colchester: The Minories and Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth Arts Centre.

textiles as an art medium. But it was in *The Subversive Stitch* that Parker embarked on a full-length, in-depth study, bringing together the history of embroidery, the social history of women, her knowledge as an art historian, and her love of literature.

In this groundbreaking work she mapped the decline in the status of embroidery from the Middle Ages to the 19th century: from a high art form practised by both men and women, particularly in England (where it was greatly valued and had an international reputation), to one that was seen as lowly and feminine – and from an admired professional art to a marginalised domestic craft. Yet she also offered insights into the ways in which women negotiated the limitations of femininity, using embroidery as a weapon of resistance. Moreover, she brought questions of class into her analysis, examining ‘sweated labour’, the sewing done by working women, which then as now meant long hours and low wages. Her work continues to inform how we think of the role of embroidery in Western culture, the construction of femininity and the practice of both art and craft.

In her opening remarks at *The Subversive Stitch Revisited* symposium in November 2013, Jennifer Harris, until recently Deputy Director at the Whitworth, recalled reading *The Subversive Stitch* soon after it was published:

As a relatively young curator it had a profound impact on my own practice. Most writing on embroidery history before Parker focused on questions of style and technique, or the source material for embroidery patterns. But *The Subversive Stitch* was polemical. It explored the social, cultural and economic contexts for embroidered objects and inquired into their meanings. It inspired me to review and reinterpret the way I displayed our collections and to see the exhibition as a site of contention – something that can engage in critical debates and explore research questions rather than simply reflect contemporary scholarship.

The 1988 *Subversive Stitch* exhibitions in Manchester

A couple of years after *The Subversive Stitch* was published, three of us, Jennifer Harris, Bev Bytheway (then Exhibitions Organiser at Cornerhouse in Manchester) and Pennina Barnett, conceived the idea of two independently researched but complementary exhibitions based on the ideas in Rozsika Parker’s book; one to be historically based, the other contemporary. We extended its reach by drawing on the work of other writers and critics, but Parker was unstinting in her support for the project and our wish to use the same title – how could you improve on it?

The Subversive Stitch became the umbrella title for a historical survey held at the Whitworth Art Gallery entitled 'Embroidery in Women's Lives 1300-1900', which included over 200 objects from medieval vestments to embroidered suffrage banners, and for a large exhibition of work by over 30 contemporary artists at Cornerhouse called 'Women and Textiles Today', including Sam Ainsley, Caroline Broadhead, Fran Cottell, Beryl Graham, Janis Jefferies and Jo Stockham, amongst many others⁴.

Although Parker had specifically focused on embroidery, the contemporary exhibition broadened its remit to provoke questions about the relationship between women, *textiles* and feminine stereotypes both historically and in the 1980s, exploring themes such as domestic crafts, the hierarchy of the visual arts, social class and the exploitation of women's labour, stereotypes of sexuality, and women's political protest. Furthermore, we were interested in work that explored these ideas regardless of medium, so that as well as textiles, we also included film (Alison Marchant), photography (Verdi Yahooda) and performance (Silvia Ziraneck). The collaboration between the Whitworth Art Gallery and Cornerhouse in Manchester resulted in the exhibitions touring to five further UK venues, attracting well in excess of 100,000 visitors in total⁵.

It is hard to sum up the critical impact of the exhibitions, and as curators we are probably not best placed to do so. In terms of media coverage, there were two eight-minute slots on national radio, reviews in specialist craft, textile, and feminist art journals, but little coverage in the mainstream art press – and a slamming review by Germaine Greer (1988) in *The Independent* newspaper⁶. Perhaps one of the most enduring images from the exhibitions is the sampler by Lyn Malcolm commissioned by the Whitworth Art Gallery and Cornerhouse and reproduced on the poster, catalogue and private view cards at the time (see plate 3). It became the 'brand image' for the project, and was later used for the 2010 reprint of Parker's book, and also for our own 'revisiting' project in 2013, linking the quarter century since *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions opened in Manchester.

⁴ A list of the participating artists can be found in *The Subversive Stitch* exhibition catalogue, see note 2 above.

⁵ Both Subversive Stitch exhibitions toured to the North East where they were shown concurrently, with *Embroidery in Women's Lives 1300- 1900* at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, and *Women and Textiles Today* at Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead. The contemporary exhibition then toured to Watermans Arts Centre, Brentford; Cooper Art Gallery, Barnsley; City Museum and Art Gallery, Plymouth; and Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

⁶ For a discussion of the critical reception of *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions, see Barnett P. (1995) Afterthoughts on Curating *The Subversive Stitch*. In: K. Deepwell, ed., *New Feminist Art Criticism – Critical Strategies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 76-86.

Why revisit *The Subversive Stitch*?

What made us decide to revisit *The Subversive Stitch* in 2013? Since it first appeared in 1984, Rozsika Parker's pioneering book had been republished a number of times - in 1986, 1990, and 1996. Then for a long time it was out of print, and feminism, although it had never gone away, was not 'fashionable'. But in 2010 we heard that the publisher I.B. Tauris was planning a new edition (with a revised introduction by Parker herself), and we realised that it was coming up to 25 years since we had curated *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions in Manchester. It was an interesting moment: the 21st century seemed to be 'rediscovering' feminism – it was back on the agenda, with new generations organizing events, symposia, and publications. At the same time textiles – at last – seemed to have 'come of age' as a confident interdisciplinary field, with an increasing number of books, peer review journals, and a proliferation of doctoral research in both theory and practice.

It is worth emphasizing here that the theorisation of textiles as a serious field of study – 'textile theory' – is a relatively late development. Although the 1980s saw a proliferation of books on feminist art histories and a number of textile exhibitions informed by feminist approaches, relatively few critical resources were available until the mid 1990s, and it is only in the last 20 years that collected essays/readers and academic journals such as *Fashion Theory* (1997), *Textile: Cloth and Culture* (2003) and *The Journal of Textile Design and Research* (2013) have been established⁷. Before that it was a matter of finding, here and there, interesting exhibition catalogues and articles. As Pennina Barnett recalls,

as an art student in Leeds in the mid-1970s with an interest in textiles, I could only find dry historical accounts or technical 'how to' books – though I did come across Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larson's *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (1974), a survey of the Art Fabric movement from the 1960s onwards, packed with inspirational images of artwork from North America and Europe. *The Subversive Stitch* book hadn't yet been published, but a faint version of Rozsika Parker's *Spare Rib* article on embroidery was kept in the 'xerox cabinet' in the University's Fine Art Library, together with a copy of the (as yet unpublished) manuscript of *Old Mistresses*. Griselda Pollock came to teach in Leeds in

⁷ *Textile: Cloth and Culture* was the initiative of Kathryn Earle, then at Berg Publishers, Oxford, and its founding editors were Pennina Barnett and Janis Jefferies (both teaching on textile programmes at Goldsmiths, University of London at the time it was launched in 2003). In the UK, Jennifer Harris was the original Exhibitions Review Editor and Victoria Mitchell the Book Reviews Editor; Doran Ross and Rebecca Stevens were part of the original US editorial. It is now edited by Catherine Harper and published by Taylor and Francis in London.

the middle of my studies, and it was her lecture, based on the 'Crafty Women' chapter, and that early essay of Parker's that gave me the confidence to develop my interest in contemporary textiles, and the critical tools to address the gendered divisions of art and craft. Today, with the development of masters and PhD programmes, new generations of (still mostly) women with a wide knowledge of contemporary textile practice and theory are teaching on textiles courses, and the body of literature on the subject is constantly expanding.

The republication of Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* in 2011 reflected that hungry audience, and seemed a good moment to take stock and look back to those earlier art and feminist debates from which both the book and exhibitions materialised, but also to explore the politics of cloth *now*: what were the urgent questions and how were they being addressed? Together with Althea Greenan at the Women's Art Library/Make at Goldsmiths, artist Jess Smulders Cohen (a Goldsmiths' Textiles graduate who gave us invaluable administrative support), and later with colleagues at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Iniva, we began to develop a collaborative project. Rozsika Parker's unexpected death, in November 2010, gave the project an added urgency, and we dedicated *The Subversive Stitch Revisited: The Politics of Cloth* to her as a way of saying 'thank you'.

***The Subversive Stitch Revisited: The Politics of Cloth* symposium, Victoria and Albert Museum, 29-30 November 2013**

Having settled on the idea of a two-day symposium, we realised that *The Subversive Stitch Revisited* could be interpreted in many ways. Given that many other issues have come to the fore since Parker's book was published, should we focus solely on the impact of feminist theories on textile practices, writing, curation; or include other concerns too, such as the global textile trade, cloth and cultural difference, environmental and health issues, recycling? We organized two brainstorming workshops to help us think this through, inviting a number of artists, curators and writers to join us. We sent them a series of questions beforehand: what did Rozsika Parker's book mean to them when they first read it; have key issues changed since the 1970s and 1980s; what are the most urgent issues now, and importantly, what might constitute a politics of cloth for the 21st century? The workshops were invaluable in shaping the form and content of the symposium, which we broadened to include work by both women and men that addressed ethical, social and global issues, with a focus on cloth as a subversive strategy – and an emphasis on radical projects and interventions that challenged structures of power.

We then circulated a call for papers and were overwhelmed both by the response and quality of proposals – over 180 from across the world. From these we selected 24 presentations, inviting Griselda Pollock and Elaine Reichek as keynote speakers. It was a privilege to meet colleagues from across the UK, Ireland, Austria, Norway, Serbia, Canada, North America, South Africa and beyond. The event sold out – over 200 tickets – in just a few days, with a waiting list. In order to widen access to the proceedings they were recorded, and a website set up after the symposium with podcasts and abstracts of each presentation, as well as archive material about the 1988 exhibitions⁸.

Art_Textiles

If the symposium gathered together politically engaged textile curators, artists, writers, academics and activists (sometimes combined within a single individual) to share, debate – and to disagree, *Art_Textiles* brought a similar energy to the Whitworth in material form, presenting an international selection of artists for whom textiles – as both medium and metaphor – is a powerful tool for expressing ideas about the social, political and artistic. As curator Jennifer Harris (2015, p.8) suggests, for many artists “cloth operates as a conceptual strategy to challenge the hegemony of traditional art media and, by drawing on the quotidian associations of textile, (can) make the ordinary extraordinary and question meanings of art making”. Although the use of textiles in art is not new – as was evident from the range of work selected, spanning nearly five decades – *Art_Textiles* identified a tendency within contemporary art to engage with the materials and techniques of craft, raising questions about the value of the handmade in the digital age. The exhibition was presented across a number of large gallery spaces, and although not explicitly signposted it was organized around a number of themes identified in the exhibition catalogue (Harris, 2015): ideas about the local and global (Abdoulaye Konaté, Risham Sayed); the relation between text and textile (Lawrence Lemañana, Ghada Amer); questions of identity – cultural, political, sexual, global (Lubaina Himid, Mary Sibande, Do Ho Suh, Kimsooja, Tracey Emin); the haptic and poetic qualities of cloth – in particular the relationship between touch, memory and longing (Anne Wilson, Laima Oržekauskienė, Jessica Rankin, Beverly Ayling-Smith).

⁸ The website was developed with Althea Greenan at the Women’s Art Library/Make at Goldsmiths, University of London, and can be accessed at: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/> WAL/Make also holds (hard copy) archival material relating to *The Subversive Stitch* exhibitions.

Not surprisingly, the traditional association of women and domesticity continue to be deeply implicated in textiles, and many of the artists explored issues of gender, power and hierarchy (Dorothea Tanning, Elaine Reichek). In this context Lyn Malcolm's 1988 *Subversive Stitch* sampler signposted the importance of Rozsika Parker's book, bringing back memories of our work on the 1988 exhibitions. But this was not the only reminder of the earlier feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s, decades when many women artists reasserted the value of traditional domestic crafts such as embroidery, crochet and quilting as subtle means of subversion. Here *Art_Textiles* paid homage to the important contribution of Miriam Schapiro with *Anonymous was a Woman* (1976), and Faith Wilding, inviting her to install her *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*, originally made in 1972; while *Red Abakan III* (1971) by Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz met the viewers as they came into the exhibition. Works by such pioneers as Schapiro, Wilding and Abakanowicz are rarely seen in British galleries.

Making, thinking and writing subversive textiles

As writers and curators, we pay homage here to the legacy of Rozsika Parker's work. She encouraged us – and many, many others – to consider the place of women within art and craft histories, to value critical analysis and enquiry in textiles, and to extend our research across disciplinary boundaries. The subversive potential of cloth remains central to making, thinking and writing, and it is heartening that her work continues to inspire new projects that explore and extend these areas of practice and theory. *Cut Cloth* is a very welcome addition.

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