

I approach this text as a working-class woman, artist and PhD student, and as I write this I admit I have not been able to marry these successfully and for the purpose of introducing the text below I want for this moment to revel in this unsuccessful marriage. I place myself here now in this text with / purposefully, despite my academic training that tells me not to, and I admit this training wins over in the body of the text. / want to place myself in this text as it is my history, one that despite my academic background in textiles I have had little contact with. Feminisms history with textiles is richer than one linear path and in drawing from a rich history of socially working class English women's relationship to textiles and political action this text will re-place working class women within the histories of feminism and textiles. Further asserting their (our) relationship to textiles from a socially English working class position that is no less urgent in understanding textiles as a medium today.

Feminist art and textiles has a rich history. Female artists used the materials available to them that they had training in and access to, to make art about their experience. This resulted in bold political works such as *Womanhouse* (1972) completed by the new students of the relocated Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro and *The Dinner Party* (1974-77) by Judy Chicago to bodily material explorations by artists such as Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. This feminine inversion of traditional formalist practices which used materials including metal, cement and stone, to now include textiles and craft work, unfixed the formalist assumptions of inherent gender neutrality in materials used in artworks before this. It was Lucy Lippard who noted, after working with many of the minimalist and conceptual artists of the 1960's and 70's New York art scene that while the men made work in large sprawling old factory spaces, the women

were often sat at the kitchen table making work that could fit the small space they were working in (Lippard, 1971) (Lippard, 1995). Textiles therefore were practical, transportable, malleable and small enough to exist in the lives of women artists as much as the process was a political statement.

Feminist theory and second wave feminist art practices developed against the present masculine hegemony and in doing so the narrative of 'other' was created around the female. The undoing of formalist masculinity created a space for new material explorations but the narrative of the female as other left out those that didn't fit into this dichotomy. Queer theory began to address this gap by questioning who was permitted to matter by challenging those that had been erased by this dichotomy of fixed gender identities, which is to say gay, lesbian, trans-gender and other queer identities. In *'Bodies That Matter'* (1993) Judith Butler challenged heteronormative subjectivity in questioning "which bodies get to emerge as critical matters of concern" (Butler, 1993, p. XIV), asking which groups of people matter and which groups of people don't. Textiles can reflect real lived experiences and in doing so can become part of a questioning of socio-political and economic value structures of materials and by extension, the bodies they represent.

This feminist history of women and textiles takes for granted the relationship of a certain group of women and textiles as a universal female experience. Focused on the home and a small scale, intimate relationship to textiles this narrative is removed from, and removes, women working in textile industries. To return to the previous question of who matters and who is allowed to matter, this earlier discourse of women and textiles privilege a social class of women who did not need to work, or whose work was not within a large industrial

model, leaving socially working class women outside of the group that 'mattered'. In England feminism and textiles was articulated through *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) and the discourse of textiles as both political and intimate followed from their American sisters, paying less attention to socially working class women whose livelihoods were linked to the production of cloth on an industrial scale. Working together en masse, a largely female workforce could produce 30,000 yards of cloth a day ("History of Salts Mill", n.d.). This industrial production of cloth is physically different from small scale methods of creation. The bodily relationship to large machinery and exact repeated processes as part of a large production line in loud, busy environments is a different history to the quiet, delicate history of needlework and other textile histories acknowledged in second wave artistic practices. Removed from the product of their labour, working class¹ women have a different relationship to the textiles they create through their work than socially middle class and upper class women have to the small-scale production of their textiles.

Women's communities are as prevailing in working class cultures as in socially middle and upper class women's lives. As the need to question a woman's place was central to *Womanhouse* by questioning attachments to marriage, the home, motherhood and sexuality, working class women have come together to challenge patriarchal conditions that have denied their labour². Women's work, whether in the home or in the work place, has long been undervalued. In the 1960's the Ford corporation began grading the different areas of their workforce to determine the pay of labour within their factories, enacted to divide the union strong workforce. In 1968 the female workforce of sewing machinists were graded to be less skilled than their male colleagues resulting in 15% less pay, despite the

¹ The English socially working class position will from now be referred to as working class for ease of reading.

² As well as the above labour referenced.

same level of work. On 7th June 1968, after Ford refused to upgrade them, the sewing machinists at the Ford factory in Dagenham went on strike to be joined soon after by the machinists at Ford's Halewood factory in Merseyside. The strike, lasting three weeks, brought the Ford factory to a standstill and heavily influenced the 1975 passing of the Equal Pay Act 1970 (McGregor & Sagall, 2010). In doing so these women became part of an important history of working women striking for equality in the workplace, from the London Matchgirls Strike over working conditions in 1888 and the London bus-girls' strike for equal pay in 1918 (Gall, 2010) and continuing after them to include the Grunwick dispute from 1976-78, involving South Asian women led by Jayaben Desai (Bell & Mahmood, 2016), the Timex strike in Dundee in 1993 ("Timex Strike, 1993 – European Counter Network", 2009) and the 2009 Chemilines strike in London for equal pay and dignity at work^(Bhattacharyya, 20019)³.

In 1984 the women sewing machinists went on strike for a second time, this time winning the important upgrade for their skilled labour. As articulated by one of the women involved in the 1984 strike "Women there, everything you wanted, you really had to fight for" (*A Woman's Worth: A Story of the Ford Sewing Machinist, 2008*), a position many women, despite their economic or social background, will be able to relate to.

Cloth throughout history has been used as a signifier of wealth and our relationship to textiles in art practices succumbs to these same histories. It's important in understanding an artwork to recognise the histories it draws from and exists within and textiles offers an important juncture for the representation of working class English women's political histories to be retold, explored and passed forward. In their relationship with textiles

³ This is, of course, by no means an exhaustive list.

working class women have reclaimed, and continue to fight against, their marginalised position, resulting in radical, practical acts which have brought about real political change.

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