

The Ambiguous Ambivalence of Feminist Textiles¹

Alexandra M. Kokoli

Some subject matter is more slippery or perhaps more knotted than others. As Claire Pajczkowska observes, the elevation of textiles into a cultural object worthy of examination in the context of both art and material culture, requires ‘a specific kind of consciousness’, one that tolerates and even accommodates contradiction and even a degree of indeterminacy (2010, p. 135). The physical suppleness of textiles signposts their cultural position at the interstices of ‘an excessive materiality and an almost irrational immateriality’ (ibid), while the stitch metaphorically ‘conjoins both matter and ideational content’ (ibid, p. 139). Omnipresent, pervasive and resistant to coherent classification, textiles are interwoven into the private and public practices of every civilisation, both formal and informal, quotidian and ceremonial.

Feminism’s engagement with textiles and, more broadly, craft, not only amplifies such ambiguities but tinges them with ambivalence, due to the deployment of domestic crafts as a fundamental constituent of patriarchal domesticities. Over the past few decades a now well-established area of feminist scholarship emerged, devoted to the exploration of the artistic manifestations of a feminist critique of domesticity as an overdetermined space both physically and symbolically connected to a sexual division of labour. This division is held responsible for taking women out of the labour market and ideologically binding them to an idealised reproductive function, in terms of both procreation and the socio-cultural perpetuation of normative sexual and gender arrangements. The mimicry of domesticity in installation art with the intention of challenging and subverting it has been a major strategy in feminist art practice (e.g. Schor, 1997, pp. 191-203; Molesworth, 2000, pp. 71-97; Kokoli, 2016, pp. 91-117). In this context, mimicry should be understood in its anti-colonial definition: the feminist artistic challenge to domesticity does not manifest as a departure

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from the home but through a repeated performance (in a variety of media) of patriarchal domesticity as contradictory, fragile and frayed at the edges (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 85-92).

Pseudo-domestic art installations became the vehicle for the uncanny return of the repressed of patriarchal domesticity. The power of such installations consisted of their striking closeness to their 'originals': still home interiors but *not quite*. These treacherous feminist 'homes' were modelled on the Freudian uncanny in more ways than one. In addition to offering a material manifestation of the *unheimliche* (unhomely) in the almost literal sense, they teased out the subtle but crucial unhomeliness already present in the home. If 'un-', the uncanny's prefix of negation, is the mark of repression (Freud, 1919, p. 368), pseudo-domestic art installations bring social oppression home by materialising and embedding its symbols in simulated domestic interiors. Still, the significance of domesticity for such practices was not limited to a critical mobilisation of domesticity as sign, nor the use of the domestic interior as a formal framing device with the potential to disrupt the pristineness of the white cube. The DIY ethos of domestic crafts supported inclusivity and celebrated creative practices with little attachment to originality and individual authorship, which for related reasons had long been excluded from the mainstream artworld.

When I curated a retrospective of Su Richardson's crochet and mixed media work in 2012, a participant in the *Women's Postal Art Event, a.k.a. Feministo*, a landmark collaborative feminist project and series of installations, as well as its follow up *Fenix*, I felt deeply ambivalent about benefiting from a resurgent interest in craft (cf. Kokoli 2014, pp. 110-129). In Britain, craft has emerged as an economically conservative response to austerity; a signifier of nostalgia for wartime rationing; of the thrifty sensibility of 'make do and mend' and even, possibly, of an implicitly white British identity, before the end of Empire and Commonwealth diasporas. Austerity craft is profoundly middle-class, concerned with environmental pollution and opposed to certain kinds of consumerism, specifically of cheap and disposable commodities favoured by differently classed subjects than its own, while simultaneously supporting market values, particularly entrepreneurship and small business (Jeffries, 2011). Ele Carpenter (2011, pp. 86-91) considers the dismissal of craftivism as 'woolly activism' as a symptom of the sexism that craftivism seeks to oppose, while also recognising that crafts present as many opportunities for innovative feminist activist

engagement as for neo-conservative consumerist co-optation: 'Knitted cakes are [...] an irritatingly joyful distraction from the important history of craft as Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA)' (ibid, p. 88). Following women's craftivist collectives on social media suggests that even explicitly craftivist yarn bombing initiatives do not necessarily engage in a reflexive analysis of the media of knitting and crocheting, viewing them instead in purely celebratory terms and casting their activities as unequivocally positive injections of colour and joy into the harsh (and implicitly masculine) urban environment. It is not only to feminism that craft has been a problematic ally: artists and cultural workers, Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch coined the term 'craftwashing' to refer to 'instances where craft' (or a crafted aesthetic) 'is used to market and perform political and social engagement while obscuring similarly sticky ethical, environmental, and economic impacts of global production and consumption' (Black and Burisch, 2013).

The conservative revival of the cult of domesticity through amateur craft and DIY highlights a condition that has long shaped the cultural meaning and political mobilisation of crafts. The ambivalence-inspiring ambiguity of craft for gender-critical and other countercultural and revolutionary social movements has been noted in both feminist theory and practice. As Janis Jefferies observes, weaving, more than any other craft, has been pulled into at least two contradictory directions due to cloth being:

inscribed within a range of humanist and universalist discourses as a container for full human expression; rites of passage, [...] rural idylls and safe havens. Closer to 'home', textiles have been mobilised as banners for Suffragette resistance, trade union rights, wrapping the Greenham Common fence and honouring those who have died of AIDS (1995, p. 164).

Although it would be tempting to rest on this binary between conservative universalisms and progressive activisms, the restless ambiguity of craft thankfully makes this difficult. As Rozsika Parker (2010) so eloquently articulated in *The Subversive Stitch*, craft's ambiguity, at least in the case of women's craft, has always been marked by ambivalence: simultaneously an outlet for otherwise marginalised creativity and a means of inculcating patriarchal femininity. Craft's ambivalence was recognised and explored in art informed by feminism,

complicated and enhanced by feminism's troubling of domesticity in general. In the words of Phil Goodall, founding member of the artists' group behind the Women's Postal Art Event, their project 'both celebrated the area of domestic creativity and "woman's world" and exposed it for its paucity' (1987, p. 213). Jefferies suggests that by the mid-1990s, the meanings of textiles had already become as unstable, malleable and provisional as definitions of gender:

The mobilities of fabric can be traced through the echoes of another sign which can be loosened from its referent, i.e. the founding theory of 'femininity as masquerade', which scrambles the codes of the singular to encompass a signifying chain of fractured, multiple and precarious identities (1995, p. 164).

If feminism brings to the ambiguity of textiles the mixed blessing of ambivalence, how do textiles reciprocate? The parallels drawn above by Jefferies between fabric and gender suggest an equally ambiguous counter-gift, both equivocal and subversive: a fluid variability which curiously mobilises its own 'haptic dimension' towards a 'powerful relationality' (Pajaczkowska, 2010, pp. 145-146), one that finds itself at home in-between categories rather than safely contained (or frustratingly confined) within them. Radical, generative and nurturing rather than deconstructively estranging, feminist textiles offer a materialisation of the 'local strategies' envisaged by Judith Butler in the closing of *Gender Trouble* (1990, p. 149), which would contribute to the ongoing 'denaturalisation of gender as such'.

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