

As Sarah-Joy Ford points out in her introduction to *Cut Cloth: Contemporary Textile and Feminisms*, “Cut Cloth contemplates the rise in popularity of art textiles and its impact on its value as a specifically feminist mode of expression.”

Like language, cloth is malleable and possible to manipulate and transform. Cloth is one of the oldest materials known to humankind, for example (Constantine & Reuter, 1997:14 and Livingston & Ploof, 2007:256) cloth can be a vehicle and a conduit for difficult and complex meanings: it enters through all our senses, not just sight; we touch it, we smell it, we can hear it, we can even taste it, observe a child. Cloth assimilates the smells and odours of the body; it silently absorbs us. The Canadian artist Yan Miller writes, “Clothing is like our bodies...it acts like a skin to protect us. Its fragility shows up our own” (Livingstone & Ploof, 2007:288). Like ourselves it can be cut and stitched, it is mortal. (Weiner & Schneider, 1989).

Cloth in the hands of artists can become an alternative language to address the complexities of our times. *In Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric and The Art Fabric Mainstream*, for example (Constantine & Larsen, 1973, 1986) established a discourse of cloth within contemporary art practice. The artists profiled broke new ground, moving beyond textile technique and material into conceptual discourse.

In greatest abundance are materials which are soft, pliable and with technological virtuosity these are used in a myriad of forms. Why is SOFT so all persuasive in the traditional world of art?i

It took the feminist art movement, and the re-evaluation of categories of fine art in the late 1960s and 1970s, for cloth and textile traditions to be appropriate vehicles for sculpture. Abakanowicz’s giant three-dimensional woven *Abakans* of the period announced the relevance and physicality of the act of making. Eva Hesse’s latex covered cheesecloths, *Contingent* (1969) alongside Louise Bourgeois’ often organic, sexually-explicit bodily forms, reference the apparently biographical aspects of their lives. The sewn and stuffed-fabric body’s internal

organs of Annette Messager's *Penetration* (1993-1994) remain similarly influential.

These artists were also influential during the 1990s when I was Head of Textiles (1994-2002) within the Visual Arts Department at Goldsmiths, University of London. The BA and MA programmes extended the pedagogic principles of Constance Howard and Audrey Walker. Whilst Constance had established embroidery as a singular art form, Audrey introduced interdisciplinarity by instigating a name change for the area from embroidery to textiles. Technical teaching was kept to a minimum and materials used – leather, rubber, fiberglass, vinyl – were pliant and organic. They could be incorporated into other processes like print, weave, paper and felt producing hybrid forms potent with ideas and biographical, political significance. A whole range of material practices invited elasticities of method and meaning drawn from students who came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences, both internationally and within Europe. Critical thinking as well as creative writing became embedded in personal practice opening up to the theoretical discourses of the period for example, feminism, colonialism, post colonialism and queer politics. In institutional terms, there was an understanding of the artistic and conceptual practices we pioneered which threatened both the hard core masculinity of fine art and the department.

The practices developed embodied the complexities of translation; between theory as hands on doing, between making and meaning, language and identity, material forms and conceptual strategies. Every translation effects a transformation in being translated, shifting it away from its original meanings to the making of hybrid forms which often lose resemblance to their point of departure. It has been my use (or misuse) of the term 'textiles' that has signalled the possibility that it is always 'not quite' there and also not 'quite that'. It is a term that has never settled in the same space, twice. What is thought to be known about a term can be revisited and replayed into a productive moment of crisis.

I wrote, but have adapted the previous paragraph, at the time of *WAVES: Fifty years of Textiles at Goldsmiths 1948-2000*, that the term 'textiles no longer adequately encompasses the diversity of attitudes and forms that have ruptured conventional categories' (2000:14). I still hold this position however risky and precarious. Any predetermined 'common sense' or 'safe ground' assumptions about a practice, so seemingly familiar as cloth or textile, is undone at the moment of an encounter between you and the work.

Since the Millennium (in western dates, 2000), there has been a rich historical and contemporary exhibitions both within the Europe and America that have become excited by the demise of the long shadow cast by fine art that has so often dogged the reception of 'textiles' in mainstream art only institutions. For example, in 2013, *Textiles: Open Letter* was jointly curated by Grant Watson and Rike Frankⁱⁱ and more recently Karen Wright, curator of *Entangled: Threads & Making*, has stated that the show is an opportunity to re-evaluate the political status of women in the market place as well as the way that they use materials and express their concernsⁱⁱⁱ. These are but two examples in a long list of curatorial projects that aim to reframe textiles within the context and discourses of art-history and resurrect the lost memory of these 20th century practices.

A further link can be drawn between art-history and textiles. Such influences are particularly relevant in relation to the development of performance art and subsequently participatory and socially engaged art practices. This has a great deal to do with the direct but complex relationship between textile production, its position within socio-economics, and inevitably political divisions that are drawn in relation to them.

The exclusion of textile from modern readings of art-history has served as a metaphor for the exclusion of certain social groups and political agendas. As such, textile, with its histories and connotations of craft, manual labour and class and gender divisions, had become a mirror image of certain communities in the socio-political fabric. This is one of the propositions that Sarah-Joy Ford has framed in her introduction to 'Cut Cloth: Contemporary Textiles and Feminisms.'

One of the key texts we had at Goldsmiths was Rozsika Parker who in her 1984 book, *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the Feminine*, connected between embroidery and the construction of the feminine, how social groups and the practices assigned to them can be positioned within the hegemonic political map. It is therefore timely that 'Cut Cloth: Contemporary Textiles and Feminisms' will be launched at the Whitworth Art Gallery, in Manchester where the exhibition, 'The Subversive Stitch' was originally shown in 1988^{iv}. 'The Subversive Stitch Revisited' project resulted in a two-day conference titled 'The Subversive Stitch Revisited: The Politics of Cloth.' It was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in November 2013. The curators of the original exhibition, Pennina Barnett and Jennifer Harris together with Althea Greenan proposed a web site in 2014, dedicated to the conference proceedings and to furthering research and practice, developed and hosted by the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths^v. <http://www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/>

Whilst the textile programmes at Goldsmiths no longer exist^{vi}, the website and the work of the Women's Art Library^{vii} and the Textile Centre and Constance Howard Gallery^{viii} at Goldsmiths ensures that the historical legacies of textiles in an expanded field of provocation and inspiration are maintained and continued.

ⁱ Constantine, Mildred, 'Statement about soft materials,' in *Weich und Plastich: Soft Art*, Kunsthaus Zurich, 1979 p.51.

ⁱⁱ Rike Frank and Grant Watson created TEXTILES: OPEN LETTER as a long-term research project starting in 2012.. A comprehensive publication on TEXTILES: OPEN LETTER with texts and images is available from Museum Abteiberg and the Documentation and additional information about the project is available at www.textilesopenletter.info.(accessed 04/04/2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/entangled-threads-making> (accessed 9/04/2017).

^{iv} Subversive Stitch, please see the excellent section about exhibitions by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in: Parker, R. / Pollock, G. (Eds.) (1987) *Framing Feminism; Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, Pandora, London, pp.4/185-260

^v <http://www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/> (accessed 8/04/2017).

^{vi} Johnson, Pamela, 'Art or Women's Work? News from the Knitting Circle, in Oral History, Special Issue on the Crafts, 1990 pp. 50-53 in which Anne Lydiatt, Lynn Malcolm, Kate Russell and myself were interviewed as contributors. The 'knitting circle' was how one of Kate's male colleagues described her textile department at Leeds College of Art.

^{vii} Contact: Althea Greenan

The Women's Art Library, Special Collections, The Library, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW
www.gold.ac.uk/library
make@gold.ac.uk

^{viii} Contact: Lesley Ruthven

Special Collections & Archives Manager Library
Goldsmiths, University of London New Cross, London SE14
6NW www.gold.ac.uk/special-collections
l.ruthven@gold.ac.uk

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