

Women's Work Revisited:
On The Vestiges of 1970s Feminist Craft Traditions in Contemporary Art

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I. INTRODUCTION

For feminists, fiber craft played a role in the construction of an alternate history of art making. A shared marginality between the female traditional artist and the contemporary feminist artist helped the latter negotiate the paradoxical goal of seeking recognition in the mainstream art world, while at the same time attempting to critique it. In this context the once negative associations of fiber or craft with femininity and the home were recast as distinctive and culturally valuable features of an artistic heritage specific to women.

– Elissa Auther, “Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960-80”, (2012)

Women have historically been confined to interior and domestic spaces in an attempt to restrict female access to the public sphere and ultimately form control over them. As such, women have for a long while been synonymous with notions of the interior and systems of domestic space. However, there is no essential correlation between femininity and the home, only socially, politically and historically produced narratives that have fortified a rapport between women and the interior. As a domesticated activity, amateur craft is a hallmark of the historical narrative of the homebound woman, not simply because it is a medium that was considered at once utilitarian and permissibly feminine because of its decorativeness, but fundamentally because it is a medium that is often portable and, therefore, confineable. Many fiber crafts could habitually be performed inside the home, whether the maker was sat at the kitchen table, at the loom, or the sewing machine, their work could be executed in ways that other tradecrafts or fine art mediums can't accommodate due to the conditions of the materials or machinery. In order to suppress female agency and minimize female access to public life (which conveniently kept patriarchal structures intact), fiber-based crafts were allocated as women's

work. Consequently, techniques such as quilting, knitting, crocheting and embroidery were all relegated to the domain of the decorative, and subsequently categorized as apart from and inferior to high art because of their distinctly laborious and gendered connotations. Although there is a history of subversive craft making and dissemination that predates the early 1970s, it was at this juncture, after the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and at the peak of Second Wave Feminism, that the medium was overtly politicized in a far reaching way in order to conveying a feminist critique of the hegemonic patriarchal systems that governed the art institution's ideological prioritization of fine art over craft. This lofty goal at hand, artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold, Lyn Malcolm, Sandra Ogel, Eva Hess, Janis Jeffries, Ann Newdigate and Sheila Hicks employed craft techniques in their creative practices as a means of destabilizing the influence of the male-centric Abstract Expressionism that monopolized the most distinguished exhibition spaces and art institutions across the United States during this time. For these artists, exploring fiber and textile art was a way to embrace the marginalization of craft as an essentially decorative, amateur and emphatically female 'hobby,' while also tracing an alternative history of art making that reinforced women's distinct histories at the intersection of art and feminist activism. Currently, feminist craft techniques have resurfaced in not just the fine art spheres of Western society, but in popular culture as well. There are an overwhelming number of women artists who weave and quilt and call themselves 'textile artists', 'fiber artists' or 'soft sculpture artists.' The medium is making a reappearance in institutional museums of the highest caliber, in art schools, in notable professional galleries and independent, guerilla exhibition spaces, all at once. Instagram is littered with pseudo-political craftivism in the form of hand-embroidered patches, panties and about every stitchable surface imaginable. Within similar virtual social forums, there are endless 'do-it-yourself' tutorials for shag wall-hangings and independent producers selling their macramé plant hangers and textile wares. Thus, the medium has

inarguably experienced a resurrection in the last decade, or perhaps it never expired at all, only lingered beneath the surface, and has just now decided that it is time to rear its ornate head once again.

In consideration of the popular resurgence of 1970s feminist craft traditions in contemporary art, it is pivotal to consider what it means to mine a past era of time in order to transplant the trappings onto the present. It would not be enough to simply prescribe the contemporary definition of craft, if there even is one, but more productive to determine precisely why it is that feminist craft and female-oriented labor are popular not just again, but precisely at this moment? What exactly is at stake in grafting the seventies feminist craft aesthetic onto a contemporary art phenomenon? Can this revival possible convey the same sincere political weight that it did at the time of its emergence? In order to attempt to address some of these questions, the discussion that follows will be organized around three case studies in which craft is invoked as both the predominant material, aesthetic and conceptual methodology. The work of Casey Jenkins will be examined in order to articulate the relationship between knitting, body performance, female labor and ritual. The conversation will then move into the work of Liz Magor, as an alternative means of investigating labor, but this time framed by the status of the decorative, both historically and in contemporary art. Finally, the work of Mike Kelley and Tracy Emin will be called upon in order to upset the ideological framework of the decorative through a discourse that champions abjection, amateurism and the politics of the homespun. In taking up these instances that evoke perhaps the facade, if not the guts, of the seventies craft movement, I will look towards the work of Hannah Arendt and Daniel Harris in order to contextualize a discourse on labor and aesthetic fetishism. As a framework through which to interpret the case studies, an essay by Daniel Harris on “Quaintness” in *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* will be essential in critically assessing this genre of art because it takes up an expansive Marxian discourse concerning class, production, labor, consumer culture and the commodity object (of which high art

most definitely is, for the purposes of this essay) and centers it around a dialogue on quaintness as a fetishistic device. Several texts that trace the history of fiber art will also be employed to elaborate upon the associations between fiber craft practices, decoration, amateurism and a specifically female-oriented domestic labor as a kind of labor that is historically unacknowledged.

II. BODY PERFORMANCE, LABOR AND RITUAL

The 1970s feminist craft movement was largely an assemblage of ritualistic practices that had been weaponized as a political rhetoric. Notable artists such as Faith Wilding pulled the ritual hobbyism of craft methods into public view with her work *Womb Room* (fig.1), a crocheted environment installation in Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse* of 1972. Historically, crocheting and knitting practices, and the items they produce, were deeply associated with the human body. Before they were denounced as decorative artifacts, knit goods possessed utilitarian purposes as garments that were invented to keep the body warm and protected. Casey Jenkins' performance embodies that practice on both aesthetic and political fronts as she creates her own 'woman space'. Her work mobilizes the strategies of predecessors such as Wilding by assimilating knitting as a form even more directly to the female body. More than using her hands to create, the source of Jenkins' creation is figuratively focused on her uterus. The title of the performance, *Casting Off My Womb* (fig. 2), suggests a process of shedding, discarding and decay, similar to the ritual of menstruation. Her project is a simple one: to knit wool from skeins that she has inserted into her vaginal canal for a period of 28 days – a literal manifestation of Wilding's *Womb Room*. The completed material product is a long umbilical object that gradates from a soft cream color to a gently rusted red and back again, interally hung on wire hangers throughout the exhibition space. The piece was performed live in 2013 at the Darwin Visual Arts Association, while also intermittently filmed for a short video that documented the performance.

The majority of the video footage depicts the artist sitting in a white gallery room, naked from the waist down, wearing a decidedly seventies-style cream-colored crocheted sweater, knitting methodically and contently. The work necessitates ritual as a foundation of the performance by virtue of its material formation; a repetitive assemblage of like gestures of the body resulting in knots that accumulate into a curious, but quaint object through a systematized process of pure accretion. In *The Aesthetics of Consumerism* Daniel Harris argues that ‘quaintness’ as a pervasive interior decorating aesthetic is founded on and defined by its insistence on the baroque (31). Imbedded in the form of the knit object, is a doctrine persistent on ritual accumulation as a crucial element to conjuring an aura of quaintness. Routine is the over-arching structure that informs Jenkins’ performance, as the repetitive process is gradual but deliberate; it is a task that requires intense patience and an unwavering ability to perform a rhythmic kind of labor for hours on end with enduring composure. The resulting material product may appear quite simply constructed, plain even, but the object is not the work of art here at all, it is the performance of labor itself that is the real continuity of the work. In postulating on the contemporary value of labor, in his essay, Harris also observes:

“[...] labor itself has become quaint and the conspicuous consumption of time has been aestheticized, transformed into a prurient spectacle for a generation that [...] reenacts the past as a form of recreation [...]” (27).

It is precisely this kind of performative labor that *Casting Off My Womb* exemplifies - as a superficial romanticization of the routines and rituals that are and have historically been authentically performed, without recognition let alone validation, in the domestic interior. In meditating on this occurrence, why is that contemporary Western society still values labor-intensive practices? Acts, products and art that are invested with time and manual labor are consistently perceived to be of higher value in the fast-food, fast-fashion spectacle of the Western social sphere. A jar of handpicked, home-canned peaches is

vastly more valuable than the tin of mass-preserved ones. As Harris explains of the fetishistic indulgence in artisanal objects: “[...] quaintness glorifies the unassuming industriousness of both the lower middle class and the proletariat [...] redolent with American purity and patriotism” (46). Something that takes time is considered more precious because our investments in labor and time consumption have tangible, temporal weight – the production of a handcrafted object is quantifiable by time, and time, in consideration of mortality, is of exceptional value. If one subsumes that the majority of products consumed today are made too instantaneously without measurable process, the ritualistic practice of Jenkins’ performance is then perhaps a mode of decelerating, a counter-action to mass production. If this is so, then the work must also comment on the contemporary ability to disseminate individualized labor online. One notable phenomenon is that the resurgence of feminist craft traditions came into public visibility around the same time as the global economic crash of 2008. Although first launched in 2005, it was around this crisis that Etsy rose to popularity and mass accessibility. As a virtual commerce website focused around vintage, handmade, artisanal and craft items that puts independent producers in direct contact with individual purchasers, the do-it-yourself inheritance of craft culture was once again condoned on a massive, public scale. Currently, countless Etsy imposter websites exist, proving the enduring popularity and continued accessibility of such artisanal commodity exchange forums. The influence of the ‘authentic’ artisanal object in mass culture, (which has not been a measure of value in high art or popular culture for some time), has re-instated a hierarchical system of validation in which labor incurs greater value, contributing to the resurgence of craft in fine art.

In order to comment on the female body as a political site, Jenkins updates the traditions of the 1970s feminist craft movement and body performance by sharing her investigation of labor and ritual with the virtual peanut galleries of the internet. In direct contradiction to the graceful and even charming appearance of the performance, one Huffington Post article bluntly dismissed the piece with

its headline: “‘Vaginal Knitting’ Is Here To Make Everyone Afraid Of Performance Art Once Again” (Brooks) – when in fact Jenkins states in the video of the performance that her intention is quite the opposite. Her motivation behind the performance is concerned with demystifying rumors that have been complicit in the demonization of female genitals, reproductive system and the female-identifying body in more general terms. In the age of 4Chan and internet pornography one could reasonably argue that there is nothing shocking or fearsome about this piece, that is, until the conservative, heteronormative and very vocal internet audience is permitted to weigh in. The onslaught of hate and verbal abuse that Jenkins received in response to this piece from armchair misogynists is merely a reflection of the very same alienation and shame that women face in the public sphere, especially when a woman unabashedly demonstrates ownership over her own body. The United States in particular has an explicitly fraught relationship to female bodily autonomy, as exemplified in the indefinite struggle to secure not only reproductive rights for women in the U.S., but also their rights to safety and equal opportunities. In consideration of this gendered rift in Western society, women know that their bodies hardly belong to them once they’ve crossed the threshold from the private realm into the public – and yet, they remain and endure in the same heterotopic spaces of marginalization that have condemned *Casting Off My Womb* as outrageous smut. In light of the severity of the online responses, it is crucial to ask how, then, does language inform the reality of this performance? The overwhelming amount of negative criticism, which catalyzed the viralization of the work, contributes a specific dialogue that fabricates a mythology around the project and propels the performance into that uncharted territory of witchy, feminine mystique. What is actually ‘scary’ about the work, for these anonymous virtual spectators, is two-fold. One is the very obvious fact that Jenkins is symbolically using her womb to create something other than what is expected to come from a uterus. And secondly, she is not allowing her vagina to be penetrated in the way we are habituated to seeing on the internet – the act is not being

performed to satiate the sexual fantasies of the spectator, therefore the online audience perceives it as unnatural and wrong. Considering the divisive social rules that distinguish acceptable private acts from public acts, in a chapter on “The Public and Private Realm” from *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt states,

“Hidden away were the laborers [...] and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else's property but because their life was "laborious," devoted to bodily functions” (72).

This observation is perhaps exemplary of why Jenkins’ performance has incited such seething hatred online because, moving past the trope of the vagina/uterus as scary-because-it-is-mysterious, this work catalyzes fury because it is, within a heteronormative, reproductive understanding of the utilitarian purpose of the uterus, refusing to do what it is expected to do. If we understand the performance as a private ritual turned public labor, Arendt’s writing illuminates the ways in which the public outcry is perhaps less about the supposed debasedness of the artist’s exposed vagina, and more so concerned with the choice Jenkins makes to introduce a seemingly private act, something that should, by normative expectations, be a hidden and shameful kind of childless labor, into the public realm. Jenkins is vilified as a witch because her performance dispells the heteronormative pretext that the vagina has no other use than to function solely as a conveyor belt for delivering babies. In this vein of rationality, if the artist does not use her womanhood to reproduce or to be penetrated by some phallic object, then what she chooses to do with it is irreconcilably superfluous and vulgar because, by normative societal standards, vaginas are always shameful when not being wielded for their god-given, reproductive purpose. Consequently, Jenkins’ performance asks the spectator to reconcile the ways in which they are complicit in reducing and confining the value of femininity to its biological functions,

pre-destined by the hegemonic social order. *Casting Off My Womb*, as an attempt to de-center craft from the domestic interior by publicly theatricalizing it, is indicative of an alternative future, established on the cornerstones of seventies feminist craft and body politics, in which women cast off the shackles of their isolated rituals in order to move freely through the public domain with legitimate bodily autonomy.

III. THE STATUS OF THE DECORATIVE

Around the same time that Marina Abramovic was also enacting sensationalist body performances concerned with ritual on the public stage, quilts, the quintessentially American craft, were crossing the threshold from the decorative into the domain of high art. In 1971, the Whitney Museum complied with Gail van der Hoof and Jonathan Holstein, two prominent figures in the New York art scene, who insisted that the museum exhibit the patchwork quilt collection (fig. 3) they had accumulated over several years, beginning in the sixties, from across the Eastern United States. The selection of quilts, mostly composed of bright patchwork designs, were chosen for their striking formal resemblances in color, line and shape to the work of Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, Mark Rothko and their contemporaries. In light of their similarities, Holstein purposely had the quilts hung much in the same manner as the boldly masculine Abstraction Expressionist paintings that dominated art institutional spaces during the seventies. In order to prove that these lowbrow craft objects could stand their ground in a high art setting, all emphasis was focused around the formal qualities of the quilts, stripping them of their social context, their personal or familial meanings and even their makers. These qualities were often viewed as burdens in interpreting a work of art for a highly orthodox 'art for art's sake' audience. Holstein's interpretation that the personalities imbedded in these quilts were distracting from their formality and originality as art objects is in fact quite ironic when, in consideration of its

history, quilting was never intended to be an art that championed singularity in the way Abstract Expressionism does. Traditional quilting is based on a logic of strict formal rules that value perfection, ornateness and a narrative of decoration. Their makers pride themselves on consistency, repetition and obsessive attention to uniformity. Granted, every quilt is ‘an original’ in its own right by virtue of being handmade, but the traditional intention was to achieve replication – quilts that didn’t flaunt straight stitching or evenly composed squares of fabric were considered failures. However, Holstein picked quilts with the opposite of such values; quilts with uneven stitching, lopsided designs, even ones with severe wear, tear and stains in order to emphasize their originality as works of art. In “How The Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary”, Karin E. Peterson explains that Holstein made these formal decisions because stripping the quilts of their social values were the only way to legitimate them as high art, worthy of a Whitney patron’s modern gaze. She states, “To become objects of higher cultural value, worthy of presentation in an art museum, quilts had to be transformed into autonomous artistic creations and seen as detached from tradition contexts” (101). However, the disavowal of the historicity of the quilts, which some feminist critics and professional quiltmakers argue is inextricably linked to the works themselves, was met with much skepticism. In particular, the exhibition was criticized as being an act of assimilation; “a kind of ‘symbolic violence,’ an erasure of the meanings and interpretations that nonelite (women’s) culture might give to quilts” (Peterson 108). The concern here was that this exhibition didn’t elevate the cultural significance of quilts to the status of high art, but merely suggests that these objects bare similar formal qualities in their observations of line weight, contour and space economy. As Peterson puts it in her essay, the only thing Holstein proved with this exhibition is that quilts could semi-successfully “pass” as high art for a high art crowd (108). Furthermore, it was only in 2003 that the Whitney held an exhibition of “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend.” Gee’s Bend is an isolated community situated on the Alabama River, with a majority African-

American population. The most notable cultural contribution of this community is their quilting tradition that extend before the nineteenth century and has been passed down through generations of women, originating from a female slave tradition in which the women would save scraps of discarded or imperfect cloth to make bedcovers, which lent the works their signature improvisational nature (fig. 4). And although the white cube of the art institution still loomed over such lowbrow work, in light of the criticism surrounding Holstein's exhibition, there was somewhat of a distinguished effort made to promote the social, cultural and historical origins and evolutions of these works, in terms of how they were made and who made them.

The work of Liz Magor rests somewhere between Holstein's Whitney exhibition and "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" exhibition because she at once embraces the formal and narrative aspects of the found bedcovers that comprise her sculptural work. Instead of repudiating the decorative quality associated with quilts, and crafts in general, that 1970s feminist art such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* desperately sought to disrupt, Liz Magor's work embraces the decorative and accepts the uselessness of something that is wall-bound. Two prominent works of Magor's, *Maple Leaf* (fig. 5) made in 2011 and exhibited at the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto, Canada the same year, and *French From France* (fig. 6), made in 2013, are part of a series of draped fabric sculptures (fig. 7), that the proceeding discussion will focus around. For exhibition, this series of works are habitually installed in a manner similar to Holstein's quilts at the Whitney, insofar as they are poised starkly against the white walls of the gallery, seemingly decontextualized from their individual histories. However, Magor's sculptures are folded over exposed wire hangers, which tend to imply a certain kind of narrative concerning the quotidian, the everydayness, of the works. Magor selects handmade blankets, quilts and other fiber-based domestic coverings found in thrift stores and proceeds to have them washed, ironed and folded – plain side facing outwards – in a choreographed gesture that allow for very small

moments of the geometric interiors to peek out between the folds. In that, these pieces are concerned with a kind of concealment that lends itself as a foil to the exaggeration and exhibitionism of Jenkins' performance (a spectacle inheritance of the feminist craft art, like Chicago's, that came before these works). Some of the pieces in this series are hung with the protective, plastic dry cleaning bags still hung over the fabrics. Other works in this series have been mended with many rows of stitches, a process called darning, often employed to close a wide fabric tear. Magor takes her glorification of wornness a step further by preserved the inconsistencies in the fabrics with a coating of polymerized gypsum that essentially freezes the wear, the snags, the holes and threadbaredness of each object, fossilizing the markers of their previous ownership. Loved, lost or mistreated, these objects aren't hierarchically valued by Magor. As an anthropological archive, their status as decorative artifacts within an art institutional setting is leveled by the fair treatment and modest display of the hallmarks of their decorativeness. Everything confined inside the work is positioned as equivalent commodity forms with uniform value that would not exist outside of the context of the gallery. All this said, the distinctive crux of Magor's work is in the decision to cover-up the decorative face of the blanket that is habitually displayed outwards. Magor's choice to veil that which is traditionally thought to be the most compelling quality of a bedcovering forces the viewer to analyze the details of the construction of the blanket, in all of its shortcomings. The impermeable interior of the work forces the spectator to instrumentalize its exposed edges as a legend of sorts – a traversable index of what is folded inside. The work composes an aesthetic vernacular that allows one to reads through specific set of material associations in order to peel back a history that has, in its mundanity and innocuousness, become impenetrable. However, the installation of these works also begs the question of what is at stake when we choose to render a utilitarian object absolutely useless? Additionally, how does this affect the status of decoration in the echelon of lowbrow and high art and the dichotomy between the useful and the

decorative? As Harris proposes in his essay concerning uselessness: “We are so estranged from the past that we turn old utensils into the exact opposite of utensils, into art objects, modernist sculptures denuded of both meaning and utility [...]” (28). *French From France* has an especially utilitarian identity that alludes to a specific kind of Canadiana, entirely bound up in the history of The Hudson Bay Company and the exchange of consumer goods, particularly wools and furs, during the colonization of Canada. Over time, commodities like this blanket accumulate distinct and significant aesthetic and historical values that imbue them with symbolic weight. Acknowledging this history, what happens when a consumer good, like a Hudson’s Bay blanket becomes an artisanal artifact hung on a gallery wall? By petrifying a useful product like a wool blanket, the object is rendered equally as decorative as a fussy and ornate tapestry. In this way, the content of Magor’s sculptures address an index of ownership and hierarchy between people and objects, producers and commodities, makers and buyers. Each blanket hung, paralyzed by gypsum, had, at one point, a utilitarian purpose that has now been rendered useless by virtue of the work’s insistence on stasis – on preserving the decorative and articulating a narrative not through their previous utilitarianism, but through their newfound status as cultural artifacts to be admired. The domestic objects that compose Magor’s work do not, cannot transform, it is the fetishistic agency invested in the form that makes it so. Their folds refuse to be explicit about their own existence, it is the agency the viewer impresses upon the work that counterfeits a story of quaintness, homespun labor and nostalgic reverence. Consequently, Magor’s work is ultimately an example of what occurs when craft is utterly absorbed into fine art.

IV. THE POLITICS OF THE HOMESPUN AND AMATEURISM

As the aesthetic of the homespun constituted a pillar of the 1970s feminist craft movement, the eighties and nineties high art interests in craft championed the lowbrow. Opportunities to examine the

abject side of fiber-based art, something that is only hinted at in Jenkins' and Magor's work, were taken advantage of by artists such as Mike Kelley. Particularly in regard to his work *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (fig. 8) from 1987, Kelley explores notions of labor through an amateur deployment of craft, unconcerned with the skilledness of the work itself, as a means of subversively questioning the rank of craft within an institutional hierarchy of low and highbrow art. The work itself is a dismal, tragic assemblage of forgotten stuffed toys that Kelley collected from secondhand shops and stitched onto a found afghan blanket. Much in the same way that Magor only selects handmade items from the thrift stores that she pilfers, Kelley's work is only comprised of handmade dolls and plush animals, squarely underscoring manual, amateur labor. The implications of the title are manifold insofar as it alludes to a labor of love on the maker's part and the consequences of loving something too much on the possessor's part, evidenced in the cherishedness of the worn and ragged toys. The piece is eerily quaint and simultaneously haunting. As Harris suggests in his essay on "Quaintness,"

"The primitive belief that our possessions have souls has never disappeared from our culture, and in fact has been reawakened in the twentieth century by consumerism and the tyranny of the new, which have given rise to a new folk religion whose purpose is to restore to our possessions their inner lives" (39).

The orphaned toys are a testament to the passage of time; the coming of age of children who are forced to relinquish their favorite plush companions in exchange for the laborious burdens of adulthood. In a way, Kelley indirectly puts Harris' claim to task, positioning the work as an ensemble of questions concerning labor and time value. *More Love Hours* questions whether the arduous process of handmaking these toys and the owners' love previously invested in these objects, now found neglected and abandoned in thrift stores, is worth its weight in time and if so, can the labor be compensated? Unlike a formal appliqué quilt, Kelley's handiwork is haphazard, blatantly unconcerned with technique

or a certain level of craftsmanship, in that; the work is wholly an embrace of not only the abject, but the amateurishness of its construction. In *Thinking Through Craft* Glenn Adamson suggests that this was because Kelley's "[...] main interest in craft is therefore not in its positive gender associations, but its negative or marginal social character. He has described craft as culturally "invisible" and degraded [...]" (160). Kelley identifies craft as a formal language that has historically been subjugated and gendered for its inferiority and deploys the form in a way that disrupts the hegemonic ideological structures that subtend the content in order to "[...] mongrelize their syntactical relation [...]" (Adamson 60). Kelley taps into the high art prejudice which suggest that craft can only ever operate as an inferior mode of making in relation to fine art because of its predilection towards the decorative. *More Loves Hours* isn't decorative in a traditional sense, but it is ornate in a debased way that comments on excess, whilst still employing stitching techniques that were originally created for decorative craft. In light of this adoption, Kelley was accused by some critics of flippantly appropriating feminist craft tactics, because the work is not overtly feminist in its political inclinations, it was perceived to erase a specific history of female labor.

Although Kelley appropriates feminist techniques, his motives are seemingly genuine in their intent to dismantle the hierarchy of value between amateur craft and high art. Faile's take on the appliqué quilt is much more an antagonistic erasure of the feminist heritage linked to quilting. A collaboration between artists Patrick McNeil and Patrick Miller, Faile's *Lost and Found* (fig. 9), made in 2014, was featured in the Los Angeles originated *Cat Art Show*. The fact that this work was first exhibited as part of an art exhibition all about cats already indicates a preoccupation with lowbrow kitsch culture similar to Kelley, but contextualized by a contemporary irreverence for internet trends. Within the simple, geometric pattern of the salmon-colored quilt are eight appliqués of silk-screened illustration of cat portraits, in a style reminiscent of DIY 'Lost Pet' posters. These are systematically

interspersed with mantras and personalized catchphrases that nod to the provocative and antagonistic one-liners of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Tracy Emin. In the center, in a similar illustrative style is an image of an older woman riding a motorcycle, encircled by a banner that states: “Witches of the Night.” In that, the work offers up a portrait of a character, that suggests that, for the artists, there is a legible correlation between the crazy cat lady trope, quilting and witchcraft. *Lost and Found*’s trivialization of quilting, and by relation its distinctly female history, encompasses a devolution of high art manifesting itself as a stylized narrative of lowbrow culture. Pushing the boundaries much further than Kelley, Faile’s interest in appropriation, collage and consumer culture iconography takes the subversively quaint, homespun aesthetic that the 1970s feminist craft movement fought to have taken seriously as high art, and drags that legacy through the residues of lowbrow culture.

This aggressive move away from the professionalism of high art fetishizes amateurism as its hero. This isn’t exemplified better than it manifests itself in the recent quilt works of Tracy Emin, which recapitulate the feminist sensibilities that Faile’s work denigrates, but tailored to Emin’s autobiographical fixations. The work, *I Do Not Expect* (fig. 10), from 2002, and the many other quilts like it (fig. 11) that Emin has made, highlights the debasedness of amateur craft. Unlike Kelley, Emin puts undivided attention on the historical narrative, unintentionally reinforced in the Whitney quilt exhibitions, that quilting is unequivocally women’s work and therefore, categorically not high art. Emin takes this case of gender essentialism and instead of subverting it or dismantling the binary of low and high art as Kelley attempts, Emin fully exploits not only this narrative, but the domesticated trope of female hysteria as well. As Adamson states, Emin’s quilts are “[...] a mechanism that performs the double act of guaranteeing authenticity, but which in fact takes into account the replication of her self as a highly successful commodity” (161). For Emin, who in her general notoriety and fine art status is decidedly not an amateur craftswoman, her deployment of counterfeit amateurism

not only constitutes her celebrity, but also articulates her fetishization of craft in similar ways as Magor's work. As John Miller states in "For A Set of Abandoned Futures",

"[...] craft becomes convoluted: a fetish. According to the logic of high modernism, craft is also the opposite of fine art. In mass culture, craft typically devolves into hobbies, namely the escapist pursuit of producing only nominally useful things, a pretext for busy work" (135).

As Miller suggests, Emin's quilts convey a hobbyist aesthetic, there are no traces of the concerns of pattern, line, form, shape or other formal systems that habitually concern professional quilters. Emin's quilts aren't well put together, straight, clean or systematized whatsoever, which suggests a romanticized interpretation of quilting as a female-oriented tradition. Emin emphasizes the marginalization of craft as an art form by invoking a secret system of signs, symbols and meaning in her quilts – the coded, highly personalized slogans allude to a language to which the general public is not privy. Whereas there is certainly a historical narrative of black femininity present in the quilts of Gee's Bend and even more evident in the work of Faith Ringgold (fig. 12), Emin does not employ quilting to construct an accurate biographical narrative, but a fabricated one that is bound up in her celebrity – for Emin, the quilt is ostentatiously canvas as confessional stage. If Kelley's motives for appropriating craft are external to himself, Emin's are indisputably internal, as she positions herself as the emphatically female subject of her work, fetishistically imbuing craft with contrived personal value.

V. CONCLUSION

This examination of contemporary fiber art intended to discover why craft is so popular at this particular point in time and whether this resurgence can possibly articulate the same feminist politics as the original movement. At this moment, I hazard to claim that this is not even the goal of the current

craft movement, it is its pretense, it feigns feminist rhetoric by re-invoking the artisinal object and that is precisely what makes it popular. The work of Casey Jenkins, Liz Magor, Mike Kelley and Tracy Emin pivot on the precedent set by the lineage of the 1970s feminist craft movement, however they hinge on subjective ritualizations of labor and fetishistic interpretations of craft as both fine art and a commodity form. This is not to say that this was not also a preoccupation of the original feminist craft movement, but that it has been translated differently in the present, in consideration of the influence of late capitalism. Framed by the trajectory of women's distinct histories, these contemporary works don't necessarily articulate the same commitment to feminist activism that their predecessors intended to achieve because contemporary craft is more concerned with aesthetic politics than the gender politics imbued in the medium. Although these works may look and behave the same way as their antecedents, they do not speak the same language. In meditating on the motivations of the artworks under speculation, in terms of the ways in which they activate discourses on the female body, labor, the ritualization of craft, the status of the decorative and the politics of amateurism, they seem to be deployed as fetishistic devices that emulate a bad kind of nostalgia. The type of nostalgia that co-opts the aesthetic of an era without entirely acknowledging the social, political and economic contexts that contributed to its stylization. This is not to claim, however, that these works are superficial, just that their motivation are distinct from seventies craft. They are attempts to commemorate, challenge and relocate the feminist craft aesthetic as opposed to regurgitate the political motivations that incarnated the movement itself. This fetishism of craft as a formal methodology is perhaps a privilege of these works that, within the current capitalist structure, garner attention by exploiting a contemporary desire to value the forgotten artisinal object, laden with aura, authenticity and the hand of the artist, because it is these qualities that continually constitute and activate craft as a form. We are nostalgic for the artisinal – which is not anti-technology, just a romanticization of the mythified quaintness of the

homespun object. This said, feminist craft strategies are desirable again in fine art and in popular culture for the very same reasons that most old things get recycled – because Western society is obsessed with reinvigorating the artisinal in an age where authenticity no longer exists and is not valued in general. The original artifact does not possess the same value that it once did, and craft becomes a vehicle through which we can repossess the original. Ultimately, these works of art are fetishistic inhabitations of the present mediated through nostalgic manifestations of the past.

VI. IMAGES



Figure 1. Casey Jenkins, *Casting Off My Womb*, 2012, performance, wool, menstrual blood.

Jenkins, Casey. "I'm the vaginal knitting performance artist - and I want to defend my work." *The Guardian*. (13. Dec. 2003). Web. 1 Nov. 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/vaginal-knitting-artist-defense>>



Figure 2. Faith Wilding, *Womb Room*, 1972, crocheted wool environment, size variable

Ripley, Carina. "Womb Room at Whitworth." Personal Weblog, Carina Ripley. (11 Dec. 2015). Web. 7 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.carinaripley.com/blog/womb-room-at-whitworth>>



Figure 3. Liz Magor, *Maple Leaf*, 2011, Wool, dye, fabric, metal, plastic, thread, 58 x 24 1/2 x 4 inches

Figure 4. Liz Magor, *French from France*, 2013, Wool, fabric, thread, plastic, metal and wood, 60 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 6 inches

Jeffries, Catriona. "Liz Magor – Works." Catriona Jeffries Gallery Website. N. d. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
<<http://catrionajeffries.com/artists/liz-magor/works/>>

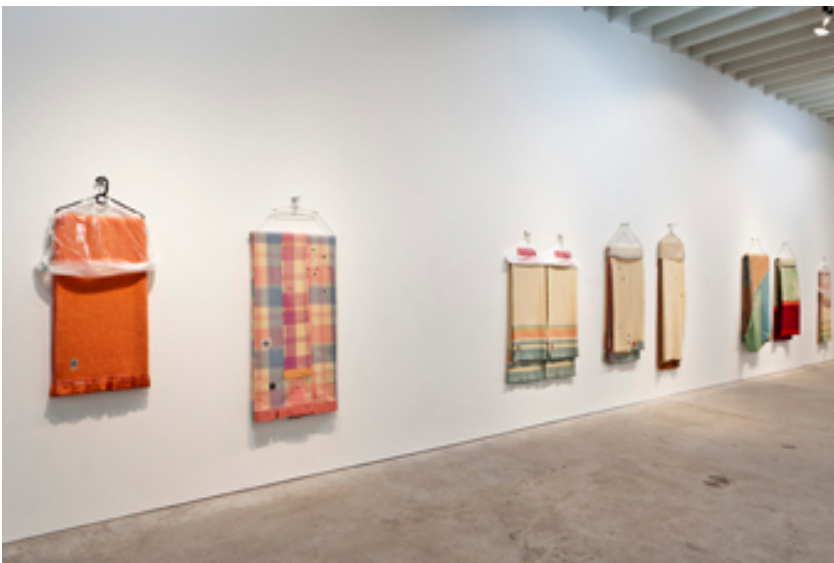


Figure 5. Liz Magor, Installation view, Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto, 2011

Jeffries, Catriona. "Liz Magor – Works." Catriona Jeffries Gallery Website. N. d. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
<<http://catrionajeffries.com/artists/liz-magor/works/>>

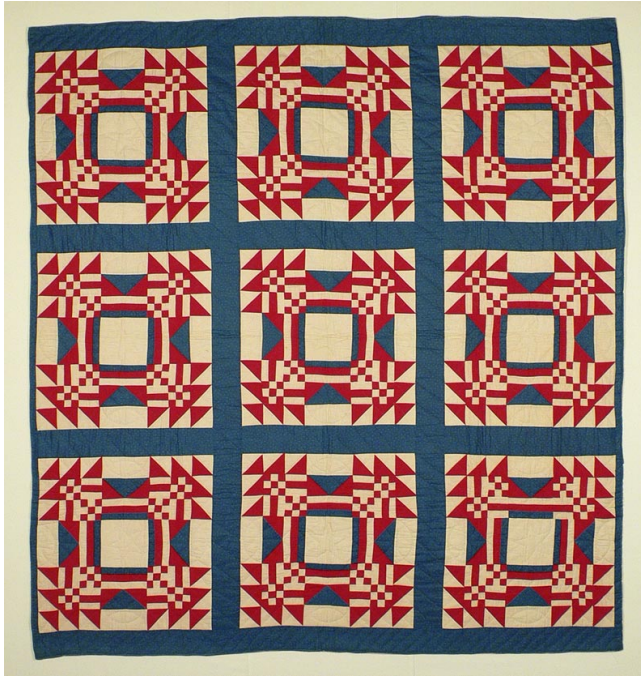


Figure 6. Quilt from the Jonathan Holstein Collection.

Nebraska State Historical Society. "Quilts A –Z." N. d. Web. 30 Nov. 2016.
<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/sites/mnh/quilts_a_z/u-z.htm>



Figure 7. Sally Bennett Jones, 1966, "Center medallion of triangles, surrounded by multiple borders, cotton," 86 x 77 inches

"Quilts of Gee's Bend Catalogue." N. d. Web. 7 Dec. 2016.
<<https://www.auburn.edu/academic/other/geesbend/explore/catalog/slideshow/index.htm>>



Figure 10. Tracy Emin, *I Do Not Expect*, 2002

Brach, Claire. "Tracy Emin Analytical Study." Personal Weblog: "Tactual Textiles. (22 Dec. 2013). Web. 7 Dec. 2016. <<https://tactualtextiles.wordpress.com/2013/12/22/assignment-4project-1-stage-3-1st-analytical-study/>>



Figure 11. Installation view of Tracy Emin's quilts

Brach, Claire. "Tracy Emin Analytical Study." Personal Weblog: "Tactual Textiles. (22 Dec. 2013). Web. 7 Dec. 2016. <<https://tactualtextiles.wordpress.com/2013/12/22/assignment-4-project-1stage-3-1st-analytical-study/>>



Figure 12. Faith Ringgold, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border, 74 x 80 inches

Doyle, Nancy. "Artist Profile: Faith Ringgold." *Nancy Doyle Fine Art*. Personal Weblog, Nancy Doyle. N. d. Web. 9 Dec. 2016. < <http://www.ndoylefineart.com/ringgold.html> >

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