

Making Strange the Domestic Space:

Renovating Relations between Labor, Commodity, Amateurism and Theatricality
in Jessica Stockholder's *Just Sew*

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Women have historically been ideologically associated with systems of domestic space in an attempt to restrict female access to the public sphere. In conjunction with this spatialization of femininity, craft was represented as a hallmark of the homebound woman – not simply because it is a medium that is at once utilitarian and permissibly feminine, but fundamentally, because it is a medium that is often portable and, therefore, confineable. In order to suppress women’s agency and minimize their access to public life (which conveniently kept patriarchal structures intact), fiber-based crafts were allocated as women’s work. Because of their distinctly gendered and hobbyist connotations, craft techniques were relegated to the domain of the decorative. In light of the feminization of craft, it was subsequently categorized as amateur, and therefore apart from and inferior to other ‘professionalized’ forms of artistic practice. With respect to this history, this essay will take up Jessica Stockholder’s installation work, titled *Just Sew*, and her essay “Art and Labor,” and situate these texts within a broader conversation concerning her work’s relationship to feminist craft, gendered labor and the domestic space. This discussion will be underpinned by a historical framework that figures Stockholder’s work into a lineage of craft-adjacent practices incited by the second wave feminist art movement. By analyzing the ways in which Stockholder’s work grapples with commodity fetishism, this essay will demonstrate how Stockholder makes use of representations of the domestic as a site through which to restructure dominant assumptions about gendered labor and its relationship to craft.

Just Sew, from 2009, is currently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the exhibition *Open Ended: Painting and Sculpture Since 1900*. Stockholder’s work is a multi-surface, sculptural installation that places emphasis on the idiosyncratic arrangement of forms and color in space. Featuring mostly common goods collected from secondhand stores, garage sales, and hardware stores, this work is a defamiliarized anthropological account of the everyday. Pinned

to the wall is a collage-like assemblage that includes a deconstructed yellow rubber boot, yellow latex coveralls, a blue cloth curtain with a bubblegum pink quadrilateral painted on it and a plastic shower curtain with transparent brushes strokes of phthalo blue paint. To the left of this drapery is a single asymmetrical neon red form cut out of plastic and attached to the wall at eye level. Another geometric form of the same material is repeated on the nearby rubber boot. Sitting below the assembled curtain is a wooden structure painted with geometric shapes in blue and pink with two accompanying VHS cassette tapes wrapped in forest green plastic. Down and to the right of the wall-hanging, is a metal cube frame protruding from the wall – attached to this frame is a collection of green objects and materials including a plastic tray, tennis ball, plastic drain catcher and fake pears wrapped in waxy green tape. On the floor, a few inches away from the wall structure is an olive green carpet with a thick viridian stripe down its left side. Stretching diagonally across the top left corner of the carpet are two overlapping geometric forms similar to those that appear on the curtains. One is painted in a gradient that goes from bright peach to a lemon yellow, and the other, slightly smaller shape, (which is more of a large stain than a staunch geometrical form), graduates from turquoise blue to lime green.

Regarding the role that color has in informing her installation works, Stockholder states, “I make art to play with color, to see it work.... [But] I experience color as sculptural, as something that collects onto things and takes up space, a physical event existing next to physical objects.”¹ As such, color becomes an aesthetic with which to articulate and delineate spatial relationships. Sitting on top of the carpet painting is a small glass side table with a wooden frame. The two front-facing legs of the frame are painted in lime green and sky blue, some swatches of dark green felt line the front left leg and a piece of grey faux-fur is attached to the top of the frame. More geometric

¹ As quoted in Miwon Kwon, “Promiscuity of Space: Some Thoughts on Jessica Stockholder's Scenographic Compositions,” *Grey Room*, no. 18 (2004): 6.

forms in pink are painted over these swatches. At the top the glass table sits a lamp with a lime green stand, the lampshade is shoddily covered by a sheet of copper foil. To the right of this object sit a ribbed vase, in a similar shade of green, with expressionistic marks in white, blue and pink on the front. The only object connecting the floor-based part of the installation, to its wall-based counterpart is an apple green extension cord that stems from the lamp and coils down to the floor and snakes behind the curtain.

The didactic panel that resides near the work states that the title, *Just Sew*, refers to the particular ways which people arrange the materials, furniture and bric-a-brac that decorate their homes to accommodate personal stylistic tendencies.² But, it is also a nod to the relationship between the amateur modes of repair and the craft techniques, such as stitching, that Stockholder employs to assemble the materials of her work. Miwon Kwon notes that Stockholder's installations "[...] are simultaneously abstract and literal, pictorial and material, representational and real, decorative and structural, and available for haptic and optic apperception."³ In wrestling with this system of binaries, this work also employs an assemblage aesthetic that conflates the intended functions of common goods. This formal strategy undermines the hierarchical organization of ideological binaries such as craft/art, feminine/masculine and domestic/public that are implicit in the objects.

Although there is a history of subversive craft making 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 craft practices were overtly politicized in a far-reaching way to conveying a feminist critique of the art institution, and the patriarchal systems that authorized the devaluation

² Wall text, *Open Ended: Painting and Sculpture Since 1900*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

³ Kwon, "Promiscuity of Space," 59.

of craft. This lofty goal at hand, notable artists such as Faith Wilding pulled the ritual hobbyism of craft methods into public view with her work *Womb Room* (fig. 2), a knit environment installation in Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse*, from 1972. *Womanhouse* was a vanguard and ambitious testament to the hyperbolization of amateur crafting as a way to make strange common goods that are typically marketed towards women (lipstick, stockings, cleaning products). Wilding's work conflated hegemonic definitions of art and craft as a means of destabilizing the monopoly that (male-centric) Abstract Expressionism had over the most distinguished exhibition spaces across the United States during this time. For Wilding and her contemporaries, exploring fiber and textile art was a way to embrace the marginalization of craft, constructed as an emphatically feminine 'hobby,' while also tracing an alternative history of art making that reinforces women's distinct histories at the intersection of art and feminist activism.

As the aesthetics of amateurism constituted a pillar of feminist craft sensibilities, the eighties and nineties positioned that amateurism as a means of championing bad taste. Opportunities to examine the abject side of textile-based art were taken advantage of by artists such as Tracy Emin and Mike Kelley. This aggressive move away from the professionalism of fine art is even manifested in the recent quilt works of Emin. In the piece, *I Do Not Expect* (fig. 3), from 2002, Emin exploits the historical narrative that quilting is unequivocally women's work and, therefore, categorically not legible as fine art. Emin's quilts aren't well put together, straight, clean or systematized whatsoever, which suggests a fetishized interpretation of quilting as a female-oriented tradition. For Emin, who in her general notoriety is decidedly not an 'amateur' craftswoman, the deployment of counterfeit amateurism constitutes her fetishization of craft.

Stockholder reformulate this negotiation between the commodity form and its resistance to amateur aesthetic in the present by deconstructing mass-produced commodities such as rubber

boots, rainproof overalls, plastic shower curtains and stitching them into a frankensteined drapery that suppresses use value in order to exaggerate aesthetic heterogeneity. Stockholder asserts that her work is often misinterpreted as a commentary on junk, while it does use the transformation of the commodity form as a means of discussing labor and utilitarianism, Stockholder affirms that her interests are geared more towards the defamiliarized spatial arrangement of these forms as they relate to domestic architecture.⁴ By deconstructing some objects, and covering others with texturally juxtaposing materials (wood adorned with fake fur, or synthetic paint poured over toothy carpet) and re-stitching or adhering these altered objects together, demarcates an uncanny kind of domestic environment in which use value is arrested and artistic intervention is emphasized. This assemblage tactic demonstrates what Julia Bryan-Wilson describes as a bleeding between the private and public domain, insofar as Stockholder's laborious reworking of familiar goods lays bare the abject commodification of the domestic and reflects the ways in which "[...] the entire capitalist-economy rests upon women's unpaid domestic labor."⁵ In her essay "Art and Labor," Stockholder questions the value of artistic labor as it pertains to the hierarchy of craft and fine art. She remarks, "The artist occupies a peculiar place in class structure. Working with our hands we are laborers. And yet, by expending a great amount of time and materials creating ostensibly useless objects, we are wastrels, dilettantes, connoisseurs."⁶ Stockholder questions the dualistic role artists are thought to inhabit as both producers and elitists. She, thus, implies that this space between the useful and the decorative is where art's relationship to labor plays out. This relationship becomes especially complicated when amateur craft techniques, often invoked in

⁴ Tillman, Lynne, "My Work Isn't About Junk: Jessica Stockholder on Debunking Common (Mis)Understandings of Her Work," *Artspace*, July 7 2017.

⁵ Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Lisa Anne Auerbach's Canny Domesticity" in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (New York: Berg Publishers, 2012), 290.

⁶ Jessica Stockholder and Joe Scanlan, "Art and Labor: Some Introductory Ideas," *Art Journal* 64, no. 4 (2005): 50-51.

feminist art work, are instrumentalized in mainstream artworks. To be certain, Stockholder does not directly replicate the visual language of feminist craft, but she does borrow some of their methodologies in order to articulate a relationship between the domestic and unvalorized forms of labor. In the essay, “House Work and Art Work,” Helen Molesworth observes that, “[...] historically under-recognized forms of domestic and decorative craft replace the lure (and perhaps just barely veiled decorative aspects) of industrial production.”⁷ *Just Sew* echoes Molesworth’s observation by deploying craft-like techniques to aesthetically reinvent common commodities such as a lamp, a tennis ball or a garish vase. The content of Stockholder’s installation addresses an index of ownership and hierarchy between producers, consumers and commodities.

In “Inhabited Space,” Alexa Griffith-Winton describes the relationship between Thing Theory and the domestic interior. Thing theory is a vein of critical studies that takes up the emergent social, cultural and spatial interactions between humans and objects. This theory claims that it is at the moment that objects cease to serve their utilitarian purpose that they become things, and absorb newly coded socio-cultural values. As Griffith-Winton explains, “Thing theory offers historians and theorists a means of apprehending the larger meaning of objects beyond their function or their monetary value, instead incorporating them into the analysis of whole systems of cultural practice. This has direct relevance to the critical understanding of the interior, given the number of (domestic) things incorporated into the routines of daily life.”⁸ Griffith-Winton claims that the domestic collector/connoisseur refuses objects their utilitarian purpose and their monetary value, instead reifying the object by investing in it private signification. Stockholder, working as

⁷ Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* vol. 92 (Spring 2000): 84.

⁸ Alexa Griffith-Winton, “Inhabited Space: Critical Theories and the Domestic Interior,” in *The Handbook of Interior Architecture and Design*, ed. Lois Weinthal and Graeme Brooker (London and New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 45.

both laborer and connoisseur, obstructs the use value of the objects incorporated into her spatial compositions by reinventing their aesthetic properties – a deconstructed rain boot has no use value in the sense that it can no longer perform the duty it was invented to fulfill; however, it gains new aesthetic and social value as an integral part of Stockholder's spatial composition. Although *Just Sew* is not temporally part of second wave feminism, it similarly comments on the gendering of labor. Additionally, it is concerned with how the aesthetic materialism of the domestic can be transfigured in acknowledgement of late capitalism. In thrusting the domestic onto a public stage, perversion of common goods give way to redefinition for Stockholder.

Just Sew is, in many ways, the opposite of what its title implies: it is not containable, neat or tidy, it spills out, unapologetically onto the floor and across the wall, threatening the contrived divisions between the domestic and public domains. As such, this work is not just responding to the gendering of domestic space or even explicitly conversing with a legacy of feminist craft, it is more so an account of women artists' sometimes fraught relationship to unvalorized forms of labor. Transforming a private space into a public theatre, Stockholder pulls back the curtain on the invisible forms of labor that sustain the domestic. Her genre-blending installation repurposes the properties of craft aesthetics in order to defamiliarize the tangible objects that codify domesticity. Thus, Stockholder liberates the spatialization of craft aesthetics and amateur techniques from the domestic realm and propels them into public view. Framed by a legacy of second wave feminist craft, *Just Sew* may not look and behave the same way as its precursors, but it reorganizes the language of feminist craft in reaction to current trends in mainstream art practices. The agitation of ideological binaries that preoccupied second wave feminist art, such as craft/art, feminine/masculine, private/public are implicit in Stockholder's negotiation of labor and commodity fetishism within the frame of domesticity. Ultimately, Stockholder deploys the

domestic space as a site through which to make strange prevailing associations between gendered labor and craft practices.



Tracy Emin, *I Do Not Expect* (2002), appliqued blanket, 72.83 x 103.94 inches



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (1979), Mixed media, 576 x 576 x 576 inches

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