

Textiles of Trouble, or, Dropping Threads and Finding New Ones

1. THE SWARM IS ARMED WITH CLOTH

Circled by flowers, by bodies, by lights—by spoken and printed words—is a rectangular piece of white cloth with hand-painted black and purple lettering. *No Killers No Cops Sisters Run the Block*. It is being held up by more than one woman's grip, as thousands gathered at Clapham Common bandstand to grieve, collectively, the death of Sarah Everard, and to embody (in voice, in gesture, in textile, in *swarm*) our anger and rage at her murder—by a male police officer at the fall of darkness. The force of the insectile swarm, writes the feminist thinker and classicist Page duBois, represents a source of more-than-human collective energy and protest that has the potential to upend right-wing state oppressions (the swarm always threatens to sting), which was mobilized on the evening of Saturday, 13 March 2021 to challenge and resist intersecting forms of domestic, sexual, gendered, state, and racist violence.

There, at the bandstand, where people had come to reclaim the safety of our streets from male violence and harassment against women, girls, and gender non-conforming people; refuse the controlling of gendered, sexed, and racialised bodies; perform an un-silencing, protestors were torn to the ground—*hand-cuffed*. But like the outstretched arm repeatedly emerging from the freshly covered grave in the Brothers' Grimm tale "The Willful Child" —acquiring a "life of its own, even after the death of the body of which it is a part," as the feminist theorist Sara Ahmed describes, gendering the wilful child as *her*, kin to the feminist killjoy; they are "willful women, unwilling to get along, unwilling to preserve an idea of happiness"—the feminist hand, her gesture, persists as an act of disobedience.

She embroiders the words "Girls should feel safe at school" in red thread on white cloth and tacks it to a tree.

She grasps stitched, painted, and quilted cloth in reparative protest.

She waves her purple flare.

She signals her wilfulness with candlelight.

2. HER HANDSHAKE, THE WEAVE

I looked and touched and *felt* these gestures from 100 miles away, as I helped my mother care for her mother (my 'Nana'), whose recent surgery had discovered sick shadows on her bowel and liver. The next weeks, to months, are uncertain, but Nana maintains her daily rituals, with care and wilfulness, like the way she rubs the textures of my clothing between her thumb and forefinger as a form of tactile, non-verbal, affectionate communication. This is known as 'the weaver's handshake', which the queer theorist with a passion for textiles, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, calls her own "rub of reality," and which she also inherited, along with the skills of crochet and embroidery, from her grandmother (as I also did from mine).

It was around the time of Sedgwick's becoming ill with physical pain, which then turned into a symptom, which then turned into a cancer diagnosis, that she fell "suddenly, intrusively, and passionately in love with doing textile work." She began "cutting up fabrics, especially old kimonos... to make into other fabrics," an affective process of material, reparative transformation that conveys—like the portrait of textiles artist Judith Scott embracing one of her densely-woven fibre sculptures, which illustrates the front cover of Sedgwick's 2002 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*—the "affective and aesthetic fullness that can attach even to experiences of cognitive frustration." While Nana can no longer see clearly to loop needle into thread, I see fullness, creative survival, in her everyday caresses of my clothing.

3. TEXTURES OF IDENTITY

I see it too in the stitching, veiling, ripping gestures interlaced within the artworks of this exhibition, which “imagine the sewing needle as a dangerous tool,” a source of female trouble that has the potential to “upend conventions, threaten state structures, or wreak political havoc,” as Julia Bryan-Wilson writes in *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017). In *Frida* (2020), for example, the Ukrainian-born artist Anna Perach (b. 1985) uses the raised, hairy surface of tufted rug material, in cerulean blues, citrus oranges, blood-reds, and neon-pinks, to form a sculpture of fragmented and decapitated body parts: from a woman’s neckline to her torso to her hips. It is hung on the wall as if it is the head of the bust that is missing, a wry comment on masculine authority, as a bright-red tongue, or phallus, emerges from the textile-figure’s shoulder decorated with skulls. The lower half, where the reproductive organs lie, is imagined as a paradoxical space of flowering and fecundity. And so there is a tension—between maternal care and violent death—as the artist critiques gendered archetypes and conventions—providing a more complex, ambivalent, *textured* picture of the female body—through feminised woven techniques. As a tribute to the colourful, trouble-making textiles of Frida Kahlo—the unruly nature of her life, work, and body—the work also becomes a vessel for contact and correspondence between women artists across time.

Bringing together fourteen women artists from across time and place (imagining affective and political correspondences between them), *Staying with the Trouble* departs from Donna Haraway’s eponymous articulation of the necessary response (and responsibility) to “make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.” The exhibition highlights feminist art practice as a space where such collective lines are formed, where the intimate singular meets the political universal, and where the textures of identity can emerge, in a persistent and wilful dwelling *in* the multivalent fabric of trouble. In textile works, and textile-evocative works, across performance, photography, sculpture, and video, it inhabits and unravels the contradictions and ambivalences of living, loving, working, bodying, desiring, making, as a woman today, and across time.

Vulnerable to fraying at edges and seams by wear and friction; to unravelling by touch one thread at a time; to becoming loose by pulling and stretching apart, the materiality—and languages of materiality—attached to textiles of all kinds signifies the wilful desire of feminist politics. Echoing Haraway’s methodology, this exhibition thinks with the capacity of ‘textile’—as material and language (and material ‘as’ language)—to challenge systemic sexism, classism, racism, and ableism: to remain ‘in the fray’ of the intersectional fight against such discriminations, oppressions, and violences, as Melania Toma’s (b. Italy, 1996) vast jute work comprising woven and layered materials, *Spring Summer Healing Process* (2020), explores and adapts. Conceived in affective correspondence with the Chilean *arpilleristas*, a feminist dissident movement that produced burlap-backed cloth wall hangings to speak out against human rights violations under General Pinochet, Toma’s work shapes inventive connections with past feminisms to rethink the radical, reparative effects of textile art. Indeed, Haraway’s allusion to ‘string figures’ in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) is also rooted in textiles: via the string games played with hands and fingers (like Navajo weavings or westernised versions such as cat’s cradle), which Haraway thinks with as a making, thinking, and writing process involving multispecies, speculative storytelling: “dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful.”

The string figure re-figures the troubling efforts of feminist artists, and it re-emerges in this exhibition curated by Joanna Gemes: in the straw broom dipped in black paint that the Polish artist Anna Kutera (b.1952) sweeps across a long sheet of paper (*Feminist Painting* (1973), producing embodied, active marks of circling, tracking, and patterning form, rather than gendered expectations of passive retreat, or an erased page as clean as a kitchen floor. Intimacy with the elemental “tissues” of Terra also defines the connectedness of the string figure, which is invoked by the erotic merging and string-like entangling of floating flesh, into ripped cotton ribbons, into stone, performed by Teresa Tyszkiewicz (b. Poland, 1953-2020) in *Stone* (1984). And in Małgorzata Markiewicz’s (b. Poland, 1979) more recent *Cobweb* (2003/2016), the artist utilizes textural, twisted threads of wool to weave a knitted lace dress, which splays outwards like a spider’s web entrapping the artist within its holey mesh. She is an ambivalent (string) figure (part aggressor, part victim, part multispecies

kin). She stays with the trouble, a seductive entangling. The artist took inspiration from the worlding and wise powers of a Grandma Spider Woman in Hopi Native American mythology, and it is also the *Pimoa cthulhu* spider, a tentacular string figure and companion, which Haraway appeals to when sculpting the “open and knotted” textures of SF methodologies [italics mine]. Markiewicz’s *Cobweb*, as armour, clothing, comfort-blanket, fetish, and trap, is interwoven with similar multiplicities, showing the textures of gender identity.

Stitch

The verb ‘to stitch’ is, according to its etymological root, paradoxical in meaning. As ‘a prick, puncture, sting, stab’, the embodied, textural event of the stitch suggests an act of violence from a sharpened point on the flesh. Its relation to sewing came later in history, as stitching came to mean the process of making, mending, or fastening materials together with loops of thread or yarn directed by a needle. To stitch is to perforate, and repair, fabric (or flesh).

The Birmingham-based artist Su Richardson (b. 1947) has recently materialized the subversive effects of the paradoxical stitch in crocheted pieces, which also destabilize (or ‘fray’) the misogynistic boundaries between fine art and craft, in an echo of Roszika Parker’s crucial 1984 text on embroidery and in the insurrections of ‘the feminine’. A pivotal figure in histories of British feminist art of the 1970s, Richardson’s early works manipulated the pliable properties of textiles—from sheer nylon stockings giving shape to her absent body in *Self Image aged 13* (1975) to decapitated silk gloves cradling crocheted female genitalia in *Friends Gloves II* (1979)—as a tool through which to critique gendered constructs concerning artistic discipline, domestic or affective labour, and sexual desire.

In *Heavy Heart Magnificent Menopause Mat* (2021), which is included in this exhibition, Richardson uses crocheted recycled materials and cut-up clothing in velvet, silk, chiffon, and synthetic fabrics to give weight to a soft, sculptural heart, a tactile organ to touch, interlaced with soft lilacs, deep purples, and hot-pinks to mimic the colour-code of consumable femininity. Lead weights stitched within its inside adds to the force of gravity, as do the unrecognized energies, effects, and affects of menopausal embodiment, which have been written on the ribbons that dangle from the heart’s bottom end (“itchy skin, fatigue, disrupted sleep, hair loss, memory lapses, irregular periods, anxiety, weight gain, bloating, osteoporosis, stress incontinence, brittle nails, allergies, irregular heartbeat, body odour, irritability, panic disorder”). Stitched works such as these, together with the bulbous forms and draggy breasts of *PMS Cushion* (2021), highlight the conflicts and complexities of the reproductive female body. With parodic humour, the artist mocks the feminising and pathologising frame in which the female body is ‘held’, as her bright and tactile body parts assume a surreal, soft life of their own. Her crocheted hearts, stomachs, breasts, and hands embody the paradoxical force of the stitch, its capacity to stay with the trouble. They pierce, sting, attack, and critique the gendered construction of reproductive labour, while also re-making, *transforming*, the drooping, swelling, and aching bodies who have come to endure it.

Veil

The Turkish artist Güler Ates’s (b. 1977) work also resides in the manifold resonances of a particular gesture or action, which is also a noun: *veil*. To veil is to cover, usually with cloth; it is to conceal, mask, or disguise. It is a gesture of envelopment, even entangling, between body and thing. The veil, as an article of gendered and racialised clothing, has been considered a ‘problem’: by turns demonised, pathologised, colonised, eroticised, and victimised throughout history. Rather than promise a mode of repair based on restoration or cure—as duBois has also challenged in relation to the ancient, fragmentary poetry of Sappho, and as Haraway has also forestalled, preferring the “more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together”—Ates thinks with the multivalences of veiled cloth, its cross-geographical, cross-historical iterations, in photographic prints depicting lone, cloaked figures positioned within ancient architectural surrounds.

In *Home Performance I* (2014), a figure veiled, wrapped, and draped in burnt-orange brocade appears to sail across an open square or car-park, heaving (back-arched) her own shelter with her. This operatic image, a visual mediation from a performance in the Lapa neighbourhood of Rio de

Janeiro, distorts the boundaries between embodied presence and absence, as the thick shroud weighing down her bowed head and figure refuses the desire of the photographic gaze to own her and know her. The veil becomes a trace, a spatial material in which she moves, *migrates*, as its threads rub the concrete ground. This ground: a space 'belonging' to commerce and trade, to masculine ownership, flanked by a towering viaduct, which threatens to swallow the mysterious veiled figure. But she persists in her footsteps. She is defined by movement, in the billowing drape of the cloth, in her straining forward, in the changing shape of the veil's materiality of meaning, unfixed to a singular idea of gender, nation, ethnicity, or religion. The artist challenges exoticising constructs, and orientalisating impulses, exploring instead the woven crossings of identity interwoven within veils and veiling, home and re-homing.

Cut (open)

As Ates takes scissors to cloth and revises the shape and spatial orientation of the veil, its intersectional feminist possibilities; she cuts into histories of women's categorization and containment, cutting open speculative narratives and forms. The Austrian artist Anita Witek (b. 1970) also turns to the gesture of the cut in the photographic series *Artist and Muse* (2017), treating paper like cloth in her tearing apart of posters promoting Egon Schiele's portraits at the Leopold Museum, Vienna, as a way of removing figurative signs and embodied traces of his subjects' gendered objectification. In this process of paradoxical violent repair, Witek releases new shapes with this trouble-making gesture, sculpting abstract and sensual configurations of painterly gesture that reflect upon the erasure of Schiele's model, Wally Neuzil, in art historical narratives. An alternative spectral presence is suggested, but staying with the trouble, Witek does not 'restore' her whole. Rather, it is about *texture*—noun and verb—a texturing that is threaded throughout the works on display, in stitching, veiling, ripping forms and gestures.

In this exhibition, to consider the role of textiles in feminist art—its frayed lines with activism and craft—is to highlight not only the ways cloth becomes a carrier of subversive intent, but also the ways in which feminist politics can also be read through the lens of textile materialities and concepts. It is to think of gendered bodies, lives, and identities as textured, knotty, and intermeshed. It is to feel the interwoven lines of string figures: embracing entanglement, refusing "easy binaries." It is to run with contradictions, dropping threads and finding new ones. It is to dwell in the trouble to make trouble. It is a cutting *open*: making space for the multiplicities of the swarm: its choral stitch that stings.

Alice Butler

Dr Alice Butler is a writer and scholar whose field of research focuses on the intersections of recent and contemporary feminist art and writing to explore debates regarding gender, embodiment, sickness, and sexuality, via feminist and queer perspectives and experimental approaches to archive and autotheory. This is evident in her first upcoming book on Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller's lives in and as writing, which is a development from her PhD thesis, awarded from the University of Manchester in 2019. She is currently a 2020 Paul Mellon Centre Postdoctoral Fellow, researching a book project on textiles and perversions in feminist art and writing practices, which she began as the 2019 Freud Museum Writer in Residence. Her work has been published widely across art and academic contexts, with recent essays published in the MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE anthologies *ON CARE* (2020) and *ON FIGURES* (2021). She teaches in Critical and Historical Studies at the Royal College of Art, London.

Page duBois, "The Politics of the Swarm," Princeton University, 16 April 2019. Accessed: https://mediacentral.princeton.edu/media/Faber+LecturesA+Page+duBois/1_a9mjmwlw, Date accessed: 20 March 2021.

Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 1-2.
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Making Things, Practicing Emptiness," in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 71.
Sedgwick, "Making Things, Practicing Emptiness," 71.

l'étrangère

Ibid.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 24.

Julia Bryan Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

I am indebted to Bryan-Wilson's close reading of definitions, encompassing the terms 'fray', 'fraying', and 'in the fray', in *Fray*, 4.

Ibid., 10.

Ibid., 31.

Ibid.

See Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010 [new edition]).

See Page duBois, *Sappho is Burning* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, 7.