



**Visiting Artist:
Sheila Pepe**

**Tuesday, February 28, 6:30p
Sleeper Auditorium**



About Sheila Pepe

Sheila Pepe is best known for her large-scale, ephemeral installations and sculpture made from domestic and industrial materials. Since the mid-1990s Pepe has used feminist and craft traditions to investigate received notions concerning the production of canonical artwork as well as the artist's relationship to museum display and the art institution itself.

Pepe has exhibited widely throughout the United States and abroad in solo and group exhibitions as well as collaborative projects. Venues for Pepe's many solo exhibitions include the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, and the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, North Carolina. Her work has been included in important group exhibitions such as the first Greater New York at PS1/MoMA; *Hand + Made: The Performative Impulse in Art & Craft*, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, Texas, and *Artisterium*, Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia. Pepe's work was recently featured in the exhibition *Queer Threads* at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Lesbian and Gay Art in New York, and commissions for the 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale, exhibitions include a commission for the ICA/Boston's traveling exhibition *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-present*. Two new solo projects are scheduled for 2016 – a summer installation at Diverseworks, Houston, TX, with special event works by CORE participant Sondra Perry.

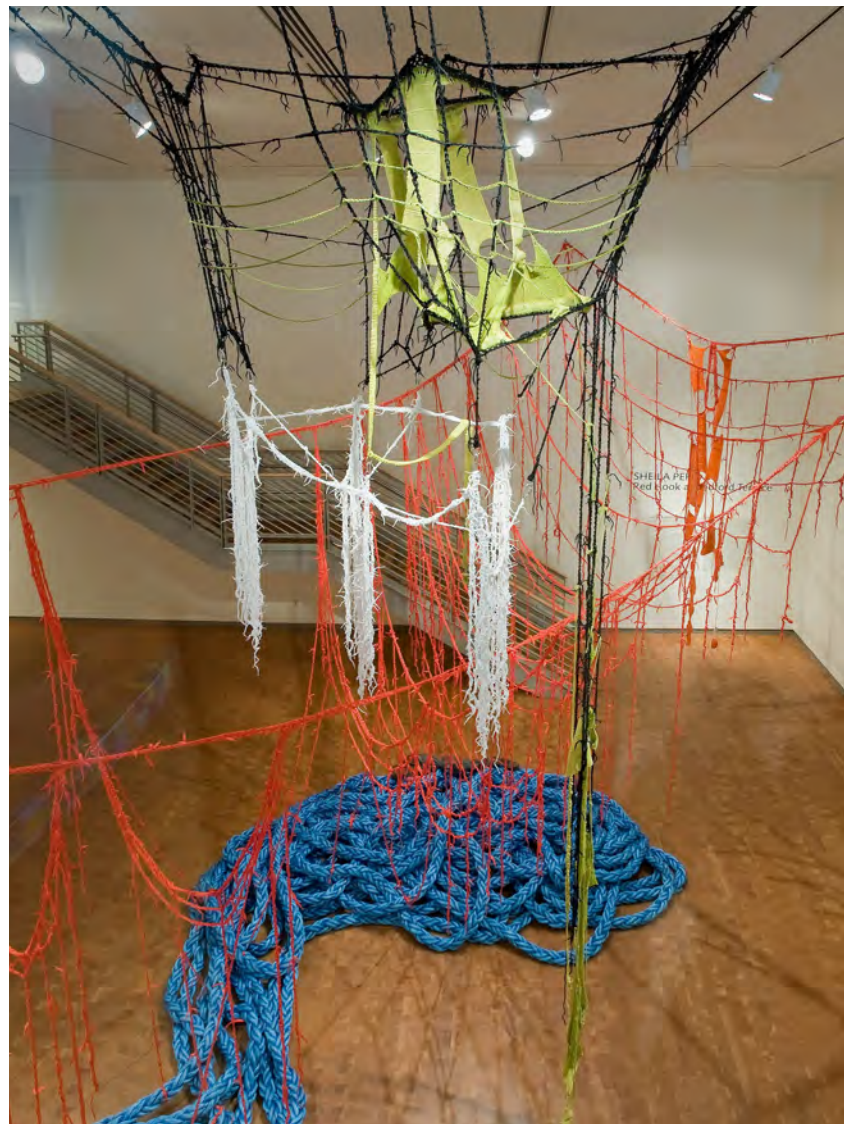
Pepe is also known as an educator who likes to trespass the boundaries of fixed disciplines in art and design. She has taught since 1995—for many years as adjunct faculty in a variety of programs and schools including Brandeis University, Bard College, RISD, VCU, and Williams College—until 2006 when she took a full-time position at Pratt Institute as the assistant chair of fine arts. Her own artistic development was a mix of academic training and non-degree granting residencies: BFA, Massachusetts College of Art, 1983; Haystack School, 1984; Skowhegan School, 1994; MFA, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 1995; and Radcliffe Institute, 1998–99. Pepe was a resident faculty member at Skowhegan School, 2013. She is now a Core Critic in the Painting + Printmaking Department at Yale University.



Biography

- 1959** Born in Morristown, New Jersey.
- 1983** Receives a BFA in Ceramics from Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.
- 1995** Completes her MFA at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 1997** Included in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth-Century Art* at the ICA Boston.
- 2000** Featured in *Greater New York* at MoMA P.S.1
- 2001** Receives Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award
- 2005** *Mind the Gap*, a site-specific installation, at University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- 2009** Awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Artists Grant
- 2010** Featured in *Hand + Made: The Performative Impulse in Art & Craft*, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, TX
- 2014** Major site-specific installation, included in *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-Present*, a group exhibition at the ICA Boston.

Works





Writings by Sheila Pepe

Honor our Wrinkles: Fiber, Women, Dykes & Queers
Interview with L.J. Roberts
Art Practical, February 2015

Twenty Things About Art Education
Brooklyn Rail, December 2015

The Margin You Feel May Not Be Real
Brooklyn Rail, April 2014

Craft Class
Open Art Journal, June 2011

Sisterhood, Then and Now
Gay City News, November 2005



6.3 / Dimensions: Expanded Measures of Textiles

Honor our Wrinkles: Fiber, Women, Dykes and Queers

By Sheila Pepe, L.J. Roberts *February 26, 2015*

I first heard the name "Sheila Pepe" in 2001 in my junior year at the University of Vermont. In sculpture classes, I was making art using wood, video, plaster, and textiles—though the textile element always seemed like an afterthought. (The summer before my junior year, I had injured my foot in a terrible accident. In bed for months, I began to knit after a fourteen-year hiatus.) When I began my intermediate sculpture class, I presented knitted work. My professor, Kathleen Schneider, gave me a list of names of artists working with fiber; Sheila's was at the top. When I saw her work, I was in awe. Her huge installations took the ideas in my imagination and blew them up—the ante had been upped. What was even more exciting: Sheila was a butch and was crocheting. As a baby gender-fucked butch, I felt surprised and perhaps even embarrassed that I was knitting and not welding, but there was Sheila using a crochet hook and shoelaces and tow-ropes to take over giant spaces, in a gender that I aspired to. Fifteen years later, I am more comfortable in my gender but still in awe of Sheila for not only her artistic practice but also her contributions to local and international creative communities. Sheila has taught so many students, good friends of mine, who also revere her. She writes, speaks up, and collaborates. She is generous with her wisdom and her willingness to listen.

For this issue of Art Practical, I am happy to share my discussion with Sheila about feminism, fibers, politics, and the current directions of our work. Through the winter, we conversed on the phone and through email, sharing our ideas, speaking from our respective generational positions, and laughing about being gender weirdos obsessed with yarn. The following is a small snippet of what was said. —L.J. Roberts

L.J. Roberts (LJ): Do think your use of abstraction mixed with craft is a strategy that inserts political concerns and agendas into a form that can be accessed by a wider range of people with more avenues for interpretation? If so, my work differs greatly from yours in that way. I thought I worked very literally, but now I'm actually working figuratively, which is not where I saw myself going at all. Perhaps that closes doors on the conversation and creates less of a gateway for multifaceted conversations.

Sheila Pepe (SP): I think we are all working literally, but we are also working to combine layers of literal signs and signals that work as metaphor and analogy. It is what it is—and it points to something else. That's why I'm thinking again about craft and art. One could say that within the context of art, craft may be queer but only if the latter is understood as a static self-sustaining location, invested in and empowered by its marginality. To this end, there must be an inherent disinterest in becoming part of the larger whole. As a personal quest, this sounds good, but as a political one, it doesn't: few people have the luxury of—or interest in—living and/or working in a static state of marginality.

I'm wondering what your political ambitions are for the concepts of queer and craft. What do they look like, in your mind's eye?



L.J. Roberts. *The Queer Houses of Brooklyn In The Three Town of Boswyck, Breukelen, and Midwout During the 41st Year of the Stonewall Era* (Based on the drawing by Daniel Rosza Lang/Levitsky and with illustrations by Buzz Slutzky), 2011; crank-knit yarn, fabric, thread, poly-fil 1-inch pins (free to the public and to be replenished endlessly). Courtesy of the Artist.

LJ:

For me, lately, the politics of craft and queer identity have been revolving around the notions of women and femininity—in terms of concept, visibility, and political gain—academically and even in the market.

In disciplines that have been traditionally practiced by women, like textiles, we've seen a group of men—particularly cisgender men—become highly visible, which is quite different

than how women working in textiles have been positioned, both historically and contemporarily. Many representations of masculinity in mainstream culture are quite violent, and so to see a man exuding a feminine masculinity—like knitting or crafting, for example, is enticing. Most of these men who position themselves within the realm of queer craft (if we want to use that term) are making work about men, male identity, and male desire (usually toward other men). The valuing of men engaged in textiles is often hyper-gendered and what I call slyly misogynist. For instance, the show *Man-Made: Contemporary Male Quilters* that recently opened in Los Angeles at the Craft and Folk Art Museum seems to embody a lot of the problems you and I have been talking about, in terms of the intersections of queer identity and craft. It's a show composed entirely of white cisgender men (queer and straight) who all are making work about being male. It's convenient to engage in women's work to accentuate and declare masculinity. I think of these men-who-sew shows as illustrating Sedgwickian Triangles,² a dynamic in which men flirt or bond through a woman who acts as a conduit—but in this context, it's a creative practice that has been historically marginalized that is a catalyst for these homosocial dynamics. These shows have systemic consequences on so many levels, micro and macro.

We used to call the Textiles Department the "Exile Department."

I was mulling on what you said, about the luxury of marginality and the disinterest in becoming part of the larger whole. When I was a graduate student at California College of the Arts (CCA), we used to call the Textiles Department the "Exile Department." Someone even peeled the vinyl "T" off the door, so it said "EXILE." The department isn't located on either of the two main campuses; it's in a building across the street from the Oakland campus. It was filled with women and a few gender-queer and trans people like myself, and often one would hear complaints about the lack of men—a statement that rung misogynist to me. (Though the department did at the time have one of the only gender-non-specific bathrooms in the entire college.) During this time, when craft was in a crisis—CCA dropped the word *craft* from its name in 2003—craft departments were hungry to be recognized, I think. I had the aching suspicion that rallying to bring men into these exiled departments provided the double dip of legitimacy and—almost ironically—diversity. When I mentioned this to a mentor, she said, "Oh, the exile has been colonized," which is also something that queers regularly do to people of color. Most of the rare tenure-track and full-time positions at the top fiber and textile programs in the country have been given to men while women, trans and gender non-conforming people are stuck in adjunct positions. I think this follows a national trend, where homonormative populations—particularly gay white males—have seen their social and economic status advance while women and transpeople see their rights scaled back. We see this trend in the recent decisions made by the Supreme Court. More states will legalize gay marriage, and soon such a case will likely go to the Supreme Court and become federal law. But at the same time it is becoming legal for employers to deny birth control based on religion or to restrict abortion rights. Women and trans people are still being cast aside for what is now a tolerable or even desirable gay presence, one that is resolutely male, white, and Western. In my opinion, this is pink washing.

So, to answer your question, the political project of queer craft needs to embrace a trans-feminist politics, one coming from a transnational feminist perspective. It would center the work of women, trans people, people of color, or people from locations other than the United States as a foundational and critical political position. We must sit down and deeply interrogate how men are positioned in the realm of textiles in the United States and in its academic and art-world offshoots. What does it mean to have men who are making work that pertains to being a man—about men, male desire, and masculinity—appropriating traditional women's work and theory that is grounded in feminism, without much accountability? Homonormativity that centers cisgender men's experiences omits critical feminist viewpoints. Simultaneously, works made by women and by trans or gender-non-conforming people are cast aside for being less valued genders. What does it mean to have men teaching craft theory that addresses queerness that is primarily generated by women, trans, and gender non-conforming people? If we are going to use the term *queer*, we should interrogate institutional power and violence and then act on it in a way that does not perpetuate misogyny, trans-phobia, xenophobia, racism, classism and ageism. Let's not have *queer* be something that skims the cream off the surface but instead something that deeply strives to push our ways of thinking about what's being accomplished, who's being forgotten, and where we need to be accountable.

I'd love to hear your answer to the same question: In terms of your political aspirations for textiles and craft, what would you like to see?

How has the field of textiles adapted in relation to other forms and dialogues to allow the impurity of its material and functional referents? If you make an image with textiles, do you call it a painting? The use of textiles is simply one way to think of making a painting (or a sculpture). Helen Frankenthaler's paintings made with pours and stains touch on the history of textiles as a way to demonstrate new (and very old) ideas about making images. The broader field is where the rules can and need to be bent into submission.

We can only take a stance of difference in a large, heterogeneous platform that already lives in a broad public imagination. I maintain a public identity as lesbian, feminist, and textile user as a way to persistently point to the political otherness of people and taste. I do so in an effort to make these things move from a disempowered Other to valued differences in a broad field of shared differences—all as empowered in real terms of access, money, and influence. I'm working against purity and for equal access.

LJ:

I admire your practice of maintaining otherness in a large arena to encourage dialogue in overlapping communities and facets of material culture. I think a textile pedagogy, in which a foundational aspect is how to see and analyze the concept of difference, is key to finding something deeper. There has got to be a move toward applying multifaceted interdisciplinary approaches to textiles that makes the experiences of making, viewing, and consuming them multidimensional and not cliché or exotic. I don't want to label everything as queer—the labeling defeats the purpose, and you end up with a calcifying effect. I think it is better to venture into territory that is unknown and that leaves more questions than answers. You want to be taken to a place where the walls of your thinking crumble and you begin to consider possibilities that seem unthinkable or unimaginable. I think your questions locate critical locations of inquiry that often are cast aside by easy trends. For a discipline that expressed anxiety about being marginalized by both craft and art circles for a long time, turning to trends is a fast but faulty way to attain leverage.

During our conversations, one profound thing for me was hearing about the many ways you've stayed within and moved through marginalia throughout your life. You've employed different strategies at different times in response to personal or political elements or environments that necessitate these tactics—at times you've been separatist and at times very inclusive. To me, your ability to shift and still maintain your politics over a lifetime is very inspiring. And I wonder if multiple textile circles can take this model of shifting impermanence as a framework for the development of critical movement without becoming static or turning to easy solutions from anxiety. I feel good about a cycle of persistent destabilization that is at times uncomfortable. I want to think big and inclusively, but I also don't want to abandon discussing specific political issues and concerns that feel urgent pertaining to textiles, both conceptually and logistically.

SP:

In your 2007 thesis, you argue that queer theory could provide a model for theorizing craft—as Other and marginal—and note the sources of queer theory as being activism,

feminism and women's studies.¹ This is a compelling idea, since my decision to use crochet in 1998 (rather than any other craft form) was that it was a valued yet marginalized form that honored my biological and feminist mothers while it winked to those who knew me and my mustache, as a mashing of gender signs and behaviors.

I've come to call it queer in order to speak to another generation. But I've always found the word *queer* as it's performed very limited in the art community and beyond. I have found it consistently so male-identified that seeing the work through my lesbian-feminist lens would never completely fit in. What about you?

LJ:

Great question. I once saw this punk patch that read, "Not queer as in radical but lesbian as in FUCK YOU." In a lot of supposedly radical queer dialogue today, lesbians can get a bad rep. I think this trashing is tied to the policies of institutions like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival excluding women of trans experience (many of whom are lesbians and dykes). I've never attended the festival because I find their policy of exclusion towards trans women violent. No one should be denied a chosen gender. I think it's important to remember that trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) don't represent all lesbians. At the moment I identify as gender-non-conforming and as trans and a dyke. I have friends, lovers, and ex-lovers who identify as lesbian and dyke who steadfastly affirm my gender and those along both masculine and feminine trans spectrums.

I've been thinking a lot about how we currently define what a woman is and how I apply that to my own identity. In the '90s, when I was inching my way out of the closet, I saw images of butches, and they were pierced and muscled and bearded, and there were femmes of all sorts of variations and dykes that were neither. The definition of a lesbian or a dyke is messy and has a huge range. I've been thinking about how Leslie Feinberg, who recently died, had the ability to encompass many identities while holding each one (or mash-ups of them) with the utmost integrity. Many of the dykes in my life do that.

I don't always find the term *queer* entirely appropriated by cisgender men, but I think it tilts that way. I think we all know that there are shows and programs billed as queer whose entire rosters are cisgender men. I find the term *queer* useful in that it's fluid and makes it tougher to form assumptions about a person's identity, body, sexuality, race, and gender. I think many of my friends who experience constantly shifting identities feel good about using *queer* as a descriptor of identity and practice. And no doubt it was useful when the AIDS epidemic was at a fever pitch. But I think we forget that many lesbians and dykes have always been queer and gender-non-conforming or trans, too. Somehow a schism happened in which the term *woman* became a very constrained idea in queer dialogues.

SP:

Sometimes constraints prove quite powerful. And it's power that I am thinking about, in terms of identity and the parallel to craft and art designations. For example, if you are looking to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival to include all people other than self-identified women, then it's like asking the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum, to do the job of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Yes, there may be some overlap in what you find in each collection, but the differences in power and reach are quite different. That difference is not just in naming but also in experience. We expect MoMA to make the first move in being more inclusive, not the other way around.

Notes

1. Lacey Jane Roberts, "Put Your Thing Down, Flip It, and Reverse It: Reimagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory," in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Duke University, 2011), 243–59.
2. "The triangle is useful as a figure by which the 'commonsense' of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations, and because it allows us to condense in a juxtaposition with that folk-perception several somewhat different streams of recent thought." Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985)
3. For more about Sedgwickian Triangles see: Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985)

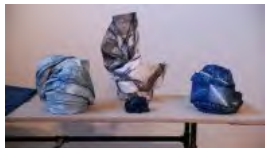
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"He is survived by his longtime companion": Feeling in the Work of Josh Faught

By Elissa Auther

Sheila Pepe

Twenty Things About Art Education—One for Each Year That I've Taught

1. An academic education is only a fraction of the total education of any artist.
2. Educational diversity—of practices and practitioners—requires all participants to kill cherished myths.
3. Colleges and universities are hierarchical institutions—artists are best served by learning the structures in order to use them up before departure.
4. MFA programs that have to accept applicants not yet ready for grad school, just so they can stay financially afloat, should be closed.
5. Need-blind admission makes tuition free to those who need it; free tuition helps the privileged remain privileged.
6. Large programs require sustaining a responsive curriculum and the right number of faculty to do that work while also teaching.
7. Teaching and learning have nothing to do with fame.
8. A curriculum is meant to serve students—not faculty or administration.
9. Serving the students does not mean treating them like customers.
10. Those enrolled in academic programs willing to set aside the identity of “artist” in order to be students are the only ones who have a reason to be in school.
11. Professionalized “student exhibitions” should be banned, schools should get out of the business of it—and students who exhibit professionally should be expelled.
12. Visiting artists programs have “jumped the shark”—all students should get something beyond exposure and an opinion during the visit.
13. The mission of the terminal degree (MFA, PhD) is the development of new knowledge; this requires institutional support for both students and faculty—in that order.
14. All participants in education must be honest about what they don't know—skill, knowledge, and experience still count.
15. Curatorial and art history programs that “study” the work of living artists give young scholars unprecedented power to create new canons in real time.
16. Creating new canons in real time positions the participants as the exclusive makers of “peer-reviewed” history, rather than the keepers of it.

17. Displaying memes without context or discourse, we can only assume the role of tastemaker rather than meaning-maker.

18. The term pedagogy should be reserved for those who can name the constituent parts of the practice.

19. A pedagogy that directs students to outcomes without namable criteria is simply tastemaking.

20. Tastemaking is the dominant mechanism of gentrification, which is a more palatable term for colonization.

21. Also: Great learning environments have transparent governance and teaching methods.

Contributor



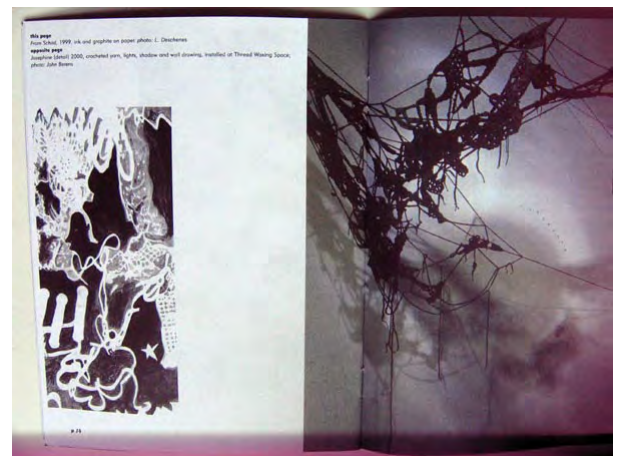
The Margin You Feel May Not Be Real

by Sheila Pepe

Identify the act of making as a form of visual, tactile, and spatial speech. Art is made when the maker is willing to take a position in a dialogue larger than her own conscious ruminations. No art is made without craft—whether engaged, distanced, or somewhere on a continuum of a similar relationship. In this way, meaning is made available, intentionally or not.

Art talks back to and into the history of art first, and then everything else around that artwork by necessity. By “around it” I mean the context of its making, the means and materials of it, and the sociopolitical and economic facts indicated by those choices.

This implies that makers and lovers of art fluidly grasp large vocabularies of signs—systems, methodologies, and their tropes in history as well as the moment. Above all, we’d assume everyone aspires to know many languages of making—whether paintings, pots, or gifs. No matter the stuff (or non-stuff), each one, compiled along its own technological legacy, has a language called “craft.”



“Photograph (with light leak) of pages 14 & 15, *Sheila Pepe: Josephine, Thread Waxing Space*; essay by Lia Gangitano, 2000. (page caption: this page: *from Chad*, 1999, ink and graphite on paper; photo: L. Deschenes / opposite page: *Josephine (detail)*, 2000, crocheted yarn, lights, shadow and wall drawing, installed at Thread Waxing Space; photo: John Berens),” 2014. Courtesy the artist.

During the 1980s I became schooled in various common vocabularies. In 1981 I was a ceramics major at MassArt, imagined “art” as my context, and came out as a Lesbian Feminist. I had great teachers. I read *Heresies* magazine and built clay bodies for color without glazing. I could fire all of the gas kilns in the shed, yet still made an unfired clay installation called “Women are Bricks.”

I was lonely in each of my budding identities. In art I worked at the margins as a lesbian making ceramics. In ceramics there was no room for anything other than clay and clay metaphors. And when I became a Lesbian Separatist, any reference to patriarchal art history became taboo. Everybody had rules. Learning the rules, as my assimilating Italian-American parents taught me, would alleviate the loneliness. Good at compartmentalizing, I lived in different cultures simultaneously. When the limits of each proved restrictively dogmatic, I was free to move on.

In 1984 I left ceramics, and separatism by 1986. Soon thereafter, I left art, and only made things for friends. I picked vegetables, cleaned, and then roofed houses in Ashfield, MA. After that I worked in art museums with some excellent collections and amazing people. When I finally returned to those art “rules,” I saw them as choices, crafts, and forms to be used as parts of larger languages.

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If you look through the exhibition catalogue for *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identities in the 1980s*, you will see a small part of the critical shift made by artists and curators during that period. This sampling of diversity, mounted in 1990 at the New Museum, the Studio Museum of Harlem, and the Museo del Barrio (then called the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art), indicated the enormity of diverse peoples working across the country, and the expanding methodologies that would further open heterogeneous dialogues in the following years. From it I learned that my studio in western Massachusetts was connected to ideas far beyond my geography. I remember thinking—“my world!”—thrilled at the prospect of more difference and a flattened hierarchy of materials, methods, and strategies.

What I did not see coming were emergent rules of inclusion. In the few years that followed, it seemed that the maker’s marginalized body, or those overt cultural signs assigned to that body, had to be mapped onto their artwork. Black people were expected to make images of black people or subjects like rap music. Gay people depicted the homoerotic or pushed codes, like camp, out of the closet. Each began as lived experience, righteously decrying national injustices; the former, American apartheid, the latter, the radical neglect of the AIDS crisis. However, mainstream receptions turned representation with the intent of inclusion into the only permissible script for the new participants.

I refused to perform the clichés of my identity in my art. I already did it every day in the world. Instead, I spoke formally to issues of difference and contingency as directly as possible through ongoing works called the *Doppelgänger* series. In them, I fixed a small light with its cluster of unruly of cords onto a partially handmade abstract object, casting its chance shadow. By filling that shadow with a very recognizable image, the total work launched a cascading set of differences drawn, cast, mounted onto the wall, and plugged into a common electrical grid.

First made publicly in 1994, I sought to confound the multiple, narrow, combating ideological factions I lived between. Initially, these hybrids of objects and ephemera were legible to few. But it was this work—fueled by both a linguistic and Duchampian turn—that got me into Skowhegan and later launched my career. By 1995, a further expansion of this project allowed me to carry out my utopian studio practice, charted as a Wittgensteinian notion of “family resemblance.” My “family” consisted of small abstract things made as devotional objects (called “things”); other things that were dolls; videos; *Photogram Projection* drawings made from cyanotype photograms and ink (a 2D version of the *Doppelgängers*); small installations of hand knit rubber bands, crocheted yarn; and a variety of re-combinations of all of these parts.

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In 1996 I made my first crocheted installation at Simmons College, Boston. It was a cyan-blue, dimensional analogue to the cyanotype photogram drawings. In 2000 I made “Josephine”—green and purple crocheted drawings in space that cast shadows for wall-drawings. It was a constructed portrait of my mother, Josephine, who taught me how to crochet. Curator Lia Gangitano lovingly captured the whole of my practice in a tiny catalogue produced for the show, which was installed at Thread Waxing Space in Soho.

I was doing fine. In the wake of postmodernism’s death of originality and progress, the art world seemed to increasingly tout liberated, inclusive attitudes toward artists and art forms. However, underneath it all, old hierarchies still excluded by undisclosed means. Women artists claimed men as their historical precedents, even though more apt connections could be made to work by other women. Lesbians had no visible culture to reference. Feminist works were highly mediated, amplifying the fact that art made by handcraft was still “in trouble” on both sides of the aisle. On the craft side, interpretation conformed to the aesthetics of craft traditions as if they existed in isolation. On the art side, suspicions were aroused if the artist—rather than fabricators or assistants—preferred to handmake their work. Ironically, the terms of inclusion, built upon the ideas of Marx and the backs of “the other,” continued to configure form and fracture according to the art market’s needs.

I was often introduced before lectures as a “conceptual artist,” because that’s the only way folks could understand my discursive relationship to crafted forms. Ever frustrated by formal prejudices, I became equally disturbed by craft illiteracy and troubled that the feminist and lesbian cultures I came from would disappear. Then, I remembered that I was free to move on when the limits of an ideology proved restrictively dogmatic. In 1998 I stopped making video and committed my studio to hand-making with readymade materials. Soon after, I unplugged the lights, stopped drawing on walls and began crocheting big, formal drawings in space. It was a bit lonely at first, but then I found the others—first the D.I.Y.ers, and then all at once, young feminists, queers, and craft theoreticians. Craft Theory? Yup, there’s no going back now.

CONTRIBUTOR

Sheila Pepe

SHEILA PEPE is an artist and educator based in Brooklyn.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



WINTER’S PICKS

Books on The Craft of Writing

by Catherine LaSota

DEC 15-JAN 16 | BOOKS

Go into almost any bookstore, and you’ll likely see an entire section dedicated to books about writing. These self-help—or “reference”—guides for writers, though not a new phenomenon, have become an increasingly popular genre

Craft Class

« Previous / Next »

By Sheila Pepe / September 4, 2011 / Archive, Highlighted Content

Elissa Auther. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 248 pp., 83

color ills. \$29.95, paper

Glenn Adamson, ed. *The Craft Reader*. New York: Berg Publishers, 2009. 672 pp., 75 b/w ills. \$39.95, paper

Glenn Adamson. *Thinking through Craft*. New York: Berg Publishers, 2007. 224 pp., 16 color ills., 44 b/w. \$29.95, paper

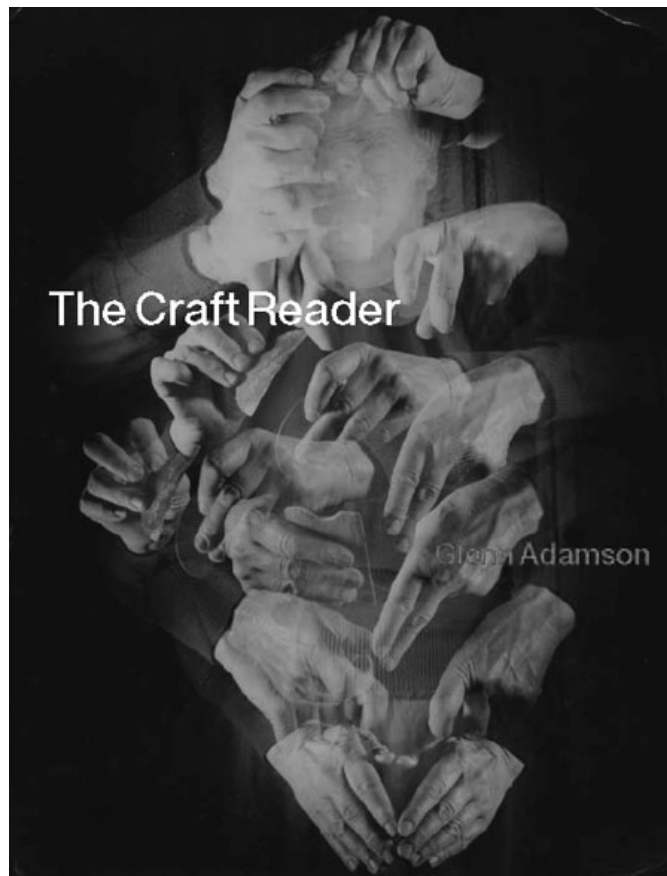
By the time Rozsika Parker published *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* in 1984, the following overtly feminist “stitched” works had already been made: Faith Wilding’s *Womb Room*, 1972; Harmony Hammond’s *Presence V*, also made in 1972; Faith Ringgold’s *Zora and Fish*, 1975; and Judy Chicago’s monumental *Dinner Party*, 1979—for which she employed extremely traditional fiber and ceramic craft techniques. Alongside these works and many others strategically soft and stitched, columns of political-art speech were woven into the discourse, most notably in the pages of the American magazine *Heresies* (issues number 3, *Lesbian Art and Artists*, 1977, and number 4, *Women’s Traditional Arts—The Politics of Aesthetics*, 1978).

Parker’s *Subversive Stitch* was the first and arguably the best researched distinctly art-historical work addressing the social utility of the fiber crafts in a feminist context. Using precedents from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, she successfully codified what her American sisters had been overtly accessing in a contemporary forum—the fact that the domestic crafts identified with women’s work were at the very least undervalued as works of art, and were therefore appropriable for cultural and political use.

Parker took her interrogation one step further, however, through a close investigation of one traditional form in particular: embroidery. Within this narrow band, she traced the histories of various forms of stitching to demonstrate the employment of needlework in the “construction of femininity across classes.”¹ In doing so, Parker identified the sexism inherent in a hierarchical system of classing methods and objects, while also pointing to an endless feedback loop of evaluation structured into this system, classing materials, processes, and forms, as well as the people who use them.

To be sure, this investigation of craft echoed much of what the American artists and writers had already unearthed. However, Parker’s contribution was different—as an art historian she could provide a grounded theory that pushed the social-justice issue beyond a subjective desire for inclusion. Parker made clear the differentiation “between the construction of femininity (as a course of socialization), lived femininity, the feminine ideal, and the feminine stereotype” as collapsed in the site of embroidery as not an art—but a craft. She did so by shedding light on the long history of taste guided by gender stereotypes (women who paint vs. men who paint) and, perhaps more radically, by pointing to the complexity of gendered facture/craft stereotypes (women/men who paint vs. women/men who stitch).

Erected upon *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (1981), her earlier book with Griselda Pollock, *Subversive Stitch* simultaneously acknowledged the importance of the maker’s sex while untying biological identity from the



gendered construction and facture of objects. These ideas were echoed in the studio, where artists wrestled with notions of biology, authenticity, and originality in their work. For them, Parker's text represented a significant shift in the conceptualizing of feminist strategies in art and the understanding of craft. For politicized artists with material interests, Parker's work marked an important argument in the "constructed vs. essential" identity debate among feminists. By holding up this tangled web of associations, she allowed new circuits of causality and articulation.

Less than twenty years later, we would see a generation of artists—bitch sissy-men and sissy bitch-women—plug into these new circuits to re-deploy stitching, knitting, and crocheting directly into new varieties of ironic and earnest representations and cultural assertions. Among these artists we must include Mike Kelley in portions of his mid-1980s work, as well as Elaine Reichek, Oliver Herring, Beverly Semmes, and Charles LeDray, whose work in the mid-1990s provided a vital



bridge to the now-ubiquitous use of soft and home craft strategies in art of every kind. For example, many of the artists included in Museum of Art and Design's 2007 exhibition *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*, such as Elena Herzog, Cat Mazza, and Sabrina Gschwandtner, were members of this group. Gschwandtner stands out as a convergent force, gathering numerous artists together in her 'zine *KnitKnit* (2002–7), and the subsequent book *KnitKnit: Profiles + Projects from Knitting's New Wave*, coauthored with Kiriko Shirobayashi (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2007).

The prominence of craft strategies in contemporary art practice has naturally led to a bounty of new books on the subject, including Elissa Author's *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Author's serious historical scholarship chronicles the politics of an expanded family of fiber objects made in America since the 1960s. She concludes the book by examining the work of Reichek, Herring, and LeDray, along with other prominent artists such as Ghada Amer, Do Ho Suh, Ann Wilson, and Louise Bourgeois.

With an eye on the assimilation of work made of or from fibrous materials, Author records the problematic history of the proposed hierarchy by swinging out from a feminist frame to the larger and occasionally more static dialectic of craft vs. art. She begins the story by marking juxtaposed inclusions into the exhibition and critical venues of high art. On one hand we have works of Fiber Arts that have grown out of the American craft movement; on the other, there are works that deploy craft materials and yet are positioned as Process Art. Author precisely pairs the images of two works that appear somewhat similar at first glance: Alice Adams's *Construction*, 1966, and Alan Saret's *Untitled*, 1968. Thus, we are shown what we are also told in the details of the text, of the different critical agendas that held each work in place and apart, as craft and art respectively.

This foundational argument is made in great part by asserting that the material use and formal attributes of these two works could "conceivably lead to the conclusion that they were produced by the same hand" (1). However compelling the contextual narrative, the argument is undone by closer inspection of the visuals. The photographic reproductions alone might attest to the intention and reception of the two objects—Saret's is given a flatly lit,

documentary look almost directly to the floor, while Adams's work is framed at a lower angle, attempting to capture its profile, with the aid of careful lighting. And while Auther does note the differing degrees of formlessness, what is missed is exactly that line of distinction these two objects describe, one where the mess of process plainly overpowers a careful unraveling of form. What if the reception of Saret's work had less do with material use (fiber) and more to do with his willingness to nearly eradicate form through actions completely unrelated to craft processes? Perhaps Auther's argument is too neat to do justice to the complexity at hand.



Using Bourgeois as a guide, Auther bookends a rich and complex account of the shifting critical receptions of fibrous works made in a variety of studio situations through the 1960s and 1970s. Hired in 1969 by the magazine *Craft Horizons* to review the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Wall Hangings*, Bourgeois describes the work in the exhibition as something less than full-fledged art. Yet by the 1990s she herself is generating a plethora of stitched flatwork and sculpture to enthusiastic critical embrace. Between these illustrative moments, Auther situates the history of Fiber Arts in a greater context, redraws the relationships between and around the work of Eva Hesse and Robert Morris, and expands our knowledge of artists using craft methods and materials during the Feminist Art movement.

Although artists may preserve ideas in the course of making their work, codifying history still remains the sole province of art historians. Through this scholarship, we gain a collective understanding and knowledge of the artists whose groundbreaking work set the precedents for what has followed in contemporary art.

Among the beneficiaries of Auther's scholarship is Harmony Hammond. The commanding resonance of Hammond's early studio work in Lesbian Feminist art history and her participation in the 1970s dialogue about abstract painting have recently been documented in the exhibitions and catalogues *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* and *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975*, respectively. Auther does the important work of positioning Hammond's *Floor Piece* and *Presence* series as critical precedents concerning the use of craft. Similarly, the fullness of Auther's insight into the painter Faith Ringgold's use of craft materials, processes, and forms in defiance of the hegemony of a white, Western art-historical canon is impressive. In an ever-expanding global art context, this line of history is invaluable.

As a whole, *String, Felt, Thread* rests in great part on Parker's *Subversive Stitch* and Parker and Pollock's *Old Mistresses*. Auther also embraces ideas put forward in Glenn Adamson's provocative 2007 book *Thinking through Craft*, applying his notion of craft's "subordination and marginality as indispensable to the evolution of art" (xxix, *String, Felt, Thread*). With apt observations of the subordination of traditional craft origins—as practice and identity—Auther shows us the valuation system that dominated most of the twentieth century in America, demonstrating the hierarchy at every step.

As a result, the ongoing "struggle for legitimacy," a concept stated early on in *String, Felt, Thread*, becomes a uniquely American story of social justice in an art context. In many respects, this is the best aspect of the book, shedding light on art that deserves more of it. However, in this same narrative struggle lurks an imperative to dismantle all hierarchies. And this sensibility seems to close down the potential for embracing differences we may have simply enjoyed from the start. This is surely the only constraint Auther's theory suffers in service of history.

Consider an alternate narrative guide to the categories art and craft, put forward in Adamson's *Thinking through Craft*. This story is more of a dance than a struggle. Adamson choreographs a new set of moves toward a more specific entanglement between art and craft. Rather than fixing an identity, Adamson takes a straightforward interest in thinking through new problems, named in each of the five chapters and offered to open up our understanding of craft. His approach is one that echoes the sometimes messy, sometimes meticulous work habits of the studio. It is enormously refreshing, as are his sites of investigation: Supplemental, Material, Skilled, Pastoral, and Amateur.

In each chapter he invites the reader into a way of thinking that is empowering in its fluid reconstruction of how we relate to art and craft via these “new” categories. Setting aside any overly essentialized notion of maker and made, we are challenged to match Adamson’s skillful attributions of culturally constructed features (of things, parts of things, processes, and behaviors) exactly where pathways of more nuanced understandings might open up. It is not that identity or facture no longer have a claim on the classing of art—but he rightly assumes that we are so much more sophisticated at using the politicized tropes of all crafts, that categorical distinctions between this and art no longer make sense.

Now add one more important book to the recent proliferation of compilations and theoretical texts on the subject: *The Craft Reader*, edited by Adamson. This substantive compilation was born, he says, of “seeds planted” while he participated in a graduate seminar led by Edward S. “Ned” Cooke, Jr., at Yale more than ten years ago. Adamson launches the reader in the wake of *Thinking through Craft*, and the two books work nicely together, even though it’s a thrill that the first book does not provide a perfect footing for the second, since the categories of thinking do not completely align book to book. In fact, *Thinking through Craft* feels more like a wondrous hole of ideas dug out as a groundbreaking preparation for the commencement of new structures.

Without doubt, *The Craft Reader* provides an ample first collection in the service of a theoretical architecture about “making things” by considering the specific intersection of modernity and craft. As in *Thinking through Craft*, Adamson uses industrial technologies and markets as the catalysts for our changing relationship to those elements we thus far have identified as craft. In doing so, his anthology takes on terms that exceed the narrow view of the art world, recalibrating what we might think are pertinent distinctions and methods of organizing. Applying frameworks used to discuss the making of all things, he addresses the subject in broad commercial terms for most of the book, devoting only one section to what in context seems to be a tiny American art vs. craft debate over the status of objects.

The anthology is divided into seven sections, reflecting an organizational strategy that interlaces historical precedents, areas of studio expertise, points of view, and theoretical reference points into a stable but pliable tool. Section 1, “How-To,” boldly asserts the seriousness of what might be an otherwise ironic gesture, embracing the overt physicality of learning how to make. What follows—including Michael Ettema’s nuanced view of craft’s role in furniture making of the late nineteenth century; all of Section 4, titled “The Persistence of Craft in the Age of Mass Production”; and much more—amplifies Adamson’s forthright disruption of the commonly held explanation of the modernism-craft juncture as that place where deskilling flourished as a result of industrialization, while the Arts and Crafts movement benevolently pushed back to keep traditional skills (and values) alive. In all, the value of Adamson’s work as both author and editor is the agility and confidence he draws on in applying significant political, historical, and aesthetic material to the topic of craft so to overwhelm finally the simplistic art-craft divide. This work allows us to consider the economic, social, and spiritual viability of craft anew: the parallel worlds of art and the artisanal, the use of historically established material hierarchies to gain new political ground, and the legacy of utopian idealism found in the Craftivists of the twenty-first century.

Last, but surely not least, Adamson makes sure that the considerable impact of the Bauhaus—as both pedagogy and design strategy—is present, but it is not the only force at play in shaping the makers’ relationships to modern industry. With the help of voices like Ettema’s, and perhaps most notably with the inclusion of Rafael Cardoso’s 2008 essay “Craft versus Design: Moving Beyond a Tired Dichotomy,” Adamson puts design in a new light. And while it may be consoling to be reminded that everyone has his or her own false dichotomies, the task at hand requires that all must be dismantled simultaneously. Somehow in this mix, the designed object comes into focus as a force capable of rupturing the old art-craft divide. It emerges as if a missing link, previously identified as either the disavowed, machine-made commodity, from a pure craft perspective, or the high-class, intellectually supercharged readymade in the palaces of high art. Now maybe another divide can be put to rest. Art and design have a renewed common core: craft.

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1. Rozsika Parker, “The Creation of Femininity,” in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 15. 

Sisterhood, Then and Now



Fierce artists grasp history with clear-eyed tenacity; that is their convergence

BY SHEILA PEPE

History repeats itself. And in the meantime, memories dim and attention spans shorten. Lulled by the hopeful, or perhaps hopeless, invocation of the end of progress, many bathe in the accomplishments of those who came before. Or simply cash in for the quick fix, or quick pick—that lottery of private fulfillment.

Neither Nancy Spero nor Mary Kelly has. As their current exhibitions convey, these fierce artists grasp history with clear-eyed tenacity. Each from a different generation and strategic position, both insist that we see where we've been and where we are going.

Kelly restages photographs from her own archive, casting younger artists as women's movement activists of the 1970s. She makes women glow in "Flashing Nipple Remix," reversing the spectacle of cameras documenting street theater protests against the 1971 Miss World Pageant in London. "WLM Demo Remix," a 90-second film loop, dissolves an archival image of a 1970 women's liberation demonstration into a current reenactment of the event. Keen to current politics, Kelly recasts the central figure, an African-American woman in 1970, as an Arab American in the 2005 image. Perhaps too subtle for those who are not savvy to the ambiguities of race construction, it's a sound move that speaks directly to the moment. Arms locked in a wall of "sister power," Kelly skillfully primes a new generation of women with an actual performance of solidarity.

In "Sisterhood is POW," Kelly reflects on her own participation in the Miss World protest, producing a multi-paneled text that spans three walls. Its hollowed and back-lit script recalls and exclaims the events and conditions of the day, "... nil for Miss Used, Miss Laid, Miss Taken..."



Nancy Spero has infiltrated institutional spaces with her female protagonists, impressing the walls with the exuberance of strong women plucked from a broad expanse of visual culture, as in “Cri Du Couer.”

Both Kelly and Spero wrap the interior of their respective galleries with a text, building critical revisions against a seemingly fixed wall of history; the two are linked by the reiteration of this device.

Using architecture to connote the construction of patriarchal history is a tactic that Nancy Spero has employed expertly for decades. She has infiltrated institutional spaces with her female protagonists, impressing the walls with the exuberance of strong women plucked from a broad expanse of visual culture. Her pictorial texts prove the brilliance of women who will not be silenced. “Cri du Coeur,” is another instance in a long and rich body of work that blasts full voice with the least of means—paper, ink, and placement.

In this installation Spero employs ancient Egyptian female mourners from the tomb of Ramos of Thebes in a contemporary lament of war and death. Following this continuous frieze, grounded along the floor, visitors plunge into a dense, accumulated murk. Low, and lean, the work commands a somber entrance, and then builds to elicit a shrieking grief. One is moved to pace the circumference of the room, and in doing so faces the mourners, drawn in profile, again and again. Waves of tightly packed choruses, with their arms outstretched, poke into the vast expanse of the walls above.

Spero twists and mauls the ink into a transfer of color that lightens and intensifies. She pulls out of blacks and blues, to bruise yellows, blood reds, and searing greens. And before she turns full circle, around the room, drains all color to reveal the tender paper support. She cuts and reconfigures, scumbles and scuffs through a chaos that hacks to the quick. Spero speaks of a loss both personal and ancient, pressing us to contemplate current events, from Katrina, to Baghdad, to the death of her longtime partner Leon Golub. “Sisterhood is POW,” says Kelly. It is the piercing wail of Spero’s mourners, and the chant of young women on the street. Another century of work is at hand. And as ever, it must be accomplished full voice in different dialects. Just as once the strategies these two artists employ might have seemed at odds, so now we must consider where they converge. If not, sisterhood may simply be a P.O.W.

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