

Conference: The Matter of Material.

Turner Contemporary, Margate. 27 April 2017

It is now almost 35 years since Sarat Maharaj asked the question 'Textile Art- Who Are You?', describing textile art as "undecidable"...something that seems to belong to one genre but overshoots its border and seems no less at home in another. Belongs to both, we might say, by not belonging to either." It is an even longer period of time since Eva Hesse confused the New York art world in the 1960's with works combining cloth and thread. Since then, cloth as a narrative voice has threaded its way through feminism and political activism, from marginalisation to surety in its strength and appropriateness.

Textiles and textile thinking, as the medium of choice for art works, have featured in mixed exhibitions and exhibitions of specific material focus throughout the world, with the Kaunus Biennale currently leading the way in radical readings of textile and art. Featuring 10 new works and over 40 international artists, **'Entangled: Threads and Making'** brings together a group of 20th century pioneers of textiles, tapestry and design alongside contemporary artists who incorporate similar materials and processes in their work.

The Conference 'The Matter of Material' will discuss the use of fabric in art, how textile can be seen as a piece of beautifully designed cloth; as contributing to the expanded field of textile art; or be appropriated for a particular work. Cloth is a universal material we love it and understand it, yet we overlook, and sometimes dismiss it as (im)material. Conference organisers invite submissions from different practices that reflect on, and about, the importance of the material in art, viewed from an historical and a contemporary perspective.

Speakers were: Dr Catherine Harper (Keynote), Karen Wright (curator 'Entangled'), Freddie Robins, Dr Maxine Bristow, Dr Beverly Ayling-Smith, Dr Catherine Dormor, Shelly Goldsmith.

Abstracts

Professor Catherine Harper

The Matter of Material

The Matter of Making conference at Turner Contemporary, Margate, sits in conversation with Karen Wright's curation of the *Entangled: threads of making* exhibition, and continues the infinite construction of the multi-dimensional web – actual, textual, material, digital, sensual, somatic, decorative, functional, ritual, personal, social and economic – of textiles. A web that twists and turns through history and into contemporary culture, and across themes that range through art and craft dialectics; gender and identity politics; the discourses of cloth, body and architecture; of labour and technology; of techno-design and practice, and the contextual realms of material and visual culture. So how to make a conversation, start a chat? This paper will draw upon notions related to textiles in these fields that have proved useful to me in 'thinking my domain', and offers potential ways in to consider *Entangled's* threads of making in terms of meanings that matter.

Karen Wright

This symposium celebrates the exhibition *Entangled: Threads & Making* that contains work of over 40 international artists, 19 nationalities and over 100 objects. Taking over three years to put together and formulate and even title - I did not want to put the word women in the title as I wanted people to discover the reality within the show.

Having put together this exhibition largely through ideas garnered in the studio added to the knowledge gleaned through my art history studies, both here and in the USA, I want to defend the position that this exhibition is "merely" about making.

Lucy Lippard famously wrote in 1970 "I thought artists had to have big, professional looking spaces. I found woman in corners of men's studios, in bedrooms and children's rooms, even in kitchens, working away". It is true and what also needs to be looked at is that many of the artist discoveries included this show worked on regardless of being known. Names like Regina

Bogat and Betye Saar are not household names. The “compulsive need” to make work is central to this exhibition. All art is political – but while many of the objects displayed, use the materials, often associated with craft: weaving, sewing, crocheting and knitting yet I would argue the central idea behind it is not only craft and textiles but goes far beyond.

Freddie Robbins

In conversation with Day+Gluckman

Freddie Robbins will discuss her practice with curators Day+Gluckman in the context of textiles, feminism, heritage and art practice. Using examples of her work and exhibition profile they will consider how her career and practice has developed as an artist working with textiles and whether she consciously considers it to have a feminist voice; whether gender still has a pivotal role in how textiles are read and how Freddie’s work continues to contribute to that debate.

The conversation will look at how textiles have been curated into exhibitions, for example FABRIC (2014) and Entangled (2017). It will examine curatorial hierarchies and whether there is a perceived or actual fear in displaying objects that don’t hold their shape. We will also discuss the propensity of echo chambers in the art world and beyond - are we only talking to each other? How as artists and curators do we identify our audiences and is there a gendered snobbery about the ‘right type’ of audience?

Dr. Maxine Bristow

Medium (un)specificity as material agency – the productive indeterminacy of matter/material.

In this paper I consider some of the debates brought to the fore by *Entangled: Threads and Making* and embodied through my recent doctoral research; namely the tension between a continued allegiance to medium specific conventions and the richness, hybridity and heterogeneity afforded by the post medium condition of contemporary art. Implicit within this are two further considerations concerning the relationship between aesthetic/extra-aesthetic contexts and the creative tensions between subjective/material agency that arise in negotiating these positions.

Through a new body of sculptural and installational practice I propose a ‘constellatory opening up of textile’ in which the medium specific can be (re)mapped in a fluid and fragmentary way; where boundaries become blurred, meaning is unable to settle and fundamental categorical divisions between subject and object are destabilised.

Drawing particular reference from Adorno’s notion of mimetic comportment, this model of practice involves a mode of behaviour that actively opens up to alterity and returns authority to the productive indeterminacy of matter/material. This is manifest through a range of practice strategies - ‘thingness’, ‘staging’ and the play between ‘sensuous immediacy and corporeal containment’ - which give rise to a precarious experiential encounter that continually oscillates between subjective attachment and detachment.

Acknowledging the critical currency afforded to textile through feminist and poststructuralist critique, my new work moves away from a rhetoric of negative opposition and established interpretive frameworks, privileging affective intensity, aesthetic artifice, complicit formalism and the ambiguous resonances of an abstract sculptural language over more overt strategies of representation.

Offering a reinscription of medium specificity in terms of material agency, I suggest that we might usefully adopt Adorno’s term ‘material particularity’ in recognition of the properties that are distinctive to the material world; properties that mobilise a constellation of sensuous and semantic correspondences yet at the same time continually elude conceptual synthesis.

Dr. Beverly Ayling-Smith

The bed-sheet – from linen cupboard to art gallery.

The choice of material in the creation of artwork is vital to the communication of the meaning of the work, be it concept, narrative or metaphor.

Bedsheets act as silent witnesses to many natural processes in life such as birth, puberty, pleasure, disease, decay and death. At a time of day when we are wearing little clothing, or perhaps none at all, the bedsheet is in contact with the body for many hours every night, soaking up sweat and bodily fluids to create a very personal cloth impregnated with the identity of a person. Whilst their function seems simple, they can also be appropriated to act as banner, bandage, noose, escape ladder or shroud. The bedsheet can become a material on which to literally or metaphorically write our meanings and messages to the world.

This paper will discuss the materiality of the bedsheet, an everyday and humble cloth. It will reference the work of artist Ewa Kuryluk who used sheets in her work. It will also draw on my own research into the use of materials to carry metaphors of emotion. It will be illustrated by my recent works using bedsheets to make a connection with the emotions of the viewer.

Dr. Catherine Dormor

The Event of a Stitch.

This paper will take as its points of departure the event, the visit and the legacy, told through the voice of the seamstress, the traveller and the storyteller. That this symposium is taking place in Margate, looking out to the port and the sea is particularly pertinent as it marks a site where cultures meet and create community together – a precarious ecology built upon exchange and encounter.

According to Slavoj Žižek, an event is an effect that exceeds its causes – a point of rupture, after which everything is changed (2014: 6). As needle and thread pass through cloth, they engage in a tactical creation of mutual exchange. To visit, on the other hand, is to spend time in another place, with its residents, to be introduced through their eyes and bodies, not *in place of* them, but *together with* them. Hannah Arendt drew on the concept of visiting in terms of 'thinking with an enlarged mentality' (1978: 257), a mode for thinking that foregrounds and presupposes movement away from the self, towards the other, not in a colonising manner, but in the role of the invited visitor, the guest.

These two points of departure necessarily involve the leaving behind of traces, a legacy, a way of being together beyond and through the visit. This paper draws upon the legacy of Anni Albers, whose assertion that all weaving traces back to 'the event of a thread', together with Walter Benjamin's storyteller/craftsman, and their repeated, fragmented, joined and embellished story-fabric.

Setting stitch as simultaneously and separately event, visit and legacy, this paper will consider these legacies and their makers, seeking to expand the notion of stitch from a hand-held series of movements into full-body articulation of stitching as a form for enlarged mentality. Works by kimsooja, Kirstie Macleod and Chiharu Shiota will be drawn upon as a way by which to think of the event of a stitch as a cosmopolitan practice – a mode of practice which exists in each moment of encounter between needle, thread and cloth.

Shelly Goldsmith

Looking beyond the warp and weft: unpicking latent narratives in clothing.

The paper presents my on-going practice in which I explore and reveal perceived memory and experience imbued in worn clothing, specifically through the recent piece of work **Łódź Blouse Trilogy**.

In this work, I undertook a series of interventions on blouses to reveal dormant and latent matter; details from a single photographic image of a tea party in Poland's Lodz Ghetto. Discovering Henryk Ross's photographic work many years ago, I

have been haunted by this photograph. Further investigation disclosed how Ross hid (buried) his collection of images, returning years later to unearth them.

Łódź Blouse Trilogy and related work addresses the use of textiles, cloth and clothing as a rich landscape for expression; a vehicle to explore and communicate complex ideas within a fine art context. And seeks to present knowledge and provoke thinking on a series of levels, from craft skills to contemporary scientific and psychological thinking.

We are intimately familiar with the physicality and materiality of clothing. Thus, this work offers a 'safe' fluid entry point to discuss and stimulate contemplation around inherited memory; biological and metaphorical transference; personal recall and repression; our sense of self and the ability of cloth and clothes to hold and translate human experience.

In today's Forensic landscape, textiles play a powerful contributing role in developing narrative from the crime scene. In 'A Garment in the Dock...' Kitty Hauser talks about the FBI's use of unique ridges and valleys' in worn denim jeans to identify US bank robbers. This research showed that despite the ubiquity of jeans, each pair has individual identifying characteristics and highlights the relationship between garment and wearer.

Fascinated with the creative implications of what is left behind in the clothes we wear, and supported by my experience of working with Alison Fendly at the FSS, I have sought to make visible a personal response. The use of garment construction/deconstruction, digital embroidery and dye-sublimation printing have made this work manifest.