



Fray: Art and Textile Politics

Julia Bryan-Wilson

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In 1974, women in a feminist consciousness-raising group in Eugene, Oregon, formed a mock organization called the Ladies Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society. Emblazoning its logo onto t-shirts, the group wryly envisioned female collective textile making as a practice that could upend conventions, threaten state structures, and wreak political havoc. Elaborating on this example as a prehistory to the more recent phenomenon of “craftivism”—the politics and social practices associated with handmaking—*Fray* explores textiles and their role at the forefront of debates about process, materiality, gender, and race in times of economic upheaval.

Closely examining how amateurs and fine artists in the United States and Chile turned to sewing, braiding, knotting, and quilting amid the rise of global manufacturing, Julia Bryan-Wilson argues that textiles unravel the high/low divide and urges us to think flexibly about what the politics of textiles might be. Her case studies from the 1970s through the 1990s—including the improvised costumes of the theater troupe the Cockettes, the braided rag rugs of US artist Harmony Hammond, the thread-based sculptures of Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, the small hand-sewn tapestries depicting Pinochet’s torture, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt—are often taken as evidence of the inherently progressive nature of handcrafted textiles. *Fray*, however, shows that such methods are recruited to often ambivalent ends, leaving textiles very much “in the fray” of debates about feminized labor, protest cultures, and queer identities; the malleability of cloth and fiber means that textiles can be activated, or stretched, in many ideological directions.

The first contemporary art history book to discuss both fine art and amateur registers of handmaking at such an expansive scale, *Fray* unveils crucial insights into how textiles inhabit the broad space between artistic and political poles—high and low, untrained and highly skilled, conformist and disobedient, craft and art.

Fray: Art and Textile Politics Details

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Melissa says

This book is an absolutely brilliant, well-researched and compellingly written examination of the complexities of the politics at play in the textile arts. Textile art is maybe the most perfect medium to explore the tensions between high art and low craft. She shows how the gendered and racial histories of textile have contributed to a devaluing of the medium and held them back from acceptance in gallery spaces and art histories. At the same time, she questions the distinction between “low” and “high” art, arguing that practices in craft and “art” inspire and feed off of each other.

Bryan-Wilson also examines the links between feminist and queer activism with textile arts - that the adoption of these crafts became a celebration and reclaiming of their gendered histories and tied to the forging of identities. Yet, she still criticizes the problematic white washing of the racial and class histories of textile production in these modern textile politics.

She takes on the simplistic view that textile politics are inherently progressive, as argued by the 2000s “craftivist movement” by thoroughly analyzing two of the biggest examples proffered: Chilean arpilleras and the AIDS Quilt. Arpilleras may have been a form of resistance and critique of the Pinochet regime, but at the same time, they were commodities sold in foreign markets and subject to the demands of foreign buyers. Some subjects sold better than others - at what point does the market dictate the message? The AIDS quilt, long lauded as both memorial, grieving aid, and visual demonstration of the impact of AIDS is also not without criticism. Act Up frequently “tore into” the quilt as being too apolitical and refusing to demand action on the AIDS crisis. In the beginning, Clive Jones and other organizers were adamant that the quilt not be political. The quilt is also not necessarily representative - panels were submitted voluntarily by families and friends of the dead who had the time and money to make them, which may have excluded families from the lowest economic backgrounds. African Americans also appear to be underrepresented in the quilt, despite continuing to be overrepresented in HIV-AIDS diagnoses. But even so, the quilt is now too large to display in any one location and the Names Project is running out of funds and resources to both store, maintain, and repair the aging panels.

Bryan-Wilson also questions the supposed superiority of the hand-made handicraft of the Etsy and craft show crowd over factory produced textiles. Did you know that 200 workers contribute to the making of a pair of running shoes? Textile factories still employ by hand techniques, generally performed by underpaid and under recognized women of colour working in exploitative conditions due to a lack of other economic opportunities.

This book really got me thinking about my own position and privilege as a middle class white woman who knits and embroiders. I have to admit that I was buying into the craftivism narrative and the virtue of the handmade object without realizing some of the racial and class exclusionism of this POV and also without seeing the link to the neo-liberal economics at play. Brava, Julia Bryan-Wilson. Thank you for this phenomenal work.

