**The Canon and the Gift**

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**The Canon and the Gift**

**Abstract**

*The Matter of Material* 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.

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**Introduction**

This text is developed from my keynote presentation, delivered at *The Matter of Material* symposium, Turner Contemporary, Margate (UK) on 27 April 2017. The event was introduced by its convenor Professor Lesley Millar, and responded to the Entangled: Threads & Making exhibition in the same venue.

In my abstract for symposium, I noted the *entangled* relationships between makers, viewers and curators. Subsequent to writing that ‘in the abstract’, I further reflected on how those triangular relationships then create multi-dimensional, even materialized, conversations, in this case within the arena of the symposium. Those in turn could – conceivably – construct infinite webs of matter and meaning, both informing us and ensnaring us in textiles and texts, in embodied and out-of-bodied experiences, and in digital and somatic, sensual and decorative, functional and ritual, personal and social engagements and entrapments.

Those textile webs twist and turn, through history and into contemporary culture, and across themes that range over art and craft; through gender and identity politics; into the discourses of cloth, body and architecture; out of labour and technology; around personal and collective memory; traversing design and practice, and via contextual realms of material and visual culture.

*So how to make a conversation? How to ask what’s the matter? What’s our raw material?*

Karen Wright is curator of *Entangled: Threads & Making* at Turner Contemporary (28 January – 7 May 2017). She powerfully and successfully drew the conventions of embroidery, weave, and tapestry into a wider correspondence with the tropes of sculpture, worn-on-the-body objects, crafted and constructed materials. And in her articulation of the show’s scope and remit, she asserted that *“*little had been done in investigating this area both in terms of gender or materials”, with her curatorial stance being “to re-evaluate the political status of women in the market place as well as the way that they use materials and express their concerns” [[www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/entangled-threads-making](http://www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/entangled-threads-making)].

Without detracting from the welcome actuality of this exhibition, it seemed prudent to push back somewhat on assertion of any such exhibition as an almost novel examination of women’s material textile practice within an impoverished domain of research. And in doing so, I invoked as my muse the great Polish textile artist, a woman and a materialist, Magdalena Abakanowicz, whose death (aged 86) was only seven days before the symposium at which we were all gathered. Magdalena’s departure marked a significant moment in positioning her extraordinary contribution, and that of her Eastern European ‘fibre art’ peers in historical rather than contemporary canon. I could hear echoes of those iconic female artists – Jagoda Buic, Ritzi Jacobi, Olga de Amaral, and so on, whose work in new and traditional forms, created such touchstones for later generations of political and politicised women seeking to interrogate gender, material, gendered material and materialised gender.

That canon – the bodies of work that have gone before – broke the flat textile surface off wall and bed and floor, and spread-eagled textiles as they were understood previously (as different traditions of flat tapestry, woven fabric, embroidery and knit) into spatial, three-dimensional, installation and environmental entities, interactive and of multi-media, some monumental in scale, others minute. And that canon – that sorority of elders – informs much the continuum of traditional and experimental work we see in Entangled: Threads & Making today.

And if that canon has a section marked modernity, it began in the context of the Lausanne International Biennials of Tapestry (from 1962-95), that gave rise in time to others of significance such as the Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber, the Kaunas Biennale, the seminal contribution of Pierre Pauli and Jean Lurçat in establishing the Centre International de la Tapisserie ancienne et moderne (CITAM), and the Toms Pauli Foundation. Major contributions to this continuum came also via educational programmes at, for example, Cranbrook (US) and Goldsmiths (UK), and through the work of the Textile Society of America, the European Textile Network, and of course the work of Professor Lesley Millar’s International Textile Research Centre at University for the Creative Arts.

In my presentation, I worked through some conceptual, theoretical and practical attempts to map the geographies of entanglement that are certainly not uncharted or unarticulated. I urged acknowledgement of *that which has gone before* – textiles interwoven with human development since the beginning of time – as the provenance of the *Entangled: Threads & Making* exhibition’s contribution, not merely to cite contemporary novelty, but to recognize the authority of historical trajectory, of progressive stability, of cultural hybridity, and the paradoxes of multiple singularity.

French philosopher Michel Serres has spoken of fabrics, textiles and material as providing “excellent models of knowledge” in almost-abstraction, drawing us towards the information of tactility as a new form of intellect (2009: 83-4). Our knowledge of textiles becomes located in their very *materiality* and *narration*, as textile texts, and in the editing, choreographing and curation of *stuff* that requires sensual and non-cerebral interrogations, relying as much on sound, smell, taste, memory and touch to unlock their meanings and find further sense in their inter-relations.

To curate the *Entangled: Threads & Making* exhibition then surely has been to engage with the age-old *gifting of stuff* – presenting, accepting, delighting, and preserving, with a focus on the precious potency and poignancy of that which is gifted, and the close and embodied connectedness between gift-giver (the curator) and gift-recipient (us, the viewers). The psychological and physical interchanges between people and things, as conjured by our reception of this exhibition gifted to us by its curator, are exactly those that construct our social identities, relations and temporalities, understood variously as consistent or provisional. Entangled threads – for which read cloth, clothing, materials and matter, textiles and their texts – become key to the material culture of transitional memory: of the personal and collective significances of people, occasions and rites of passage concerned with time going by, separation, loss, and ultimately death.

Analysis of *Entangled: Threads & Making* – either in Turner Contemporary, or indeed manifest as entanglement elsewhere in textile canon and consideration – therefore requires both the *methodologies* of objective engagement with the artefact or commodity (as evidence of human culture), and the *methods* of subjective examination: that of smell and feel, the emotional and affective, the embodied and performative, and the remembered associations of the object of the analysis. These can be personal, political, universal, and so on…

The experience of the curator herself is as much part of this as that of the viewer, *or the ‘gift recipient’*. This curator will – I suppose – have gently unwrapped, unfolded, unrolled these textiles and their related objects, placing them on display with great care and attention to them individually and as a designed whole. And arguably, enacting and reproducing women’s work through the traditions of subjective and autobiographical curatorship, reflecting the material knowledge, social sensibilities and expressive tone of ‘feminine selfhood’, mobilising a curator’s plural subjectivities, and creating a complex nexus of curator-maker-viewer, gifter-gift-gifted, that is valuable in resisting the homogeneity of thinking, and the singularity, rationality, and über-confidence of omniscient, omnipotent ‘high art’ that unravelling, marginalized, unruly and overwrought textiles tend to resist. Textiles – I have argued – are the ‘hysterical’, ‘hormonal’, ‘menopausal’, ‘shrill’ sisters of cool rational visual culture…

And to these gifts, we bring migrated, imported, almost talismanic ideas of the *intimacy of ownership. C*ollected objects exhibit the weight of cultural baggage that we all wear, bundled and strapped to our souls - heavy but not intolerable burdens. The public textiles in *Entangled: Threads & Making* become sacred gifts, ritualized in their primary unfurling and in their subsequent use, thereby consolidating in their spectacular collective impact. Their textile language – building upon and augmenting the conventions of seaming, pinning, interleaving, folding, layering, darning, patching – provides a code for articulation of fragmented nations, splintered identities, or multiple sexualities, modes of operation, and cultures.

Embroidery, quilting, knitting, wrapping, stitch hold such significance too for discourses concerned with tradition, the role of women, their (our, my) bodies’ placement in national cultures. And useful too is the concept of the embodied and ruptured *motherland*, linking to women in the iconography of reproduction and preservation, nationhood and authentic identity, that resonates through *Entangled: Threads & Making*, here or elsewhere.

In the all female line-up of over forty women makers in this exhibition, we can begin to really interrogate the autobiographical signature of hand stitchery (and all the rest) that is *écriture feminine’s* foil to the smooth certitude of mass production and rational concept. That signature stakes a contingent claim for the irrational, unstable, subversive and unfixed identities of textile, material and woman. Fragmentary form, for example, in women’s writing resonates with the making of a quilt, the piecing of patches, the tidy textile symbol associated with ‘socially successful womanliness’, balanced, intricate, manifesting the cultural value of the so-called ‘feminine virtues’ – of thrift, diligence and domesticity.

There *is* something fresh and innovative in the gift given to us here by curator Karen Wright, and it is this. To have the courage to create an exhibition exclusively of the work of women in itself is a pungent and topical action, and one much welcomed in the imperative of re-evaluation of women’s political status. So, essentially for me, the innovation of *Entangled: Threads & Making* is not so much its approach to making or materials, matter or materiality, but rather the innovation arguably lies in its purposeful curation of what could be conjured as a *radical feminist separatist action mode of engagement* that would trump Trump!

The pioneer, innovator and influencer women creators of the twentieth century works on display impacted the work of successive generations. The complexity of feminine meaning embedded in the motifs, materials and motivations before us demonstrate the emotional affectivity of an exhibition comprising solely the work of women. Works become both conceptual containers and commodity comforters, the marginal and peripheral place of women’s stories against the ‘master narrative’ of dominant history is shaken and stirred. The inter-relationships of text and textile, of materiality and the feminine, are essentially present in the curation model at play in *Entangled*’s selections, classifications, and prioritizations – this is curation as a form of subversive stitch.

This is, of course, a contested position. There is nothing inherently or essentially ‘female’ about the act of sewing, or indeed any other form of creativity including cloth or threads. Rather, though, there is an historical trajectory where women were understood to mend and tidy up that has *constructed* sewing as such. Alternative discourses, created with the needle – rather than other forms of dominant articulation – argue for the rhetorical power of needlework and needle-worked products. And women have, undoubtedly developed codified thoughts and indirect discourse that over time segued into the decisive actions of emancipation and the rhetoric of leaving a stitched mark of authorship, confession or exposition for posterity. This worked as a form of protest, a ‘sewing stance’, a repetitive and obsessive theme, inculcated with submissive obedience, head bowed, patient and sitting very still over many hours. Then, now, activated in *protest and subversion*: first patience, perseverance and feminine industry; then activist-activity, the quiet seamstress bursting out…

Histories have placed women as subordinate, inferior, softer; the purveyors of menstrual and uterine dangers, of uncontrolled emotions and a weak physique, as best confined to the domestic sphere and the humility of needlework. Have no doubt that conservative global tides have us in their way.

Rozsika Parker – herself another, now sadly absent, gift-giver within our intellectual and practical canon – described the 16th century polarization of wealth, the growth of the ‘merchant class’ and the liveried companies, and the consequent explosion of *embroidery* in the overt show of wealth typical of the time [1984:]. Wealthy women embroidered; less wealthy women found employment as professional embroiders; and amateur embroidery flourished. The form and craft of embroidery teetered here in history on the edge of its reclassification, and, although advocates of the education of women feared that embroidery and other domestic arts were becoming too all-encompassing, the ‘virtue of domesticity’ and the ‘innocence of ignorance’ won the day for women.

We need to ensure this does not happen again as global politics *turns* on the world’s tilted axis. We need to ensure that tenuous rights – reproductive autonomy, freedom of feminine movement, thought and speech, and embedded and diverse human rights – those tenuous rights continue to be sought, fought for, maintained, and gifted forward.

So, inexorably, embroidery, tapestry, pricking and other labour intensive manual crafts became aligned with the feminine, and the ‘high arts’ of masterful painting, divine architecture and individualized design with masculine intellect. These are tropes taken up in contemporary form: the subversion of stitchery – for which read thread entanglement in its broadest sense – has developed wildly beyond the cunningly hand-crafted and domestic to encroach upon industrial, engineered and biomechanical domains traditionally the bastions of the masculine, encompassing digital smartness and the pixel patchwork of cyber-space and cyber-net. Not to forget, that computing emerges directly out of the binary code of weaving, within a global web-matrix that is as much about textile history as the looming future. And that in turn testifies for the matrixial positioning of a *female future* linking women, materials and textile in its widest ‘webbed’ sense.

From the webs of ancient Greece and the voices of the shuttle come Arachne’s woven challenge to Athena, the skilled divine weaver; the raped and silenced *Philomena*, weaving the story of her violation into a tapestry to expose her trauma and its perpetrator; the faithful *Penelope* whose weave and unravel repetition keeps her virtue safe from marauders until the return of her husband Odysseus; *Ariadne*’s red flannel thread leading her beloved Theseus safely in and out of the labyrinth. And from these webs and shuttle voices, via Rumpelstiltskin’s alchemical spinning, via Virginia Woolf’s allusion to her fiction as “like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” [1929: 43-44], to the patenting of extruded nylon in time for war-time’s ‘silken’ stockings, and so to the webs of transgenic techno-textiles like ‘spider-milk silk’ surpassing the toughness of even synthetic polymers. These are the wild webs we weave.

Considering the drawing together of the women artists whose work is temporarily gifted to us here at Turner Contemporary, it is worth thinking too of the *entangled* relationships between those artists, us viewers and the show’s curator, as a means by which to seek out meanings below surfaces and connections across time, space, place, and race. If tactility can be a form of intellect, might then our finger tips, optic nerves and scent sensors translate through our beings a narrative that manages to negate our hunger for fashionable novelty, our contemporary desire for hyperbolic innovation, our gushing lust for the radical new?

*My* gift to *you* – the reader of this text – is to recommend that is worth remembering to see and touch and hear the trajectories of history, gender, ethnicity, economy, nation and desire that informs each work and renders it complex and sticky, adhering uncomfortably to its neighbour, and prompting old and uncomfortable memories of the messiness of cultures. Textile culture, material culture and women’s culture has traditionally been the story of the tucked away, folded and pressed, deliberately concealed, privately preserved. Like the presence of cloth in a liminal articulation of the spectrum of losses that structures life from birth to death, so too are women and their/our matter, their/our materiality, their/our maternity, and their/our madness, on the edge, the selvedge, just out of sight, often out of mind.

Sigmund Freud suggested that a most important part of women’s contribution to culture was through their weaving, but he went on to contend that weaving pointed directly to woman’s shameful phallic lack, covered only by pubic hair, a woven veil of shame [1933: 132]. Well, you know, that’s as may be… but I will argue conversely that textiles as concealing and covering, hinting and disclosing, is political and charged. Fabric’s malleable skin tempts touch, and its ability to wrap, drape, restrict, bind, enhance and adorn the object creates powerful affective desire in the viewer, the actor and the object. Pattern, for example, is luscious, sensual and fecund, perpetuating the infantilism of hysterical repetition, provoking the violence of truncation, compelling the scissor’s snip or needle’s pierced stitch, driving its own disassembly, dislocation, destruction and unravelling. Textile is disruptive, awkward, defying categorisation and denying organisation.

The relationships of love, sex, desire, pain and pleasure are played out through textiles in multitude of ways, from the sensuality of fabric textures, the expanse or lack of colours, the impact and affect of those, their specific attention to aspects of the body concerned with repression of shame or expression of sexuality, their reference to the ecstatic voluptousness of folds and the hysterical baroque of drapes, to those finding the presence of a lover’s body referenced and replaced in garments worn, lover’s knots, fancies exchanged, and in the skin dusting traces of hems and seams.

Revelation of subjective and emotional *felt* responses to fabric’s tactile and visual splendour, to the grand and complex history of textiles, to consumption of culture artifacts and the operation of social interaction and sensory experience, to the skilled mastery and design sophistication of the practitioners of this field, and finally to the indisputable linkage of sexuality’s peripheral habits/practices and textiles.

The bodily relationship with the caress and fleshiness of fabrics is extended where the penetrating ‘prick’ of the needle becomes an active sexual metaphor, and the mechanized pricking of the sewing machine conjures the ‘desire machine’ or the auto-eroticism of desire production sitting well beyond the normative and conventional.

The paradoxes of textile culture are articulated by the cross-tensions of warp and weft, by the fraying edges of a cloth, and by the multi-functions of hiding, revealing, protecting, shrouding, enveloping, draping, covering, touching, possessing, protecting, wrapping...converging in the folding, unfolding, refolding of textiles, and the perpetuation of a textile culture that – according to another French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze – “…endlessly produces folds…twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other…all the way to infinity” [1993: 3].

*So, please take this paper as a conversation starter, a gift, a chat.*

Take it as a starter for thinking your domain, walking your expanded field, reflecting on ways into the *entangled* threads of making in terms of meanings that matter.

You and I are inside the *entangled* relationships between makers, viewers and curators. We are implicated in each others’ gifting, each others’ creation of multi-dimensional conversations constructing infinite webs of meaning. We are all informed and ensnared in textiles and texts, in materials and matter, in embodied and out-of-bodied experiences. We all converse with the digital, the sensual, decorative and functional, with ritual, and through personal, social and economic engagement.

Our own textile webs are twisting and turning, tangling back through history and spinning forward in culture, and our gifts to each other here and now must be to devote time to reflect in this curated space on the dialectics, politics, discourses and contexts of the textiles, material and over forty women, including their curator, that have gift-wrapped this exhibition for our delight.

*(3322 words*)

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