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CONTEMPORARY TEXTILES: CRAFT MEDIUM OR ART MOVEMENT?

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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

The "Textile Art Movement" is a term which has come to be applied to a proliferation of textile practices that have developed over the last fifty years. This has involved the participation of many artists and craftspeople in the transition of the application of the medium from a functional towards a more expressive end; the establishment of specific institutions to enable exhibiting facilities for the genre; and the production of many books illustrating the exciting possibilities of textile materials and processes. All have combined to create what one would expect to be an internationally recognised and celebrated contemporary movement. However, this does not appear to be the case. For "Textile Art", as it has come to be named, somewhat ambiguously, holds an insecure status which flutters on the periphery of the firmly established Art institutions.

Within the fine arts, textiles has become a popular medium of the moment, utilised by artists whose priority lies in the fulfilment of a critique, whereby the medium itself is relegated to an incidental, or at best, metaphorical status. In this case, the medium provides for the artist a metaphor for specific historical and political agendas, which become assimilated into the doctrines of the High Art sphere. The focus lies on the implications rather than the application of textiles. At the other end of the scale, there are those who work consistently with textiles, allowing the application of the medium to determine and describe their expression. Inevitably, this use of textiles is prescribed under the crafts domain, as the use of the physical properties of the medium and its technical processes as language apparently overpowers the expression this language speaks.



Accordingly, due to a forced compliance to the firmly established doctrines of the Art or Craft institutions of today, it would appear necessary to adhere to one of two distinctive positions: a loyalty to the medium, which in practical terms of establishing a reputable, prestigious career, has proved a problematic, if not stagnant policy; or a conscious disassociation with the medium in order to be acknowledged as an individual beyond the associations and implications of it.

In short, the use of textiles by contemporary "artists" is automatically locked into a definition of either craft or fine art. In this sense, "Textile Art" as a 'movement' does not, in fact, exist in its own right. There is no driving force behind what has come to be proven a dynamic practice; a tragedy which renders textiles just another medium, not a 'movement', per se. In turn, the absence of a specific definition of "Textile Art" perpetuates an inability to define what kind of work can or cannot be classified under the umbrella term. The category is rendered almost infinitely flexible, a problematic "genre deborde"(Jeffries in Deepwell (ed.), 1995, p.166): "The medium, belonging everywhere and nowhere, is everything and nothing... it has no certainty"(Newdigate in Deepwell (ed.), 1995, p.174).

In this thesis, I want to assess this ambiguous position for creative textile practices and products in the contemporary art world. This involves an analysis of the various directions the textile medium has been taken in, since around the time of the second world war. Such an analysis encompasses not only an outline of the variety of this application, but also the accompanying implications, and the inevitable categorisation of textile practice into either a craft or fine art sphere. I am posing questions in conjunction with this discussion, such as; should a loyalty, or more practically speaking, a creative affinity with textiles and its working processes, remain a handicap, and if not,

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then how can this change? Are the distinctions which determine this categorisation outdated, and if so, how is it that they remain applicable in realistic, practical terms for the contemporary textile 'worker'? It follows then that these questions inevitably lead beyond that of "What is being done to us?", and towards "What have we been doing wrong?", and "What can we do to change it?"

Chapter one outlines the various directions the application of the textile medium took in the latter half of this century. It relates the progression of this application from its roots in the traditional crafts, and subsequently in relation to the development of the contemporary crafts. This includes the descriptions of work by Magdalena Abakanowicz, Sheila Hicks and Francoise Grossen, who have all been allocated under the umbrella term "Textile Art". Relating to certain texts outlining the purpose of the craftsperson and artist, I wish to clarify how the categorisation of certain textile works into the craft domain is orchestrated. This chapter also seeks to identify the specific 'craft' properties of the new textile expression, to acknowledge their importance as a vital component in contemporary textile work.

Chapter two elaborates upon the establishment of an exclusive hierarchy within the fine arts, focusing on specific histories in the twentieth century which applied a strategy of self criticism to instrument their direction in moving into the new age. This strategy enabled the fine arts to become selfjustifying and therefore strengthened, resulting in an identity of High Art, supported by institutional structures to implement this critique and its status at the pinnacle of the art hierarchy. An ensuing dissatisfaction of many elements which were discriminated against under this powerful exclusive hierarchy led to the appropriation of textiles and its historical, social and political implications, within the fine arts sphere. The application of textiles as



political metaphor in the case of Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro's work, illustrates the subservience of the medium to a fine art dictate which overrides the possibilities of textile practices existing outside its boundaries, in a category of its own.

Chapter three analyses, through a correlation of the information already discussed, exactly how contemporary textile practices fall between the cracks of the hierarchal divisions of the arts arena. This assesses how the use of the term "Textile Art" is problematic in its failure to justify the art of it's title, and also in employing an aspiration towards what it is not. The incoherent and scattered representation of contemporary textile practitioners is initially induced by this lack of competence concerning a definitive term under which they can be located, to clarify an identification for themselves and for an audience. This chapter also looks at how the "Textile Art Movement" has, in reality, failed to *move* anywhere; how the institutions which claim to support "Textile Art" is another example of assimilation into a modernist discourse, and the literature to promote it fails to apply a competent critical analysis of present day textile work.



CHAPTER ONE Rooted in Craft: Dynamic or Detrimental?

Chapter One

Rooted in Craft: Dynamic or Detrimental?

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a change in identity for the textile medium. The textile crafts, traditionally associated with decorative, industrially produced goods such as tablecloths, clothing and rugs, developed through the popularisation of crafts during the 60's and 70's, beyond a purely functional capacity.

A mounting dissatisfaction with urban industrial development in the post second world war years, drove the crafts towards the exaggeration of the handmade aesthetic, providing an alternative to that of mainstream mass produced goods. The spawning of alternative and counter-cultural movements that spread from California in the sixties, such as hippies, back-to-naturists and folk revivalists, initiated the identification of craft as a way of life.

This identification surfaced through crafts being sold at trade fairs all over America, and to a lesser extent in Europe as well, giving the individual smalltime craftsperson the opportunity to present his/her work to the public outside a commercial manufacturing context. This resulted in a falling off in standards and much more work being criticised as banal, with the craft textile movement becoming firmly associated with macrame plant pot holders, but did initiate the movement of the crafts beyond a strictly utilitarian context.

As the crafts distanced themselves from the status of slave to the manufacturing machine, a fresh perspective on the inherent processes and materials began, which enabled the crafts to formulate a process of self-assessment with regard to the possibilities of their respective mediums. In the textile sphere this sparked a tremendous move towards exploiting the potential

of fabric and fibre in combination with endless varieties of weaving, embroidering and printing techniques towards a hybrid of aesthetically contemporary and exciting works.

Indeed, the popularisation of crafts facilitated an important revival and reassessment of domestic crafts such as quilting, embroidery and basketry, expanding the range of the textile crafts considerably, and extending the scope of the medium for the benefit of the craftsperson. The contemporary crafts went on to sever the connection with industry by developing into a self-conscious practice in that they supplied contemplational objects - objects that have been contemplated in the process of making and whose main purpose is to evoke contemplation in the viewer.

By the early 1970s it was clear that in Europe as well as in the United States there was a wide constituency for the crafts. Craft galleries began to emerge and in turn they influenced the orientation of the works themselves. Gallery owners were careful to assert the quality and status of craftwork by promoting the names of individual craftspeople who, in response, began to produce more elitist, one-off objects. The strength of the contemporary art market in America also had its effect on crafts from the late 1970s onwards, and collecting became big business. The unique object fulfilled a growing need in the general public for a personalised identity, and indeed it was in America that the contemporary crafts did particularly well.

The interest in the woven structure as an expressive form in its own right developed as an important characteristic of textile work since the second world war in accordance with the transition of the crafts. Manipulating the potential of complex weave structures, distorting selvages of fabric, research into techniques such as knotting, plaiting, and felting and abandoning the loom,



were conducted as a means of exploring the expressive and sculptural possibilities of the medium.

Poland, a leading country in the new tapestry movement which subverted the ancient tradition of translating an existing painting onto cloth, by women weaving tapestries of their own design for the first time, experienced shortages of conventional materials resulting from the second world war. This necessitated the use of agricultural materials such as hemp, sisal and rope in tapestry making. The most famous proponent of the transition of the textile medium into an expressive format, through the use of these materials, is Magdalena Abakanowicz.

Her discovery of fibre and weaving came out of a dissatisfaction with the traditional fine art mediums through which she had been educated. The link between textiles and nature which has been repeatedly demonstrated amongst prominent artists turning fibre into a vehicle for expression, is evident in Abakanowicz's work, a relationship which is connected to the hand-made aesthetic of the crafts in its early years of the movement away from commercialism. In Poland, the use of agricultural materials came to be regarded as ideologically suitable for a largely agrarian people.

Abakanowicz identifies with her materials in this sense, allowing her the expression of an aesthetic which had been borne of her childhood in the Polish countryside. In a memoir, the artist recounts an encounter with the tadpoles of a nearby pond, an event which pinpoints her creative spark:

Through the thin membrane covering their distended bellies, the tangle of intestines was clearly visible. Heavy with the process of transformation, sluggish, they provoked one to reach for them. Pulled out onto the shore with a stick, touched carelessly, the











swollen bellies burst. The contents leaked out into a confusion of knots. (Rose, 1994, p.8)

Throughout her career, Abakanowicz has utilised both soft and hard surfaces, in pursuit of analogies to the animal, plant and mineral forms of nature. Her sculptural work with fibre, for which she has become internationally renowned, reflect an alertness to the possibilities of using familiar materials in unforeseen ways. Her famous 'Abakans'(Fig 1.1) and the majestic 'Bois-de-Luc'(Fig 1.2), a floor to ceiling environment covering almost 720 square feet, encompass a thorough exploration of the possibilities of woven processes and pliable materials, evoking a presence which stimulates all the senses, containing a power which can overawe the viewer. Barbara Rose says of her 'Abakans', "When fully opened, they become immense free-standing shapes that could be hung in groups to create an all-encompassing indoor environment." (Rose, 1994, p.23)

The success of these pieces is very much reliant on her materials and techniques, demanding time to be perceived on account of the richness of their thick, irregular and unusual surfaces. Her use of monochromatic colours give a subtle variety when she moves from light absorbing to light reflecting fibres, or creates high relief by contrasting fine yarns tightly woven against large elements that are barely interlaced.

Abakanowicz is highly aware that her use of craft techniques and materials to produce sculpture allows her to challenge existing hierarchies of art. It is obvious that her relationship to her medium is a highly personal one, a relationship which gives her the freedom to manipulate it towards a very individual artistic expression. In this sense, the materials and processes belong to her, rather than a craft category. Her use of them is a deliberate strategy to remove them from their traditional associations.



The fibre which I use in my works derives from plants and is similar to that from which we ourselves are composed... When the biology of the body breaks down, the skin has to be cut so as to give access to the inside. Later it has to be sewn on like fabric. Fabric is our covering and our attire. Made with our hands it is a record of our thoughts. (Rose, 1994, pp.21-22)

Abakanowicz is noted for the "heroic" scale of her work, transforming the traditional 'feminine' activity of weaving into a means to produce monumental art. The issue of scale is very much central to the art/craft debate, and in Abakanowicz's work represents the challenging of existing art/craft criteria by changing the intensity, power and identity of the medium. Again it is evident that the ideological implications of the scale of her work is at the forefront of the artist's agenda.

The sixties and seventies witnessed the widespread creation of new university buildings and a boom in civic architecture in general, which created new opportunities for exhibiting textile work to the public. Textile hangings were amongst the few forms of decoration to have been approved by both the Bauhaus and Corbusier and were therefore popular with modernist architects. Especially favoured were the intricate structural or modular pieces that evoked associations of calm and order, regarded as vastly more suitable for civic display than the current fashions for expressionism and minimalism, which were considered decadent and disruptive of the social fabric.

"It is architecture and the people who use buildings, especially public buildings, that provide a major context for defining the shape, content and purpose of tapestry." (Colchester, 1991, p.144)

American born Sheila Hicks is most famous for her architectural installations, works which were produced in conjunction with architects. Her wall pieces







Fig 1.5 *Wall*, Sheila Hicks, 1970

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(figs 1.4 and 1.5), display a unique application of textile materials, achieved through a deep understanding of both her working processes and the aesthetic potential of fibre and thread:

Where one thread becomes attached to another; or where one linear element transverses a second; when fibres overlap and twist, actively binding together, or passing over and under each other; And when a simple knot or loop manages to hold a network of threads interlaced, meshed, fused, I observe and marvel how a textile is made. (Quoted in Conatantine/Larsen, 1973, p.173)

Hicks holds a deep respect for the traditional handicrafts, possessing a most individual understanding of and relationship with her craft which allows her a certain amount of spontaneity and liberates her to demand that the pieces evolve as she works with them. "She arranges her own reality with thread, feeling at times like a carver who has an idea of the whole but who in detail lets himself be guided by the grain of the wood." (Constantine/Larson, 1973, p.173)

Hicks' work is indicative of a fresh and exciting aesthetic for the textile medium, a supreme example of the infinite possibilities of the exploitation of the elements which create a textile, illustrating a transcendence of the boundaries of utility applied to traditional textiles of the past. Her wall pieces display a technical virtuosity and individual aesthetic appeal, applied through an interdependence of process and material content. The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, commented on Hicks' work, saying it: *"provided the perfect antidote for the functional, utilitarian architecture in which we are sentenced to dwell... [which] it enlivens with the dense work of human hands."* (Quoted in Colchester, 1991, p.139)

A similar interdependence of process and medium is evident in the work of Francoise Grossen (Figs 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8). Grossen is enabled in her textile processes and medium to execute original works which exist in space. She attempts to allow the physical properties of her medium assert themselves and become the determining factor of her work: *"The beauty of the material pre-exists and I try to make the material assert itself to the fullest degree."* (Quoted in Constantine/Larson, 1973, p.166)

A combination of a preset plan and the manipulation of her materials determine the outcome. The end result is more of a reverence, or an enhancing of, the medium rather than a transformation of it:

I am interested in finding out through working on a piece some of the potential and not the preconceived... as you work the piece itself can define or redefine the next step; or the next step combined with some vague idea. (Quoted in Constantine, Larson, 1973, p.172)

Again, Grossen illustrates the capacity to let her materials determine the expression of her sensibilities. Her work is representative of the vast possibilities within the application of textiles.

It is evident that these three artists are successful in their contemporary application of the textile medium. As we have seen, their work is based on craft practices and materials, and each has come to be revered under the "Textile Art Movement". It is difficult to estimate, however, how their work can necessarily be constituted "Textile Art" when it is obviously textiles, but closer to craft than art in its physical application. The ambiguity of the "Textile Art" title is highlighted in relation to these works, when considered in the light of definitions of craft and art which have been firmly established and imposed by the contemporary institutions of art.










The definition of properties which have been prescribed as exclusive to craft are identified by Peter Dormer in his book, *The Art of the Maker*. It is supposed that craft is merely mechanical and can be learned as and when necessary or appropriate. It is considered to be rule based and conducive to habit forming. In turn, habit and rules conflict with the freedom from which stems creativity, and consequently, craft knowledge and having ideas or being creative are seen as separate activities. (Dormer, 1984).

This simplified categorisation which has come to be accepted implies that craft skills and technical ability are constraints upon self expression, rather than being the content as well as the means of expression. Granted, craft is medium specific, pertains to manual dexterity, and is mechanical in the nature of its processes. However, the presumption that craft skill, once acquired, is always and can only be practised as an end in itself, assumes craft to be devoid of creative purpose.

The possibility of medium and methodology as a means to an artistic end, craft as content as well as means of expression, are elements which remain unconsidered - indeed realities which remain ignored, in such a limited presumption.

The basis of this presumption lies in the purpose of the craftsperson, taken to be one which serves a purely skilful and practical end. The craftsperson and the purpose of his/her work remains inside the category of utility, by definition. But if this is the defined purpose of the work of the craftsperson, what is the purpose of the work of the artist? To understand the distinction between the two clarifies the status of the craftsperson in a fuller context.



In his "Essay on Aesthetics", Roger Fry ponders the nature of the Graphic Arts and their value in the world, their relation to the other arts, and whether they constitute more than mere imitation. In doing so, he proposes the basic purpose of art. In constructing his narrative, he describes an imaginative life as distinct from real life:

Between these two lives there is this great distinction, that in the actual life, the processes of natural selection have brought it about that the instinctive reaction, such, for instance, as flight from danger, shall be the important part of the whole process, and it is towards this that the man bends his whole conscious endeavour. But in the imaginative life no such action is necessary, and, therefore, the whole consciousness may be focused upon the perceptive and the emotional aspects of the experience. In this way, we get, in the imaginative life, a different set of values, and a different kind of perception. (Fry in Frascina, Harrison, (eds.), 1982, p.80)

Fry advocates that art, being without physical necessity and relating to the imaginative life, renders a pure vision which can only be pure in its abstraction from necessity: "*It is only when an object exists for no other purpose than to be seen that we really look at it.*" Indeed, clarity of perception and purity of emotion are created by the imaginative life. And art, as the "chief organ" of the imaginative life, is that which allows the freedom of unbiased vision.

Fry also goes on to assess how the work of art can be judged, through an understanding of its function as a work of art. "We must give up the attempt to judge the work of art by its reaction on life, and consider it as an expression of emotions regarded as ends in themselves." (Fry in Frascina, Harrison, (eds.), 1982, p.84)

He also advocates an essential part of the aesthetic judgement proper, a recognition of purpose. A part of our reaction to a piece of work is a





"consciousness of a peculiar relation of sympathy" with the artist who gives us the opportunity to experience the associated emotions and sensations. "We feel that he has expressed something which was latent in us all the time, that he has revealed us to ourselves in revealing himself." (Fry in Frascina, Harrison, (eds.), 1982, p.84)

Fry enumerates what he calls the "*emotional qualities of design*", the basic physical qualities of art which are manipulated and arranged in infinite combinations by the artist: rhythm of line, mass, space, light and shade, colour.

It will be seen, then, that the graphic arts arouse emotions in us by playing upon what one may call the overtones of some of our primary physical needs. They have, indeed, this great advantage... that they can appeal more directly and immediately to the emotional accompaniments of our bare physical existence. (Fry in Frascina, Harrison, (eds.), 1982, p.86)

In describing the facilities of expression of the artist, he renders them incidental, relating merely to the animalistic, physical side of our nature: "*overtones of our primary physical needs*", and it is in appealing to the emotional side of physical existence that they have a useful application. The work of art, then, is the embodiment of the intellect - the intention of the artist; the emotional - the intention becoming expression; and the physical - the experience of that expression.

Concerning the implications prescribed to the crafts, then, the separation of art from physical necessity allows us to understand why the associations of art with the traditionally functional crafts renders it 'impure'. In addition, if the manner in which the artist is expressing his intention- the physical- is to be considered at length in itself, that is if it exhibits technical skill to 'its own end', then exactly what he is trying to say, or the clarity of his purpose, is dulled in its impact on the viewer.

The implication remains, then, that the characteristics of craft are purely of a physical nature and fail to employ the entire embodiment of the artistic experience. The assumption that the crafts exist outside this experience continues to rest on the categorisation of craft into the realm of utility. In looking at the definition of art and the purpose of the artist, the reasons for the exclusion of craft is clarified: it is to facilitate a stronger identity and autonomy for the fine arts.

CHAPTER TWO Used by Fine Art: Submission to the Establishment



Chapter Two

Used by Fine Art: Submission to the Establishment

What did emerge from the growth of scientific and technical discovery, as the age of steam passed into the age of electricity, was the sense of an accelerated rate of change in all areas of human discourse, including art. From now on the rules would quaver, the fixed canons of knowledge fail, under the pressure of new experience and the demand for new forms to contain it. (Hughes, 1991, p.15)

The dawning of the twentieth century brought with it profound changes in society: the altering technological landscape, the dynamism of the machine age, even the change in scale of people's lived environments - cities developing and enlarging, buildings moving upwards into the sky. All the conditions of western capitalist society: its idea of itself, its sense of history, its beliefs, modes of production, were in transition. But possibly the most deep rooted transition was that which was manifested in the consciousness of the people: the changing of the perception of life itself.

This change in perception obviously came to influence the fine arts into what can by identified as the most important transition in its history: the move to abstraction. Beginning with the cubists, a new kind of representation of , and relationship to, "reality" was born. They presented to the world a radical new proposition of the way we see by attempting to render visual experience in a more "truthful" manner.

Perspective, the five hundred year old schematisation of an object or view, was turned on its head, altering the ideal view of being seen by a motionless person who is clearly detached from what he sees. The cubists wanted to synthesise our knowledge of an object encompassing all possible views of it: top, sides,









front, back and compress this inspection into one moment. "They aimed to render that sense of multiplicity... as the governing element of reality". (Hughes, 1991, p.20). In turn, this process allowed for a reality which included the painter's efforts to perceive it, illuminating the interactive element of art between the artist, the view and the viewer.

The changing perception of reality therefore precipitated a changing approach for the artist, which transformed his own position and that of the viewer in relation to the work of art. The movement of the fine arts further into the field of abstraction went hand in hand with the development of the purpose of the artist in relation to both himself and that of the arts as a whole. The fine arts came to encompass new philosophies, theories and political agendas in an ever increasing effort to find for art a legitimate stronghold in the changing world. Artists strove to encapsulate in their work new ideals for the universe, to communicate through their art an increasing awareness of spirituality and consciousness.

The new art was to be utopian. Proponents of futurism, De Stijl, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus envisioned a new society which radically rejected the bourgeois values that supposedly caused the [first world] war. (Metcalf, 1993, p.41)

The Dutch group, De Stijl, proposed a new world order through the reform of art and culture, amidst the disillusionment of the post war years. The equilality of the individual and the universal was paramount, and was embodied aesthetically in the austere relationships of line, colour and picture planes. This brought about the elimination of naturalist subject matter in favour of pure abstraction. With this abstraction came a relation to art not in terms of content, but in terms of colour, form and structure: an emotional response to the aesthetic. Kandinsky brought this base emotional narrative one step further in an attempt to draw the viewer in and lead him to a higher consciousness by creating a meditative state through abstraction. He asserted that colour and form had expressive qualities of their own. Through the development of an artistic language independent of recognisable reality, colour and form would be allowed to speak and express for themselves.

The short lived Russian constructivist movement, after the 1917 revolution and the disintegration of the tsarist regime, gave rise to the ideal of art as social catalyst. The literal renewal of the country's history saw the art makers of the time at the brink of a new age, full of possibilities and optimism; the coming together of the fragments of an abolished reality into a new, collective pattern. The tradition in tsarist Russia of communicating through iconography, was an established didactic political art which could be adapted in the name of the revolution. This change in the language of art came about through Constructivism: "A futurist painting lives a collective life, by the same principle on which the proletariat's whole creation is constructed," (Altman quoted in Hughes, 1991, p.85)

As with all art movements of the time, Russian Constructivism was highly influenced by the machine age: in works of painters such as Gonchorova, as well as Malevich and Chagall, one sees incessant references to the machine aesthetic, such as the steam iron and a metalically pleated shirt front in Goncharova's *The Laundry*, 1912, (fig 2.5). The use of materials of production, of manual labour, in creating art, would appeal to the proletariat audience and develop fully every way of addressing one's fellows, rather than scrambling for places on the hierarchal ladder of the arts, and widening the gap between artist and viewer.









Art (its creators hoped) would be open to everyone instead of a few initiated souls: and the old class distinctions between artist and artisan, architect and engineer, would be merged in a general conception of art as production. (Hughes, 1991, p.89)

Art was given the enormous responsibility of bringing about a new millennium of consciousness, serving the power of the left in the highest spirit of optimism: the promise of communism was new, and the newness of art fused with it. Constructivism gave art a social purpose, acting as a transformer towards a future of equality and organised energy, the marrying of the fine arts into design for society. Developing planes in space as reference to the machine ethic was the painter's trademark: *"To make social art, one must stop depicting ownable things, in short go abstract,"* (Hughes, 1991, p.89).

An intense dialogue between art and the socio-political agenda of the time reiterated the fine arts' importance in society, not just as a small part of it, but as a vital element within its development. Although the results of this optimism were successful, they were short lived as Stalin came to power and State art again functioned to reinforce the narcissism of power. Art in this context became obsolete as, in the west, it removed itself further and further from social reference, establishing itself on the top rung of the artistic hierarchal ladder; existing in the purity if its being, isolated from anything which interfered with this higher purpose.

"As a branch of western philosophy, Modernism is part of a search for transcendent absolutes and precisely delineated categories." (Metcalf, 1993, p.41)

The rejection of the past, of the rules which had before governed the arts, spurred the artists creating in these formative years to establish a new objective, a new identity for art. Art was changing, but what was it changing



Fig 2.5 *The Laundry*, Natalya Goncharova, 1912



into? A fresh set of rules, or critical agenda, was needed to clarify the new direction of the fine arts and solidify it's status as separate and beyond all references to a social or natural world. These rules would secure for the Fine Arts a distinction as 'high art', supported by an institutional framework to implement its status in western civilisation. The move to abstraction also necessitated critical justification, for an intellectual explanation of art was the only away it could be appreciated in its fullest meaning.

The process of securing a distinguished status culminated in a self assessment through self-criticism, most articulated by the influential American critic, Clement Greenberg. He asserted that an increasing emphasis on flatness and two dimensionality played an essential part in developing self-identification of modernist painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The key to defining what art was, was in specifying what it was not.

"The question 'What is the essence of the art experience?' was restated as 'What is not duplicated in any other type of experience?'" (Metcalf, 1993, p.41)

Within this one discipline, then, the process of identification of painting as painting even further divorced from sculptural, narrative and figurative elements, firmly entrenched the discipline in its own sphere of influence and ostracised anything outside its boundaries of definition. The exclusion of all conditions which were not unique and exclusive to each discipline, narrowed down its area of competence, but made its possession of this area more secure. An internal dialogue or process of self criticism was to make art a critique of itself, a pure expression of the engagement of the artistic self with the processes and procedures of painting. "*Purity' meant self-definition, and the*





enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance." (Greenberg in Battock, (ed.), 1966, p.102)

A dissatisfaction with the structures of this hierarchy came about in later generations which injected new meaning into the textile medium as metaphor of the excluded social underdog. The use of textiles thus became popular with the feminist art movement of the 1970s, towards reasserting the status of women artists within the male hegemony of the artistic hierarchy that was high modernism. Quilting and embroidery were seen by some women as political media because both crafts were unsullied by men. Moreover, the environment and methods of production were themselves representational of salient issues. The skill based techniques indicated the degree of care involved in these crafts, whilst the collaboration between women expressed a selflessness at odds with the competitive, egocentric individuality of male artists.

Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro are both artists who have come to be widely acknowledged in their contributions to the feminist art movement. Judy Chicago's work *The Dinner Party*, (Fig 2.7), is one of the most widely known markers of feminist art in America. It encompasses on many levels the emphasis which was being placed on establishing a critique of art production and its history, and to uncover hidden histories of women artists working within the patriarchal social system and art world. In her research, Chicago discovered that embroidery had long been used in a strategic manner to reinforce discriminating social standards, which led to her inclusion of embroidered runners within *The Dinner Party*, (Fig 2.8).: "*I had been trying to establish a respect for women and women's art; to forge a new kind of art expressing woman's experience*." (Chicago, 1979, p.12)



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Fig 2.7 *The Dinner Party,* Judy Chicago, 1974-79





Full runner.



Snake Goddess plate.



Detail: couched snakes.



Illuminated capital.

Fig 2.8 *The Dinner Party* (detail), Judy Chicago, 1974 - 79





Fig 2.9 *Wonderland*, Miriam Shapiro, 1983

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Another of the principal contributors of feminist art was Miriam Shapiro. Her piece *Wonderland* was also created with a political agenda in mind. Nancy Grubb comments:

exemplifies her "femmage" aesthetic, reflecting women's domestic culture in both form and content. This dual concern is also evident in Wonderland which Shapiro made with vintage Australian needlework, crocheted aprons, doilies, quilt blocks and against a complex geometric space augmented with brushstrokes. The feminist content is conveyed not only by the use of fabric, the decorative patterning, and the collaboration with the anonymous needleworkers, but also by the central embroidered image of a housewife who curtsies beneath the caption "Welcome To Our Home. (Grubb, (ed.), 1989, p.125).

It is evident that both artists hold a deep appreciation of the craft techniques they employ. However, it is important to note that the use of textiles here is purely metaphorical, facilitating a base political motive. In this sense the theoretical implications of textiles is emphasised which consequently overshadows it's application.

Many fine artists who would not be commonly associated with the textile medium have, in recent years, adopted it into their work. As with Chicago and Shapiro, their manipulation of textiles is in conjunction with a set critique, be it socio-cultural, political or otherwise. In adhering to a specific doctrine, the critical justification of textiles is achievable, and enables its use as a medium within the fine arts. Consequently, textiles becomes assimilated and swallowed up into the fine arts, without retaining an identity of its own.

In her essay "Fabric as Fine Art: Thinking Across the Divide", curator Paula Marincola comments on the substantial number of exhibitions devoted to various aspects of artists' use of fabric across the United States. She enumerates exhibitions of this kind, such as "The Subversive Stitch", 1991, "Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art", 1993, "Guys who Sew", 1994, as well as her own "The Social Fabric", (Marincola, 1995, p.34).

As is evident from these exhibition titles, the textile medium reaches the fine art exhibiting context in once again encompassing a critique. Be it the willful disregard of conventional hierarchies of both medium and methodology as critical content, (Subversive Stitch); an assessment of and commentary on clothing within the discipline of fine art, (Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art); a political agenda concerning the "feminine" the historical and social implications of textiles, (Guys who Sew); and as Marincola says of her own "The Social Fabric", "for artists who defined themselves as fine artists and who exhibit their work in museums and galleries associated with painting and sculpture rather than textiles or craft." (Marincola, 1995, p.35)

The representation of textiles in this context assimilates it into the fine arts, whereby the textile medium is reduced to the status of a novelty medium, facilitating the expression of a critique which remains in the fine art domain.
CHAPTER THREE Falling Between the Cracks: Conforming to Categorisation

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Chapter Three

Falling Between the Cracks: Conforming to Categorisation

Having outlined the variety of textile work which has developed over the last fifty years, and assessed the categorisation it inevitably falls into, it becomes more and more clear that the category of "Textile Art" in itself fails to have any impact in the face of the contemporary art institutions and their prescribed definitions of high and low spheres of art . Indeed, the term "Textile Art" reinforces a state of limbo for those working under its patronage, because it not only fails in justifying the art of its name, but removes itself from its craft roots, and the move of the contemporary crafts towards a strong and separate identity for themselves.

To understand how the artists we have looked at are vulnerable in the sense of being categorised into an existing framework, it is worth re-evaluating their practice. Magdalena Abakanowicz is internationally regarded as a fine artist who used fibre to create sculpture in the earlier part of her career. Indeed, her renown in High Art circles has proved beneficial for the recognition of the medium beyond its traditional associations. However, what is it that has deemed her so definitely a fine artist when the same materials she uses so often implicate others to a lower status?

It is not her innovative use of fibre to create three dimensional pieces, but her dialogue with them. It is not the scale of her work, although they are hardly suitable for anything other than public exhibition: but scale cannot determine what is or is not art (it does not follow that if a piece of work is small, it is automatically craft, and if it is large, it is automatically art). Abakanowicz is not only aware of the ideological context her work is situated in, she manipulates it by challenging the hierarchies which her work inherently fall victim of; she deliberately subverts the traditional associations of her medium; she conducts an interactive dialogue with her art.

In looking again at Hicks, we can see that her work belies an intense relationship with her craft and her medium. A commentator on her own work, Hicks articulates this relationship, allowing the viewer to appreciate the full capacity of her working processes. However, although her work has become some of the most reputable in its promotion of the unique textile aesthetic, it remains essentially decorative. It represents how textile work falls short in its attempt to become 'art', ending up in the bank lobby rather than the art gallery.

It is precisely in its attempt to become 'art', in fact, that the wrong strategy is being pursued by the likes of Hicks - and Grossen, whose work exhibits an equal standard of technical virtuosity and successful manipulation of the medium. This strategy is one which necessitates a compromise in one's own language, to adjust according to a variety of confining preconceptions: "*Those* who speak a minor language often accept the pressure to be fluent in the major language while the reverse is not demanded." (Newdigate in Deepwell (ed.), 1995, p.179)

In his essay "Replacing the Myth of Modernism", Bruce Metcalf is quick to identify and emphasise the importance of the acknowledgement of one's own language:

Craftspeople should stop trying to make modern art. Assimilation into art is deadly to craft and should be avoided....craft comprises a different class of objects and also springs from a different set of values and a separate historical consciousness. These differences are essential to craft, and they are in peril of being lost. (Metcalf, 1993, p.40) As we have seen, this strength of identity through self criticism facilitates the power to discriminate, but more importantly allows the freedom to create ones own boundaries. As the fine arts developed this ability, the crafts were in turn handicapped by its effectiveness. Consequently, while art seeks to establish its own rules, craft concurrently tries to break free from those rules imposed upon it.

It is clear then that self criticism is the cornerstone of autonomy, and at the same time, the lack of it results in subservience to the standards of the other. In this light, the downfall of the efforts of textile artists to establish for themselves an autonomous, self sufficient movement, lies in its lack of critical discourse about its purpose and its context.

In our outsider status, we have tried so hard to legitimise and give credibility to our chosen medium that we have conformed to a set of standards we have not ourselves helped develop nor been given the opportunity to evaluate. Now is the time to begin to be proactive, to become agents and sensitive interpreters of historical perspectives instead of submitting unquestioningly to them. (Janeiro, 1994, p.6)

The value of self criticism lies in its leading to a stronger identity of its own processes. The process of conducting an internal dialogue with one's medium as has been illustrated and proven by Abakanowicz, successfully strengthens the theoretical support which is needed to avoid falling between the cracks of existing institutions. Textiles are in the position to take on this strategy which has proved so successful elsewhere. As we have seen in the first chapter, textiles embodies a wide variety of materials and technical processes in its application. This is a source which can be tapped into. Just as modernism in fine art narrowed down its mediums to their essential elements, textiles can clarify the essential elements of its own discipline through evaluating the physical or 'craft' properties it embodies. The success of the evaluation and clarification of self criticism in this sense has been proven by the fine arts in this century, and can be proven again to be a successful strategy for textile practitioners.

"To a very great extent we have failed to examine in active dialogue the ideas that are inherent in our media or to project them into the larger art dialogue for critical response and argumentation." (Janeiro, 1994, p.6)

I have also outlined in the first chapter some of the basic criteria which define what is craft as opposed to art, a definition which conveniently establishes craft within a category of strict boundaries and limitations. It is evident, however, that each of the definitions which add up into the criteria of the craft medium are selective in their nature, and rely on so many presumptions that they are easily argued out to be far from definitive. The arts/crafts debate is an age old one, and is ongoing, due to the instability of the arguments which depend on a basis of accepted provisions. Proving the distinction between art and craft is inevitably an endless spiral of debates which can only result in a standstill through the provisional nature of the existing categories.

In his essay, "Art and Craft", H. O. Mounce analyses Collingwood's *Principles of Art* in which the distinction between art and craft figures predominantly. Mounce identifies the basic characteristics distinctive of a craft put forward by Collingwood, and in trying to deconstruct his arguments to support these distinctions, comes up against this brick wall of overlapping considerations. Even the seemingly simple distinction between boxer as craftsman and stone sculptor as artist proves inconsequential when considering that both possess a basic skill, and each works out what to do as he goes along. Mounce concludes that only in presenting an argument which is partial or selective in its considerations, can any conclusion be made to the debate:

Plainly, when we say something serves an end or purpose, we do not mean that it will do so whatever the conditions. We always presuppose certain conditions and especially we presuppose that those who use it will appreciate its purpose. (Mounce, 1991, p.233).

It is evident that the art/craft debate is ongoing, and can only be perpetuated by the application of a limited logic. However, although it is widely recognised that the art/craft dichotomy is outdated, it remains applicable in practical terms, regardless of theoretical shortcomings. This is evidenced in the fruitless persistence of textiles and other craft mediums to disassociate themselves from their craft roots or associations toward an assimilation into the established high art sphere. The art/craft debate itself ultimately perpetuates the status of the fine arts as high art as that which must be aspired to, in its successful depletion of the values of craft. In trying to justify oneself within a foreign dialogue, the craftsperson inevitably loses sight of the importance of a dialogue of one's own. Anne Newdigate writes in her essay "Kinda Art, Sorta Tapestry", of the experience of existing in limbo between two art spheres:

I revised and censored my language for each, because what was rewarded in one sphere was precisely what was rejected in the other. In the High Art sphere, where tapestry was ostensibly dismissed as too well made (craft driven), invisibility was further guaranteed by lack of access to the teaching institutions, museums and critical journals that validate 'professionalism'. Conversely, in the Low Art sphere, the rules of technical orthodoxy (Aubusson versus Gobelin, European versus nomadic, sculptural versus flat) were jealously guarded. In this sphere too, the examination of theoretical concepts (with the possible exception of an essentialising feminism) have often been resisted. (Newdigate in Deepwell, 1995, p.176)

Having looked at the metaphorical use of textiles towards creating a political agenda for the feminist art movement, it is clear that the textile medium is used in service to what still remains a fine art dictate. This reiterates the fact that a

so-called "Textile Art" cannot survive when criteria it can subscribe to automatically gets categorised into the fine art domain. For the medium of textiles contains a wealth of historical perspectives which can be tapped into and used to a positive end.

"All its ancient usages provide a sourcebook from which craft can clarify its essential distinction from fine art. Once that is done, craft can develop its own conceptual approach." (Metcalf, 1993, p.40)

Textiles has long suffered from the historical and social implications of the medium. Apart from the complexities of its position within the crafts, the textile medium holds a political dialogue reaching far back into the past centuries. The use of textiles by the patriarchy in the nineteenth century as a tool to reinforce the status of women as second class citizens, deeply held associations of textiles with the "feminine", the place of textiles within the feminist movement from its earliest days in the nineteenth century and through to the twentieth, are all part of the historical perspectives available to the textile art movement, as a contributing factor towards the achievement of self identity.

So far, we have seen with Chicago and Shapiro, the political implications of textiles have been used to ascribe to a fine art critique, because the Fine Arts have established that which the crafts have not: the critique as the essence of its application. The historical perspectives of textiles could be used by those who practice its application towards establishing its own critique. However, the assimilation of textiles in to the high art sphere is not purely a result of its usage by established fine artists. As is evident, the debates used to this end are at the disposal of contemporary textile practitioners, relating specifically to those who use the medium. The use of the historical perspectives of the

medium towards creating an autonomous dialogue has not however been the strategy of the institutions established to support the hybrid of expressive contemporary textile work. In the absence of validating institutions for art informed by textiles, the Lausanne Tapestry Biennial became virtually the only area where reputations could be made which would allow textile artists to achieve professional recognition and with it the means of making a living.

The strategy of the Biennial developed increasingly towards creating a high craft sphere which sough to distance itself from the low craft sphere. However, while an initial energy and innovation gave rise to the Biennial's mandate to select work that 'broke new ground', the ongoing search for new revolutions privileged a certain look, that with some exceptions, started to become predictable. The look was three-dimensional and modernist and encouraged the term "Fibre Art", as a discipline that was separate from sculpture: "*The strategy of constructing an accepting forum for sculptural practices that were excluded from the wider jungles of the high art world had the potential for turning into a little jungle in a cul-de-sac.*" (Newdigate in Deepwell, (ed.), 1995, p.177).

The validity of difference in identity and location within the work was denied by the small pool of jurors whose intention was to promote an excluding professionalism that claimed international universality of intention. In addition, for the most part, any submissions which could be identified as pertaining to women's work, or figurative imagery evoking the vanquished French tradition, constituted the lower end of the low art sphere. Thus this institution failed to encompass all the aspects relating to the category of craft and in turn attempted to be validated through the codes and conventions of the fine arts. Even at that, or perhaps because of it, their main goal was not achieved. One of the most noteworthy dissonances for me has been the futility of siting the revered international stars of the Biennial as signifiers of meaning and communication when speaking in the high art sphere - the biggest of names are simply not generally known across the disparate spheres. (Newdigate in Deepwell, (ed.), 1995, pp.178-179).

The same philosophy and aesthetic of the Biennial was fostered in such books as those of Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larson, which identified and illustrated the new developments in "Textile Art". This was all they did however. These books exhibit the same lack of critical analysis and theoretical support which has proven to be the downfall in the establishment of a "Textile Art Movement". For to present this work without emphasising its purpose and context is to lead it down that same "cul-de-sac" which relates to and is recognised by nothing at all.

CONCLUSION

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It is clear that the categorisation imposed by the development of a hierarchal infrastructure in the arts over the course of the twentieth century, have successfully aggrandised the fine arts and discriminated against the crafts simultaneously. The problematic position of contemporary textile practices juxtaposed both within and between high art and low art spheres is all the more daunting for those working under its auspices, when the gap between the two seems irreconcilable. However, the apparent disadvantage of fitting nowhere and everywhere at the same time, can be subverted and used as a tool for negotiating one's own voice, and trying to find a space from which to communicate in a language that does not have to be constantly adjusted according to a variety of confining preconceptions.

The relatively recent development of the identity of textile practice as it exists today means that it has been deprived of the opportunity to contribute to the structuring of the boundaries which enclose it. But, if it did not make the rules, then why is it necessary to adhere to them? Existing in a vacuum is ultimately a self imposed position, borne of an unquestioning adherence to the discriminating application of these boundaries, and looking to them to define one's own identity.

In her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Linda Nochlin discusses the issue of women's location in the society established and supported by the white, "preferably middle class" male. In looking at the strategy she proposes to overcome discrimination in our institutions and education, an analogy can be made between the position of women in this context and that of the textile medium within the deep rooted infrastructure that is the entirety of the fine arts today. She writes: Instead, women must conceive of themselves as potentially, if not actually, equal subjects, and must be willing to look the facts of their situation full in the face, without self pity, or cop-outs; at the same time they must view their situation with that high degree of emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to create a world in which equal achievement will be not only made possible but actively encouraged by social institutions. (Nochlin, 1989, p. 147)

Compromising one's identity goes hand in hand with the presumption that one's situation is steadfastly bound by prevailing categorisations. Through self criticism, contemporary textile practices can establish a clear identity which allows it to conceive of itself as having the potential to achieve an equal status to that of the fine arts, and an independence from them. Moreover, developing an external dialogue with other contemporary practices for critical response and argumentation, will lead the medium out of it's 'cul-de-sac'- and into the mainstream

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