Researching Contemporary Handwork: Stitching as Renewal, Remembrance, and Revolution

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Contemporary handwork, including all forms of stitching, provides a reflective outlet and is rich in social, cultural, and political history. The desire to connect to the handmade and the tactile through handwork involves practices that enable us to share our humanity and experiences and offer an alternative to the pressures of contemporary life. Through the act of stitching, one can engage in a practice through the senses, seeking to satisfy a deep longing to make space for beauty and creativity, in much the same way people for millennia have come together to spin, weave, and sew (Barber, 1995).

Like others before us, we, the authors, pick up needle and thread because it is accessible and easily done; the practice providing creative sustenance and informing our research and teaching. One stitch at a time, the authors weave the story of their lives and the lives of those who may equally find the practice as nourishing as it is socially active and historically relevant. Through the exploration of this topic from several positions, including craft as activism and revolution, stitching as renewal, and remembering artists from the past, the authors' aim is to inform and illuminate the many ways craft has been a part of our social fabric and how the renewed interest in craft and handwork can shape art education.

The Language and Value of Craft

> *Humans are makers; craft has always been at the center of our making.* (Jaffe, 2014, p. 1)

Craft is a language of materials and making that have the capacity to reveal identity and culture; it is a direct sensory engagement with hands and materials. In this tactile experience, it is hard to imagine making things with our hands without embedding ourselves in the object we create. When we engage our senses and emotions along with cognitive functions, we learn with the body and the mind. Robertson (1961) explained the value of craft by stating it is not merely the hand (as in handicraft) but the entire body in "expressive rhythm relating mind and material" (p. 27).

The term *craft* applies not only to objects, but also to approaches, attitudes, and actions of craftspeople that make those objects (Adamson, 2007). Karppinen (2008) believed that making crafts is a human activity that reveals the "meaningfulness and continuity of existence" (p. 90). She defined *craft-art* as demonstrating one's skills, knowledge, thoughts, experiences, perceptions, and sensations to other people; stressing an artistic approach and artistic thinking; and a process based on sense perception, artistic experience, and self-reflection. She also explains the difference between craft and craft-art: "*Craft* is usually assessed by how skillfully one has managed to create an artifact, whereas *Craft-art* stressed the content of meaning, images and the nature of interaction" (p. 84). Craft-art maintains its practical functionality while the artists/crafters explore their "individual and reasonable relation between the outer world and the inner world of the self" (p. 87), which the authors see as a process of bridging the outer world of teacher and researcher, with the inner world of the artistic self.

A look at craft and design reveals a hierarchy that has existed since the Renaissance (Auther, 2010), which gives shape/purpose to the definition provided by Karpinnen. During this period, a distinction was made between paintings and sculpture as "liberal" rather than "mechanical" arts (p. xv). And while modern classification systems have attempted to bridge the gap and contest the distinction, since the 1900s the fine and mechanical arts have remained divided. Usefulness, skill, and a strict adherence to traditional forms were the attributes established that set the groundwork for crafts; the hierarchy was established distinguishing craft from art (p. xv). During the mid-1960s artists and curators Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larson, who worked in traditional craft media, strove to legitimize craft and raise its status from that of second-class art (Auther, 2010). The work of women artists working during this period began to challenge the dominant definition of art by freeing fiber from the constraints of a weaving loom and working three-dimensionally to create expressive sculptural forms. Other off-loom processes such as basketry and needlework equally challenged the notion of traditional women's work, minimizing the art/craft divide and raising awareness of fiber as an art form.

Despite the work of women artists, such as Faith Ringgold, Miriam Shapiro, Shiela Hicks, and Judy Chicago, who challenged the perceived hierarchy by exploring the limits of fiber, craft education declined in Britain and the United States in the mid-1990s (Mason, 2005). Craft and design education was viewed as "deeply unfashionable" while simultaneously "participation in amateur crafts" gained in popularity (Auther, 2010, p. 262). According to Hung and Magliaro (2007), "Contemporary craft activities historically associated with feminine conventions are stunningly repurposed and, as a result, become disassociated from their quotidian contexts" (p. 7). Perhaps the immediacy and portability of working with fiber, coupled with its aesthetic and social oppositional qualities, facilitated the ease with which its popularity grew within amateur circles. Furthermore, Mason found that engaging in craft making offers considerable social and personal benefits. She explains that there are four important aspects of craft: (1) the act or activity of making, (2) skilled knowledge, (3) craftspersonship, and (4) apprenticeship. She also argues that it is time for the role of crafts to be recognized for shaping our "personal, social and artistic identities instead of dismissing them as illegitimate and outmoded" (p. 267). As in the 1960s and 1970s when artists pushed the boundaries of fibers' traditional confines to create non-utilitarian, three-dimensional, and experimental forms to create art of the highest order, Mason argues for the value of craft as an art form that obscures the limitations of handwork. The authors agree that the language of craft has value and a place in contemporary curriculum, offering rich experiences that advance knowledge of handwork as a tool and fiber as a medium to expand understanding of what constitutes art.

The Reemergence of Craft: Do It Yourself

Craft, in particular handwork, has reemerged most notably through the burgeoning of the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement. Smith (2010) explained that craft "has been left unexamined; political activism and social criticism bubble just beneath the surface" of both craft movements in the 1960s as part of counterculture and the contemporary craft movement of the 21st century (p. 207). Simultaneously, there has been a creative explosion of an alternative form of street art, where knitting, stitching, and weaving interact with street environments to create urban art for free (Kuittinen, 2009). This form of alternative street art has

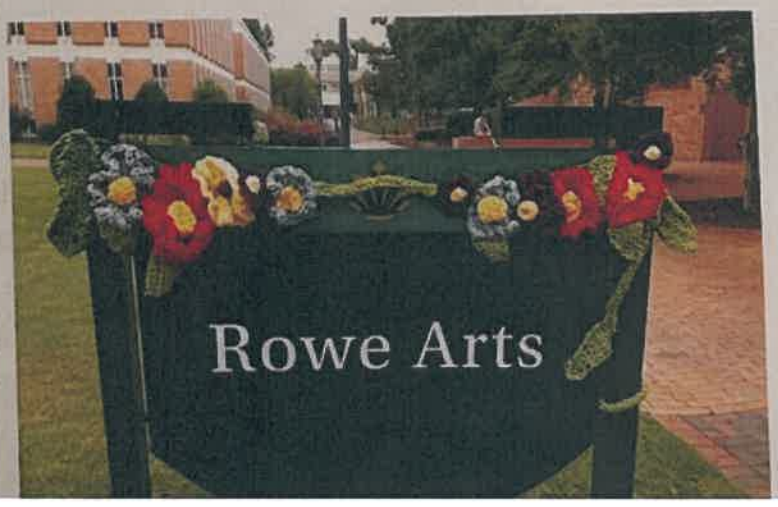

Figure 1. Yarn bomb, student response to fibers class assignment, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

been called yarn bombing, yarn storming, graffiti knitting (Vachhani, 2013), or granny graffiti, whereby, "grandmother's crochet is blown up into monumental installations, knitted socks turn into enormous, strip[ed] tree covers, and park benches are decorated with cross stitch" (Kuittinen, 2009, p. 11). The start of this movement is attributed to Magda Sayeg, a Texas woman who was struck by the unattractiveness of her impersonal surroundings. In her desire to color her world, she knitted a door handle, which led to knitting a sheath for a pole for a stop sign, parking meters in Brooklyn, and a covered bus in Mexico (Costa, 2010). Traditionally, knitting has been known as an indoor activity with a long domestic history of older woman working to create dainty objects for everyday use (Turney, 2009). However, yarn bombing is a form of street art frequently crafted to make impermanent, temporary visual statements placed in urban settings. Moore and Prain (2009) explained that yarn bombing combines several disciplines—installation art, needlework, and street art—thereby leaving handmade items attached to public fixtures (Figure 1). There also exists a social guerrilla knitting movement focusing on sociopolitical issues whereby knitted tanks or busses, or objects wrapped around barbed wired draws attention to a specific cause or issue (Vachhani, 2013). This contemporary movement can also include participation in other activist movements, such as assisting the homeless by knitting and crocheting scarves, hats, blankets, and so on.

Some theorists see the craft movement as a revolution, with several generations in play, each with their own interpretations of the meaning of crafting (Smith, 2010; Stevens, 2009). Stevens (2009) noted the long history of resistance to the industrial revolution and capitalism as supplanting the time-honored forms of human production made by hand. Yet craft has never been more important than now, as an antidote to mass production and as a practice in which the very time it takes to produce an object becomes part of its value in a world that often moves too fast (Roux, n.d.).

Craft is a language of material and making. The focus is on both the *process*, in which the goal is to simply observe while engaging in the handwork and the *product*, where the focus is on the resulting object, the outward form of an inward expression. Handwork, as an alternative to mass production and the busyness of modern life, offers respite from the need for immediacy, enabling the maker to engage with awareness aimed at bridging the inner world with the external world. Being mindful of the experience enables the maker to move with slow and deliberate action; stitching becomes an authentic form of expression either alone or with friends (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Andrea Vail, *Friendge*, 2014–present, varied materials, group participation, 600+ contributors nationwide, more than 80 ft. (currently). Hoffman Gallery, Oregon College of Art and Craft. Photo credit: Sam Hopple.

Stitching as Social and Political Activism

Craft and social and political activism have long been a part of the history of needle and thread. Anticonsumerist, localism, green, or recycling encompass the range of terms describing political and social activism using the stitch to give voice to issues. The historical association between embroidery, collectivity, and political unrest is visible today in the form of "craftivism" to describe work that brings together craft and activism (Garber, 2013; Greer, 2010), but began much earlier in the folk art traditions where embroidery demonstrated a duality, providing women a weapon of resistance as well as functioning as a source of constraint (LaDuke, 1985).

Stitching and embroidery have often been found in folk art as a way to express culture and create community. In Chile, the embroidery of cloth with decorative flowers was a popular folk art given as gifts for special occasions. However, in 1975, 2 years after the coup and assassination of then President Allende, women gathered together to stitch in protest by creating *arpilleras*, also known as "embroideries of life and death" (LaDuke, 1985, p. 1). Women, who previously had little or no craft skills, came together to stitch and tell the stories of their missing husbands, sons, and brothers who were killed or imprisoned by the government of the totalitarian military regime of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. Their small stitched tapestries told the outside world of the oppression and the *desaparecidos* (disappeared people), as well as hunger, unemployment, and fear (LaDuke, 1985).

Today, craft activism has become a contemporary approach to bringing awareness to social and political issues. Garber (2013) referred to craftivism as a species of DIY culture "that is tied to using available resources to create something to share with others" (p. 55). Garber found that craftivists investigate and educate themselves and others in ways that imaginatively empower, deepen understandings of living and directing one's own life, promote respect for diversity, build community, and engage makers in a participatory democracy. Today, craftivists learn informally or online with the assistance of YouTube and Pinterest. Some activists create cooperatives in which skills are shared through mentorship. The issues they address are anticorporate America, antiwar or military, and social justice. Garber (2013) explained, "Many women and men in DIY movements such as activist craft challenge gender hierarchy and the social status quo through their actions" (p. 57). Often, issues of sustainability are addressed by reusing materials, such as knitting with yarn from old sweaters. According to Smith (2010), two generations (1960s–1970s and 2010s) are "connected by craft and environmentalism" (p. 211). The planet they saw from space awed members of the 1960s–1970s generation, while contemporary crafters are looking at the planet as a "giant landfill" where re-using or upcycling becomes critical (p. 211). Garber (2013) saw activism in crafts as distinct from holiday craft, slow culture, and decorative art in "intent, message, and use" (p. 59).

Stitching: Two Perspectives

As teachers, researchers, and artists, we believe that making is at the nexus of the intersection of the multiple roles required of our profession. As the authors stitch, we think about the practice of craft, the years and generations before us who see crafts as political possibilities, and the inherent continuity of thread across time our stories follow. Dustin and Ziegler (2007) explained that for many artists the making of art is fundamentally "inseparable from the practice of being alive" (p. ix).

Laurel: Stitching as Remembrance

I became aware of handwork/stitching at a very young age and learned primarily from the women in my family. My great-grandmother created lace and crocheted doilies, my grandmother hand sewed an entire set of furniture for my dollhouse, my mother taught me how to sew both by hand and by machine when I was in middle school. I have been fascinated by handwork throughout my adult years; my practice includes embroidery, crochet, knitting, bargello (a type of needlework), and now my version of embroidery styles called *kantha* and *sashiko*.

Kantha is a type of embroidery created by women who repurpose saris by cutting them into rectangles, stacking them in layers, and then stitching them together by hand with a straight, running stitch.[1] The women, primarily from Bangladesh, create quilts or throws, which they sell to make a living.[2] According to Krishna Lal (2014), what began "as the aesthetic use of an old cloth due to lack of money is today a most respected craft universally" (p. 10). Bengal *Kantha* is distinctive from other quilting techniques in its use of Bengal cotton and silk and the stitching patterns are often quite intricate (p. 10).

Sashiko, a Japanese form of embroidery, literally means "little stabs" or running stitch (Takano, 1993). In this art form, artists "quilt together several layers of loosely woven fabric for strength and warmth" (p. 7), a practice that began in the 18th century. Each area of Japan developed "distinctive *sashiko* techniques and patterns" (p. 7). Often appliqué or patchwork is combined with the complex stitching designs, such as the traditional *sashiko* geometric patterns, worked in white stitching on indigo-dyed fabric, or images of trees and birds.

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Figure 3. Laurel H. Campbell, hand embroidery.

Figure 4. Laurel H. Campbell, wet felting and hand embroidery.

To me, stitching fills a space in life that calls out for solitude and calmness. I can ponder small and big questions while I stitch and consider how the very act of stitching connects me to generations of my family. Stitching represents a sense of renewal and remembrance, as the process supersedes the product. My stitching is a combination of both *kantha* and *sashiko*, done for the sake of continuing these traditions that are new to me and reconfigured to fit my aesthetic and use of preferred materials (Figures 3 and 4). The examples provided show circles that to me represent wholeness, continuity, and unity because they are complete, with circles inside of circles, representations or symbols of infinity. Jaffe (2014) explained, "Whether consciously or unconsciously, our subjective way of seeing the world becomes part of anything we make. We cannot make things without in some way embedding ourselves" (p. 1). Sharing this practice in community helps expand others' repertoire of ways to express meaning through art, where the personal merges with tradition.

Jane: Stitching as Research

For me, stitching is research. There is a rhythm of my hands working, slowly and continuously, creating focus and comfort. I believe hand stitching is a way of exploring that allows for contemplation and internalizing, bridging the inner and outer worlds; it is a contemplative practice, which creates presence and focus. The time devoted to making allows for a slower, almost meditative pace, softening the chatter of my mind and reducing stress.

Contemplative practices have long been used in the world's wisdom traditions to develop one's interiority and find other ways of knowing that extend the way information is acquired through experiential and direct experience (Hart, 2008). These practices can be broadly defined as "the ways that human beings, across cultures and across time, have found to concentrate, broaden, and deepen conscious awareness as the gateway to cultivating their full potential and to leading more meaningful and fulfilling lives" (Roth, 2006, p. 1788). As I stitch, I use the line of thread to mark time and define emotions, allowing information to enter through sensory awareness and direct experience. Textile artist Alice Kettle (n.d.) described this interaction as "the punctuations which reveal the sense of self and identity, the making of connections between the touching and tactile quality of textile, and the expression of feelings." Furthermore, I concur with Heidegger (1977), who explained how the hand is connected with the capacity of human thinking:

> The hand's essence can never be determined, or explained, by it's being an organ which can grasp.... Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. (p. 357)

Thinking through stitching allows me to develop a contemplative attitude and it is through the gestures and motions that I experience thinking made manifest through the act of stitching.

My work involves vignettes, hand or machine stitched circles on small squares of commercial fabric or handmade felt (Figures 5, 6, and 7). I have often used repeating circles in my work and while I am aware of the multiplicity of meanings assigned this

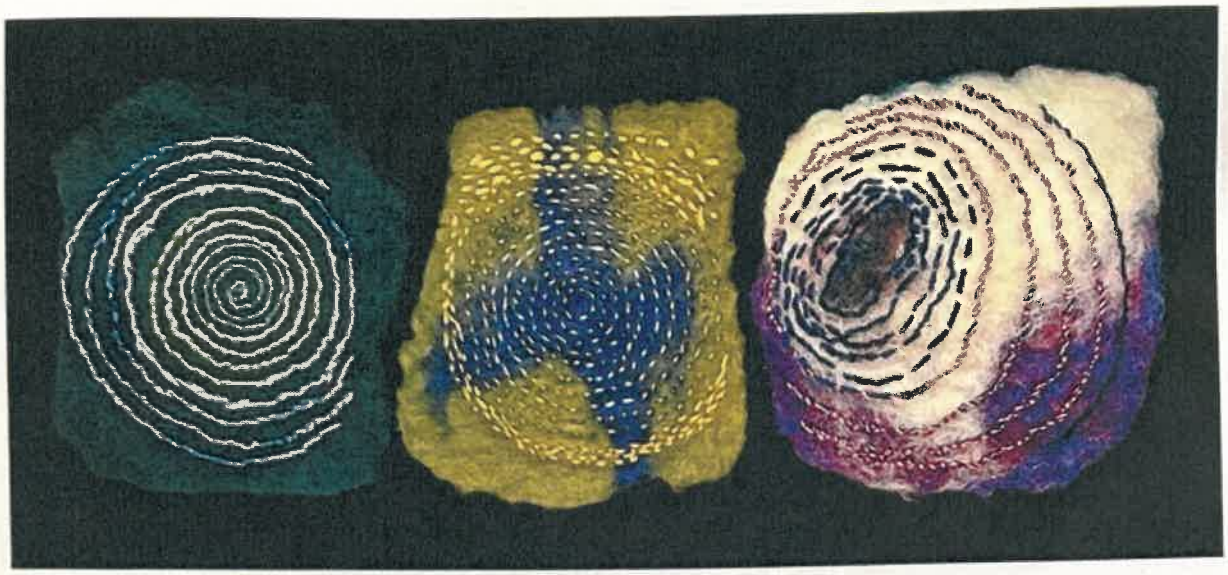

Figure 5. Jane Dalton, wet felting, hand embroidered circles.

Figure 6. Jane Dalton, free motion embroidery.

Figure 7. Jane Dalton, free motion embroidery (detail).

shape—wholeness, completeness, and the process of individuation (Arrien, 1998)—the circle allows my mind to focus using fluid and organic mark making with thread. I see all of these elements as a form of mapping moments in a day, a month, a year, and beyond: small glimpses of an interior landscape made manifest in outward form. When stitching, I am not fully concentrating on what I am doing—it is the process, not the product that invites contemplation. The focus on process yields conceptual flexibility and multiplicity, different than a singular focus and analytical approach to product.

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The stitch informs and reveals. As a repetitive art experience, stitching offers balance for the cognitive and analytical mind. I am intrigued by the power of the hand to inform and the larger notion of embodied perception, whereby the body, its movements, and the interaction with the environment fundamentally shape one's perception of the world. In opposition to the "disembodied" notions of perception that are characteristic of the information-processing approach (Sebanz & Knoblich, 2010), thinking through our senses offers an expanded, and perhaps more meaningful, basis for knowledge.

Implications for Art and Design Education

While holding a lesser place in art education theory, many artists believe that craft education is important and should return to the school curriculum (Mason, 2005). Stereotypical views of handwork as domestic and purely functional can expand and align with 21st-century skills, while maintaining the craft traditions of working with one's hands. Students can learn through an active engagement with the curriculum, utilizing critical and creative thinking skills through tactile and embodied experiences. Cultural diversity and historical periods can be the foundational context for enhancing hands-on skills and learning. Furthermore, craft and social and political activism have long been a part of the history of needle and thread, often becoming an effective tool for teaching history, as well as political and social justice issues. When handwork is taught with a broader, richer, and more global awareness of the value and importance of craft within societies, students' critical appreciation and aesthetic sensitivity are strengthened. The authors believe in the value of craft as an aesthetic, expressive, and socially relevant activity that must be passed from one generation to another and consistently included in art education curricula to strengthen students' knowledge of handwork as an art form. ■

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Endnotes

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[2] kanthacollection.com