Textiles: Some Visible and Invisible Connections in Contemporary Visual Art Installation Practice

— Kay Lawrence —

Textiles have traditionally encompassed both culturally specific and trans-cultural links. In all cultures, rich symbolism arises from the use of textiles in their domestic and ceremonial roles. In this paper I will discuss how in a postmodern context, artists have conveyed powerful social and political comments through their use of traditional textile media and techniques. In the works of these artists, the messages are communicated through a soft 'feminine' medium. In itself, this creates a paradoxical situation as the traditional, familiar associations of textiles are juxtaposed with the conflicting reality of the artist’s message.

In a postmodern context, textile elements can be used in installation art to stimulate the haptic senses which are of vital importance in the interpretation of space and materials. Textiles can significantly increase the viewer/participant's response due to the familiarity of the visible and the emotionally-charged invisible connections inherent in the media. These associations can be exploited to effectively absorb the viewer into the haptic experience, encouraging an awareness by the individual of the environment adjoining their body. Examination of a small number of recent works by some European and American artists will identify how certain visible and invisible connections to textile materials can be used by artists to enhance the concepts and subtexts of their works.

My doctoral research focuses on how the haptic and visual qualities and traditions of fibre and digital media can be combined in installation art to create metaphors that address social issues of the twenty-first century. In my studio research over the past few years, I have discovered a number of material attributes which influence the haptic responses of those who experience my textile installation works. My work entitled Cerebral Viscosity (2009) is an installation of fifty square metres of hand-embroidered textile veils and
fluorescent lights. Through its materials, the installation references the flimsy and transient nature of life and memory, and explores the space that exists between materiality and reality. The abstract imagery and shapes encourage dialogue between the viewer and the work as they allude to objects and connections between people rather than explicitly describing them. The ethereal nature of the transparent fabric infers a body or skin-like form and its vulnerable and ephemeral nature. The textiles’ sculptural qualities, discernible in the way the work hangs, suggest the body’s absence or presence. Both skin and fabric are sewn with thread and the thread itself is a metaphor as it symbolises connections between memories, people and times.

What this description of my installation does not mention, however, are the viewers’ bodily or haptic responses to the work. Jennifer Fisher states that ‘the haptic sense, comprising the tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses, describes aspects of engagement that are qualitatively distinct from the capabilities of the visual sense.’ Many people have walked through my installation experiencing its tactile nature and for some, this level of interaction has not been enough. The responses of some of my viewers have been such that they felt compelled to interact with the work by wrapping themselves in the veils, thus experiencing a more tactile and physical engagement with the work. While I had considered the haptic senses in relation to my work for some time, it was the viewers’ haptic responses to Cerebral Viscosity that have significantly influenced my studio and theoretical research since 2009. I am now researching how the haptic qualities of various textile media can be used to create a more embodied experiential form of art, capable of engaging both visual and haptic aesthetics. This includes research into how visible and invisible connotations of materials and techniques contribute to an individual’s haptic response.

One may ask ‘What are haptics anyway?’ According to Fisher, unlike the exteroceptive senses (sight, taste, smell, touch, hearing) which utilise external stimuli, the haptic or tactile senses utilise internal stimuli to sense temperature, pressures, vibrations, dimensionality and motion in space. Much of this analysis is conducted at a subconscious level using kinaesthetic sensory awareness. Introspective (internal neural information by which we perceive sensations and movement of internal organs) and proprioceptive (pertaining to the sensations of body movements and awareness of posture, enabling the body to orient itself in space without visual clues) determine the way we experience the sense of touch both on the surface of our skin and inside our bodies. As viewers, we can therefore identify and sense many qualities in an object without actually touching it.

Textile objects readily evoke memories, past experiences and physical and cultural associations. They consequently play a particularly powerful role in helping to contextualise objects and encourage haptic responses. As textiles provide our ‘second skin’ they also possess many similar attributes to skin which, in installation, can be utilised to reference the body. This common link can engender very personal and idiosyncratic responses to different textiles, with varying levels of conscious engagement.

Claire Pajaczkowska states that while cloth is a central signifier differentiating nature from culture, it remains forever liminal because we experience it as neither object nor subject, but as the interval in-between. This liminality, or space between materiality and reality, is a ‘non-sense’ that makes the use of textiles in artworks particularly interesting.

In addition, fibre enables myriad fabrication and manipulation techniques and processes. Contemporary fibre works employ most strategies used for textile construction in a variety of contexts, but in this paper I will limit the discussion to visible and invisible connections provided by certain contemporary artists who utilise embroidery, patterned fabric and metaphoric representations of the body.

Textiles are among the oldest and most pervasive art objects still produced and used today. In the past they have been used to create many precious objects; medieval tapestries, Chinese silk embroideries and ancient Peruvian textiles to name but a few. However, up until quite recently, the use of textiles has relegated the maker’s role to that of artisan in the craft tradition, rather than artist in a fine art context. The art/craft debate was predicated on the premise of ‘what white European men make is dignified by the label “art”, while that which everyone else makes counts only as craft.’ As British author Rozsika Parker noted, much of the criticism of textile art stemmed from the sexist basis of historical judgements on the usage of textile materials: ‘The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that is the former is artistically less significant. However, the real differences between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them.’ Parker states that the potential of textile art was only realised in the latter part of the twentieth century when male artists began employing textile media in their own art.

Because of their functional quality and association with the domestic and the decorative, textiles have been frequently dismissed as mere craft. This is despite a small number of artists, including Sonia Delaunay and Dada artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp, who used their art during the early-twentieth century. However, the nomenclature has changed. In the United States during the early-70s, ‘textiles’ came to be regarded as a philosophical break with functionality.

This change in perception coincides with feminist movement. As female artists grappled with issues surrounding gender equality, they reflected contemporary women’s struggles and attempted to bring more visibility to textile practice. One of the ways they articulated this was through their use of textile installation works produced by these female artists, often politicized (sic) aesthetic objects foundations of art historical discourse, art and acceptable media. Textile installation works of many female co...
artist Sophie Tauber-Arp, who used textile materials in their art during the early-twentieth century. As the century progressed, however, the nomenclature of artists' materials changed. In the United States during the late-1960s and early-70s, 'textiles' came to be regarded as 'fibre', signalling a philosophical break with functionality and craft.

This change in perception coincided with the rise of the feminist movement. As female artists grappled with complex issues surrounding gender equality, they strove to make art that reflected contemporary women's lives and experiences and attempted to bring more visibility to women's art practice. One of the ways they articulated this was through their use of textile materials. The textile works produced by these female artists became 'inherently politicized (sic) aesthetic objects' that challenged the foundations of art historical discourse and what defined art and acceptable media. Textiles have informed the installation works of many female conceptual artists such as Annette Messager and Louise Bourgeois who have referenced feminist concerns through their use of fabric to metaphorically or metonymically represent the body. By exploiting the immanent qualities of textiles in order to invoke the body, these artists consequently influence viewers' responses. A fibre can become a 'metaphor' for skin through its porosity, tactility, pliability, fragility and ephemerality. At the same time, the sculptural qualities of textile media can suggest the body's absence or presence.

In her ongoing explorations into identity and issues related to the representation of women in our society, Messager makes reference to the body by utilising the distinctive qualities of the fibres she uses. While the body is always conceptually present in Messager's work, it is depicted as fragmented much like female identity in contemporary society. Messager's Inflated-Deflated (2006) consists of about thirty objects created from parachute silk which represent the various parts of the female anatomy. These body parts are displayed in a seemingly random order where breasts encounter brains that nudge a stomach. As these objects inflate and deflate, a haptic response is elicited. The viewer becomes intensely aware of the attributes and functions of their own body.

Bourgeois' Cell VII (1998) is one of many works which address her own biographical history. In a sustained exploration of family relationships she combines the symbolic and the psychological, mining her memories to produce works intended to surpass the visual and unsettle the viewer. Within this installation, threaded needles are tied to worn clothing which is suspended from bone-constructed hangers. With these fragile threads, Bourgeois references the ties to her dead mother whose body is represented metaphorically by the clothes and metonymically by the bones. The haptic qualities of the materials elucidate Bourgeois' distinctive visual language and the viewer is engaged beyond the visual sense.

In the twenty-first century, artists have continued to explore ways in which interior worlds of perception and meaning are manifested in textile works. Artists push the boundaries of contemporary art practice through a combination of traditional skills of fabrication, new technologies and individual innovation. Rarely is the viewer's empathy for materials greater than that found in textile media. Textiles are not, nor have they ever been, neutral modes of representation. Because of their omnipresence in all our lives, textiles provide a critical connection with the body and also function as cultural signs in a language removed from the body. No matter how basic the cloth, it does have the ability to carry richly layered social and cultural conventions in most cultures. Of cultural significance and signification is the use of the drape, veil or shroud. Other common uses of different fabrics infer varying connotations such as elegance, innocence, celebration, poverty and sleaziness and as Alison Lurie states, clothing functions as a semiotic system. In accordance with the saying 'clothes maketh the man', we dress to show our affiliation with whatever group we wish to identify with and we are judged by the clothes we wear. As well as gender, social and cultural links, clothing also provides a juncture between the private and public, between our skin and the view we present to the world, as well as the persona we want the world to see. Canadian artist and writer Giorgia Volpe also writes that when one works with used clothing you 'live in another skin; it is as if you explore another body, another memory, another identity.' Since textiles contain functional and symbolic references for everyone, we each have invisible connections to the media and consequently possess an idiosyncratic relationship with various textile materials. It is these invisible connections that contemporary artists seek to investigate and exploit through their appropriation of materials, tools and techniques, previously the sphere of only domestic makers.

As well as linking to their traditional or domestic origins, textiles can also suggest the artist's presence, similar to most handcrafted and object-based art forms. Warren Seelig believes that in working directly with textiles, the hand becomes an articulate sensor. Through continuous repetitive activity, the hand possesses the understanding which causes transformation of the materials and allows
expression to emerge." Expression" 9. Because cloth takes on the imprint of energy, memory, and the hand of the maker, it revalidates the body as subject matter. As well as the material bearing witness to the maker, it can also witness the body through creases, stains and folds. The clothes employed in Bourgeois’ Cell VII and Christian Boltanski’s Monumenta (2010) substantiate this premise as they are powerful reminders of their previous owners.

In The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine, Parker traces the history of embroidery from medieval times, when it was practised by both sexes, through to the nineteenth century, as it evolved into a quintessentially feminine activity practised by the leisureed classes, to the twentieth century when it was used by the British women’s Suffrage Movement to change ideas about women and femininity. In the twenty-first century, textile artists have successfully conveyed robust social and political comments through their use of traditional forms of embroidery. New York artists Orly Cogan,20 Andrea Dezso21 and Elaine Reichek22 all work in this manner. Their works display the techniques and precision expected of traditional embroidery, but include subversive content to convey ‘powerful, provocative, and often satirical commentary on contemporary society, politics, and personal history.’

Cogan creates thought-provoking narratives with her embroidery on vintage linens. Employing humour and irony, Cogan’s art deals with women’s roles in contemporary culture through an exploration of history, tradition, fairytales, nature, relationships and intimacy. She creates a dialogue using vintage fabrics as two-way mirrors into the like-minded fantasies of successive female generations. To these she adds a layer of provocation (such as hand-sewn pubic hair) and female heroines who express their anxieties, insecurities, vanities and desires through visual narratives. The work becomes an unconventional dialogue between the old and the new and has both a tactile and symbolic presence. Cogan regards herself as a collaborator and honours the earnest efforts of the original maker while transforming ‘women’s work’ into something beautiful, evocative and unexpected. These facets of her work are illustrated in the installation Loose Threads (2006). This work portrays naked male and female figures who are embroidered on vintage linen pieces and intertwined with flowers and other symbols from nature and society. In other works such as Bittersweet Obsessions (2007), the tactile and refined undertones of the linens are unexpectedly juxtaposed with references to femininity and certain changing aspects of contemporary culture, such as drug consumption and binge eating. In this work she employs her characteristic frank and graphic imagery to explore what it is like to be a young woman in America today. Cogan illustrates the ways in which emotional insecurity and disappointment are manifested in people who are careless and unaware of the implications facing their future health and happiness. The anomaly between the embroidered imagery of the past and that of the present stresses the differences between feminine preoccupations and modes of expression, then and now.

In her series My mother claimed that… (2007), Dezso takes the belief systems and superstitions from her own Transylvanian heritage and resurrects the tradition of the folk sampler, an embroidery offering religious or moral advice. The pensive and sardonic lessons are illustrated on forty-eight cotton squares embroidered using techniques congruent with the folkloric content. The disquieting visual language cautions the viewer through words and graphic pictograms on various life matters such as health and hygiene:

*My mother claimed that wearing skimpy bikinis will give you a cold. (We should wear full coverage terrycloth panties year-round)*; *male/female relations: My mother claimed that if you let a man fuck you he’ll leave because every man wants to marry a virgin and pure superstition: My mother claimed that her father died because someone left the bread upside down on the table.* The connotations here are of cultural mores and values concerning purity, innocence and maternal protection.

In Sampler (Troilus and Cressida) (2001), Reichek utilises the sampler format of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to create symmetrically balanced embroideries that carry moral and religious messages. Reichek was one of the first conceptual textile artists to use embroidery to challenge accepted ideas about aesthetics, artistic genius and originality. These computer designed and beautifully worked samplers contain references to security, formality, gentility, femininity and leisure and espouse various quotes from art history, mythology and literature. These references each add conceptual complexity to the work as they also refer to the role of the artist, media, technology and tradition.

Other artists such as Chicago based Anne Wilson and myself choose to work against the precision expected of the craft of embroidery by working abstractly and intuitively in order to explore cloth’s tactile and evocative qualities. Wilson’s works probe the limits of the body, its senses, memory and perception. Inspired by contemporary art discourse, feminism, multi-culturalism, the art fabric movement and Arte Povera, she strives to expand the boundaries of process
Orly Cogan
Bittersweet Obsessions, 2007
Handstitched embroidery, appliqué, paint on fabric, 1270mm x 1270mm
Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist
and materiality in art. Her ongoing works, Topologies, are constructed from linen, lace, thread and pins. It is through these textile works that curator Alison Ferris believes Wilson marries the material and metaphorical associations of cloth with all the paradoxes of women’s work. Wilson describes her practice as an ‘abstract topography suggesting mapping and navigation, both internal and external to the body.’ In her series Mendings (1995), Wilson explores themes of time, loss, private and social rituals by using found materials (table linen, bed sheets, human hair, lace, thread, and wire) that are familiar and rich with cultural meanings. Wilson used worn family linens that represented ‘security, stability, propriety and formality’ and human hair that represented ‘the visceral, the unempt, the disruptive, the deadly.’ The body is never physically present; rather it is metaphorically represented through the tactile qualities of cloth and hand embroidery, and metonymically by hair. The white cloth evokes skin and the shroud, a metaphor for loss. The holes intimate orifices, wounds and a sense of fragility.

Motif and the patterning of fabric can also have rich connotations as signifiers of meaning in cultural terms. They carry with them socio-cultural, political, geographic and economic nuances. An artist who chooses to work with the invisible subtexts associated with patterned fabric is Kent Henrickson. In Patterns of Culture (2006), Henrickson subverts the connotations of gentility, domesticity, comfort and familiarity traditionally associated with Toile de Jouy with his embroideries of menacing figures and scenes of violence. He also draws upon the rich historical implications of another textile object, the hood, and its associations with death from medieval executioners through to present day concerns about terrorism.

Contemporary Nigerian/UK artist, Yinka Shonibare, chooses to use patterned fabric to layer his installations with rich cultural and historical nuances. He demonstrates his awareness of the complexities of multiculturalism and the subtexts embedded in cloth in his deliberate use of patterned ‘African’ textiles. Here he communicates socio-political meaning in the contexts of identity, globalism and colonialism. He covers shoes, upholstery, and bowls with these ‘African’ fabrics and acknowledges that he uses textiles to challenge the myth of artist as noble white male. He sees his use of fabric as drawing ‘low culture’ and ‘tacky crafts’ into the so-called ‘high art space.’ In his installation Scramble for Africa (2003), Shonibare satirizes colonialism and other power structures using a theatrical visual aesthetic that is largely at odds with the traditional rules of fine art exhibition. In this and his other installations there is no minimalist approach to the white cube of the modern gallery space. His works showcase tableaux of life-sized headless human figures dressed in flamboyant eighteenth or nineteenth-century costumes fashioned from heavily patterned ‘African’ fabrics. The ‘African’ cloth actually originated with the Dutch, who lifted it from the Batik tradition of their Indonesian colony and then introduced it to Africa. Scramble for Africa explores ideas about contemporary African identity, the legacy of European colonialism on African societies, class structures and social justice – many non-visual connections. My viewing of this work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 2008 produced a pronounced haptic response due to its tactility and ‘sensatorial excitement’.

Cogan, Dezsö, Reichek, Wilson, Henrickson and Shonibare challenge our belief systems by using traditional textile techniques or media in unconventional ways to address a wide range of contemporary issues. Other artists, such as Bourgeois, Messager and Brazilian Ernest Neto are using textiles in installation works without subversive intent, concentrating instead on the material attributes of the media, its tactility and other haptic qualities. Although artists are addressing these aspects, it could be contended that historians have continued to centre the aesthetic debate on the visual elements of the art work rather than considering the role of touch and other elements of haptic senses. However, as Claire Bishop states, ‘installation art...differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space... installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision.’ Individual bodily response is mediated by the participant’s haptic perception of their own body in space and the way that particular space is experienced by them.

David Pryer and Bob Jerrard point out that much of the role of haptic senses goes unnoticed, dominated as it is by the more readily apparent role of vision. However, haptic senses are of primal importance in interpretation of space and materials. Pryer and Jerrard argue that the haptic senses are at least as critical as vision. Arguably, the study of aesthetics is not limited to just a visual experience, nor are the visual and haptic senses separated from each other. Rather, the haptic aesthetic works together with the visual aesthetic to stimulate the engagement between the viewer and the installation work. Given the intimate interaction between the sensory and motor functions of the haptic system, and the sheer complexity of its functioning, it has been proven that much of the sensory information being produced is generated at a subconscious level. In this respect,
haptics may be viewed as a 'secret sense'. Prytech and Jerrard caution that its importance to the practicing artist should not be under-estimated.52

Ernest Neto's textile installations address the haptic senses as well as the exteroceptive senses. His works are grounded in the premise that the senses that we use to process and respond to stimuli exist throughout the body and are not merely visual. This belief and his passionate attachment to materiality and sensuality are implicit in his installation just like drops in time, nothing (2002).53 Neto's manipulation of utilitarian materials includes lyca, pantyhose and spices. He transforms the mundane with his use of soft, sensual and erotic forms. This work has multiple associations, including rain capturing a ray of light or a glance through a forest, but it always refers back to the presence of the body, indicated by the bulging forms and even by the close association of lyca with underwear or stockings.54 As with every installation work, personal response is mediated by one's particular history, with countless individual interpretations to the materials used.

An awareness of perceptual aesthetic factors is the subject of a recent paper by Marilyn Delong, Juanjuan Wu and Mingxin Bao.55 They conducted tests using design professionals from the United States and China in the hope of identifying whether the sense of touch was culturally determined. While their research identified some cultural specificity, most of their findings related to the universality of tactile response. Presumably other facets of the haptic senses, particularly those of the proprioceptive senses, such as dimensionality, posture and motion in space may also be universal.

This paper has touched briefly on some of the innovative ways in which textiles have contributed to postmodern art practice through the appropriation of materials, tools and techniques, previously the sphere of the domestic maker. Particular note has been made of their ability to convey critical social and political comments when traditional techniques, such as embroidery, are juxtaposed with subversive content. Textiles contain rich cultural, traditional, social and domestic connotations. They also provide a critical connection with the body and hold a range of material attributes which can be exploited to metaphorically represent the body. In the context of postmodern installation art practice, these subtexts and connotations can be used to add conceptual complexity to an artwork. Despite textiles being considered a 'feminine medium' there are more male practitioners embracing the media due to, undoubtedly in part, a recognition of the conceptual weight that they bring to a work.

Textiles can be particularly effective in engendering sensory responses in viewers that go beyond the visual. This is achieved through the stimulation of the haptic senses which utilise internal sensors to relay information concerning dimensionality and orientation in space. Haptic responses, which do not solely rely on narratives or explicit meanings, are more pronounced when the materiality of textiles merges with the immersive experience of contemporary art installations. An awareness of both haptic and visual senses is critical to providing a more embodied experiential form of installation art. Further research will identify those mechanisms and conditions under which the visual and haptic senses coalesce synergistically to produce those higher level experiences.

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1. This installation can be viewed at URL: http://kaylawrenceart.blogspot.com search?updated-min=2009-0101T00%3A00%3A00-08%3A00&updated-max=2010-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-08%3A00&max-results=4
3. Ibid., 5–8.
4. Ibid., 4–11.
8. Ibid., 120.
Annette Messager was born in 1943 in France, where she continues to live and work.

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) was born in France and lived and worked in the United States.

Annette Messager’s recent retrospective has travelled worldwide. See Annette Messager, The Messengers (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2007).

This work can be viewed at URL: http://everydaylifestyle.wordpress.com/2009/03/09 annette-messager-the-messengers-the-hayward-gallery/

This work can be viewed at URL: http://www.woodstreetgalleries.org/past/guarantee.html


For more information on how clothes function as a semiotic system, see Alison Lurie, The Language of Clothes (London: Bloomsbury Publications, 1992).


Parker, 197.

Orly Cogan was born in 1971 in Jaffa, Israel. She lives and works in New York.

Andrea Dossó was born in Romania. She lives and works in New York.

Elaine Reichek was born in 1943 in New York, where she continues to live and work.


This was a site specific installation at Jersey City Art Museum, New Jersey. It was twenty feet long and twelve feet high. URL: http://www.orlycogan.com/installations (accessed 29 April 2010).

Each cotton square measures 12.5cm x 12.5cm.

This work can be viewed at URL: http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/gallery/stitchery/works/?image_id=288337


Anne Wilson was born in Detroit in 1949. She currently resides in Chicago.

The art fabric movement of the 1960s and '70s focussed on uniting the roles of artist-designer and craftsperson-maker, which had been distinct in the old European tapestry-weaving tradition. It confronted the traditional art/craft dichotomy and building on the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement, the makers continued to push technique to the fore as part of the content of a work. See URL: http://www.fiberarts.com/article_archive/genres/bigger.asp (accessed 17 January 2011).

The name literally means 'poor art' but it refers to the movement's characteristic exploration of a wide range of materials beyond traditional oil paints, canvas, marble etc. Arte Povera denotes not impoverished art, but art made with complete openness towards materials and processes. See URL: http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=31 (accessed 17 January 2011).


Wilson, 'Art Space Talk'.

Kent Henrickson was born in 1974 and currently lives and works in New York.

This work can be viewed at URL: http://www.gerhardsegerner.com/artfairs/artfairs_a37b.htm

Toile du Jouy is a cotton or linen fabric characterised by monochromatic prints on a light background.

Yinka Shonibare was born in 1962 in London. He lived in Nigeria from 1965–84 and now lives and works in London.


Ibid.
45. This work can be viewed at URL: http://www.mca.com.au/default.asp?page_id=12&content_id=5511
48. Ernesto Neto was born in 1964 in Rio de Janeiro, where he continues to live and work.
51. Ibid., 394.
52. Ibid., 384.
53. This work can be viewed at URL: http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/?p=8969