

The Dematerialization of the Craft Object: Performance Art and Contemporary Craft

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ABSTRACT

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Nicole Burisch

Craft and performance art are both experiencing renewed significance within contemporary art. Correspondingly, practices, exhibitions, and works that combine features of both craft and performance art are appearing in the form of collaborative crafting, documentation of crafting events, live and public performance of craft work, and crafting as a tool for social and political projects. This thesis addresses the intersections of craft and performance art in select artworks and curatorial strategies from the exhibitions *Common Threads* at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery in Calgary (2007), *She Will Always Be Younger Than Us* at the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto (2009), and *Gestures of Resistance* at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland (2010). Centering on presentations that foreground the performance of crafting or craft-making as the central mode of the work, I argue that a comprehensive reading of these works must situate them not only within the history of craft, but also within the history and theories of performance art. By examining and drawing upon the history and strategies of performance art, this thesis proposes that the incorporation of performance art into craft calls into question the traditional view of craft as an object-centred practice. The notion of a dematerialized craft practice is considered in light of recent developments in craft theory that propose thinking about craft not as a set of objects or materials, but rather as form of knowledge or a as subject.

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DEDICATION

For S.B.

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Introduction

“Two of the big stories in art over the last decade or so have been the reintroduction of live art in the gallery/museum sphere and the dominance of so-called relational art practices, which create a context in which audiences come together to engage in a shared activity or experience.”¹

“In fact, craft seems positively fashionable in the present moment, as artists, architects, and designers evince a fascination with process and materials not seen since the heyday of the Counterculture in the late 1960s.”²

“Indeed, all signs indicate that we are in the midst of a strong reemergence of performance and that the coming years are only like to bring more.”³

As made clear in the quotes above, craft and live or performance art practices are both experiencing a revival within contemporary art. Correspondingly, it should come as no surprise that practices, exhibitions, and works that combine features of both craft and performance might also be appearing alongside these developments. This thesis is specifically concerned with recent intersections of craft and performance art, and considers select artworks and curatorial strategies from the exhibitions *Common Threads* at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery in Calgary (2008), *She*

¹ Bill Arning, “Foreward,” in *HAND+MADE The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, ed. Valerie Cassel Oliver (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2010), 7.

² Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (New York: Berg, 2007), 166.

³ RoseLee Goldberg, “A Biennial of its Own,” in *Performa: New Visual Art Performance*, ed. Jennifer Liese (New York: PERFORMA, 2007), 12.

Will Always Be Younger Than Us at the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto (2009), and *Gestures of Resistance* at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland (2010). These exhibitions have all included works and projects that combine aspects of craft and performance, ranging from collaborative crafting, knitting circles as a form of public outreach, video documentation of crafting events, live and public performance of craft work, and crafting used as a tool for social and political projects. Within this growing collection of diverse uses, my research focuses specifically on projects and presentations that foreground the performance of crafting or craft-making as the central mode of the work. Alongside an interest in exploring how performance art and craft are being combined in contemporary practice, this thesis is also concerned with tracing an expanded lineage for these contemporary works that acknowledges performance art history, feminist art practices, and craft history as clear precedents for the development of new performance-craft works.

To date, there has been some initial writing that explores the connections between craft and performance, including: a 2009 conference presentation “Activating the Object: The Intersection of Performance Art and Clay” by artist Summer Zickefoose⁴, ceramic historian Glen Brown’s 2008 presentation and article “Craft As Idea as Idea,”⁵ Jo Dahn’s essay “Elastic/expanding: Contemporary Conceptual Ceramics,”⁶ a publication accompanying the exhibition *HAND+MADE: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*,⁷ and a publication in progress by curators Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman in conjunction with the *Gestures of*

⁴ Summer Zickefoose, “Activating the Object: The Intersection of Performance Art and Clay,” *NCECA Journal*, Vol. 30, Spring 2009, 106-107.

⁵ Glen Brown, “Craft As Idea as Idea,” *NCECA Journal*, 2008, 42-45.

⁶ Jo Dahn, “Elastic/Expanding: Contemporary Conceptual Ceramics,” in *Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁷ Valerie Cassel Oliver, ed., *HAND+MADE The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2010).

Resistance project.⁸ Nevertheless, there is still much room for investigating and contextualizing these intersections, and it is here that I see my research contributing to a continued discussion and theorization of this subject. Indeed, much of the writing about craft and performance has centred on identifying historical precedents drawn from a craft perspective, or involving craft artists or materials. While this craft-centred approach is an important step in framing contemporary performance-craft practices, I contend that a comprehensive reading of these works must situate them not only within a history of craft practice, but also within the history and concerns of performance art. Thus, my thesis will look to the development of performance art and feminist art practices and theories as they emerged in the 1960s and 70s⁹ for how they might be productively considered alongside my contemporary examples. Bearing this history in mind, I propose that the incorporation of performance art into craft requires rethinking the traditional view of craft as an object-centred practice. Through an examination of my three case studies in light of this potential dematerialization, I will demonstrate how concerns around liveness, ephemerality, documentation, and labour are being (re)negotiated in each of these examples. My discussion of historical and contemporary examples, provides the opportunity to develop and apply several models that will elaborate ways of understanding the intersections and combinations of these fields.

My thesis takes as a starting point an understanding that craft, while undoubtedly a unique form of practice, is nevertheless shaped and informed by its relationships to fields such as

⁸ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, “Performing Craft – Home,” *Gestures of Resistance: The Slow Assertions of Craft*, <http://www.performingcraft.com/>.

⁹ Where some historians, such as Roselee Goldberg have argued that the history of performance art can be connected to earlier precedents in Dada or Futurist works, this thesis considers performance art as a more recent development in the context of visual arts discourse. Roselee Goldberg, “Performance: A Hidden History or, The Avant Avant Garde,” in *Performance By Artists*, eds. AA Bronson & Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979) 170-175.

art, design, or architecture, and correspondingly exerts an influence on these fields in return. Furthermore, if historically craft has occupied a position somewhat outside of dominant art discourses, today most historians and theorists would concede that the art/craft divide is, if not completely resolved, far less distinct. Contemporary art now makes room for radically pluralistic practices that combine and cross formerly distinct borders, disciplines, materials, techniques, and histories – craft among them. As is the case with much of my other research, I am most interested in considering instances of productive overlapping between craft practice with other fields. As such, running through my discussion is a tentative project to work through a number of possible models for envisioning the shifting relationships between the fields of performance art, art, and craft. Of particular interest are the ways that overlapping tactics, theories, methodologies, and histories from performance art, craft, and art history might be used or combined to question, examine, or contextualize both performance-craft works and definitions of craft more broadly. On the one hand, craft can be viewed as a practice *within* the broader field of art. In this case, craft can be aligned with and compared to performance art, with the common abilities of these two historically marginalized disciplines to challenge dominant art historical systems and values. Alternately, we can think about craft as a field that exists *alongside* art, as a distinct form of practice that is similar, yet analogous. In this case, we can consider ways that performance art has impacted, influenced, and developed the tenets and structures of artistic theory and practice. From here, it becomes possible to think through how performance may be exerting a similar influence on the tenets and structures of craft theory and practice, potentially shifting or displacing values such as materiality, objecthood, or function within craft practice.

Building on this stance, I propose that the incorporation of performance art practices and discourses into and alongside craft can assist in elaborating upon recent developments in craft

theory that propose considering craft not as a distinct class of objects, but rather as a matrix,¹⁰ a methodology,¹¹ or a form of knowledge.¹² Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) provides one of the most persuasive arguments for this approach. In it he proposes that we "treat craft as a subject, not a category."¹³ While this theoretical model may not be appropriate for all forms of craft practice (being by Adamson's own admission more focused on the "relation of craft to the avant garde" than traditional studio craft practices¹⁴), it provides a useful approach for thinking through increasingly cross-disciplinary craft practices and projects, such as the ones I am discussing.

Further to the growing pool of writing on this topic, it is important to note that the texts listed above are not the only examples of what could be viewed as a recent and growing interest in the intersections of craft and performance practices, and that contemporary artists such as Devora Neumark, Germaine Koh, Allison Smith, Travis Meinolf, Liz Collins, Erik Scollon, Teri Frame, Summer Zickefoose, and Lalie Douglas have made or continue to make work that operates at this intersection. However, for the sake of brevity, as well as an interest in identifying and discussing a (broadly) Canadian history and context¹⁵ for these practices, my discussion will focus on the three exhibitions listed above. While this thesis will necessarily engage with

¹⁰ Glenn Adamson, "Handy-Crafts: A Doctrine," in *What Makes a Great Exhibition*, ed. Paula Marincola, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006), 116.

¹¹ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, "Performing Craft – Home," *Gestures of Resistance: The Slow Assertions of Craft*, <http://www.performingcraft.com/>.

¹² Mike Press, "Handmade Futures: The Emerging Role of Craft Knowledge in Our Digital Culture," in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, ed. Sandra Alfody (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007), 251.

¹³ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 169.

¹⁵ Both *Common Threads* and *She Will Always Be Younger Than Us* were both presented in Canadian institutions. *Gestures of Resistance* was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, OR, USA – but was co-organized by Canadian curator Shannon Stratton, and featured Canadian artist Anthea Black.

questions around the degree to which performance art practices must centre on live or temporary presentations, it should also be noted that I have chosen to focus on works and exhibitions that I have experienced first-hand, and with which I have a more direct, and in some cases, personal, relationship. As an emerging form of practice, I anticipate that there will continue to be further examples and discussions around the methods and consequences of performance-craft work. By identifying and contextualizing new forms of craft making, performance, display, and dissemination I aim to contribute to the development of a more complex vocabulary for discussing and understanding contemporary craft that will serve not only crafts people, but also a larger community of artists, art historians, arts administrators, activists, and cultural theorists.

Survey of Works

As a starting point for this examination, I will present an overview of the three exhibitions that will form my main objects of study. Taken together, these exhibitions offer a spectrum of approaches for negotiating and presenting combinations of craft and performance, and I will return to more detailed discussions of each throughout the text.

Common Threads was an exhibition curated by Lee Plested that was initially presented at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, PEI from June 3 to September 23, 2007. It then toured to Calgary, AB where it was presented at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery at the Alberta College of Art and Design from November 22, 2007 to January 5, 2008. The exhibition brought together a selection of works that used processes of knitting, embroidery, and crochet, or textile-based materials such as yarn or thread. As the title suggests, many of the works in the exhibition used textile materials or processes to address ideas around the potentially social or communal aspects of artistic practice. As explained in the curatorial statement:

Influenced by various social histories of the handmade, conceptual and process art, as well as populist and communal cultural production, these artists take crafts' materiality and social potential as a starting point and subject...Memories of utopian modernity are referenced and reworked...these artists create works that actively address the utopian proposals which emerged from various late 20th century artistic practices, taking up these models today for a critical investigation of the contemporaneous role of textiles.¹⁶

While the exhibition did not have an explicit focus on performance in relation to textile-based practices, its emphasis on the “social potential” of the handmade necessarily raises questions about how or where this potential might be enacted or performed in these kinds of works. In this sense, *Common Threads* is an important case study in the context of my research, particularly for works in the exhibition which (re)presented or suggested aspects of performance.

One such example in *Common Threads* was the “KnitKnit Sundown Salon,” a 2004 event originally co-organized by New York based artist-curator Sabrina Gschwandtner and Los Angeles based curators Fritz Haeg and Sara Grady. Haeg had been hosting a series of salon-style events in his geodesic dome, and Gschwandtner was invited to host a knitting-themed salon in conjunction with local artists.¹⁷ The event took place over the course of a day and included participation, actions, and exchanges by a variety of artists, crafters, and community members. Gschwandtner describes the multitude of activities and participants in her text for the *Common*

¹⁶ Lee Plested, “Foreward/Strings,” in *Common Threads* (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008), n.p.

¹⁷ Sabrina Gschwandtner, “The KnitKnit Sundown Salon,” in *Common Threads* (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008), n.p.

Threads catalogue and on the project website.¹⁸ Activities ranged from knitting circles, displays of knitted work, serving food, selling zines and other projects, performances, unraveling and reusing of old sweaters into new projects, film and video screenings, and a specially created CD of “music to knit to.”¹⁹ Gschwandtner’s reflections on the event underscore the spirit of community, exchange, and sociability:

It wasn’t just the quality of the work, or the abundant activities, inside the dome that made the event momentous; it was the complete reciprocity with which the work was given and received. I have not experienced that level of engagement at any other art show. For eight hours on a gray February day in Los Angeles, the KnitKnit Sundown Salon existed as a utopic, three-tiered marvel of handmade wonders, a communal undertaking that gave me hope for the rise of a new social order.²⁰

Here, the potential for social interaction and new models of (utopic) sociability are clearly derived from the participatory and unstructured activities of communal and live crafting. Gschwandtner produced a video documenting the day’s events, which has since been included in a number of exhibitions and screenings – including *Common Threads*. In these gallery contexts, the work consists of the video of the original event played on a TV screen installed in a dome-style tent (reminiscent of the geodesic dome), where viewers enter to sit on crocheted cushions

¹⁸ Sabrina Gschwandtner, “The KnitKnit Sundown Salon,” in *Common Threads* (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008), n.p. and Fritz Haeg, “sundown salon/events/#11knitknit,” *Sundown Salon*, <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/salon/events/11knitknit.html>.

¹⁹ Sabrina Gschwandtner, “The KnitKnit Sundown Salon,” in *Common Threads* (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008), n.p.

²⁰ Ibid.

and watch the documentation (Fig. 1). “The KnitKnit Sundown Salon” as it was presented in the *Common Threads* exhibition is a clear case of presenting documentation of a past event, rather than in engaging viewers in any kind of participatory or social activity in the gallery. Viewers were exposed to the idea of crafting as a potential site for a social engagement, but were only able to witness or imagine this potential rather than enact it for themselves.

Perhaps inspired by the notion that craft’s social or political potential might be enacted through the act of crafting, the Illingworth Kerr Gallery organized a series of workshops hosted by participating artist, Suzen Green. At the time, Green was based in Calgary and a recent graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design’s Fibre Arts program. Her 2006 work “In Disguise,” a series of knitted garments altered to provoke or disrupt various forms of social interactions, was included in the exhibition (interestingly, under glass display cases, a marked contrast to the way that she presents these works on her own website being worn and performed in public spaces. See Figures 2 and 3). The workshops were publicized with the following cheerful invitation: “This is your call to action! Knit with Common Threads! Saturday drop in- 1 to 5PM. Join us for FREE drop-in knitting circles or schedule your group/organization for their own knitting bee inside the exhibition.”²¹ The workshops took place within the “Bass Benches” installation by Canadian art collective Instant Coffee – a space designed to host, provoke, or inspire social gatherings²², complete with rough wooden benches accessorized with colourful crocheted cushions, a do-it-yourself DJ station with a turntable and collection of records, and a disco ball hung from the ceiling of the gallery (Fig. 4).

²¹ Mackenzie Frere, “Common Threads Exhibition + workshop + public art talk,” *Art Cloth Text* (blog), November 20, 2007, <http://www.artclothtext.com/2007/11/common-threads-at-the-illingworth-kerr-gallery/>.

²² Lee Plested, “Foreward/Strings,” in *Common Threads*, (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008), n.p.

In his curatorial text, Plested describes the increasing popularity of knitting across both “quotidian and...high-cultural manifestations,” and stresses the role of “social organizations that entwine the act.”²³ Ostensibly, the public knitting workshops aimed to have participants enact the kind of social activity or utopic potential referenced by the works in the exhibition and described in the curatorial text. However, the workshops suffered from poor attendance as well as an ambiguity around their role within the context of the exhibition and the gallery: members of the public were asked to come and “perform” social crafting, but without the motivations, support, or duration that would usually provide the backdrop for these kinds of activities. It is worthwhile contrasting these workshops with other contemporaneous and increasingly popular uses of craft such as “Stitch n’ Bitch” group meetings held in yarn stores and cafes, and the growing interest in “knitting as a communal activity [which] lends itself particularly well to collective art projects that often blend nostalgic feelings with the concerns for current political and social issues.”²⁴ Significantly, these loosely organized hobby groups, as well as the decidedly public and political activities of Craftivist groups such as the Calgary-based Revolutionary Knitting Circle rely upon and enact versions of craft’s social potential – without (and sometimes in defiance of) any support or recognition from institutional or gallery spaces.²⁵

Admittedly, not all socially-oriented art projects end with revolution or new and lasting friendships, and in some cases the very awkwardness of social interactions can be a powerful and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Alla Myzelev, “Whip Your Hobby into Shape: Knitting, feminism and construction of gender,” *Textile 7*, Issue 2 (2009): 155.

²⁵ Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch, “Craft Hard Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism,” in *Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek, 204-221 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 215-216.

significant aspect of these kinds of works.²⁶ However, the workshop I attended drew only two participants (who already knew how to knit) and participants spent most of the workshop in awkward chitchat – never achieving either the sociability or action called for in the invitation. The ambiguous aim of the workshops was further problematized by the fact that they were never positioned as art works in their own right. Green’s role was that of a public programmer (rather than an artist) when leading the workshops, a professional role that clearly situated the live performance of craft in the gallery as distinct from the objects on display. My encounters with these projects in the context of the 2008 Calgary exhibition in many ways prompted my interest in thinking through how live crafting might be productively or more explicitly exhibited, documented, curated, or valued in a gallery context. Even as the exhibition’s curatorial text and premise claimed to be interested in aspects of process, making, or social engagement, these more active parts of craft were only present as either documentation or public programming. Several significant questions emerge when considering how galleries might include (or reject) less conventional versions of craft: How do galleries or exhibitions reinforce or rely upon traditional (and still influential) ideas about craft as an object-centred discipline? How might artists, galleries, and curators work to shift these ideas? More broadly, I contend that this exhibition exemplifies a fundamental tension (that is by no means unique to craft) around how museums, galleries, and institutions might accommodate works or practices that do not fit comfortably into their usual modes of programming.

²⁶ Curators Arpi Kovacs and Gabrielle Moser write that “...moments of discomfort, disconnection and awkwardness are necessary byproducts of our attempts to relate to one another.” Their exhibition *This is uncomfortable*, presented a series of video-based works that “confront moments of vulnerability and embrace discomfort as a necessary part of social interactions.” Kovacs and Moser, *This is uncomfortable*, (Toronto: Gallery TPW June 24 – July 31, 2010), http://www.gallerytpw.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=183&Itemid=8.

In contrast to the focus on the social aspects of craft, Wednesday Lupypciw's 2006 work "K2tog: video knitting coven" foregrounds the slow processes and actions of solitary craft-making. Lupypciw is a Calgary-based artist working with textiles, video, and performance. She graduated with a BFA in Fibre from the Alberta College of Art and Design in 2005 and has since gone on to exhibit work across Canada and in the United States. While she has on more than one occasion presented live performances, many of her works take the form of performances staged directly for the camera, and exhibited as video or installation. One such work is "K2tog," which was included in the exhibition "She Will Always Be Younger Than Us," curated by Canadian artist Allyson Mitchell. This exhibition presented a selection of young women artists whose works draw influence from early feminist art's use of textile-based materials, and was presented as a companion to the exhibition "When Women Rule The World: Judy Chicago In Thread." The two exhibitions were originally presented at the Textile Museum of Canada, in Toronto, ON from February to September, 2009 and then toured to the Art Gallery of Calgary from September 2009 to January 2010. The exhibition also included works by Orly Cogan, Gillian Strong, Cat Mazza and Ginger Brooks Takahashi, many of which included or referenced similar participatory or socially oriented strategies as the ones in *Common Threads*. Lupypciw's work is notable in this context in that it presented the performance of craft-making not through documentation of a past event, but rather as the subject of the work.

In "K2tog," Lupypciw and her double (a kind of evil-twin character produced through the use of a split screen) move between phases of sleep and work. Using a knitting machine they alternate between cooperatively passing the shuttle back and forth, and eyeing each other suspiciously while working back-to-back. Finally, one Wednesday is left alone and attached to the machine by the arms of her sweater—struggling to move the shuttle by dragging it across the

machine with the weight of her body (Figs. 5 and 6). A sense of weariness and tedium remains on her face throughout – save for the climactic moment when one Wednesday stabs the other with a pair of sewing scissors, causing her to “bleed” clumps of black yarn from her mouth and stomach. Although the sounds and actions of the knitting machine are present throughout the video, no clear object is ever produced. Lupyciw remains trapped in her perpetual work as craft-maker, driven to violence by a desire to be productive, or perhaps by the solitary, painstaking, and repetitive work of making something by hand. When exhibited, the video was played on a loop on a small pink TV, surrounded by the messy pink strands of a second installation work entitled “Seasons.” (Figs. 7 and 8) Decidedly reminiscent of the woolen “blood” or “viscera” in the video, according to Mitchell, the knot-work in these strands can also be read as a reference to “quipu, the ancient Incan language of talking knots used as physical indicators of quantity, commercial exchange, census-taking, agricultural production and dating status.”²⁷ While not my primary object of study, it remains worthwhile to consider this work alongside “K2tog,” as it productively informs and contrasts with the performance of craft work in the video. In “Seasons,” the crafted object functions as a record of time passed and work completed, arguably more akin to a form of documentation (an idea I will return to later).

Gestures of Resistance is an ongoing project by curators Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman. It was originally presented as a panel discussion and small exhibition at the College Arts Association conference in Dallas, TX in 2008.²⁸ It was subsequently developed into a larger exhibition that ran from January to June of 2010 at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in

²⁷ Allyson Mitchell, “She Will Always Be Younger Than Us,” in *When Women Rule The World: Judy Chicago in Thread*, eds. Allyson Mitchell, Jennifer Sorkin, Sarah Quinton, (Toronto and Calgary: Textile Museum of Canada and The Art Gallery of Calgary, 2009), 88.

²⁸ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, “Performing Craft – Exhibition Dallas 2008,” *Gestures of Resistance: The Slow Assertions of Craft*, <http://www.performingcraft.com/caa-panel-2008/>.

Portland, OR. Through the panel, exhibition, and their website *Performingcraft.com*, Stratton and Leeman have been investigating works and practices that intersect craft, performance, and political activism. The exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Craft was developed as a follow-up to the initial exhibition in Dallas in which the objects were frequently (and unintentionally) read as more central or significant than the performance components, which were “easily misread as the process that led to the object.”²⁹ The Portland exhibition, in contrast, used the windowed downstairs space of the Museum to host ongoing performative projects, actions, and gestures by 8 different artists, each in residence for about a month over the course of the exhibition (Fig 9). Projects ranged from John Preus and Sarah Black’s collaboratively constructed stage/house structure, to Canadian printmaker Anthea Black’s public postering project, to Ehren Tool’s durational wheel-throwing work, to Theaster Gates’ final performance in which he white-washed the contents of the space in a layer of clay slip. While issues of labour, gender, and class ran through the majority of the projects, each also addressed specific topics ranging from global manufacturing conditions, race, sustainable building practice, anti-war protests, and the reclaiming of queer space.

Alongside the main performance space, the exhibition also featured a separate upstairs “study centre” where past works, resources, and further didactic materials were displayed in order to provide context for the performances happening below (Fig 10). While the products of each artist’s residency were gradually installed and left in the downstairs space as residue or ephemera, the exhibition foregrounded the performance aspect of the works – and in particular the live performance of craft-making. The artists were also involved in creating, installing, and

²⁹ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, “Episode 248: Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman,” by Brian Andrews and Duncan MacKenzie, *Bad At Sports*, podcast audio, May 31, 2010, <http://badatsports.com/2010/episode-248-shannon-stratton-and-judith-leeman/>.

performing works in Portland, with several of them designing site-specific projects that responded to the city and its inhabitants. It is important to underline the way that this project explicitly aimed to present the live performances as the central aspect of the exhibition – not only because this turned attention onto the act of crafting as the place where performance was occurring, but also for the way the live performance of craft-making presented the most overt challenge to the traditional role and functioning of a craft museum. Carole Lung’s performance *KO Enterprises: High Performance Apparel Production, an experiment of uneconomical production* as part of the *Gestures of Resistance* exhibition was one such example. For her performance Lung (who also goes by the name Frau Fiber) traveled around Portland with her bicycle-powered sewing machine, enlisting the help of volunteer citizens to pedal the bike while she sewed rain jackets made from repurposed plastic shopping bags (Figs. 11-12).

Her project connects to a history of garment production that moves from the unseen creation and mending of ones own clothing within the home, to the mass-production and consumption of standardized garments in unseen factories on the other side of the world. Through the public display of the work involved in creating a jacket, Lung’s performance makes evident the skill, planning, time, and labour involved in creating consumer goods – while drawing connections between the things we buy and a global textile industry that often relies on sweatshop labour. The project presents an admittedly exaggerated alternative model for the production of locally-sourced, sustainably-produced garments, and one that Lung herself has acknowledged would be impractical to implement on a broader scale.³⁰ However, it is through the use of live crafting, that the project reveals and emphasizes each of the individual

³⁰ “Carole Lung, a.k.a. Frau Fiber,” YouTube video, 3:12, interview with Carole Lung as part of *Gestures of Resistance* exhibition, posted by “contemporarycraft,” June 16, 2010. <http://mocc.pnca.edu/exhibitions/1278/>.

components that go into the production of the garment: the time, the labour, the energy, and the raw materials are awkward, imperfect, and inefficient. Through a crafted approach and aesthetic, they are each made to stand out, and thus allow us to consider the significance of each one.

Questions around how to negotiate between the potentially conflicting viewpoints and aims of artists, audiences, and institutional structures are by no means unique to this exhibition, or craft more broadly. *Gestures of Resistance* curators Stratton and Leeman have openly discussed the challenges of presenting performances and their traces within the context of a museum and, in particular, within a craft museum.³¹ This feature is notably complicated by the fact that the exhibition evolved over the course of several months – and the experiences of seeing it at the beginning or when no artists were present were distinctly different than when a live performance was happening. The curators have also discussed the use and legibility of didactic materials and wall texts, and the potentially conflicting aims of wanting to provide as much information as possible about the works and performances versus allowing time and space for a more exploratory or discursive interaction with the exhibition, performances, and objects.³² The exhibition was also documented extensively through photography, video, artist interviews, participant blogging, and podcasts.

Furthermore, the expectations around what kinds of objects and practices should appear in a craft museum necessarily colour how audiences might view or interpret the works in this exhibition. Arguably, the most common way for audiences to encounter performance in a craft museum is in the form of a live demonstration by a skilled craftsman (a strategy that the

³¹ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, “Episode 248: Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman,” by Brian Andrews and Duncan MacKenzie, *Bad At Sports*, podcast audio, May 31, 2010, <http://badatsports.com/2010/episode-248-shannon-stratton-and-judith-leeman/>.

³² Ibid.

Museum of Contemporary Craft has used in conjunction with other recent exhibitions³³). The longstanding interest or fascination with this aspect of craft making is exemplified by the new Museum of Arts and Design building in New York City, NY (formerly the American Craft Museum), which includes several glass-encased studios on one of its floors (Fig. 13). Similarly, the studios at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, ON feature open studios where artists-in-residence are put on display so that visitors can observe the process of producing craft objects. *Gestures of Resistance* subtly challenged this more typical version of live crafting by presenting a number of works where no recognizable or functional craft object was produced, or where ambiguously functional objects were created in collaboration with those who would normally act as passive spectators.

While it is not one of my main objects of study, it is also worth mentioning here the exhibition *HAND+MADE: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft* (from 2010 at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston). This exhibition took a broader view of the connections between craft and performance, including work that ranged from public crafting performances, objects and installations that suggested or invited interactivity, or those that referenced what could be considered the performance of use through references to clothing or jewellery. The project to identify a “performative impulse” within craft practice represents an important part of the work of understanding these relationships, and will likely inspire other similar investigations in both curatorial and artistic practice and future scholarship. However, I argue that it is necessary to distinguish between a broadly “performative” reading of craft, and works (such as

³³ Namita Gupta Wiggers, *Laurie Herrick: Weaving Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, (Portland: Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2011), <http://www.museumofcontemporarycraft.org/exhibitions/1270/>.

the ones I am discussing) that focus on performances of crafting or craft-making and thus engage more directly with the history and aims of performance art.

From Objects to Actions

When considering the exhibitions and works outlined above, it should be clear that they represent a spectrum of approaches towards the intersection of craft and performance art, and correspondingly a range of strategies for framing or (re)presenting this intersection through curatorial approaches, documentation, and public programming initiatives. I will here explore the implications of these strategies, with a particular interest in thinking through how histories and theories of performance art might be productively included in this discussion. Guiding this investigation are questions around how we might use performance art theories to think about the role of the craft object in the context of performance-craft works.

In her book on performance art and feminism, art historian Jayne Wark identifies three “broad, albeit sometimes overlapping categories”³⁴ of literature on performance art: those concerned with the ontology of performance, those concerned with the body, and those that address feminist performance. This thesis will touch in part upon each of these approaches, however, I am interested here in the discussions concerned with the ontology of performance, and corresponding considerations of liveness, ephemerality, and documentation. Given that craft remains an object-centred discipline, the questions raised by this category of literature and analysis are especially relevant for the way they articulate and problematize the relationship between live performance and objects. More broadly, in the works I am considering there are clear connections to the concerns, approaches, methods, and history of performance art practices.

³⁴ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 8-9.

Examining these connections in the works I am presenting can productively expand or broaden understandings of how performance-craft works operate, and provide what I hope are useful models for future analysis along these lines.

While it is important to identify a historical lineage for contemporary performance-craft works and to consider how my examples engage with aspects of this history, it is crucial to first note that more broadly, craft remains a decidedly object-based practice. In a text from the catalogue for *HAND+MADE*, curator Valerie Cassel Oliver identifies a handful of craft artists working in the late 1960s, including ceramist Peter Voulkos and weaver Sheila Hicks, who, drawing on artistic developments of the day, experimented with working practices that incorporated aspects of performance.³⁵ Oliver's text explores how shifts in art practice at that time were impacting craft, and she cites examples such as Voulkos' experiments with collaborative making as precedents for the contemporary performance-based works in the 2010 exhibition. Her text represents an important step in uncovering and developing a lineage for contemporary performance-craft works, but I would argue that despite the connections and precedents she identifies, these works (or a reading of them as performances) remain an exception to how craft practice is commonly understood. Furthermore, while the works and participatory events she discusses could certainly be read as containing aspects of performance,

³⁵ Oliver, *HAND+MADE*, 12-15. In this text, as well as the full title of the exhibition, Oliver uses the term "performative" to describe works or practices that contain aspects of performance or that connect to the histories or strategies of performance art. While this usage is increasingly prevalent, I have, where possible, avoided using the term "performative" in this way to avoid confusion with its use in theories discussing "performativity" in relation to language or gender (as in the writings of J.L. Austin or Judith Butler). No doubt, theoretical exploration in this vein might be productively included in future discussions of craft and performance broadly.

she nevertheless concedes that “in earlier craft-based performative events, objects remained a steadfast and intentional goal.”³⁶

Put another way: the shifts in relationships between object, action, artist, and audience that occurred in visual arts have not had the same impact on craft. Art historian Glen Brown describes how: “art and craft have followed different paths as discourses. The ‘linguistic turn’ in 20th-century thought exerted a powerful influence over art but left barely a dent in the carapace of craft. A few ceramists in the 1960s and 1970s...did explore the linguistic nature of craft concepts...but their work remained largely within the realm of ‘craft as idea.’ They were, in other words, primarily interested in making the concept of craft the content of craft objects.”³⁷ Even Louise Mazanti’s very recent theoretical explorations of craft’s “core identity,” shows a willingness to question features such as “tradition,” “material,” or “process,” but returns to an understanding of craft based around “the role that it performs in the world of objects.”³⁸

No doubt adding to the centrality of object-creation in traditional and popular understandings of craft, are the diverse range of uses for “craft” as a term and a practice far beyond the reach of visual arts discourse. Hobbyists, interior decorators, professional or studio crafters, and the growing indie craft scene all use this term to describe their activities, and engage primarily in the production and/or sale of objects. Despite multiple crossovers and intersections with visual art, traditional definitions of craft remain most firmly in place within the context of contemporary studio craft, which as Glenn Adamson has described “has not managed to adapt itself well to the historical shifts in contemporary art... studio craft is still unswervingly devoted to the creation of ‘objects.’...And as its very name suggests, it has not yet begun to grapple with

³⁶ Ibid, 15.

³⁷ Glen Brown, “Craft As Idea as Idea,” 43.

³⁸ Louise Mazanti, “Super-Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position,” in *Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek, 59-82 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

the realities of the ‘post-studio’ environment.”³⁹ We might also look to the recent and continuously expanding indie or DIY craft movement as the clear descendent of the studio craft movement (even if a degree of generational tension or territoriality are delaying its recognition as such⁴⁰). The indie craft movement is exemplified by websites like *Etsy.com*, craft sales such as the *Renegade Craft Fair*, and has recently been documented in Faythe Levine’s 2008 book and film *Handmade Nation*.⁴¹ Alongside an ostensibly political interest in “creating an independent economy free from corporate ties,”⁴² most members of this community also remain resolutely invested in the production and sale of objects.

In contrast with the centrality of objects within craft practice, most writing about the history of performance art in the last 60 years “as a distinctive practice within the visual arts,”⁴³ point to a fundamental shift in artistic discourse that leads up to this development: a move away from the centrality of the object towards a new focus on actions. While the main thesis of Wark’s book is about the interconnectedness of feminism and performance art, she argues that “the broad appeal of performance for female *and* male artists also had to do with how it was positioned, along with other anti-object art forms, as a countervailing force against the market-

³⁹ Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 165-166. Adamson is here discussing the terms “[w]ork, practice, and site” and their usage in contemporary art. These are set in opposition to *objects, actions, and studio* in traditional studio craft practice. See also Howard Risatti’s *A Theory of Craft*, where he identifies “objecthood and applied function” as the defining properties for “the class of craft.” Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 41.

⁴⁰ For an excellent analysis of some of the tensions around recognizing this lineage, see Dennis Stephens, “Validity Is in the Eye of the Beholder: Mapping Craft Communities of Practice,” in *Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek, 43-58 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl, *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

⁴² *Ibid*, ix.

⁴³ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 10.

driven, commodity-oriented ethos that dominated the art world in the 1960s.”⁴⁴ Henry Sayre identifies a similar anti-commodity stance behind the strategy of making “art which was objectless, art which was conceived as uncollectible and unbuyable because intangible...art became a useful object of change, insofar as absenting itself as an object undermined the economic and aesthetic norms of the art establishment.”⁴⁵

While this shift can arguably be traced to a number of artists, practices, and political projects, it is generally agreed that a significant precedent was the re-reading of Jackson Pollock’s painting practice as a form of performance (or “more specifically...the photographic images of Pollock at work that were widely circulated in the early 1950s.”⁴⁶) Where modernist critics had previously “emphasized product over process in the work, genius over chance,”⁴⁷ this new reading of Pollock’s work suggested that the *act or work of art-making* might be as significant as the production of an object.⁴⁸ Curator Paul Schimmel traces “the reversal of the traditional precedence of the object over the act” as progressing from: “Actions performed with the goal of producing objects” to “performative actions whose primary goal was the process of creation rather than the production of objects” to “performances that often involved audience

⁴⁴ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁵ Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 14-15.

⁴⁶ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 29. For further discussion see also Amelia Jones, *Body art - performing the subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 15-16 and 53.

⁴⁷ Marina Roy, “Corporeal returns: feminism and phenomenology in Vancouver Video and Performance, 1968-1983,” *Canadian Art* Summer 2001: 61.

⁴⁸ “In a gesture that can be seen as the impetus for the aesthetic developments under discussion here, the abstract expressionists recognized that the action painting itself was the mere record of the series of moves that was the action of painting. The “work” as activity was privileged in this way over the “work” as product. A museum might well have purchased a Pollock, but it could never purchase the action of Pollock painting – the event itself, the real work.” Sayre, *The Object of Performance*, 4.

participation, from which no resulting object was produced.”⁴⁹ It is also important to note that the shifts in artistic practice in the 1960s and 70s (what Lucy Lippard notably identified as the “dematerialization” of the art object⁵⁰) impacted and influenced not only the development of performance art, but also concurrent and overlapping streams such as Conceptual Art, Minimalism, or Process Art.⁵¹

I contend that the shift from actions designed to produce objects towards performances where no object is produced (to paraphrase Schimmel), can be extrapolated and applied to contemporary craft. In particular, works such as “Knitknit at the Sundown Salon,” Lupyciw’s “K2tog” and Frau Fiber’s “KO Enterprises,” show how this dematerialization is taking place in contemporary craft practice, with varying degrees of emphasis on actions and gestures in relation to the production of objects. Similarly, the curatorial framework for *Gestures of Resistance* exemplifies an interest in rethinking the traditional precedence of objects over actions, and draws clear influence from the idea that the political or “resistant” potential of a given work might reside in its gestures (or in an anti-commodity or anti-object stance). This idea is echoed in the curatorial text for *Common Threads* where Plested argues that it is communal craft-making that gives rise to “a new social order,” and allows artists to form “an individualized and expressive

⁴⁹ Paul Schimmel, “Leap into the void: Performance and the Object,” in *Out of Actions: between performance and the object, 1949-1979* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 17.

⁵⁰ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973). See also: Sayre, *The Object of Performance*, 2.

⁵¹ Also notable is the way that recent exhibitions and publications have looked to frame these movements through broader cultural preoccupations, shifts, or anxieties such as work, labor, or time. See Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic*, (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art and University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009).

critique.”⁵² Taken together, these works demonstrate a new interest in rethinking the (central) role of the crafted object, as well as an opportunity to consider the possibility and consequences of a dematerialized craft practice.

You Had To Be There: Performance art, Craft, and Documentation

If performance art has historically been linked with a shift from objects to actions, then relationships between performance, actions, objects, and audiences are distinctly complicated by the role of documentation. Thus, I argue that questions around the relationship of performance art to its documentation must also be a feature in discussions of contemporary performance-craft works, specifically in regards to the role of the craft object as a potential form of documentation. Henry Sayre has described how museums and galleries, when faced with the problems of collecting and displaying live or performance works, turned increasingly to documentation of performance:

What...gave [the museum] access to objectless art, was the document, the record of the art event that survived the event. More often than not this document turned out to be a photograph. By the early seventies, at any rate, most self-respecting modern collections included some kind of performance piece, which often meant only that it “owned” a conceptual

⁵² Lee Plested, “Foreward/Strings,” in *Common Threads* (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008).

idea or, more materially, the rights to photographs documenting an event.⁵³

If one of the central aims of performance art was to produce objectless work that could “not be bought or sold,”⁵⁴ then the way that artists, museums, and audiences have adapted to and negotiated the problems presented by these works is significant. Despite an interest in creating temporary, live, or ephemeral works, there remains a clear need to record, present, frame, and historicize performance art works. As theorist Peggy Phelan has described, performance art is distinctly transformed by its translation into documentation: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”⁵⁵ The resulting tensions, discussions, and maneuverings that have accompanied the (re)presentations of performance are undoubtedly present in exhibitions of performance-craft works as well. As mentioned above, the project to document and disseminate information about *Gestures of Resistance* was a key aspect of the exhibition, and although this extensive documentation allows broader access for those who could not visit the exhibition (or were only able to see parts of it), it is necessary to question how this documentation functions in relation to

⁵³ Sayre, *The Object of Performance*, 2. In this same passage, Sayre describes the particular challenge that performance art practices presented to the traditional functioning of museums: “By the late sixties it was clear...that the art object per se had become, arguably, dispensable...As this development became more and more obvious during the last decade, it became increasingly clear as well that the museum – designed to house and display objects, after all – was as deeply in trouble as the object itself...What has surprised even the museum, however, is the power these [photographic] documents seem to possess, not only in the public imagination but over the museum itself, which has been metamorphosed by them into something resembling an archeological depository.”

⁵⁴ RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), 152.

⁵⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 147.

the live performances and whether it risks taking precedence over the performances and actions themselves. Curators Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman have acknowledged that tensions around providing access and information versus maintaining an emphasis on the performances themselves were a feature in how *Gestures of Resistance* was presented.⁵⁶

Conversely, other theorists have recently argued for a more direct or equivalent relationship between performance and its documentation. Philip Auslander identifies two main modes of performance documentation: the documentary and the theatrical. Auslander's "documentary" mode encompasses the more traditional understanding of documentation: a record(ing) of a live performance that functions as "evidence that it actually occurred."⁵⁷ The "theatrical" mode includes works which are "staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful existence as autonomous events presented to audiences."⁵⁸ Chantal Pontbriand identifies similar categories of "*direct* and *deferred* performance," and makes clear that "the idea of performance is present in both cases."⁵⁹ Auslander goes on to argue that the differences between the documentary and the theatrical modes may not be as distinct as they seem, and that even the most "direct" performances are often consciously performed or staged with documentation in mind, calling into question the notion that the live or original event is somehow more significant or real. He extrapolates this to suggest that in some sense "it is not the initial presence of an audience that makes an event a work of performance art: it is its framing as

⁵⁶ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, "Episode 248: Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman," by Brian Andrews and Duncan MacKenzie, *Bad At Sports*, podcast audio, May 31, 2010, <http://badatsports.com/2010/episode-248-shannon-stratton-and-judith-leeman/>.

⁵⁷ Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *Performing Arts Journal* 28, no. 3, (2006): 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵⁹ Chantal Pontbriand, "Introduction," in *Performance By Artists*, eds. AA Bronson & Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979), 11.

performance through the performative act of documenting it as such.”⁶⁰ This claim is echoed by Amelia Jones in her argument that “the specificity of knowledges gained from participating in a live performance...should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event,”⁶¹ and the need to rely on such traces when writing about historical works of performance.

However, even as it has become necessary to encounter or write about performance through its documentation or to consider documentation as an art form in its own right, there are few people who would argue that the experience of viewing or participating in live performance is the same as experiencing it through documentation. Catherine Elwes has criticized “the supremacy of documentation and supposedly embodied critical practices”⁶² as a means to present or historicize performance. Elwes goes on to argue that “the non-verbal reaction to a live event and the unruly subjectivity of the artist herself must be at least as valuable as any subsequent analysis, performative or otherwise.” In her discussion, she echoes Phelan’s claims about the significance of the live event, and the differences in how we “encounter the flesh and blood person of the artist and how that experience is transformed by the subsequent creation of documentary evidence.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” 7.

⁶¹ Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter, 1997): 12.

⁶² Catherine Elwes, “On Performance and Performativity: Women Artists and Their Critics,” *Third Text* 18, no. 2 (2004): 195.

⁶³ “At a time when so much is made of the notion of an embodied response it should be obvious that, when looking at a documentary photograph or text, the best part of our senses is absent or distanced from the apprehension of the work. A kind of pared-down vision is at play but the registration of temperature, the senses of smell, taste, touch, hearing, and that illusive sixth sense that picks up ambience have to be reconstructed in the imagination rather than experienced somatically.” Elwes, “On Performance and Performativity,” 195.

More recently, in a 2010 article about a workshop held at the Museum of Modern Art, Carol Kino describes the heated discussions when “more than a hundred artists, scholars and curators crowded into the boardroom...to talk about performance art and how it can be preserved and exhibited.”⁶⁴ Kino reports on how recent approaches, such as “reperformance” or the use of technologies to “translate” performance into other media, continue to complicate the notion of an original or temporary performance that can never be fully reproduced or documented. Clearly, questions around performance art, its documentation, exhibition, historicization, and curation continue to be a site for debate. Given that these evolving discussions remain a site for productive analysis, I propose that tensions around the relationship between performance and its documentation must also be considered when analyzing and historicizing performance-craft works.

Drawing upon Auslander’s categories of the “documentary” and the “theatrical,” we can look at the three examples I am presenting and consider them within a spectrum of approaches to presenting performance-craft and/or its documentation. In *Common Threads* and its corresponding public programming initiatives, the distinctly different experiences of participating in a knitting workshop or watching a video of a knitting event highlighted the ways that the live performance of crafting was either downplayed or mediated through documentation in the context of this exhibition. Documentation, in this instance, provided access to an event or experience that might not have been practical or possible for the gallery to include. The potential for including viewers in a time-based, interactive experience of communal craft-making was present, but was positioned as secondary to the display of object-based work. In contrast, for *Gestures of Resistance*, live or participatory craft-making was at the centre of the exhibition,

⁶⁴ Carol Kino, “A Rebel Form Gains Favor. Fights Emerge,” *The New York Times* March 14 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/arts/design/14performance.html>.

emphasizing the significance of temporary or ephemeral gestures. Here, it would have been impossible for all of the performances and participatory actions to be accessible to all viewers, but traces of each performance were left in the gallery throughout the 6-month run of the exhibition. The various works and actions were also documented extensively (through the gallery's website, blogging, artist interviews, video, podcasts, and photographs), and this documentation falls solidly into the traditional "documentary" mode. The documentation for *Gestures of Resistance* serves an important function in broadening the audience for the performances and making them accessible beyond the time and place of the exhibition itself. However, we must still consider the extent to which this documentation sufficiently represents the experience of direct involvement with the live performances. Alternately, as the exhibition moves further into the realm of "history," the documentation will become increasingly significant and in turn may function to replace or displace the significance of the original event. In "K2tog," the performance centres on the actions of knitting, albeit translated through the medium of video, exemplifying the "theatrical" mode of documentation. The video and its installation become the object for exhibition and display, and Lupypciw's use of video (as a form of "deferred" performance) reinforces the absence of any functional craft object as an outcome of this work. In discussing another of her performance-based works, Lupypciw has stressed the significance of documentation as a central aspect of her practice, as well as her decision to favour the production and display of documentation over the production of a completed craft object.⁶⁵ Of my three case studies, Lupypciw's approach to deferred performance is arguably the

⁶⁵ "I think that the craft object of what I'm doing is not as important as documentation as the object...I have these amazing pictures that I can present to people and talk about further...[the documentation is] a discrete entity and that's the point of it for me...I love the weaving for sentimental reasons because it's beautiful and uneven...but images of the weaving and of people making the weaving and of people watching the weaving

most “dematerialized,” completely replacing or displacing the crafted object with recorded actions of making.

Clearly, the works and exhibitions I am discussing must also negotiate the relationships and differences between live performance, documentation, and display. Complicating these relationships, however, is the potentially unsettling presence of the craft(ed) object, which is present to varying degrees in each of my case studies. Functioning as a kind of performance ephemera, the objects produced through performance-craft have a unique role to play in rethinking these relationships. A number of productive questions emerge when considering this role: What is the impact of the craft object on performance art’s interest in liveness or ephemerality? On the historical progression from objects to actions? How might the craft object complement or suppress the traditional role of documentation?

One notable approach that has emerged in considering the intersections of craft, performance art, and documentation is the idea that craft objects are naturally “evocative”⁶⁶ of their own making, or what curator Namita Gupta Wiggers has identified as “the latent performance potential of a crafted object.”⁶⁷ Bill Arning describes this potential as emerging from the way we might imagine the creation of a craft object: “If we see a woven basket, we imagine its weaving. If we see a thrown pot, we imagine its throwing.”⁶⁸ This is a seemingly

are... where my interest lies.” Wednesday Lupypciw, (lecture as part of “This Is How We Do It: Performing Craftiness” panel discussion, moderated by Nicole Burisch as part of *Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival 5*, Glenbow Museum, October 10, 2010.)

⁶⁶ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 168. Adamson writes: “...crafted objects are by their very nature evocative of the way in which they were made, a trait that is amplified by the organization of the craft movement into discrete institutions and groups along media lines.”

⁶⁷ Namita Gupta Wiggers, “Craft Performs,” in *HAND+MADE The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2010), 29.

⁶⁸ Arning, “Forward,” 6. I would propose that this could be extended to think about use as well: if we see a sweater, we imagine wearing it, or if we see a ring, we might imagine wearing it.

productive lens through which to think about craft, performance, and documentation, and bears considering further. Building upon the notion of a latent or imagined performance potential, crafted objects might be viewed as highly appropriate, embodied, or representative forms of documentation. Here, the craft object functions as a record of all the actions that took place over a given time, physically inscribing the “event” of making upon or within the object. Lung’s jackets or Lupyciw’s “Seasons” are examples of crafted objects that might be read in this way, provoking a means to imagine the performance of their own creation, or functioning as a complement to other forms of photographic or video documentation. More likely, Wiggers and Arning are thinking about traditional or functional craft objects, such as a wheel-thrown cup, which offers not only a visual reminder of the time and actions that led to its creation, but also a tangible record with the potential for an extremely direct relationship to the user. In touching such a cup, the user’s hands presumably rest in the same position as the maker’s, prompting gestures and actions that might echo the experience of creating the cup and placing the user in the same position as the maker. However, I would here underline the significant differences between traditional, functional craft objects and those produced through live performances. I argue that the objects produced in the context of a studio-craft setting are decidedly different than those produced as part of a performance, most notably in the ways they are circulated, displayed, and consumed. It is also crucial to note that reading a vague “performance-quality” into craft objects more broadly is markedly different than the experience of witnessing or participating in a live performance. Or put another way: a tapestry hanging on the wall may evoke thoughts about its creation, but this is fundamentally different than the experience of watching someone weave or of weaving itself. Furthermore, the potential for direct and tangible interaction with a crafted object is often absent when that object is displayed within the “look-

but-don't-touch" setting of a museum. The more interactive and participatory framework of *Gestures of Resistance* worked in many ways to unsettle this assumption, and allowed viewers to walk through, touch, and handle many of the projects installed in the gallery.

Craft's historical position as an object-centred discipline and its "latent performance potential" certainly offer some useful avenues for discussions around performance and documentation. However, I would question what is clearly an object-centred approach as the sole means to read the relationship between craft and performance art, and I am hesitant to ascribe an inherent performance-quality to *all* craft objects on the basis of this potential. Furthermore, I see two key problems with this approach: First, an imagined or latent performance potential does not universally apply to crafted objects. A similar "imagined creation" can easily be read into any artwork that contains traces of its own making, and arguably even those that do not. The fascination with Pollock's painting process described above is but one example, but there exist multiple practices or works that might inspire a similar curiosity. Secondly, in many instances, the "performance" of making is hardly that. While craft production undoubtedly involves actions and processes, more often than not, in the studio-craft context to which the writers above are referring, the process of making is done in the privacy of the studio, with the primary goal of producing an object. Demonstrations do offer something of an exception to this private studio model, and are certainly a common way for the public to encounter live crafting. However, demonstrations are also generally done in the service of producing an object (or educating the public or students about how to produce objects). This is not to say that these activities might not contain degrees of spectacle and showmanship, but only to question the extent to which they are constructed or received as performances – and to contrast the "performance" of traditional craft

production with works that foreground performance such as “K2tog,” or those presented in *Gestures of Resistance*.

From Private to Public: Tracing a feminist lineage

As we have seen in the discussion above, considerations around the role of the object in performance art present an important means to complicate and expand understandings of new performance-craft works. From here, it is also necessary to think through how we might approach performance-craft works not only through discussions around objects, but also through a consideration of the live actions and bodies in the performances themselves. How do these works relate to other histories and practices that have centred on features of gesture, bodies, work, and time? I propose that another clear historical precedent for the work I am discussing can be found in feminist performance art works, and specifically those that address issues of women’s labour. The development of feminist art has had a significant influence on how both performance art and craft have been developed, exhibited, and theorized in the last 60 years, and is thus a site of productive inquiry and overlap that informs and influences contemporary works that combine these two fields. I argue that examining this history in light of my contemporary examples can offer productive models for analysis that centre on readings of actions and gestures, rather than objects. In particular, I will examine the significance of live and active bodies in feminist performance art, as well as the strategy of moving previously neglected forms of labour into the gallery.

A survey of the history of performance art as it has developed in North America makes clear that “the relationship between feminism and performance art since the 1970s has become so

inextricably linked that it is inconceivable to speak of one without reference to the other.”⁶⁹ In particular, performance as a new form that existed outside of, and thus with the ability to challenge dominant art systems and values seems to be one of the main reasons that feminist artists turned to these practices in developing their work. As Marina Roy writes, it was because “...video and performance were so new that women felt they could truly make these media their own without the historical baggage of male precedence.”⁷⁰

Central to much of the relationship between performance art and feminist movements, is an understanding of performance art as a practice that responded to and challenged modernist art discourse. In the majority of texts discussing performance art, as well as those about feminist art, performance is clearly positioned as a reaction against or a move away from the notion of so-called disinterested aesthetic judgment as originally outlined in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.⁷¹ Taken up by formalist art critics such as Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried, this critical stance favours the centrality of the autonomous art object devoid of “theatricality”⁷² and argues that art should provide a transcendent aesthetic experience removed from the contingencies of everyday life or political concerns⁷³. The “privileging of masculine values and white male artists” through the supposedly objective lens of modernist criticism was seen by feminists artists as “a reactionary apoliticism that supported the status quo” and unfairly

⁶⁹ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 3. See also Peggy Gale, “Preface,” in *Performance By Artists*, eds. AA Bronson & Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979), 7.

⁷⁰ Roy, “Corporeal returns,” 62.

⁷¹ Jones, “Performance: Time, Space, and Cultural Value,” 31; and Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 18. See also Sandra Corse, *Craft Objects, Aesthetic Contexts: Kant, Heidegger, and Adorno on Craft* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009).

⁷² Pontbriand, “Introduction,” 11-12. See also Wark *Radical Gestures*, 17-19, 27-28; Jones “Performance: Time, Space, and Cultural Value,” 31-32; Roy, “Corporeal returns,” 61.

⁷³ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 19.

excluded work by women artists.⁷⁴ Performance provided a means for feminist artists to intersect and make public both the personal and the political, to “see art not as compromised by, or in conflict with their political goals, but indeed as the object of them.”⁷⁵

Particularly in relation to the political aims of feminist performance, the live presence of bodies in action was central in allowing women “to assert themselves as the active and self-determining agents of their own narratives.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Amelia Jones describes the “de-containing” potential of performance and live art practices and their ability to resist the dominant aesthetic frames of art history and criticism. Kantian aesthetics, in her view, functions to “contain, or exclude the potentially scary, fleshy, joyous, wounded, and/or abject vicissitudes of embodied human experience.”⁷⁷ She points to practices that include bodies, time, duration, and unconventional uses of space or display as having a particular ability to resist or “de-contain” the “boundary-making function”⁷⁸ of these kinds of art discourse. In her introduction to *Performance by Artists*, Chantal Pontbriand outlines many of the common strategies and approaches employed in performance art, such as the focus on process and actions over objects, a goal to move away from representational modes towards aspects of real life, the dissolution of strict distinctions between artistic disciplines, and the involvement or implication of the viewer beyond traditionally passive roles.⁷⁹ These more flexible and participatory strategies could also be seen as making performance a more appropriate method for communicating and exploring feminist (and other political) concerns.

⁷⁴ Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 409-433 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 411.

⁷⁵ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

⁷⁷ Jones, “Performance: Time, Space, and Cultural Value,” 30.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

⁷⁹ Pontbriand, “Introduction,” 12-17.

It is worthwhile mentioning the ways in which craft also exists as a field that operates in relation or opposition to modernism.⁸⁰ Craft theorist Bruce Metcalf describes aspects of craft (especially those that link it to everyday life, such as function) that make it incompatible with a modernist emphasis on transcendent aesthetic experience.⁸¹ In addition to its connection to use or function, both craft's supplementarity and its connection to materiality further contribute to this position. Craft's "direct engagement with specific material properties" contradicts the "normative idea of modern art", which "involves the transcendence...of just this encounter."⁸² Craft's direct challenge to these value systems becomes especially evident in the reception of key feminist works that employ aspects of craft materials or processes, such as Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" (Fig. 14). Amelia Jones describes how the "hysteria with which modernist art critics have accused *The Dinner Party* of being kitsch testifies to its enormous threat to these ostensibly disinterested discourses...the piece blatantly subverts modernist value systems, which privilege the 'pure' aesthetic object over the debased sentimentality of the domestic and popular arts."⁸³

If we extrapolate the idea that the live presence of the artist's body potentially challenges dominant systems of art production, display, or criticism, then a similar challenge can feature in how we might read the live presence of the crafter's body in the works I am discussing. If

⁸⁰ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft, 2*: "Modern art might appear to be a realm of purely aestheticized and transcendental objects. But in fact, as Johanna Drucker has recently argued, it has always been an infinitely varied field defined by a series of contingent horizons...craft should be thought of as one of those horizons: as a conceptual limit active throughout modern artistic practice."

⁸¹ Bruce Metcalf, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism," in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, ed. Sandra Alfody, (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007), 18. Garth Clark traces a part of this history in his lecture *How Envy Killed the Crafts Movement: An Autopsy in Two Parts* (Portland: Museum of Contemporary Craft and Pacific Northwest College of Art, 2009).

⁸² Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 39.

⁸³ Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party," 410.

audiences and museums are more accustomed to displays of craft work in the behind-the-scenes context of demonstrations or studio production, when crafting bodies inhabit the gallery as the central feature of the work, they arguably echo the potential of live actions and bodies to undermine or “de-contain” dominant modes of display and criticism. The challenge presented by live crafting is potentially augmented when we also consider the historical uses of craft within feminist art practice.

As feminist artists of this period were using the flexible, uncharted, and resistant properties and methods of performance, many were also using craft to similar ends. However, where feminist artists turned to performance perhaps because of its newness, the use of craft was often a strategy of using or drawing upon historical associations between women, domesticity, and craft in order to revisit, redeem, or aestheticize previously neglected “aspects of women’s cultural contributions.”⁸⁴ Women’s movements in the 1970s used embroidery to show “that the personal was the political – that personal and domestic life is as much the product of the institutions and ideologies of our society as is public life.”⁸⁵ In many ways, these artists were using craft as a form of creative practice that had been excluded because of its historical associations with femininity, as well as its longstanding association with domestic and feminine realms.⁸⁶ Furthermore, many of the historical approaches and contexts for making craft, such as participatory or communal production share noticeable similarities with performance art’s ability to activate and engage audiences in a more direct way and to undermine the primacy of the solitary (male) genius artist.

⁸⁴ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 62.

⁸⁵ Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 205.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

If feminist practice from the 1960s and 70s employed both craft and performance, arguably for their positions outside of traditional art practice, it is no surprise then that within the history of feminist art practice, examples of the use of craft and performance either in combination or alongside one another can be found. One example is Vancouver artist Evelyn Roth who made crocheted costumes and coverings for objects out of recycled materials in the early 1970s (Fig. 15) and also performed crocheting in the context of the gallery.⁸⁷ The landmark *Womanhouse* project of 1972 also featured both performances and craft,⁸⁸ as in the case of Faith Wilding's "Crocheted Environment" (Fig. 16). In these instances, the live performance of craft work often had much to do with making public aspects of women's work and labour that had been relegated to private and domestic realms, a key feminist strategy that reappears in several of my contemporary examples. While not all early feminist artworks involved both craft and performance, it remains important to think about how the overlapping histories of feminism, performance art, and craft can all be considered as important precedents for constructing a feminist lineage of new performance-craft works.

The feminist focus on women's work and its role in public and private spheres is an area that bears further investigation in relation to contemporary performance-craft and the examples I am considering. Helen Molesworth's 2000 article "Housework and Artwork" discusses key works by four feminist artists: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, and Mary Kelly.⁸⁹ Of particular interest for my research is Molesworth's reading of Ukeles' *Maintenance Art Performances* – where the artist performed tasks such as scrubbing the museum floor, mopping the plaza in front of the museum or cleaning glass display cases (Fig. 17). Molesworth

⁸⁷ Roy, "Corporeal returns," 60.

⁸⁸ Wark, "Radical Gestures," 54; Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 151.

⁸⁹ Helen Molesworth, "Housework and Artwork," October 92 (Winter 2000): 71–97.

describes how this work reveals and ruptures distinctions between public and private spheres – making public those tasks, gestures, and labour that were traditionally done in private (and most often in the service of maintaining the patriarchal public sphere).⁹⁰ Molesworth also presents portions of the “Maintenance Art Manifesto” which distinguishes between what Ukeles’ calls maintenance labour (“keep the dust off, preserve, sustain”) and development labour (“pure individual creation, progress, excitement”).⁹¹ Molesworth goes on to discuss Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* in light of Ukeles’ work – where she points out that the labour involved in creating *The Dinner Party* is often ignored or positioned as secondary to the artwork itself.

Molesworth’s reading of *The Dinner Party* in light of distinctions between maintenance and development labor points to an interesting ambiguity around where craft work fits into this model. *The Dinner Party* features extensive use of craft techniques and materials such as china painting and embroidery, and while typically accompanied by documentation of the many women who assisted in its making, is still presented with Chicago as the sole author-owner of the work (Fig. 18).⁹² Here, the equation of craft work with maintenance work is not an unreasonable comparison – although it should be noted that the word “craft” is suspiciously absent from Molesworth’s discussion, and she instead refers to the work done by Chicago’s team of crafters as unspecified “labour.”⁹³ Equating craft work with maintenance work underlines how both forms of labor remain associated with the (stereotypically feminine) domestic sphere, and thus problematically excluded from the public or professional spheres. The exclusion of craft (both in Molesworth’s discussion and in the presentation of *The Dinner Party*) emphasizes the extent to which this form of work is typically omitted or downplayed in arts discourse or display. If we

⁹⁰ Ibid, 76.

⁹¹ Ibid, 78.

⁹² Ibid, 84.

⁹³ Ibid, 84.

consider this omission in relation to my examples, the ambiguous inclusion of live crafting in *Common Threads* reveals how even within contemporary contexts, craft labour is frequently and more comfortably situated in the realm of “maintenance” work: something to be done in private in the service of producing art objects for the public sphere, but never the central feature of the work.

Correspondingly, when maintenance labour or craft labour are performed live in the gallery they both move from the private to the public sphere – and are potentially “elevated” or revalued. By performing maintenance labour in the gallery, Ukeles was able to reveal traditional distinctions between public and private forms of labour, while repositioning and revaluing maintenance work as an artistic practice. A similar strategy is at work in both “K2tog” and many of the works in *Gestures of Resistance*– where the public performance of craft-making in the context of the gallery reveals and repositions the value of this work. These performances place the active crafter’s body at the centre of the work, and move the typically unseen or private labour of craft-making into a more public context. Here, these works can be considered for the significance and value of their actions and their relationship to time and duration.

Given these historical precedents outlined above, it is not surprising that ideas about combining the histories and critical potential of craft and performance might also be a part of current practices that combine the two, particularly those with an explicitly political aim, such as the works in *Gestures of Resistance*. In these instances, the public performance of craftwork references the significant histories and strategies of both performance and craft as resistant, de-containing, and politically charged practices. More recently, craft’s radical or resistant potential in several politically aimed works has been aligned with ideas about its connection to “slowness”

and broader “Slow” movements.⁹⁴ In the case of *Gestures of Resistance*, Stratton and Leeman identify a “particular interest in the relationship of slowness and agency, [to] delineate and then proceed to interrogate a species of action in which self-conscious crafting, contextual mischief-making, and cultural re-scripting play themselves out.”⁹⁵ In other words, it is not just the presence of live bodies in action, but also the specific ways they make evident or manipulate the time and duration involved in crafting. Curator Adrian Heathfield has discussed what he terms “durational aesthetics” and affirms the particular strengths of durational works as “a means to assert “inassimilable” values.”⁹⁶ Bearing this in mind, live crafting as a time-consuming, conscious form of work can operate as a form of durational practice that resists “Western culture’s linear, progressive meta-narratives, its orders of commodification...”⁹⁷ —a feature that I would argue is distinctly highlighted when craft work is performed live. Catherine Elwes has also argued for the ways that live and durational works provide a particularly important strategy for women artists. Here, the performer generates and controls the duration and pace of the work, which Elwes argues “reverses the conventional power relation in which meaning is read on the surface of their bodies as opposed to being generated by their actions.”⁹⁸

As described above, feminist artists have used craft and crafting as a means to discuss issues of women’s labour. Particularly when that work was done in public or in the context of a gallery, the presence of the “repetitive and obsessive act...within the context of art...served to

⁹⁴ Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004.)

⁹⁵ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, *Gestures of Resistance: The Slow Assertions of Craft*, <http://www.performingcraft.com/>.

⁹⁶ Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh, *Out of now: the lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (London: Live Art Development Agency; and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 21.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 23.

⁹⁸ Elwes, “On Performance and Performativity,” 196.

elevate the status of women's work.”⁹⁹ These ideas have clearly been taken up by contemporary crafters such as Lung and Lupyciw, whose projects foreground the actions of making as well as the time, energy, physical and psychological effects of craft work. The step-by-step processes of making something – either in a domestic setting or in the broader context of global garment manufacturing is revealed in each time-consuming, lengthy, and sometimes tedious stretch of time. These works alternately exaggerate or contradict the desire to be productive or the task of making useful things. In discussing the works in *Gestures of Resistance*, Shannon Stratton has argued that “craft is a really useful place to talk through the political, because it’s so connected to labour, everyday life...class, gender.” She describes how craft as “a time-based medium, as singular investment in a process,” makes it an especially appropriate form for addressing these issues.¹⁰⁰ Bearing all this in mind, it is clear that it is possible and even necessary to think about craft not through an object-centred reading, but rather through its engagement with time, process, gestures, and actions.

It is in considering a feminist lineage that craft also seems to find common ground with ideas about “the everyday” and artistic practices that draw upon supposedly mundane, trivial, repetitive actions (or objects) of daily life. However, simply equating craft with the domestic or everyday negates its role or history as a creative practice, and reinforces longstanding hierarchies between art and craft that frequently result in the devaluing of women’s creative work. It is also important to consider the extent to which strategies of “elevating” a given form of work necessarily rely on or perpetuate its status as “lower” or “outside” the realm of art. As I have discussed elsewhere, many of craft’s contemporary iterations continue to reinforce traditional or

⁹⁹ Roy, “Corporeal returns,” 60.

¹⁰⁰ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, “Episode 248: Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman,” by Brian Andrews and Duncan MacKenzie, *Bad At Sports*, podcast audio, May 31, 2010, <http://badatsports.com/2010/episode-248-shannon-stratton-and-judith-leeman/>.

stereotypical perceptions of craft as a passive, gentle, or feminine¹⁰¹ and thus perpetuate or rely on gendered readings of craft. If craft is a practice that sits somewhere between “maintenance” and “development” labour and is still shaped by gendered readings, then contemporary crafters or artists can nevertheless work from this in-between position to leverage or counter historical associations with femininity or domesticity. Works where the active crafter’s body is present draw upon feminist art histories and strategies of duration, liveness, and action to expose and question a view of craft as hidden, domestic, or necessarily feminine.

From here, we can also take into account the two quotes that started this thesis, and the ways that both craft and performance are gaining popularity and recognition within contemporary fine art. If this is indeed the case, we might question the extent to which either can still be positioned as “outside.” In a recent state-of-the-field survey of craft, Julia Bryan-Wilson addresses this very question when she writes that:

For today craft is not only an artistic trend being rapidly institutionalized; it is also a thriving enterprise that exists within a larger geopolitical context of mass production. The very notion of “women’s work” that compelled Chicago has now shifted, given the feminization of the global labor force. This shift means that some earlier feminist uses of craft in art – as an institutional critique of gendered hierarchies or as a political recuperation of the decorative and the low – have been rendered somewhat beside the point.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Nicole Burisch, “Craft Off: Performance, Competition, and Anti-Social Crafting,” *Cahiers métiers d’art* :: *Craft Journal* Spring 2012 (forthcoming).

¹⁰² Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Sewing Notions,” *Artforum* February 2011: 73.

It may well be the case that some earlier feminist motivations may no longer hold the same urgency or relevance. However, the strategy of moving a typically unseen or undervalued practice into the gallery can still serve to revalue that practice or prompt a reassessment of the system that has excluded it in the first place. Furthermore, craft's connection to the "larger geopolitical context of mass production" clearly remains a site for productive investigation and critique. This context includes and connects to almost every facet of craft, including traditionally produced craft objects sold as tourist souvenirs, mass-manufactured hobby kits or DIY manuals, artists and crafters exhibiting in contemporary art contexts, and labourers who assemble, extract and refine raw materials. Contemporary craft practices continue to be particularly well-suited to address this context, as evidenced by many of the works in *Gestures of Resistance* or by the very works that Bryan-Wilson focuses on in the second half of her text.¹⁰³

Swedish craft critic Love Jonsson has also questioned the conditions of craft's newfound popularity, arguing that once something is "in" it inevitably risks being "out" as tastes change and evolve.¹⁰⁴ He describes how, despite or because of its recent popularity, craft is frequently viewed not "as a dynamic practice that remains notoriously difficult to define, but rather... as an unchanging and even backward-looking field." In this view, craft's value hinges upon its ability to signify or behave in traditionally construed terms of materiality, tactility, or function – or what Jonsson identifies as "the notion of craft as a refuge or an escape."¹⁰⁵ Glenn Adamson echoes these claims when he describes the use of "craft's 'object' position, its 'lower than low' status in

¹⁰³ Bryan-Wilson, "Sewing Notions," 74-75.

¹⁰⁴ Love Jonsson, "Letting Slow Go," (Lecture, *6th Think Tank symposium*, Gmunden, Austria 8-11 October 2009). Also published online, *Think Tank*, "Papers Edition06," 2009. <http://www.thinktank04.eu/page.php?4,182>.

¹⁰⁵ Jonsson, "Letting Slow Go," 14.

the cultural hierarchy” as a strategy for artists in the 1980s and 90s such as Mike Kelley, Janine Antoni, or Kiki Smith.¹⁰⁶ Here, craft is exploited for its position as “a site of cultural failure, a field of activity that is resigned to inferiority and debasement.”¹⁰⁷ Both Adamson’s and Jonsson’s readings of craft’s value as residing in its “abject” or “backward-looking” status counter Bryan-Wilson’s assertion that craft is no longer engaged with negotiations of its “low” or outsider status. Arguably, this perception of craft has evolved somewhat in the last 20 years, but I contend that despite the shifting presence and significance of craft in contemporary art, it is still engaged in negotiating its historical position outside of dominant aesthetic systems. Indeed, based on Adamson’s examples, as well as his recent writing about the idea of “sloppy craft,”¹⁰⁸ it would seem that craft’s usefulness in contemporary visual art is often linked to qualities of materiality or tactility. Works such as Mike Kelley’s or Josh Faught’s (Fig. 19) that use badly-made objects or techniques that highlight the traces or presence of the individual maker, are decidedly engaged in negotiating craft’s traditional emphasis on skill or function. However, they too reinforce a traditional view of craft as object-centred – often relying on connections to materiality and object-ness to contrast with less materially-based art practices. From here, the incorporation of performance art strategies into the craft works I am presenting, clearly provide new avenues for negotiating and reflecting upon craft’s position within broader fine arts discourse. Rather than reinforcing craft’s abject or material qualities, performance-craft works position crafters as “active and self-determining agents”¹⁰⁹ who are engaged with contemporary concerns, global economies, and institutional contexts.

¹⁰⁶ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 159.

¹⁰⁸ Glenn Adamson, “When Craft Gets Sloppy,” *CRAFTS* 211, March/April 2008, 36-41.

¹⁰⁹ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 32.

Craft as Knowledge

While this thesis has centred on examining connections to performance art history as a means to consider the dematerialization of craft, I will also briefly address how performance-craft works might relate to or contribute to current discussions in craft history and theory. Historically, a significant portion of craft writing and theory has focused on craft's continued exclusion from fine art discourse, institutions, and economies. Garth Clark's 2009 lecture "How Envy Killed the Crafts Movement,"¹¹⁰ takes as a given the status of craft as a field or practice that has been consistently (and oftentimes legitimately) excluded or separated from fine art. Running through much of Clark's argument (as well as those of many other craft historians and theorists such as Bruce Metcalf or Howard Risatti), is a project to delineate and classify artists, objects, and practices that do or do not qualify as craft. I have no doubt that there are some who would look at the performance-craft works I am discussing and dismiss them as "not craft," as the practices and exhibitions I am addressing are undoubtedly different than other concurrent streams of craft practice such as studio craft or indie craft. However, I argue that alongside situating performance-craft works within the histories and strategies of performance art, these works can also contribute to discussions of craft history and practice. My argument is supported by the fact that many of these exhibitions are being presented in craft-focused institutions, and many of those who are creating and presenting these works have trained in traditional craft disciplines such as ceramics or fibre arts. Equipped with the same skills, knowledge, and vocabularies as other craft makers, these artists and curators are working to apply or expand traditional craft techniques and approaches through combinations with other media or exhibition contexts. Even as these works challenge conventional definitions or understandings of craft, they still contribute

¹¹⁰ Garth Clark, *How Envy Killed the Crafts Movement: An Autopsy in Two Parts* (Portland: Museum of Contemporary Craft and Pacific Northwest College of Art, 2009).

to an evolving dialogue about what craft is and how it might exist not only in objects or materials, but also in actions or gestures. I argue that identifying and developing useful theoretical models for new forms of dematerialized craft will provide a platform for analyzing and contextualizing other works, practices, and exhibitions that may contain connections to craft practice or history.

My argument for considering these practices through the lens of craft theory is further supported by other recent texts and theoretical explorations of craft. As described in my introduction, several theorists and historians have begun to reframe a view of craft that relies less on traditional craft/not-craft distinctions. Rather, these theories work to identify craft's specific qualities, properties, and values, and in turn attempt to understand how this "craftiness" might be at work in other fields. Glenn Adamson discusses craft as "an approach, an attitude, or a habit of action,"¹¹¹ one among many possible strategies or approaches to be employed by artists, designers, or architects. Set in relation to other artistic terms or strategies, his reference to Johanna Drucker's idea of a "contingent horizon"¹¹² is particularly useful in positioning craft as one possible horizon shaping and/or opposing modern art. In this view, rather than existing as either within or alongside the field of fine art, craft in this sense truly does become a "moving target,"¹¹³ a shifting set of ideas and associations that can be used or applied to any number of works, practices, or exhibitions. A similar strategy is at play in Mike Press' discussion of craft as a form of "distinctive knowledge"¹¹⁴ that can be applied to or intersected with digital technologies – here craft's use in fields such as prosthetics or medical scanning are discussed

¹¹¹ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 4.

¹¹² Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 2.

¹¹³ Julia Bryan-Wilson, "The Politics of Craft," *Modern Painters*, February 2008: 80.

¹¹⁴ Press, "Handmade Futures," 251.

alongside the way that digital processes are being incorporated into craft.¹¹⁵ Again, these ideas underscore Lupyciw's explanation of her use of video as part of her textile practice; she explains that "the low-fi and analogue technologies she is drawn to allow her to be 'crafty in a video realm... You can push it around the same way as yarn or clay... the way you can piece it together or snip it apart is kind of like making a weaving... or a tapestry.'"¹¹⁶ If anything, this view of craft is clearly better suited to writing about and understanding contemporary practices that employ an element of craft in their work, or artists like Allison Smith who situate themselves as "conceptual artists whose subject is craft."¹¹⁷

If it is possible to see craft operating as a feature within any number of fields or practices, projects such as *Gestures of Resistance* offer a more coherent argument in bringing together a group of artists who use both craft and performance in a similar way, under a specific curatorial premise. Stratton and Leeman use their project to propose craft as a "methodology"¹¹⁸ that is being employed by the artists in the exhibition. All together, these new ways of viewing craft and its intersections with other fields and practices suggest that craft theory may be moving in a significant new direction—one that is particularly appropriate for reading the gestures and actions of crafting, rather than its objects or materials. More broadly, sociologist Richard Sennett has devoted an entire book to a consideration of craftsmanship as "an enduring, basic human impulse."¹¹⁹ He argues that craftsmanship "cuts a far wider swath than skilled manual labour,"¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Press, "Handmade Futures," 256-257.

¹¹⁶ Julie Bevan, "Fax love and more. Artist melds her textile and video work in a diverse practice." *FFWD Weekly* July 15, 2010. <http://www.ffwdweekly.com/article/arts/visual-arts/fax-love-and-more-6013/>.

¹¹⁷ Bryan-Wilson, "The Politics of Craft," 80.

¹¹⁸ Judith Leeman and Shannon Stratton, *Gestures of Resistance: The Slow Assertions of Craft*, <http://www.performingcraft.com/>.

¹¹⁹ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 9.

and discusses how craft-based approaches towards “problem finding and problem solving”¹²¹ can exist in any number of fields. Taken with the idea of “craftiness” described above, Sennett’s notion of craftsmanship as a quality or approach support a view of craft as a kind of knowledge that has applications far beyond the realm of fine art or craft theory. Underlying all of these theories, is the notion that craft-making might contain or embody its own forms of knowledge. Performance-craft works such as the ones I am discussing, clearly make this working knowledge apparent, highlighting a kind of making that has long been dismissed, excluded, or misunderstood by dominant art historical discourse.

The move within craft theory towards a less object- or material-centred view of craft clearly does much to pave the way for an understanding of the role of performance in relation to craft practice. Here, an emphasis on the actions and qualities rather than objects shares common ground with theories of performance discussed above. Conversely, works that make evident, problematize, or reposition the role of the object such as “K2tog” or exhibitions such as *Gestures of Resistance* present versions of craft that are rooted in actions, qualities, or processes. Craft is still present in these works, but is not bounded by traditional parameters such as materiality, function, or object production. Furthermore, the recent theoretical developments described above can be used in tandem with performance-craft to further a version of craft that is not just about mindless skill or effortless demonstration – if anything, these drawn-out, interactive, labour-intensive process-based works make evident the time, skill, consideration and thoughtfulness necessary to make and deploy craft work.

¹²¹ Ibid, 9.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the discussions above, exhibitions such as *Common Threads*, *She Will Always Be Younger Than Us*, and *Gestures of Resistance* offer new ways of thinking about and understanding contemporary craft practice. While the performance-craft works in these exhibitions undoubtedly draw from and contribute to the ongoing development of craft history and theory, they must also be related to the history and theories of performance and feminist art. Here, these works may be considered for how they negotiate concerns around liveness, documentation, and the relationship between performances, objects, and actions.

More specifically, where considerations around the diminishing role of the object were a central feature in how performance art developed, I have argued that it is necessary to think about how craft practice is variously dematerialized in the works I am addressing. In turn, we might also consider how this dematerialization may impact or redefine craft as a practice or field of inquiry. Both objects and materials are decidedly present in all of my examples, and the possibility of an entirely object-less practice (in either performance art or craft) remains a site for debate. Nevertheless in the works I am presenting, an emphasis on the actions of craft-making or craft-doing allow us to consider how contemporary craft works and practices might draw on, negotiate, respond to, and elaborate upon the strategies and concerns of performance art, as well as upon traditionally constructed definitions of craft. Indeed, even if craft as a discipline is particularly well-suited to object-centred theories and approaches, it remains important to question the reasons for this focus, as well as the possibility of framing or practicing craft in alternate ways. By seeking to understand new performance-craft works in a broader historical context, and alongside recent theoretical developments in craft theory, we can consider what

craft might be without the object, which will allow for it to be presented, valued, understood in more diverse and complex ways.

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FIGURES



Fig. 1 Sabrina Gschwandtner, “The KnitKnit Sundown Salon,” 2007. Installation and video in *Common Threads* exhibition at Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary. Photograph by Inger Marthe Skyberg, www.acad.ab.ca/wh_2007_11_ct.html.



Figs. 2-3 Suzen Green, “In Disguise,” hand-knitted sweaters and balaclava, 2006. Images from <http://www.suzengreen.com/>.



Fig. 4 Instant Coffee, “BASS BENCHES,” installation being used for knitting workshop, 2007. In *Common Threads* exhibition at Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary. Photograph: Inger Marthe Skyberg, http://www.acad.ab.ca/wh_2007_11_ct.html.

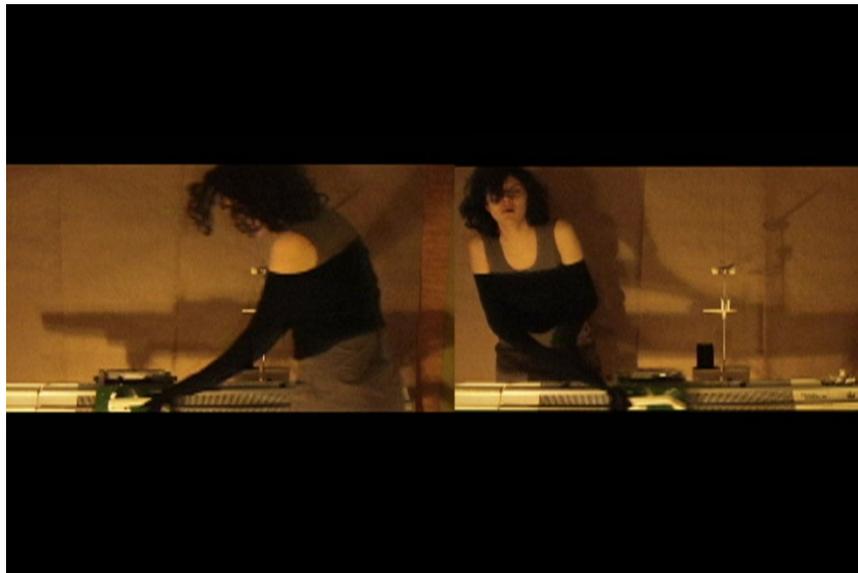


Fig. 5 Wednesday Lupypciw, “K2tog: video knitting coven,” video still, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6 Wednesday Lupypciw, “K2tog: video knitting coven,” video still, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. Wednesday Lupypciw, installation view of “K2tog: video knitting coven,” 2006, video; and “Seasons,” 2006, hand-knotted rope, cotton fibres in *She Will Always be Younger Than Us* exhibition at The Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto. Images courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8 Wednesday Lupypciw, installation view of “K2tog: video knitting coven”, 2006, video; and “Seasons,” 2006, hand-knotted rope, cotton fibres in *She Will Always be Younger Than Us* exhibition at The Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto. Images courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 9 *Gestures of Resistance* installation view, February 2010. Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland. Digital photograph by Nicole Burisch.



Fig. 10 Theaster Gates, “A Good Whitewashing,” performance, 2010. Part of *Gestures of Resistance*, Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland. Photograph: Heather Zinger, <http://mocc.pnca.edu/exhibitions/1278/>.



Fig. 11 Frau Fiber (a.k.a. Carole Lung), “KO Enterprises: High Performance Apparel Production, an experiment of uneconomical production,” performance, March 2010. Part of *Gestures of Resistance*, Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland. Photo: Leslie Vigeant, <http://mocc.pnca.edu/exhibitions/1278/>.



Fig. 12 Carole Lung (a.k.a. Frau Fiber), “KO Enterprises: High Performance Apparel Production, an experiment of uneconomical production,” performance in front of Columbia Sportswear, March 2010. Part of *Gestures of Resistance*, Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland. Photograph: Heather Zinger, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/contemporarycraft/4497631520/in/photostream/>.



Fig. 13 *Artist studio at Museum of Art and Design, New York, 2010. Digital photograph by Nicole Burisch.*



Fig. 14 Judy Chicago, “The Dinner Party,” 1979. From Amelia Jones, “The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party* - A Critical Context” in *Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner party in feminist art history* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1996), 82-118.



Fig. 15 Evelyn Roth, “Vancouver Art Gallery Installation With Dress, Hat, Bag And Boots,” 1976. From “Recycled Videotape,” *Evelyn Roth Festival Arts*, <http://evelynrothoz.com/photos-9/index.html>.



Fig. 16 Faith Wilding, “Crocheted Environment,” mixed media/fibers installation at *Womanhouse*, Los Angeles, 1972, From “Selected Visual Work,” *Faith Wilding Home Site*, <http://faithwilding.refugia.net/>.



Figs. 17 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside,” performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, 1973. From Helen Molesworth “Housework and Artwork,” *October* 92 (Winter 2000): 71–97.



Fig. 18 Judy Chicago, Installation view of the Acknowledgment Panels from “The Dinner Party” at the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art, 1996. Photo: Donald Woodman. From “Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: The Dinner Party: Acknowledgement Panels,” *Brooklyn Museum* website, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels/index.php.



Fig. 19

Josh Faught, "Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian" (detail), hand-woven Jacquard cloth, gold lamé, black vinyl, plaster, papier mâché, gold sequins, chicken wire, screenprinted wallpaper, acrylic yarn, dye, paint, batiked cloth, drawing paper, Indian ink, beeswax and mirror, 2006. From Glenn Adamson, "When Craft Gets Sloppy," *CRAFTS* 211, Mar/April 2008, 36-41.