
common threads
an anthology

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by

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Preface

Ever since I discovered textiles as a language for myself, I have been subjected to this immeasurable curiosity to understand this craft and its underlying ramifications on issues concerning gender, culture, and space. As both a maker and an architect, it is of particular interest to me to explore how crafts and materials carry with them a certain message and historical significance, and how using them within space-making practices is an opportunity to highlight unvoiced narratives.

Confronting the fact that architecture plays a role in upholding oppressive structures, my exploration of textile crafts comes from a desire to understand how ways of making have the potential to be disruptive. Stemming from the fact that there is a normative line that has segregated the male from the female, the arts from the crafts, and the public from the domestic, my aim is to uncover how these societally dictated binaries have affected women, and in its reverse, how women have resisted to them. The history of textiles is undeniably a history of female authorship; from society's first texts to modern feminist discourse, textiles have remained present as a medium through which women have exercised their agency. This has been true even when textiles were weaponized and used to enforce ideas of femininity and domesticity unto women.

Through this anthology, my aim was to gather stories from women who have acted as storytellers through textile making – *in some cases in relation to notions of space* – spanning across cultures and temporalities to understand the relation between this craft and female agency. Instead of simply compiling the stories, I attempted to weave some of the stories together into new ones according to patterns or common themes. By doing so, I wanted to reinforce the idea that there is a significance in textile making that surpasses local cultures, genders, race, and social status, which is made visible when drawing parallels between stories.

Despite my efforts to put together an all-encompassing collection, I must point out that this anthology remains a work in progress due to the overwhelming amounts of stories I didn't have the chance to unravel. When I began my research, I faced the obstacle of not finding enough material on textile histories, which towards the end of this work completely changed into finding overwhelming amounts of content to explore. The main challenge, however, was how most of this information exists far from the reach of traditional academic literature and must be uncovered through anecdotal experiences. In the end I think this also speaks to the erasure of women's histories and voices within the field of academia, as well as the devaluation of crafts and their role within culture and serves as a call for not only more inclusive forms of making but also to more inclusive forms of storytelling and documentation.

Goddesses of Weaving

Textiles, and in particular weaving, were pivotal to humanity's first cultures, and were thus immortalized through their stories (Kruger, 2002). It is therefore common to find many references to textiles within mythology all over the globe. What is interesting, however, is how in most cultures textiles bear a direct connection with a female figure, usually a deity.

In the following pages I have put together a list of women which have appeared in folklore around the world as representative of the textile arts. Nonetheless, the list is incomplete, and it is important for me to mention that throughout my attempt to make this list as complete as it could be, I came to realize how much of folklore and ancient storytelling is unfortunately lost or remains hidden.

Paolo Veronese - Arachne or Dialectics (1520)

Arachne

Though not a deity, Arachne was an exceptionally talented mortal weaver who gained fame and recognition for her great skill. Her talent was self-made, and she openly denied having learned it from Athena, goddess of weaving, who took offense to this. In response, the goddess challenged Arachne to a weaving contest.

Athena wove a tapestry depicting the gods with grandeur, punishing the mortals that disrespected them.

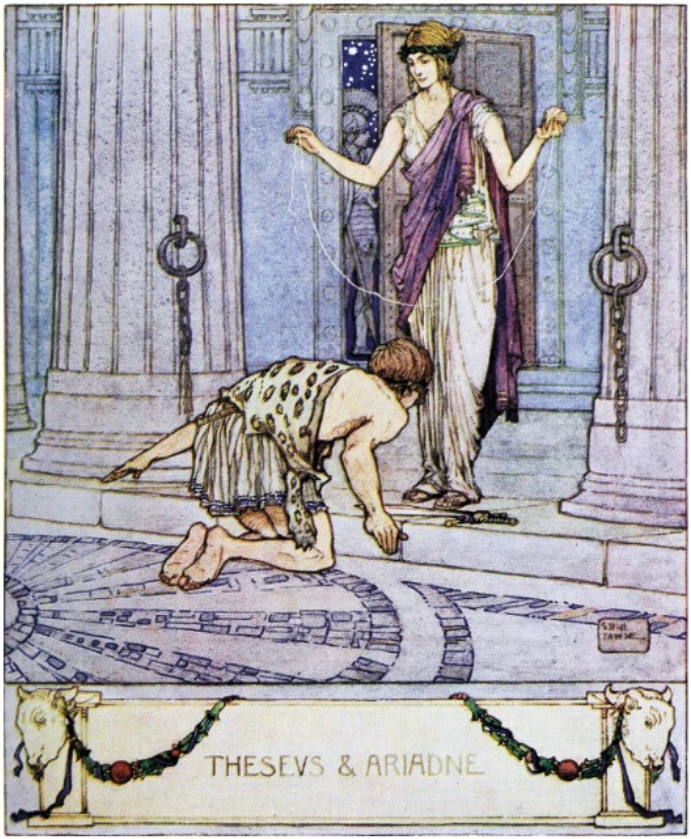
Arachne on the other hand chose to depict the gods as cruel and flawed creatures. Despite her tapestry's undisputable beauty, its contents angered Athena, which ripped the mortal's work to shreds and then hit her on the head with the spindle.

Embarrassed and regretful of her actions, Arachne hung herself. In an act of pity, Athena transformed the dead girl into a spider, allowing her to continue weaving for eternity.

Bernard Picart - Minerva visits spinsters and weavers (1717)

Athena

In Greek mythology, Athena was regarded as the goddess of wisdom, warfare, and weaving. She was not only a master weaver but also the teacher and protector of artisans. In Roman mythology, she takes on the name of Minerva.



Sybil Tawse - Theseus and Ariadne (1920)

Ariadne

In Greek mythology, Ariadne, princess of Crete, helped Theseus defeat the Minotaur by giving him a sword and a ball of thread with which to retrace his way out of the labyrinth.

Bait Pandi

From native Filipino (Bagobo) mythology, Bait Pandi is the spirit goddess of weaving, responsible for teaching women to weave.

Otto Kubel - Frau Holle und das fleißige Mädchen (1930)

Frau Holle / Holda

In Germanic folklore, Frau Holle is the patron of domestic arts, including spinning. She was believed to reward hard workers and punish lazy ones.

John Charles Dollman - Frigg Spinning (1909)

Frigg

In Norse and Germanic mythology, Frigg is the wife of Odin and is associated with fertility, motherhood and the domestic. She is often depicted holding a spindle or spinning clouds, both as a symbol of her patronage over the domestic as well as her ability to spin 'wyrd', a Norse concept of destiny.

Fu Dalu

From the native Filipino T'boli art of dream weaving (T'nalak). In T'boli culture, the goddess Fu Dalu is the spirit of the abacá plant from which natural fibers are extracted for weaving. She is believed to appear in weavers' dreams and teaches them patterns.

Unknown - Leizu teaching people to cultivate silkworms

Leizu

Also known as Hsi Ling-shih, she was an empress and wife of the emperor Huangdi. In Chinese folklore she is attributed with the discovery of silkworm farming and the silk loom.

The myth says that a silkworm fell on her cup as she was having tea, unravelling into silk which she began to spin in her hands.

Unknown - Mama Ocllo (c.1840-50)

Mama Ocllo

In Inca mythology, Mama Ocllo represents motherhood and fertility. It is believed that she was sent by Inti, the sun god, to educate the Inca people, which she did by teaching them to spin and sew.

Moirai

In Greek mythology, the moirai or fates are a group of three sisters responsible for manipulating people's destiny. Clothos is the spinner, and she decides when someone is born. Lachesis as the allotter measures the thread, determining the length of a person's life. Lastly, Atropos oversees cutting the thread, ending the person's life.

Henry Siddons Mowbray - Destiny (1895)

Unknown - Mokosh

Mokosh

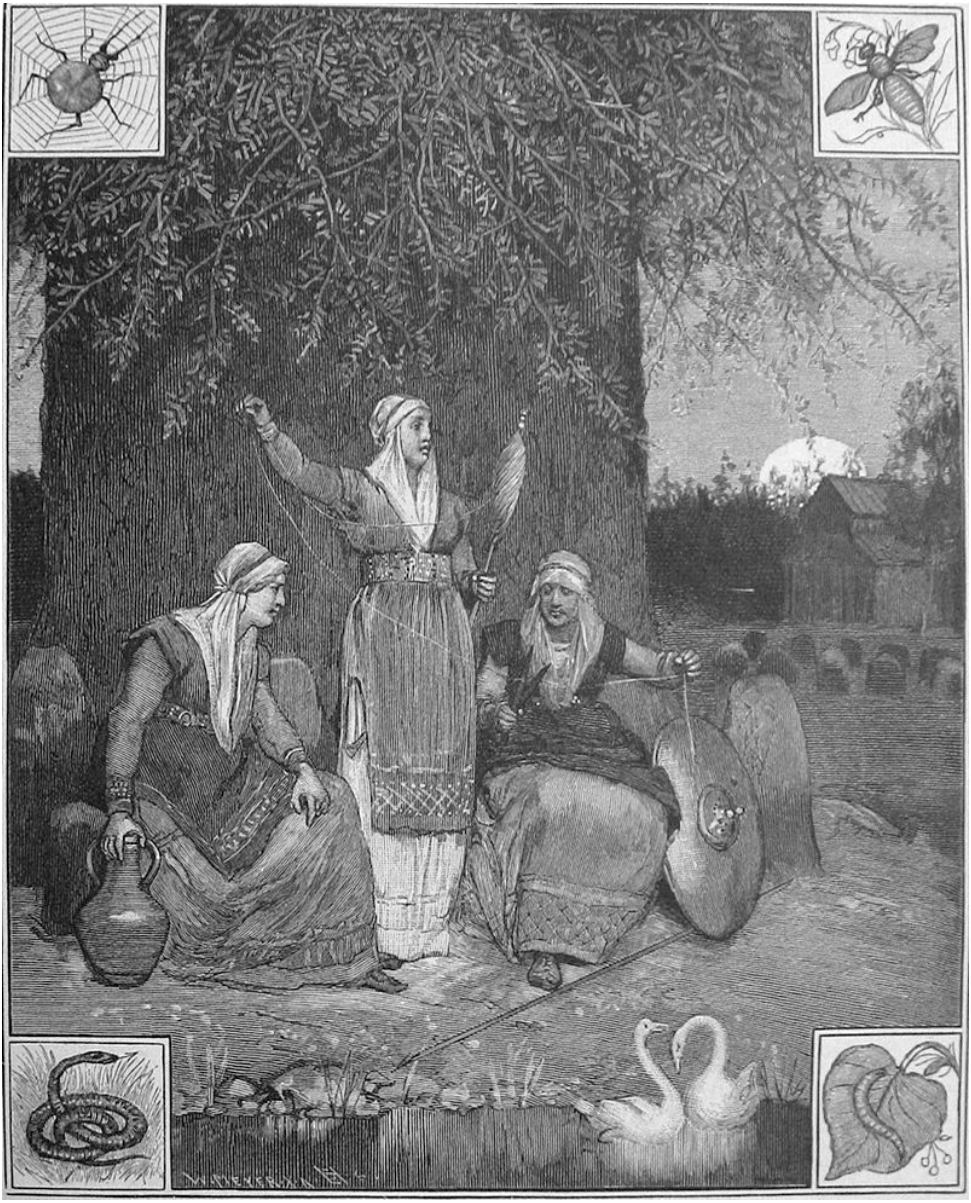
In Slavic mythology, Mokosh is the only woman goddess out of the seven primordial gods. She is representative of mother earth and is a tender of sheep and spinner of fate.

In Serbian mythology, Mokosh has a helper called Srecha whose purpose is to spin the thread of life.

Statue of Neith (664–525 B.C.)

Neith

The Egyptian goddess of the cosmos Neith was associated with fate, wisdom, motherhood, war, hunting, and weaving. Her connection with weaving is twofold: it pertains to both life and the afterlife. Weaving was an important tool for creation and provided people with necessary items for survival. On the other hand, it played a pivotal role in the passing on to the afterlife, and in the process of mummification.



Unknown - The Norns spin the threads of fate at the foot of Yggdrasil (1893)

Norns

In Norse mythology, the Norns are women with the power of manipulating and shaping fate. They live by a well beneath Yggdrasil, the tree of life, and are sometimes depicted as giantesses.

Like the Greek Moirai, they are depicted in a group of three, with each one representing a different aspect of fate: Urd represents the past, Verdandi represents what is presently coming into being, and Skuld represents what shall be.

Panthoibi

In Meitei mythology and religion, Panthoibi is a fierce goddess representing war, courage, wisdom, and the handicrafts. There are two stories about her connection to weaving, with one saying that she was inspired by a spider to create the art of weaving, and another saying that she learned it from the goddess of creation, Leishambi.

There is a dance dedicated to her and performed during the Meitei religious festival of Lai Haraoba. The dance is a portrayal of Panthoibi's love affair with god Nongpok Ningthou, as well as a depiction of the weaving process.

Elsie Bia, Master Navajo Weaver, near Spider Rock

Spider Woman

In the Navajo culture, Spider Woman is deity regarded as a helper and protector of humanity.

She discovered her talent after being advised by the holy ones that she had the power to weave a map of the universe. After mastering her weaving, she casted a loom and tools with which to teach humans.

It is tradition for young Navajo weavers to place their hands on spiderwebs to capture her spirit in their hands.

Spider Grandmother

In Hopi culture, the Spider Grandmother is the creator of the universe, alongside the sun god Tawa. The legends say that both her and Tawa created humans to their likeness out of clay, breathing souls into them to bring them to life. Like the Navajo, the Hopi also credit the Grandmother Spider as helper and protector of humans.

Tayet

In ancient Egyptian mythology, Tayet is the goddess of weaving. She's most specifically associated with linen bandages, associating her with cleanliness and purity when tending to the wounded, and with peace when embalming the dead.

Ruven Afanador - WALEKERU

Wale'kerü

In Wayuu culture, Wale'kerü is a spider goddess who taught the women how to weave and crochet colourful patterns into hammocks and baskets.

Zhen Shixuan - Niu Lang and Zhi Nu

Zhi nu

In Chinese mythology, Zhi Nu is the goddess of weaving and daughter of the Jade emperor. She is said to have woven her father's robes out of the clouds.

The scarf

I would be lying if I said that I remember exactly where my interest towards the textile crafts came from, or what really compelled me to pursue my first project. I also don't know why, but this fact is quite frustrating to me, as if there had to have been a meaningful source for my initial curiosity that makes my journey into this craft complete. I also must admit that I tend to be unreasonably dramatic about certain things. So, leaving my frustration aside, I will share what I do recall about my first steps into this spiral that has been my fascination with textiles.

When I was fourteen years old, I enrolled for a semester exchange program offered by my school in partnership with a boarding school in the UK. The program took place in autumn, which made little me incredibly excited as I had never had the chance to experience the change of seasons before. I grew up in the tropics in a place called Cali, the third largest city in Colombia, which is nestled in the valley between two mountain ranges and has a steady temperature of around 30°C year-round. Besides a couple of hoodies, I didn't really own any climate appropriate clothes for my trip, and so I asked my grandmother to teach me how to knit a scarf.

My grandmother was an avid knitter. I am sad to admit that I recall very little about her knitting projects, and it wasn't something a lot of us in the family seemed to get involved

with. However, some of the most vivid memories I have of her revolve around this hobby, and my image of her is almost inseparable from the image I have of her big basket wherein she would carry her yarn, needles, and magazines.

We went to the yarn shop together and she helped me pick out the right yarn for my scarf: one skein of semi-thick purple acrylic yarn. Then we headed back to her house, and we sat in her living room, her big basket on the floor in between us. She gave me a pair of 5mm knitting needles – which I have with me until this day – and I started to copy her hands.

It wasn't easy *at all*.

What looked so effortless in her hands looked terribly awkward in mine, but I pushed through my frustration. I eventually understood the logic of the movement enough for me to do it on my own, and I took my project home with me to finish. The finished piece had comically uneven stitches throughout, and some rows mysteriously came out shorter than others, but it was undeniably a scarf!

What I find so special about this scarf as I reflect on it a decade later, is how the making of it is symbolic of one of my first steps of self-agency. The opportunity to participate in this exchange program was to my fourteen-year-old self an opportunity to taste independence and freedom for the first time. I know that boarding school and freedom don't belong in the same sentence for many, but for me at that time that

is exactly what it was. My decision to make the scarf in preparation for my trip was, in my opinion, an expression of this yearning for freedom. As I sat on my couch for hours working on my scarf, going through the mind-numbing motion of repeating stitch after stitch, I imbued the fibres in my hands with intention. I thought about how the purple yarn I had picked would look like paired with my new navy blue and green uniform, or whether it would be warm enough for English autumn.

The cocoon

In the spring of 2022, I decided to take a yearlong break from my career to regain strength and motivation within myself. Before this I had been studying continuously for four years – I completed my three-year bachelor program and immediately went on to start a two-year master's program which I interrupted half-way – and having just turned twenty-five, I felt the quarter life crisis breathing down my neck.

Half of my bachelor's studies had been carried out under the "new normal" of the infamous global pandemic, which made it hard for me to stay enthusiastic and engaged. The first year of my masters brought in that energy of a new beginning that was exciting enough to keep me going, but I think that by this point there was a large enough rift between me and architecture that I began to feel lost. It's not that I was no longer passionate about architecture, but more that I couldn't find my purpose in it. All kinds of uncertainties and insecurities about myself and my career began to surface, and I had lost almost all motivation and confidence in myself to continue.

The final decision to pause my studies came when the enrolment deadlines for the fall semester came around. I was being forced to choose a graduation topic that would shape how I would spend the entirety of the next academic year and would also define how I conclude my academic journey.

I should reiterate that I tend to be quite dramatic.

But in all seriousness, this decision was too daunting for me to make at a time when I had no clue what I wanted. So, I decided to step back from it, and come back to it once I regain my course.

The year that followed wasn't easy either, but I didn't expect it to be. If I had felt lost while still being a student, then of course I would feel lost while unemployed and trying to piece together a portfolio capable of reflecting who I was. As if I knew.

Amidst the uncertainty, I redirected my focus to crochet. I got a job at a warehouse, and with the financial stress now off my shoulders I was free to indulge in my crafts during my free time.

Then in spring of 2023, one of my closest friends approached me with an initiative he had to put together an art exhibition and asked me if I wanted to take part in it. This came to me as an opportunity to challenge myself artistically, and to take the next step into releasing all that I had been struggling with in a way that would help me regain my strength.

This is how my first textile installation "The Cocoon" came to be.

The fabric of time

Textiles as a material and as a craft hold a deep phenomenological connection to the concept of time. We can often witness this connection in the use of metaphorical language expressions such as 'the fabric of time', or by using words like fibre, thread, entwine, unravel, etc., to describe physical and metaphysical relations bound in temporality. However, whatever traces of this connection are kept alive by linguistics today is only a faint remain of what ancient cultures once described in their mythology.

For my high school art graduation project, I took on the task to create a series of art pieces narrating the soul's assent to the divine, based on the writings of ancient Greek philosopher and disciple of Plato, Plotinus. In his Enneads, the philosopher speaks about the soul's connection with the One, the ultimate source of all existence, and its journey towards its ascension. Building upon Plato's theory of the Nous (the Ideal Realm), Plotinus introduces the concept of fate as the necessary unfolding of events in the physical world, determined by the metaphysical principles and order of the Nous. Our embodied human existence is subject to fate and necessity. Our true self, on the other hand, which pertains our soul, can exercise free will by virtuous living and contemplation, which allows it to transcend its bodily fate and reunite with the higher realms of the Intellect and the One. (Gerson, 2017)

This concept of fate against free will inspired me to artistically experiment with an expression of this dichotomy, which I did through the making of a knit blanket. For this piece I went out and got several randomly picked skeins of yarn, and together with the knitting needles my grandmother had given me a few years back, I began to knit a blanket.

My idea was simple: randomizing the selection of yarn and the order in which they were knit into the blanket would problematize the outcome of the finished blanket. Was the blanket the product of the artist's subconscious design, or was it dictated by something else? How much of its making was an act of agency, and how much of it was predetermined by an external force?

This was my very first time working with textiles as an artistic medium, and little did I know at that time how much cultural significance textiles carry in relation to the themes of fate, agency, and time.

Going back to ancient Greece, these themes come about in their mythology more than once, and more than once it is intertwined to the making of textiles.

The most powerful example is perhaps that of the Moirai, also appropriately called the fates. The Moirai are a group of three goddesses who control the destinies of human beings through the manipulation of threads: Clotho spins the thread of life and determines when a person is born;

Lachesis measures the thread of life, determining how long a person's life will be and what events will occur during it; Atropos cuts the thread of life, thus determining the moment of death (Britannica, 2024).

Another Greek tale that alludes to this metaphorical connection between textiles and time is found in Homer's epic poem 'The Odyssey'. In this story, Odysseus leaves his wife Penelope in Ithaca as he departs for Troy to fight in the war. As the years pass without his return, the people of Ithaca presume Odysseus has died in battle and thus begin to pressure his presumed widowed wife Penelope to remarry. As suitors begin to pile up at her doorstep, Penelope begins to weave a burial shroud for Odysseus's father, claiming she will choose her new partner once the shroud is finished. Instead, and to avoid making this choice, she continuously weaves and unravels the tapestry as an attempt to buy herself time until Odysseus returns (Britannica, 2024). Though not literally halting the passing of time, Penelope's acts are a form of manipulation of the notion of time through her process of weaving.

John William Waterhouse – Penelope and the Suitors (1912)

There is a myth in the native American Lakota culture which bears incredible similarities to Penelope's story, and in which, unlike hers, time is being directly manipulated. The story is titled 'the Legend of the End of the World' and goes as follows:

> *Somewhere at a place where the prairie and the Makošíča (the Badlands) meet there is a hidden cave. Not for a long, long time has anyone been able to find it.*
>
> *Even now, with so many highways, cars and tourists, no one has discovered this cave. In it lives a woman so old that her face looks like a shriveled-up walnut. She is dressed in rawhide the way people used to before the white man came. She has been sitting there for a thousand years or more, working on a blanket strip for her buffalo robe. She is making the strip out of dyed porcupine quills the way her ancestors did before the white traders brought glass beads to this turtle continent.*
>
> *Resting beside her, licking his paws, watching her all the time is Šúŋka Sápa (a huge black dog). His eyes never wander from the old woman, whose teeth are worn flat – down to little stumps because she has used them to flatten so many porcupine quills.*
>
> *A few steps from where the old woman sits working on her blanket strip, a huge fire is kept going. She lit*

this fire a thousand or more years ago and has kept it alive ever since.

Over the fire hangs a big earthen pot, the kind some Indian peoples designed before the white man came with his iron kettles. Inside the pot, wójapi is boiling and bubbling. Wójapi is berry soup, good and sweet and red. That soup has been boiling in the pot for a long time, ever since the fire was lit.

The old woman gets up to stir the wójapi in the huge earthen pot now and then. She is so old and feeble that it takes a while to get up and hobble over to the fire. The moment her back is turned, Šúŋka Sápa starts pulling the porcupine quills out of her blanket strip. This way, she never makes any progress, and her quillwork remains forever unfinished.

The Sioux people used to say if the old woman ever finishes her blanket strip, then when she threads the last porcupine quill to complete the design, the world will come to an end. (The end of the world, 1984)

Besides this story, weaving also makes repeated appearances in more than one native American culture and consistently plays a symbolic role in the histories of creation, of the origins of humanity, and in the connection between worlds. The most notable example is that of the spider, which in both the Navajo and Hopi cultures is attributed with helping to

weave the universe into creation, as well as teaching humans the art of weaving.

In the Navajo tradition, Spider Woman was instructed by the holy ones that she had the ability to weave a map of geometrical patterns representing the entire universe itself (Barth, 2019). Her act of weaving on a cosmic loom was seen as recreating or manifesting the primordial patterns and designs that gave form to existence.

What I find very interesting here is that, in a full circle moment back to Platonian and neo-Platonian ontology, the story of Spider Woman replicates the notion of a human realm existing as a copy of an Ideal Realm (Nous). Spider Woman's weaving was not a creation of something new, but rather the uncovering and manifestation of primordial patterns that already existed in the sacred realm, as ordered by the sacred beings. And once again, through an act of textile manipulation, new realities and timelines came to be.

Look me in the eye

I don't have a good relationship with my father.

That is, if you can even call what we have a relationship. We very rarely talk, and when we do, there seems to be a silent agreement that we will not interact beyond the superficial. For whatever thousand reasons which would be too vast – and too unnecessary – to cover here, this is just the reality my father and I share.

Throughout the years I have looked for ways to make our interactions less uncomfortable, and I have learned to be patient and understanding where I can be.

One time we both travelled to France to attend my sister's civil marriage ceremony, and to spend Christmas all together for the first time in a very long time. And the truth is that I don't really mind spending time with him that much when there is family around, I'm more reluctant to the painfully awkward one-on-one times.

So, on the day that my sister asked me to take him and his girlfriend on a day trip to Paris since she was too busy, I internally panicked, but agreed anyway. I was working on a scarf I wanted to gift my brother-in-law for Christmas, so I figured I would bring it along on the trip and use it as a distraction to cope with the tension.

On our train ride into Paris, we sat across from each other, and I pulled out my half-finished scarf from my purse and began knitting. I could feel his stare burning into my hands, carefully watching as I knit stitch after stitch on the needle. I kept my gaze down and focused on the yarn to avoid making eye contact with him. Maybe this way I could evade yet another one of our awkwardly forced conversations.

"Who taught you how to do that?" he asked.

"Your mother." I replied.

And so the words began to flow back and forth.

He talked about my grandmother, and her love for knitting. The words came out with a tinge of tenderness at first, as he recalled what memories he had of his mother. Then they took a slightly resentful tone.

"It's funny how things are. She wouldn't let me do cross-stitching as a kid even though I really enjoyed it, and it was one of the only things that helped with my dyslexia. I practiced the alphabet that way."

And he was right, it is funny how things are. In that moment in that train, I was able to view my relationship with my dad in an entirely new light. In the same way as there is that child in me that holds resentment for her father, I saw the child in him that holds resentment towards his mother. Two inner children that have yet to heal.

-

A month before I had this conversation with my father, I had two friends over at my place for a crochet evening. At some point as we were all sitting on the floor, focused on our stitches, when one of them began to share with us a story of a time she used crochet as a way to cope with her mother.

Her relationship with her mother is difficult at times, and during this one visit back home she was having a particularly hard time dealing with it. She felt such anger towards her that she felt like she couldn't even look at her in her eyes, and so she began to freehand a top in crochet. She worked on it as she worked through her anger, but the result was a top with no shape.

I wonder if the materials we work on with our hands have the ability to trap our emotions within them, and as a result reflect back to us what we put into them.

Lessons from Fernanda

Fernanda and I work together at the warehouse of a furniture store. Like me, she also comes from South America, and we initially bonded over our familiar upbringings, our culture shocks, and our overall journey of making a new life in a place far away from home. I felt an aura of comfort and familiarity from her in a place that was in so many ways foreign to the both of us.

I eventually learned that, also like me, she enjoys crocheting in her spare time, and so crafting became part of our routine conversations at work. We would ask each other about past projects we had worked on, future projects to come, new things we would like to try, and things we had tried that we didn't enjoy all that much. We gave each other tips and vented out frustrations. And all the while, through conversations that I felt went beyond our crafting experiences, I was gathering lessons from Fernanda.

The first and perhaps most important thing she taught me is how calm and frustration are but two faces of the same coin. During a craft night at a bar one night, I told her how crocheting is the closest I have ever gotten to meditating. I had attempted to meditate many times in the past, but always without any success. I think this has to do with my inability to fully connect with my own body without external stimuli. This prompted her to tell me about the time she went on an intense one-week meditation retreat in Brazil, and

how one thing she took with her from this experience was learning how to feel pain. Being forced to sit still in a position for a long time is physically uncomfortable in a way that forces you to be aware of your body's response. The calmness though comes from the act of accepting pain.

The reason why we both found crocheting a form of meditation partially comes from the fact that it is a way for us to gain this sense of awareness. Training my hands to adapt to the motions of the hook and yarn was not comfortable initially, and it didn't come without frustration. Even years after mastering the basics of the movement, the sole act of repeating this motion over and over for a period is uncomfortable. But at the same time, being forced to focus on a single motion simplifies all action and thought and it makes becoming aware of oneself and surroundings a more digestible act. Now every time I engage in my crocheting, I make an effort to focus on how my body reacts in response to both stillness and motion, comfort and discomfort.

Some months later I shared with Fernanda a project for a knit top I had the intention to begin soon. Like her, I am more comfortable with crochet than I am with knitting, but because I wanted to improve my skills, I decided to challenge myself and follow this pattern. She became motivated and decided to start along with me. This process, we soon learned, would transform into a real lesson of frustration and perseverance.

I was off to a relatively okay start. I casted on my work and even though I found the yarn a bit delicate to work with, it wasn't impossible, just very tedious. Fernanda, on the other hand, had a more difficult start thanks to her cat which got to the yarn faster than she could. Then when she got to the step of casting on her project, she sent me the following text:

"Did yours make the full circle? Mine didn't! Or is that after? I barely did the first row... and I already dropped a stitch. What a rage."

As time went by, the updates kept escalating in frustration:

"I had to unravel all that shit hahaha I'm so angry, you can't even imagine!"

"It was all wrong!"

"I'm going to try one more time but if I can't get it I quit"

"That yarn is too fine and not easy to work with at all"

Sometimes taking on more optimistic turns:

"Anaaa! I unravelled it and started over, and it was the best decision! Now everything is flowing much more"

Then back to frustration:

"Ana I was so close to throwing the knit out the window because of how angry I got at it"

"This is really a battle with myself."

And then one afternoon during a coffee break at work she told me about a piece of advice her therapist had given her. She said that everyday she is giving herself fifteen minutes of knitting time, no more and no less. During these fifteen minutes she has no expectations or pressures on how much of the work to get done, and instead can focus solely on the making for the sake of making. The thing about Fernanda is that she, like me, has an all-or-nothing attitude about things. If she starts a project then she expects to finish it in its full potential, and if she runs into enough obstacles along the way, she quits.

At the time when we were having this talk, I was dealing with one of my own internal frustration tantrums where I felt like I was not meeting the expectations I had for myself. I was impatiently chasing an idea of perfection and getting demotivated at any obstacle I ran into to achieve it. But then Fernanda's words reached me just in time to understand that, when putting things into the perspective of a slow, intentional craft, there is no point in chasing expectations. The point is making.

When I get too overwhelmed by looking at the full picture, I remember this advice that Fernanda's therapist gave her, and instead try to reconnect my focus and intention to the process.

Going in (craft) circles

Under the invisible yet hefty relation that binds crafting and domesticity together, the history of textile making amongst women becomes a history of confinement and subservience. It is imperative that I clarify here that this section of history I'm referring to is one almost strictly pertaining to western contexts and cultures, roughly dated back to 19th century Europe, though some of its influences span globally. The separation of the public and private spheres left women spatially restricted to the home, controlling their participation within the social sphere. Within this system, craft circles became a tool to circumvent oppression, facilitating social gatherings under the pretences of domestic labour and providing a safe space for women to express themselves.

Let me be clear about something: it's not that craft circles weren't about crafting, they were. Women would exchange sampler patterns, ask for advice, teach and learn new techniques, or maybe even work on the same piece together (Parker, 1984). But in between those moments, and as they sat focused on the movement of their hands upon the fabric, the space suddenly felt safe enough to share something deeper with the group. With the excuse of needing to keep their gaze lowered, attentively keeping their eyes on the needle or the thread and knowing that everyone else around

is engaged in their own work just the same, the sense of judgement lessens. The circle becomes a safe space.

Unknown - women embroidering on Christmas Eve (c.1880)

It may seem weird for me to describe a setting that I did not partake in as if I experienced it first-hand. How can I possibly know what these spaces felt like for these women? Or how can I possibly understand the societal restrictions these women were under, and the subsequent pressure to find outlets for expression? I obviously can't know for certain, but my speculations are based on my and other women's experiences in contemporary craft circles which I wholeheartedly believe still carry a similar magic.

My first time participating in a craft circle was after a friend of mine shared with me a poster for a knitting event she came across at a record store in Amsterdam. Titled "Knits & Notes", the event poster advertised an afternoon of crafting alongside short lectures and live DJ sets. It was this mix of crafting with other more popularly accepted social activities that caught my attention.

In a 2020 BBC article on the resurgence of knitting titled "How knitting became cool", Cassidy George introduces the craft by stating that:

> "*Of all of the so-called 'domestic crafts', knitting remains the most laden with stereotypes in the public imagination. While baking and gardening have mostly rid themselves of associations with 'women's work', knitting still, for the average person, conjures images of an elderly white woman, sitting in a rocking chair or in a circle of her peers.*"

(George, 2020)

And although I know from my own personal experience that this stereotype is not representative of the craft's real present-day demographic, seeing an event like Knits & Notes still came as a total surprise to me. Up until this point I had practiced the craft in a purely domestic setting. Sure, my own involvement with crafting was in many ways different to how 19th century Victorian women were involved with it, but

either way the practice was in both cases largely confined to the private sphere.

I signed up for the event, naturally. Despite my crippling social anxiety, I found immediate comfort and excitement in connecting with total strangers whose hobby is the same as mine. I won't deny that there were moments of awkwardness in the beginning, but as soon as everyone began working on their projects, the conversations began to flow effortlessly. It was interesting to see the transition from the more obvious topics of conversation – *what projects we're working on, how we first got involved with our crafts, if this was our first time at one of these events* – to deeper conversations about each other's personal lives, thoughts, opinions, and reflections.

And of course, we also inevitably addressed the big elephant in the room: the gender divide. Out of the roughly forty participants in the event, less than ten were men. Not only this, but most men were also sitting together at one or two small tables. This wasn't really shocking. If anything, it is exactly what most of the attendees expected. Yet we still felt the need to point it out because it is an example of how heavily influential certain systemic binaries remain, no matter how inane, or dare I say archaic, their very existence is.

Third edition of Knits n Notes on October 29th 2023

Getting back to the magic of craft circles, my first experience at this event taught me that there is a hidden power of consciousness raising through communal crafting. This isn't an original insight by any means, proof of that can be found in history books if you look hard enough, but it was my first time experiencing it first-hand. I gained a deeper understanding of how and why craft circles have been so influential in feminist agency, as well as concluded that this influence is manifested in two layers: the tactical and the tactile.

Regarding the first layer, the tactical comes from the fact that craft circles were historically used by women as an excuse to gather with a social and political intent, but in a way that did not disrupt the societal systems around gender roles.

In an article on the Daughters of Liberty, a group of women who played a key role in the American Revolution, historian Kate Egner Gruber makes this exact point:

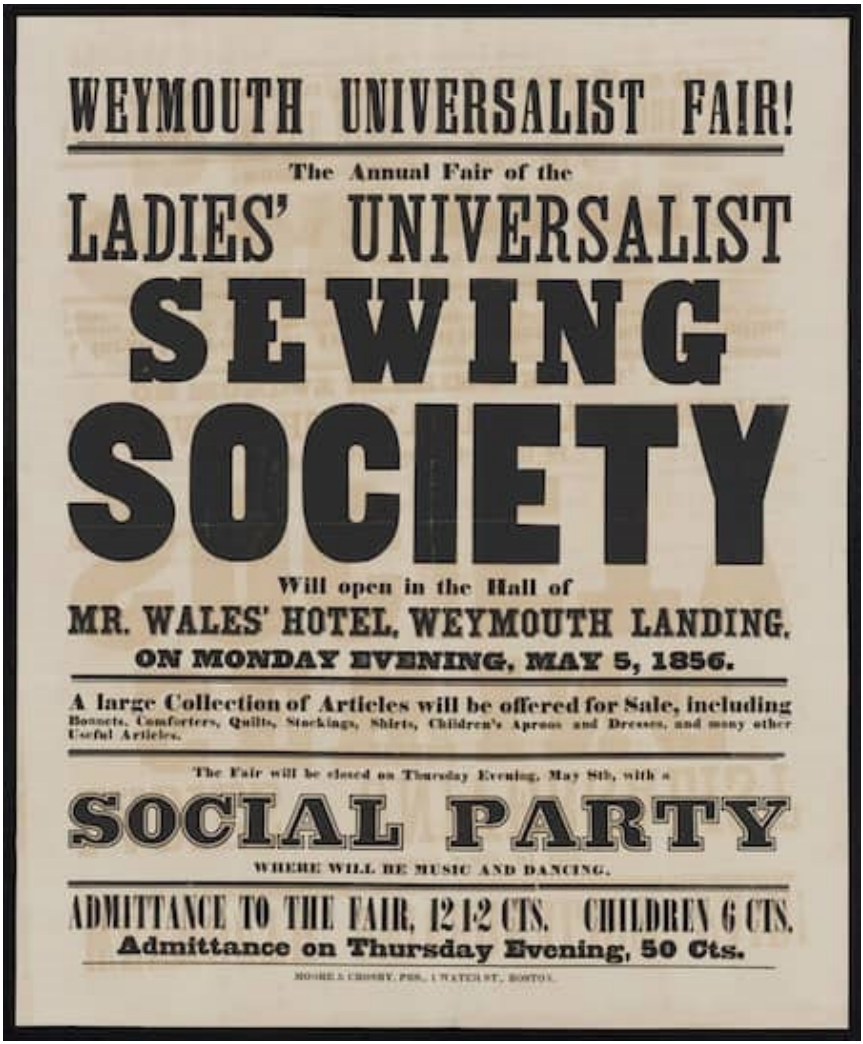
> *"Importantly, the Daughters of Liberty gave women a political arena in which to support patriotic movements without necessarily stepping outside of their normal gender roles. Women could translate traditional activities like into decidedly political ones which were widely celebrated and nonthreatening to the status quo. Spinning bees is perhaps the most widely known and famous*

> *example of women's political action during the Revolutionary era."* (Gruber, n.d.)

In protest of the Stamp Act, the women of colonial America took over the textile production of garments, boycotting British textiles. Under these gatherings they were also able to come together and participate in politics.

Similar actions took place during the anti-slavery movement. An article from December 3rd, 1847, published in The Liberator, an abolitionist newspaper, included the following:

> *"Sewing Circles are among the best means for agitating and keeping alive the question of anti-slavery. ... A friend in a neighboring town recently said to us, Our Sewing Circle is doing finely, and contributes very much to keep up the agitation of the subject. Some one of the members generally reads an anti-slavery book or paper to the others during the meeting, and thus some who don't get a great deal of anti-slavery at home have an opportunity of hearing it at the circle."* (Knapp, 1847)



Poster from an anti-slavery bazaar in Weymouth, Mass., where handmade items such as knitted stockings were sold to raise money. Photo from Fifield Family Collection, Weymouth Public Library, Tufts Library

And history repeated itself again when during the events of the first world war, the suffragists attended a call from the Red Cross to knit bandages, bottle covers, socks, and rags for the troops, in an attempt to insert themselves into political discourse and subsequently raise awareness on women's rights (Historical knitting circles are precursors of today's craftivist movement, 2020).

The 27th Assembly District of the Suffrage Party in New York City, October 6, 1917

Under a system of oppression, the oppressed will work with the tools forced upon them to create new outlets of agency. This is the tactical power of the craft circle.

The second layer then, which I labelled as tactile, concerns itself with the lived experience of the act of crafting itself. It is about the actual phenomenon that occurs when a group of people sit around a space to individually work on something, while communally engaging with one another. The crafting aspect becomes a sort of productive distraction, that by adding a layer of disconnection – *I can focus on my own work and use it as a form of barrier from the others* – it also counter-intuitively allows for connection. By being distracted in a physical activity that serves as a common ground for all participants, it becomes incredibly easy to let go of other mental barriers we might constantly keep up. The conversations then become more candid and honest. People become more comfortable sharing, as well as more receptive. And overall, given these new conditions, conversations take on a stronger, more reflective, and more unifying tone.

Since my first Knits & Notes event, I have gone back to three more of their events, and constantly keep up with their new ideas and initiatives within the community. In just the one year since its founding, the event has taken many different forms and has redefined what a craft circle has traditionally been perceived as. Taking over venues of public and cultural significance in Amsterdam such as a stage in Paradiso, or the movie theatre at FC Hyena, the collective is pushing the

boundaries between the domestic and the public. The tables at every gathering are draped with vintage crochet blankets and doilies, symbols of domesticity by excellence, juxtaposed with the wine glasses and beer bottles on top of them, all the while surrounded by the constant chatter and laughter that blends in with the rhythms of live music.

What is special about such events is that, despite this fresh take on the craft circle, the essence of its predecessors remains. These contemporary spaces are still spaces of consciousness raising, where discussions on female agency, politics, community, and inclusion are both welcomed and encouraged. Through the mediums of tactic and tactility, craft circles have an organic potential for community sense-making that is as relevant and necessary today as it always has been.

Knits n notes event at Paradiso, Amsterdam, 2023

Knits n notes event at De School, Amsterdam, 2023

Knits n notes event at Paradiso, Amsterdam, 2023

How does a spider know how to spin its web?

This is probably a silly question to ask. It's just instinct, right? But I'm not really satisfied with this answer.

The process by which a spider spins its web is highly mathematical, with clear patterns of segments and nodes that cannot, by any means, be deemed arbitrary even though we know that the spider probably doesn't know a thing about theoretical mathematics. Then at the edges of the web we can see where the structure departed from a clear-cut theoretical pattern to a more "instinctual" one, where the spider looked for anchor points in its environment such as a branch or the corners of a window. Once again, we can assume that the spider has not studied the statics of structures like an engineer has, but we also can't deny that it perfectly understands them enough to know how many connections it needs to maintain proper tension on its web. And lastly, we have the most mind-boggling detail of all: ornamentation. Some spiders add a layer of zigzag patterns on their finished web which as far as biologists have studied, don't serve any real functional process. And once again we question how the spider, with no education in the arts, can naturally embellish its design with such perfect understanding of composition.

Shawn Miller - Photograph of spiderweb with stabilimenta (2019)

The spider is a reoccurring symbol in society's first stories, commonly attributed to being the first crafter, a master weaver, and the spirit that taught humans how to craft. The significance of the spider is one that I only truly understood after I mastered how to use a crochet hook. I began to craft pieces directly from images in my head, running down to my fingers and into the yarn, twisting and knotting it into reality at the other end. Not to be dramatic, but it really does feel like magic to make something out of a ball of yarn and a stick. Like the spider – or maybe unlike it, who knows? – I have very little understanding of the mathematical process happening in my hands as I do it. I understand enough to know that a double crochet will give more height to my row than a single, and I know that a thermal stitch will be thicker than a mesh one. I know these things anecdotally, but not because I have studied the theory behind the geometry of each knot. I know how to bend and twist the fabric to make different shapes, and even though following a precise pattern and counting every stitch will probably give me the most precise outcome, I can also freehand a semi-decent shape based on pure feeling. So, all this to say that what we call instinct, lies in this intersection of science and art, of theory and practice. It is both and neither.

So why are crafts so undervalued when they are so complex?

Textiles and their imposed association with the domestic, the fragile, and the feminine, all hint towards one thing: if it's a

Victorian housewife's pastime, how hard can it really be? Because of the gendering of crafts, in addition to the segregation of crafts with other forms of making like the arts and the sciences, textile making was often societally perceived as insignificant, frivolous, and simple.

This association is particularly interesting within the period of the industrial revolution in Britain, where textiles were split into two separate paths. On the one hand this was around the time when embroidery became synonymous to innocence, purity and femininity. Women of high-class status would partake in needlework, depicted as a domestic leisurely activity. On the other hand, the invention of the Jacquard loom shifted the production of everyday use textiles from a handcrafted product to a mass-produced commodity. The application of mathematical principles to create the punch card system that birthed the Jacquard loom is progress, while the mathematical principles that underlie a housewife's cross-stitch sampler is meaningless domestic work.

Inspired Joseph-Marie Jacquard's invention in 1804, mathematician Charles Babbage began designing the predecessor of the first modern computer, the Analytical Engine, in 1837. Alongside Babbage worked fellow mathematician Ada Lovelace, whose understanding of the potential behind Jacquard's punch cards laid most of the groundwork for binary programming languages used in modern computer science. She is famously quoted for saying

that the Analytical Engine *"weaves algebraical patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves."*

Closeup of the punchcards on the Jacquard Loom, Paisley Museum, Scotland

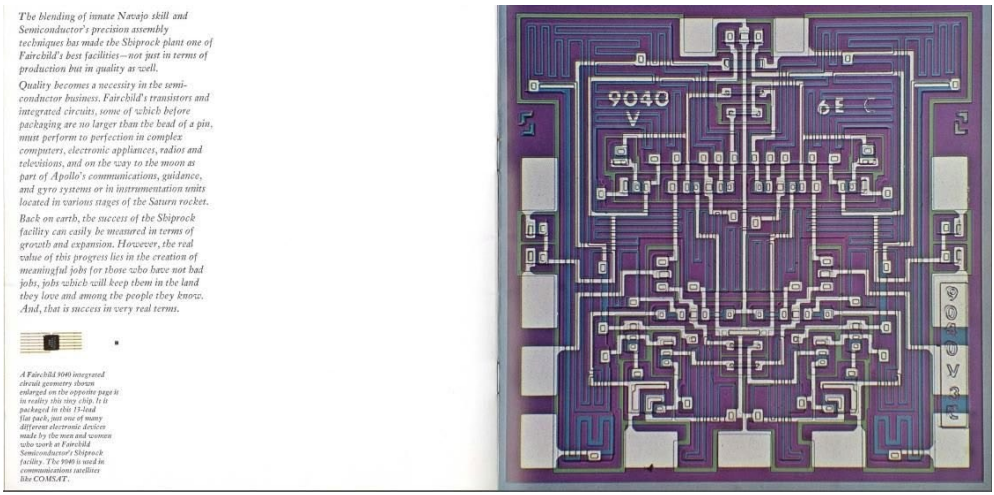
Card maker using a machine to translate a pattern onto punch cards, c. 1950.

What I find particularly interesting about the history of Jacquard's loom and Babbage's computer, is how what we consider scientific varies depending on who does it and what it produces. Textile patterns – for weaving, knitting, crocheting, embroidering – are written in their own language, and require an understanding of this language to be interpreted, the principles of which are still the same that made modern programming possible. However, these patterns are not considered scientific in the way that programming languages are.

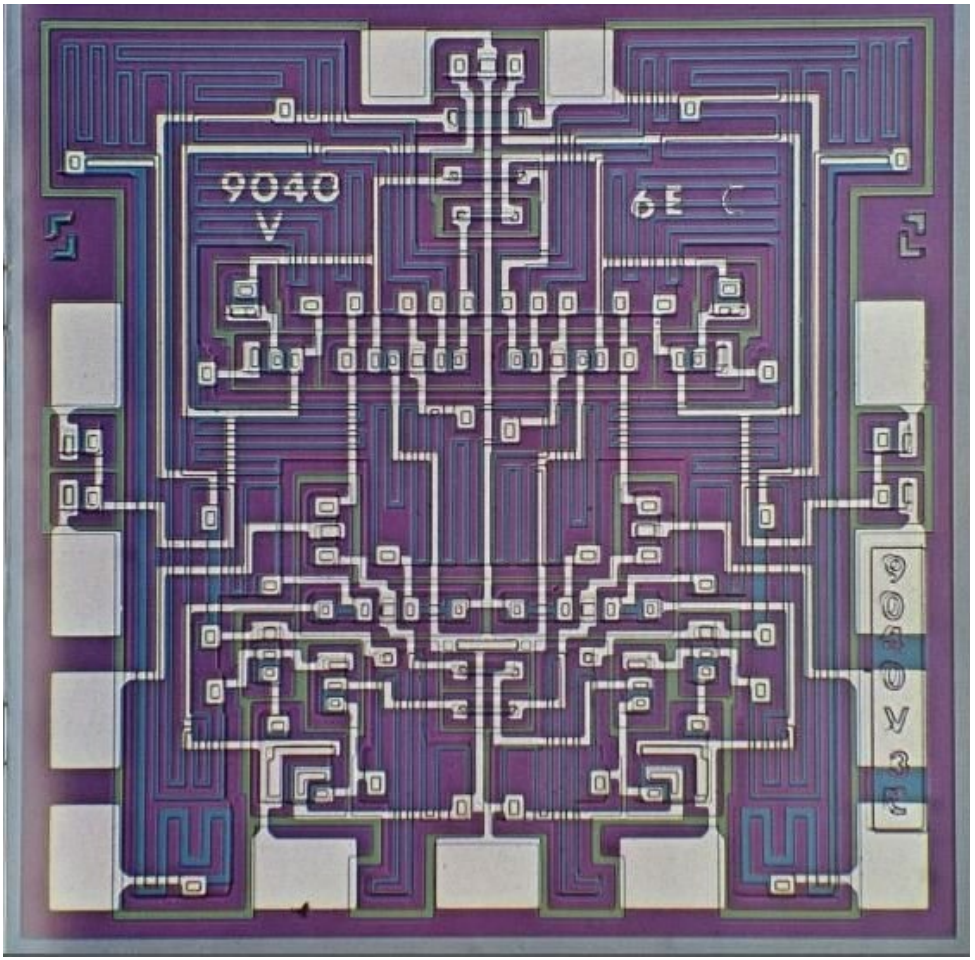
Over a century later, under the pressure of the space race, NASA engineers where now facing a new challenge in the development of computers: portability. At this time, computers would take up entire rooms and were not reliable enough to be taken on board of a spacecraft. This prompted NASA to develop new integrated circuits for their computers, which required the assembly of intricate miniscule circuits by hand. In search for skilled crafters to work on the project, the circuit manufacturing company Fairchild Semiconductor set a factory on Navajo land in Shiprock, New Mexico.

The story of the Navajo women that participated in the making of integrated circuits for the Apollo mission is a story of "women's work", of the exploitation of coloured women's bodies, and on the racialization of manufacturing processes. Renowned as highly skilled weavers, Navajo women made up the biggest percentage of workers on the manufacturing plant, weaving cables under microscopes with extreme precision. Still, their arduous labour was not given the recognition it deserved, deemed instead as a labour of love according to Fairchild themselves. Through brochure publications and corporate newsletters, the company presented the work carried out by the women at the factory in relation to their race, culture, and gender, as if their work were a natural extension of them and not the result of cultural imperialism. An example of this was the imagery chosen for a promotional brochure, in which the image of a

traditional woven rug is followed by an enlarged picture of the 9040 integrated circuit, showing the evident resemblance between the geometrical pattern present in both. The images are followed by the text *"The blending of innate Navajo skill and Semiconductor's precision assembly techniques has made the Shiprock plant one of Fairchild's best facilities—not just in terms of production but in quality as well."* Through this language, Fairchild Semiconductor diminishes the value of the labour of the workers by framing it as a natural capability.



Shiprock Dedication Commemorative Brochure, September 6, [1969]



Shiprock Dedication Commemorative Brochure, September 6, [1969]

Shiprock Dedication Commemorative Brochure, September 6, [1969]

Donna Haraway's cyberfeminist essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" draws attention to the fact that in the creation of technoculture, the invisible work of some is the reason behind the empowerment of others: *"The nimble fingers of 'Oriental' women, the old fascination of little Anglo-Saxon Victorian girls with doll's houses, women's enforced attention to the small take on quite new dimensions in this world. There might be a cyborg Alice taking account of these new dimensions. Ironically, it might be the unnatural cyborg women making chips in Asia and spiral dancing in Santa Rita jail whose constructed unities will guide effective oppositional strategies."* (Haraway, 1985) While we can acknowledge how technological advancement has played a role in the liberation and empowerment of women, it would be ironic to do so without also acknowledging the physical exploitation that made that possible. Ignoring this kind of material labour further perpetuates the erasure of women's voices and participation in the making of culture.

Despite the weight of the work carried out by the Navajo women, and what it eventually meant for the success of the Apollo mission, their work still goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. Fairchild Semiconductors' attempt to distinguish the women's labour on the circuits as a feminine craft separate from the masculine engineering carried out in other parts of the Apollo mission, heavily minimized the technicality behind their craft.

The perception that technology and engineering is men's work, higher on the hierarchical ranks, and far more difficult than female dominated industries, is unfortunately still prevalent.

Every Thursday afternoon there is a Stitch n Bitch session at the cultural centre of the TU Delft, free for any who wishes to sign up. And every week at these sessions, the group demographic is similar: all but one or two participants are women. What I find so interesting about this group is how the ideas of science, and academia, and gender, are all challenged within a setting that hasn't yet emancipated itself from the normative binaries. During one session, Marta tells us about her collection of knitting machines, and how she has used an Arduino board to reprogram some of them in order to work with a wider range of patterns. A conversation on programming that I could barely keep up with ensued, and all I could think about was how Ada Lovelace's vision had come full circle here and now, centuries later.

One of the other women at the table, Sisa, I had just met the week before, and we had talked about how she got into crafting and what it meant for her. Sisa's experience with crochet stood out to me because I had never met a person so driven by challenges and complexity before. Unlike most beginners, her first project was a sweater. She did begin with a scarf, but she decided it was way too simple and it bored her, so she stopped soon after beginning, and opted for the sweater instead. Crafting for Sisa is, among other things, a

mental exercise on pattern making and problem solving. It is the scientific character of the craft that she finds the most exciting.

At some point during our conversation, we also touched on the topic of gender inequalities on technical fields. As a computer scientist, Sisa was one of the few women in her course, with the majority being male students. She said that one of the biggest shocks for her at the beginning was how differently male students answered the question of why they had enrolled. While the women would often answer with a justification for being there, like how they were skilled in mathematics or had previous experience with computers, men would reply with things like "I like computer games, so why not?" or "It looked interesting, so I decided to give it a try". This uncovers a deeper truth that as women we are conditioned to think that we need to earn our place within the male-dominated spheres, while men face less inhibitions.

Some weeks later Marta sends a message on the Stitch n Bitch group chat with a link to a research paper titled "Crocheting Bour's Minimal Surfaces". The paper begins by stating that "Mathematics and crochet might not appear the most likely pairing for most people. However, crocheting is an inherently mathematical process." In the following pages, Professor Hanne Kekkonen lays out all the mathematical calculations to create a crochet pattern for the minimal surfaces, finalizing with the crochet instructions for the

Enneper surface. The paper also includes pictures of the crocheted shapes, showcasing the beautiful mastery of both craft and science, inseparable from each other.

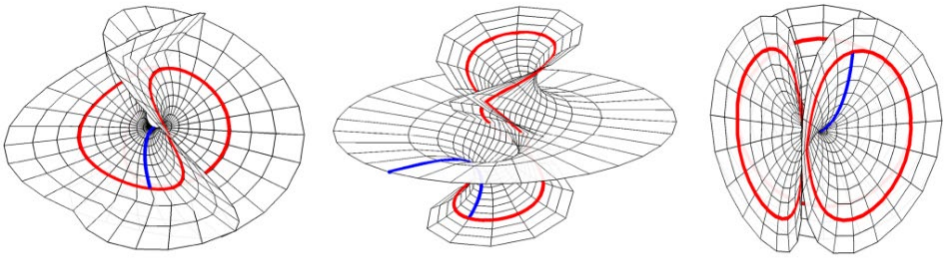


Figure 1. To crochet an accurate $\mathcal{B}_m$ surface, we need to calculate the circumference of a circle centered at the origin (red) with an intrinsic radius $R = \ell \cdot H$ (blue), where H is the height of a stitch and $\ell \in \mathbb{N}_+$ is the number of the round.

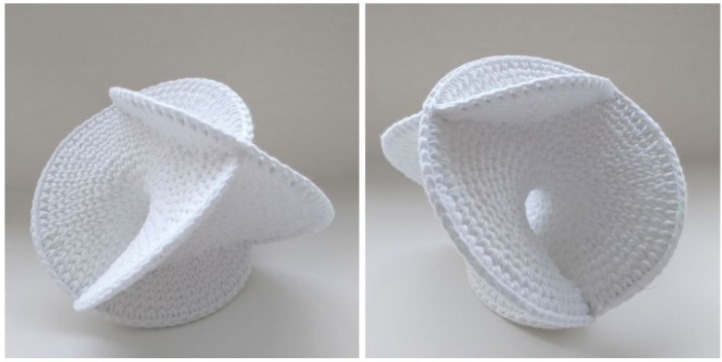


Figure 2. Two views of a self-intersecting Enneper surface.

Excerpts from Hanne Kekkonen report "Crocheting Bour's Minimal Surfaces"

The women who carry the burden

Kayayei is a Ga and Huisa name for women porters, literally meaning “she who carries the burden”.

Accra, Ghana’s capital, receives an estimated fifteen million pieces of used garments every week. These clothes come from charity bins all over Europe, North America and Australia, and are shipped to the country with the intention to be reused or resold.

In a pitifully naïve way, most of the clothes’ original owners are under the assumption that their annual trip to the donation bin is a charitable act.

The clothes will surely reach someone who truly needs them.

They will benefit someone else more than they can benefit me.

Donating them is more sustainable than throwing it away, right?

I am not here to question the genuineness behind these acts as I do feel that most come from a good place. Or at least I would like to think of it that way. Instead, my criticism extends to how delusionally ignorant and detached we are allowed to be in the West, and the lengths of mental gymnastics we go through to maintain our psychological comfort. The danger is that this ignorance, wilful or not, is allowing exploitative colonial systems to endure.

Back in Accra's Kantamanto market, the burden of our actions is physically being carried on women's backs. As the clothes come in in already arranged compact bales of around fifty-five kilograms each, they are head-carried by the kayayei into the market to be "processed".

The kayayei are paid a meager 30 cents to $1 per trip to transport bales to stalls, storage, and disposal sites. Given the imbalance of power, every actor within Kantamanto—the kayayei and retailers alike—are laboring in service of foreign profit, foreign-defined sustainability, and foreign waste management "solutions." (Ricketts, 2022)

Alhassan Fatawu - An unnamed kayayo with child carries her bale in Kantamanto Market. In front of her, the yellow words on the car read, "Macho Man," a sobering reminder of the patriarchal system that likely pushed her into this work.

Nevertheless, the issue goes beyond sustainability, or politics, or economy; it is about female agency. In the rural villages of Ghana, women's bodies have long been used as carriers, walking multiple mile long trips to rivers to retrieve water they carry in bowls atop their heads. Since this physically strenuous task – which some of them begin to perform as early as four years old – is unpaid, many women find migrating to Accra to work as kayayei an appealing opportunity. If they are going to be bearers, might as well get compensated for it, right?

Yet there is a difference between the burden of water and the burden of waste.

"A bowl of water can be half empty—the weight determined by the carrier and adjusted to her age and energy level. But a secondhand clothing bale is a commodity. Despite containing hundreds of garments in varying sizes with the markings of individual humans—sweat, ketchup stains, stretched collars, names written into tags by mom––clothing bales are not designed to match the unique variations of the human form that will transport them; their size and weight has been predetermined solely to maximize efficiency and profit." (Ricketts, 2022)

The weight of the bales these women carry is such that injuries are a common occurrence amongst the kayayei. The most common medical issue is the deterioration of the spine, though neck deformations and broken feet are not unusual.

X-Ray of back injury of a kayayei, OF Foundation

To make matters worse, most of them have no access to proper healthcare as they rarely count on valid identification. Ultimately, injured women incapable of continuing to work become the most vulnerable population in the streets of Accra. Unable to pay for their rent, they sleep in the streets where physical abuse and sexual assault are almost inescapable.

At the end of the line, the only solution left for these women is to sew. "*Because making clothing is a "job that women can do." But making clothing won't solve any of the challenges these women face when the fashion industry has driven the value of clothing into the ground."*

The global production of clothing has doubled since the year 2000. Not only are people consuming more nowadays, but they are also rotating through cycles of clothes faster than ever before, resulting in alarming amounts of waste reaching landfills already at capacity. Incapable of properly processing such volumes, the vulnerable communities which have been coerced to deal with the world's waste now face a health and environmental threat of gargantuan proportions.

Ghana's Knope landfill opened in 2013, designed to operate for fifteen years. It reached its limit within five years and then caught on fire, burning for almost a whole year. Informal landfill burnings are now common and needed in different corners of the city, many of which have contributed to air pollution so severe that it is sometimes fatal. The waste

that doesn't get burned off is thrown into the sea, where it deteriorates at such a slow pace that it instead turns into what locals call "tentacles": meter long nets of deteriorated fibres getting tangled along the shores.

As a result of climate change and environmental destruction, the desertification of Ghana's farmlands has forced the migration of men to greener pastures, and of women to the cities. Now facing longer distances for finding and carrying water, these women's choice to opt for a job as a kayayei despite the exploitation it entails, is in a way the only form of agency they have. Even if this choice is between two differently oppressive realities.

The Ghanaian refer to the clothes that are imported as "obroni wawu" – dead white man's clothes (Besser, 2021). The backbreaking burden that kayayei women carry on their bodies then surpasses that of the physical weight of a bale of clothes. It is the burden of systemic oppression.

Alhassan Fatawu - Kayayei at the OF Foundation

The hands remember

"When you are fleeing for your life, what can you carry? What do you keep when you discover that you can't carry even the little you have brought? You bring your hands. You keep what you learned from your mother and her foremothers." (Sheridan, 2023)

This is Mary S. Sheridan's opening statement for a Piecework magazine's article titled "The hands remember". In brief, the article touches on the stories of women who cross the Mexico-U.S. border seeking asylum, and how the making of traditional Mexican *mantas* interweave heritage, resilience, and hope during their migration process.

Embroidery on Manta cloth, asylum-seeker Esmeralda, U.S. – Mexico border, 2020

Mantas, or *servilletas*, are traditional Mexican textiles used for covering tortillas and bread, or for keeping food warm. They are rectangular pieces of light cotton cloth with colourful hand-embroidered designs and a decorative crochet trim. In their most superficial aesthetic expression, they are innocent and cheerful, depicting images of flowers, animals, or people. Beyond their uses, these mantas are symbolic objects of care and generational heritage often gifted to migrants by their families as farewell gifts.

In a tragic juxtaposition, these mantas have also come to adorn the desert landscape along the border, their fibrous corpses withering away amongst other personal belongings such as clothes, shoes, and backpacks. The fates of their owners remaining unknown.

"*I wanted nothing more than to find their rightful owners someday,"* says Valarie Lee James, an artist living in a ranch near the border who keeps a collection of these found mantas. James' understanding of the meaning these textiles carry led her to create Artisans Beyond Borders, a non-profit organization that has *"brought healing-centered craft ways to asylum seekers and their families stranded at the U.S.-Mexico Border and Beyond."* (James, 2021)

With a more complete understanding of the context, Sheridan's question becomes even more pressing.

"What do you keep when you discover that you can't carry even the little you have brought? You bring your hands."

Artisanal Embroiderer waiting to depart Casa Alitas, Tucson's lead migrant shelter

With almost no belongings and in unfamiliar spaces of transience, migrant women tap into the generational knowledge stored in their hands to craft messages of hope in new hand-embroidered pieces of cloth. In some occasions, they also use their hands to restore desert-found mantas.

"Val shows me a manta-in-progress, left behind on one of the many migration routes. This small cloth is finished except for an incomplete crochet border. I shake my head. I can do basic crochet, but this isn't basic. Many of these everyday textiles display extraordinary skill. "What are we going to do with it?" Val asks. She shows it to one of the women, who smiles as she picks up a crochet hook and gets to work. Her hands remember."

Gathered around a makeshift workshop, the women have an opportunity to share their stories and work through their traumas in a space of collective support. As they embroider memories from their past, their individual experiences merge together into new narratives of hope for the future.

"They say that the body remembers trauma, and I believe it. Past horrors are carried in muscle memory and in the dark unconscious corners of the brain. But hands carry the memory of skills handed down over generations. Women gather in groups to work together, to help each other, and to find strength and beauty and power in often-disregarded women's work. That, too, lives in the unconscious corners of the brain."

Embroiderers From Artisans Beyond Borders at La Casa Shelter, Nogales, Sonora.

Not only is the crafting of mantas an activity to keep most of them occupied through a period of intense psychological stress, but it is also a means of income, and hence, agency. Given that most shelters are limited in what help they can offer, asylum-seekers must find ways to finance basic needs of food and personal hygiene. In this way, programs that empower crafting and offer platforms for artisans to profit from their own work are key.

"Val and I offer the embroideries for sale online to raise funds for the migrants. I am one of the lucky ones; I get to package up the mantas created by the migrant women and mail them to Etsy buyers. We shudder to imagine what the embroiders have been through, but they send us bright flowers, birds, butterflies, hope. The women embroider their truth: "have faith," "be strong," "God will take care of you." I pick up one of the mantas. It needs a little repair to the crochet edging. Travel, washing, ironing take their toll. I find my crochet hook. My hands remember."

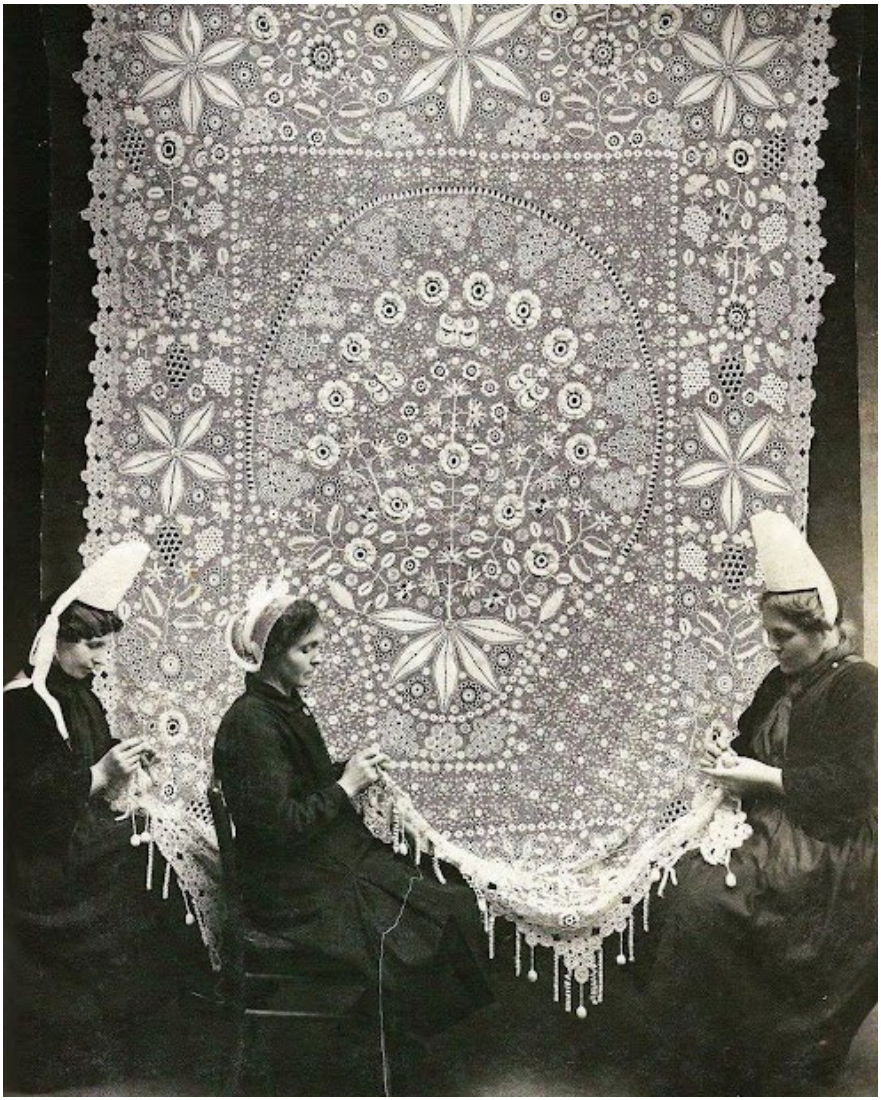
With this concluding message, Sheridan left a reflection that I have held close to me since the first time I came across her article. It is evident that craftmanship carries a great deal of its power through its physicality; a crafter's skill can be measured by how well they master their tools and materials. But it is also imperative to acknowledge the power of the immaterial, of the knowledge that is stored in our hands, because this type of power cannot be taken away.

All things truly wicked

...start from innocence.

I don't think that there is any other form of textile that is as complex as lace. And by complex I don't mean only in the way that it is crafted, but in what it represents. Worn by brides and prostitutes alike, lace carries a dual character where it exemplifies both innocence and sin alike. Nevertheless, one thing remains true in both situations: it *"has been a tool in the subjugation of women from production to consumption across the world."* (Singh, 2023)

The origins of lace are not very clear, though it is believed to have originated in Italy or Flanders in the 16th century as an evolution of other textile techniques like embroidery and drawn thread work. In its beginnings, it was an art associated with wealth and the Church, which also was responsible for most of its production. During this time, nuns or other members of the clergy oversaw the production of lace and used it as a way to spread messages of virtue and purity unto women. This was particularly important because it offered impoverished women a dignified source of income, dissuading them from criminal activity or prostitution.



Lacemakers in Brittany, France, 1920

Gaston La Touche - The Legend of Argentan Point Lace (1884)

The Virgin Mary finishes the task of a young lacemaker, too exhausted to continue the work herself.

The reality behind the production of lace, looking beyond its narrative of being a "saving grace" for vulnerable women, is one of control and exploitation. Ultimately, lacemaking was a lucrative business in 16th century Europe due to its popularity amongst the wealthy class and the fact that its production was so labour-intensive. Because of this, those who oversaw its production where also the ones reaping

most of the financial benefits of selling this coveted product, a benefit that most of the labouring women didn't get. The fact that this kind of work was primarily run out of orphanages and workhouses meant that the workers were underpaid and unprotected, maximizing the profit of the middlemen. Lacework did more for tradesmen than it did for the crafters.

The production of lace took on a new degree of exploitation under colonialist systems of oppression such as missionary work in Native American reservations. Such is the case of the Sybil Carter Indian Lace Association, a school founded in the White Earth Reservation in 1889 with the purpose of teaching lacemaking to the Ojibwe women (Goetz, 2013). The school opened with the aim of bringing a source of income to the women in the reservation, a cause that though it appears noble at first, is already problematic by not acknowledging the role that white settlers played in creating wealth imbalances to begin with. But besides this, Carter's missionary work is further problematic due to her patronizing view on native women.

"She believed that making lace would make them "cleaner" and encourage them to take better care of their homes. Carter hoped it would make women abandon traditional patterns of Native life. In speeches she said that the lace project had taken Ojibwe women who were "nothing but bundles of dirty rags" and turned them into clean, hardworking lacemakers. Native women had long

traditions of needlework design, but Carter wanted them to abandon their "dirty, ugly handcrafts" in favour of white lace." (Goetz, 2013)

Carter's views reflected the views of a culture obsessed with the idea of purity, repentance, and redemption. Ideas that were commonly used to justify oppression.

Sybil Carter Indian Lace Association - Lace makers at Leech Lake, 1906.

Dakota lace makers from Birch Coulee, including Maggie Whipple, display their work at a photography studio in Morton, Minnesota, ca. 1900. Collection III.40.101, Minnesota Historical Society.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "The Scarlett Letter" published in 1850, offers deeper insights into the complex relations between sin, guilt, and dignity, in puritan colony culture. In his novel, the main character, Hester Prynne, is publicly humiliated for committing adultery and is forced to wear a scarlet "A" stitched to her clothes. Though she is asked to confess the name of the father of her child, which is the town's reverend, she refuses. Hester goes on to live with her daughter on a cottage at the edge of the town, making a living of her highly skilled needlework. She even receives commissions from the clergy, and through this work, she begins to regain some redemption and acceptance from the town people. Her redemption has a limit however, and although she is asked to make church vestments and funeral shrouds, she is never asked to make a bridal gown. This exclusion symbolizes her status as a fallen woman, unsuitable to contribute to the sanctity of marriage.

Hawthorne's novel serves as a testimony to the complexities behind moral and societal judgement within a puritan culture, but more importantly, it portrays how a woman's worth, dignity, and perception is directly linked to how she serves her community and the type of labour she does. On the other hand, Hester's story also shows how needlework offered her a path of self-agency amidst ostracization. It was equally a symbol of oppression and resilience.

But these deep-rooted associations of delicate lace with purity and dignity that were so strongly used to subvert

women take on an ironic shift when we look at their evolution into a material of sensuality and sin. Even in this change, there is a presence of oppression.

Cabaret dancer Edmonde Guydens dancing at the Moulin Rouge, Paris in a costume made of lace. (1926)

As the Church moved away from the use of lace, deeming it a symbol of frivolity, the religious ties between the production of the textiles also began to wane. Furthermore, as feminist movements gained strength, women began to find empowerment through the use of plain clothing, which influenced the separation of lingerie from underwear. Here, lingerie became almost synonymous with sexualization and fetish. It's association with sensuality was nevertheless heavily tied to the male gaze.

"*Eventually, filtering out of pornography for men, it featured in media created for women in which they were confronted with images meant to showcase the standard they should abide by.*" (Singh, 2023)

Lace has faced a resurgence in current fashion trends, and its use and production should also bring with it a bigger awareness of what this material represents and the complexities in its history. Though the production of lace has completely changed with the introduction of mechanization of textiles, current widely available lace is mainly produced in exploitative factories in the Global South, where women of colour once again pay the price. Reclaiming lace as an empowering material through which to subvert the norms of purity and sensuality through self-expression is equally as important as it is to recognize the history of its production and how they may continue to perpetuate patterns of oppression.

Weaponized motherhood

In her essay "Grandmother Spider", Rebecca Solnit presents the issue of female erasure throughout history, beginning with the most blatant of all examples: their names. She mentions how in most cultures it is customary for women to change their maiden's name for their husband's after marriage, as a sign of ownership. Or how children inherit their father's last name, erasing the mother from their lineage.

But within this discussion of lineage, Solnit brings up an interesting layer to the discussion of motherhood and disappearance. Referencing to the period of the "dirty war" in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, in which dissidents were taken by the military junta and made to "disappear", it was mothers who lead the voices demanding their missing people be returned. These mothers, who later earned the name of "Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo" because they would protest by walking around the iconic plaza, made an example of weaponizing their motherhood.

"Motherhood was an emotional and biological tie that the generals then in charge could not portray as merely left wing or criminal. It was a cover for a new kind of politics [...]. The role was a screen behind which they had a limited kind of freedom of movement in a system in which no one was truly free." (Solnit, 2014)

The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo have become a symbol of resistance within Argentinian culture, even decades after they first took over the plaza. Until this day, the Mothers with capital M, still unite at the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday to make their presence known, and to keep asking the still unanswered question: where are they? They are recognizable by the handkerchiefs on their heads, the names of those they have lost embroidered in blue thread on the cloth. The symbolism of the handkerchief has garnered such weight and relevance within the culture that those who support the Mothers' cause wear it as pins or paint it on murals, as a reminder of the losses that haven't yet been answered for.

The story of the Mothers is very similar to that of their neighbours, the Chilean Arpilleras. In the period of the violent dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet which caused the disappearances of many men from their homes, wives and mothers gathered to craft burlap embroidery art through which they depicted their rejection towards the oppressive government as well as documented their lives under the oppressive regime. Their pieces capture the stories that were otherwise silenced, while also acting as an outright denouncement of the human rights violations they, and their families, had to endure.

The Coup, 1986, Embroidered textile

community Arpillera Workshop, 1976, Embroidered textile

Women Demand Justice!, n.d., Embroidered textile

In 1981, the Women for Life on Earth arrived to the city of Berkshire, England, to set up an encampment outside of the RAF Greenham Common station in protest of the missiles that were to be stored there. The protests which encompassed the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp set a precedence for other protests around the world because of their emphasis on gender, and their use of their identities as mothers to gain legitimacy. Their narrative consisted on the rejection of destructive decision-making to be in the hands of men, while women and their children had to pay the price. The encampment was therefore for women and children only, highlighting female voices while also acting as a stark opposition against the almost purely male space on the other side of the fence.

The Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice was one of the camps that took inspiration from the Greenham Commons Women's Peace Encampment. Established in the summer of 1983, the women-only camp protested the use of nuclear weapons with similar messages to those used by their sisters in Greenham. The women called for a better future for their children, and denounced the patriarchy for perpetuating violence, militarism, poverty, racism, and environmental destruction.

Also inspired by the Greenham encampment, these women adopted the spiderweb as a symbol to represent the dual character of fragility and resistance of their power and would weave webs of yarn amongst each other in multiple protest demonstrations.

Seneca Women's Encampment brochure 1983

Queering binaries

Gay rights activist Cleve Jones is the mind behind the AIDS Quilt, a project in which quilting is used to memorialize the lives lost to the AIDS epidemic, while simultaneously drawing attention to the cause.

The story begins in 1985 when Jones returned to his home city of San Francisco after having spent some time abroad, only to be met with the devastating reality that many friends from his community had passed away from AIDS. At that time, there was a lack of recognition from the public about the disease, coupled with deeply rooted homophobia and harmful stigmas surrounding the gay community.

As a response to make the public aware, as well as to honour the victims, Jones and his friend Joseph Durant put together an intervention at the Harvey Milk annual candlelight march. They handed out poster boards and markers to the crowds asking them to write down the names of people they had lost to the disease on them. At the end of the march, the posters were put up on the façade of a building, laid out like a patchwork piece.

"And as I scanned the patchwork, I saw it—as if a Technicolor slide had fallen into place. Where before there had been a flaking gray wall, now there was a vivid picture and I could see quite clearly the National Mall, and the dome

of Congress and a quilt spread out before it—a vision of incredible clarity." (Jones, 2000)

Two years later 1,920 panels inscribed with the names of those lost to AIDS were laid out on the National Mall in Washington D.C., completely transforming the usually barren strip into a colourful patchwork. The AIDS Memorial Quilt received half a million visitors on its opening weekend, though its success and notoriety only grew ever since. The NAMES project, which is behind the organization, collection and archival of the quilts and other memorial objects, has now around 200,000 pieces in its collection.

The AIDS Quilt is the largest piece of community folk art in the world, the premiere symbol of the AIDS pandemic, and a living memorial to those that died during the height of the pandemic. (Bennington-Castro, 2021)

The power of the NAMES project is, in my opinion, its mindful combination of activism, space, and craft. Before I elaborate on that I would first like to introduce Sara Ahmed's concept of "orientation" within the context of "Queer Phenomenology".

If bodies and objects are situated in relation to other bodies and objects, then, we can define orientation as that which relates body to body, body to object, object to object. In Ahmed's book "Queer Phenomenology" she points out how there is a societally determined normative line – typically white and heteronormative – which renders all non-conforming bodies as queer or deviant. In contrast, queer experiences are those that are not fixed, but rather actively shaped through interactions with surroundings. To embrace a queer phenomenological perspective requires the disruptions of norms, the challenging of heteronormative assumptions, and the prioritizing of marginalized voices (Ahmed, 2006).

So, to now situate the AIDS Memorial Quilt within Ahmed's queer phenomenology, I will break down three critical characteristics of the project: the voices behind the cause, the medium for the cause, and the space.

Beginning with arguably the most obviously queer component of the memorial: it's community. The very point of the project was to bring visibility to a stigmatized and marginalized community by both honouring losses, as well

as advocating for their own rights. The embroidering of the names alone was a way to bring attention to figures commonly pushed to the periphery, and to make their losses known.

I would like to insert a short story here of a surprising encounter I had with a family member. While explaining my graduation project to my uncle's wife one day, I briefly mentioned the AIDS Memorial Quilt as an example I was researching. She told me that when she was a student in the U.S., a friend of hers came to her one day with a picture of a quilt panel on the newspaper that had her last name on it, asking if she perhaps knew this person. She did recognize the name; it was her uncle's. She told me that she knew he was gay, so that part about his life wasn't kept a secret, yet up until that point she had not known the real reason for his death. In the case of many of the other losses stitched in the fabrics of the quilt, it wasn't uncommon for families to find about the deaths of family members this way.

The message behind the memorial was also to bring light to the AIDS epidemic, and to demand for people's health to be treated equally, independently of their sexuality. The ignorant labelling of AIDS as a "gay disease" created further stigma and dehumanization of the queer community.

Then there's the medium: the quilts. The choice to make the memorial out of handmade quilts wasn't arbitrary. In Cleve Jones' vision for the project, he related the aesthetic qualities

of the quilt with the home and with family. Therefore, the quilt's medium had the power to reach the larger population through this language of comfort and familiarity, easing the stigma and indifference that made it so difficult for the queer community to make their voices heard. From the lens of Ahmedian theory, the medium challenges heteronormative assumptions about the home by juxtaposing a language of comfort and domesticity with a message of discomfort and non-domestic rebellion.

Lastly, there is the space: the National Mall. The large strip of grass that connects the Washington Monument to the Capitol is a wide straight line, intersected at various points by other straight lines, all in a perfect perpendicular fashion. The length and straightness of this path also amplifies the presence and subsequent symbolism of the two monuments at either end. The positioning of the quilt along this line created a disruption of the landscape such that it forced a change in the embodied experiences of the visitors. A landscape that almost forcefully makes passersby to obey to a direct and linear path, the quilt instead erased any hierarchy of movement. Visitors walked in and out, through and over, above and under, straight and diagonally, across the monument. Whereas before the vision was involuntarily drawn to either the National Monument or the Capitol, it was now invited to the ground. The imposed normative orientation of bodies to the landscape was hence queered.

The legacy of this project is the sum of all its parts. It is the collective stories of love and loss, the materials carefully and sentimentally stitched unto each panel, the coming together for equal parts crafting and honouring, and the tactical disruption of landscapes that perpetuate heteronormativity.

Richard Latoff - AIDS Quilt Washington DC (1996)

Yarnbombing

It is almost absurd to imagine frilly, innocent, colourful crochet pieces as aggressive. Not physically aggressive I guess, but more like imposing, and with the same underlying forceful tone that graffiti carries unto public space. This, however, is what yarnbombing is all about. Also known as guerilla knitting, yarnbombing is a subversive form of street art in which fibre artists and crafters take over public spaces by wrapping them in colourful knits and crochet pieces.

Though the exact origins of this activity aren't known, it is widely attributed to Texan Magda Sayeg. Her first yarn bomb was a crochet covering for the door handle of her boutique, which was equally inoffensive as it was thought provoking. Since this event in 2005, yarnbombing has been making the rounds on a global scale, often taking on more political tones as part of the craftivism movement.

In an equally rebellious and provoking way, yarnbombing is considered the female counterpart to graffiti, which is traditionally a male-dominated art form. Here, the emphasis on gender behind both art forms isn't an attempt to create further segregation, but the opposite. A reason why feminists have leaned so heavily on craftivism as a medium of resistance is because it is a way to reclaim and bring attention back to an undervalued craft. The goal isn't to only expand already existing mediums to be more inclusive, but also to expand the options of mediums altogether.

Besides activism, yarnbombing installations have the potential for community building through the collaborative beautification of public space. Through these kinds of approaches, communities have the opportunity to bond and learn from each other, passing on knowledge or creating stronger ties with one another through crafting. This is also a great tool for empowering communities, allowing people to exercise agency through decisions that directly affect the spaces they inhabit.

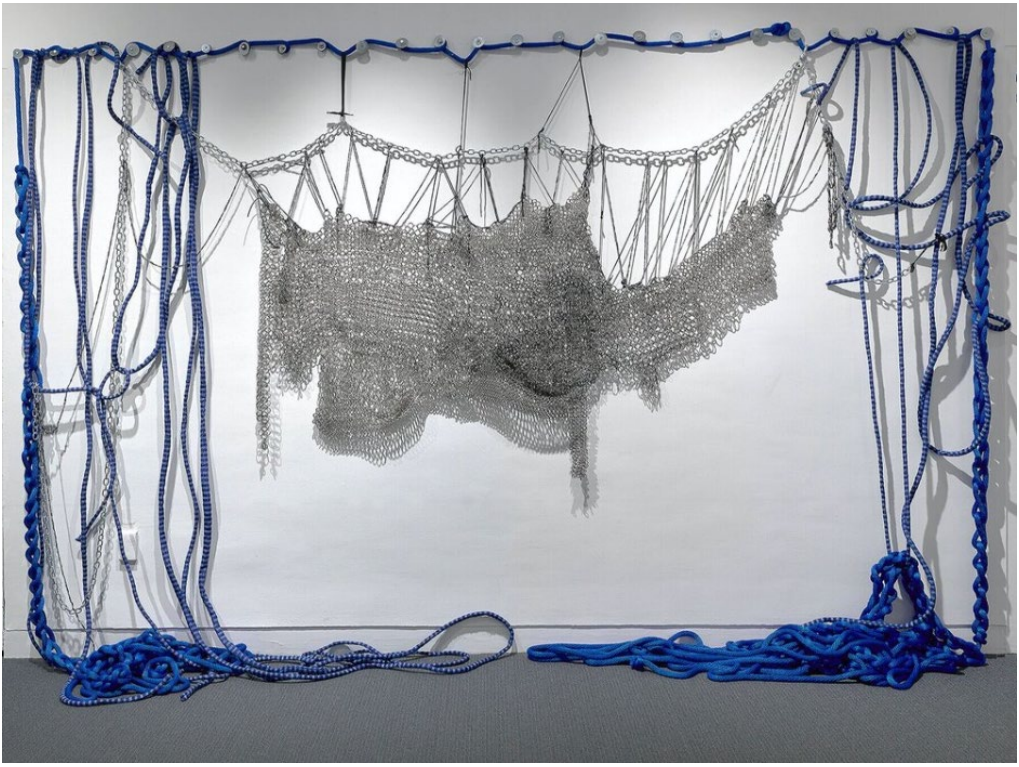
Pink Tank by Marianne Jørgensen. Aarhus, Denmark

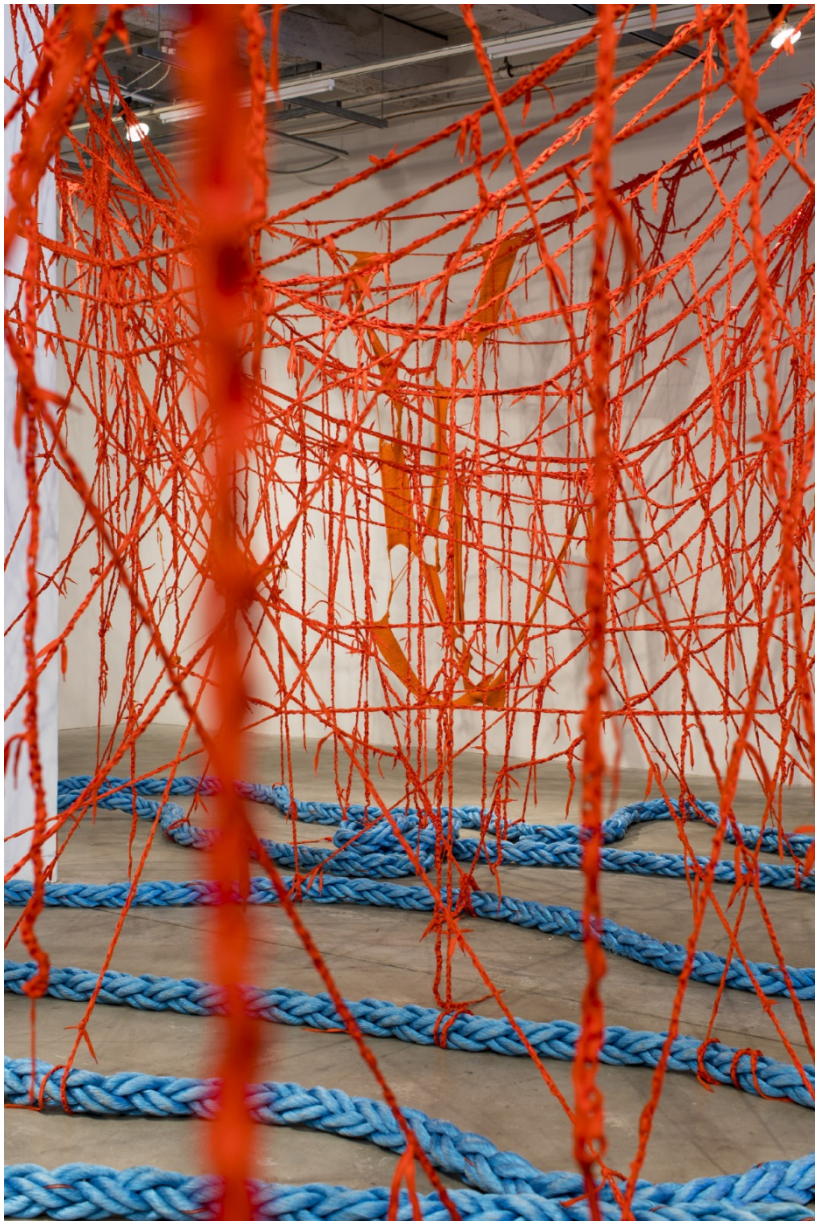
Sheila Pepe's Crochet Installations

Hot Mess Formalism - description by the Phoenix Art Museum

For over twenty years, Pepe has constructed large-scale, ephemeral installations and sculpture made out of domestic and industrial fibrous materials. Sheila Pepe: Hot Mess Formalism examines how the artist often plays with feminist and craft traditions to counter patriarchal notions of recognized or accepted forms of art making. Because Pepe's works are often site-dependent, there is a critical

relationship to traditional boundaries of museum display that are essential to her sculptural practice. While personal and cultural narratives often play a vital role in Pepe's artistic practice, her work is left open to multiple interpretations.





My Neighbor's Garden – description by Madison Square Park Conservancy

Artist Sheila Pepe has created her first outdoor exhibition, My Neighbor's Garden, which opened on June 26 in Madison Square Park. Through her crochet practice, Pepe brings color, unexpected materials, and optimism to the site. Pepe, a feminist and queer artist whose elaborate web-like structures summon and critique conventional women's craft practice, uses crochet to transform contemporary sculpture. She has inserted work into galleries and museums and will now bring her vision to Madison Square Park for a project that is accessible to all to experience in civic space. Pepe's canopies and webs made of string and ties, paracord, shoelaces, outsize sustainable rubber bands and climbing plant materials will rely on the park's extant physical structures including light poles and will span over several pathways. As the uncommon heirloom vegetables and flowering vines grow across the seasons, they will intermingle with Pepe's crochet. The artist's work has long questioned indoor space as literally and symbolically closing the door of potential to women. Here, Pepe considers publicness to create physical positions that welcome all parkgoers through a fabricated city garden.

Aleksandra Kasuba's Live-in Environments

The work of Lithuanian American artist Aleksandra Kasuba is difficult to put in a box. Despite her background in the arts, her work makes leaps across disciplines as she combines materials, senses, and embodied experiences to create environments. The term environment is key, as her designs were beyond the conventions of what is defined as sculptural or architectural.

Her exploration of architectural environments is characterized by her use of tensile fabrics that almost completely erase the existence of traditionally angular and rigid spaces. For Kasuba, ninety-degree angles belonged to "a Western civilization that had lost its primary connection to the environment." (Černiauskaitė, n.d.). Often complimented with light and shadow play, as well as the use of sounds and aromas, Kasuba's environments were a multisensorial experience that called for more sensitive connections between body and space.

Heidi Bucher's Latex Skinnings

Heidi Bucher was a Swiss artist whose work focused on the relation between domestic space and the body, famously explored through latex skinnings of architectural spaces.

As directly described on the artist's website:

It is a transformative and poetic work, that deals primarily with private spaces and belongings, architectural fragments from mostly the 19th century, feminism, domestication and the individual or collective experiences and memory. (Bucher, n.d.)

Heidi Bucher's artistic legacy is concurrently a visionary and aesthetic testimonial, as well as a conceptional liberation from an old, patriarchal affected world.

By first applying a layer of liquid rubber onto the walls of select spaces, Bucher then performs the physically intense task of peeling the latex skins off, retrieving architectural moulds imprinted onto a synthetic skin. Trough this self-described "process of metamorphosis", the skinning is a metaphorical emancipation from the social conditionings perpetuated by genderized and oppressive spaces.

"The settings Heidi Bucher chose often had private and public significance at the same time, such as the Bellevue psychiatric clinic on Lake Constance. There Bucher skinned, among other spaces, the "Parlour Office of Doctor

Binswanger" (1988), where Sigmund Freud treated his first subject, the alleged hysteria patient Anna O., and later women's rights activist Bertha Pappenheim in close exchange with Binswanger. By skinning the entrance portal of the abandoned Grand Hôtel Brissago on Lake Maggiore, Bucher confronted a highly ambivalent space collectively occupied by guilt and shame: the hotel had initially been a resort for intellectuals and became a state-organized "internment home" for Jewish children and women during the Nazi regime. Bucher conceived of the skin as an interface to the world, a sensory storehouse of memory." (Haus der Kunst, n.d.)

In her own parents' house, Bucher confronted her patriarchal family structure by skinning the "Gentlemen's Study", a space previously used exclusively by the men in the family.

Womanhouse (1972)

As part of the first Feminist Art Program at CalArts, co-founders Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro gave birth to one of the most influential feminist art installations of the early seventies: Womanhouse. This installation brought together local artists and students to transform an abandoned house in Los Angeles into a public exhibition aiming to subvert the conventional societal roles of women.

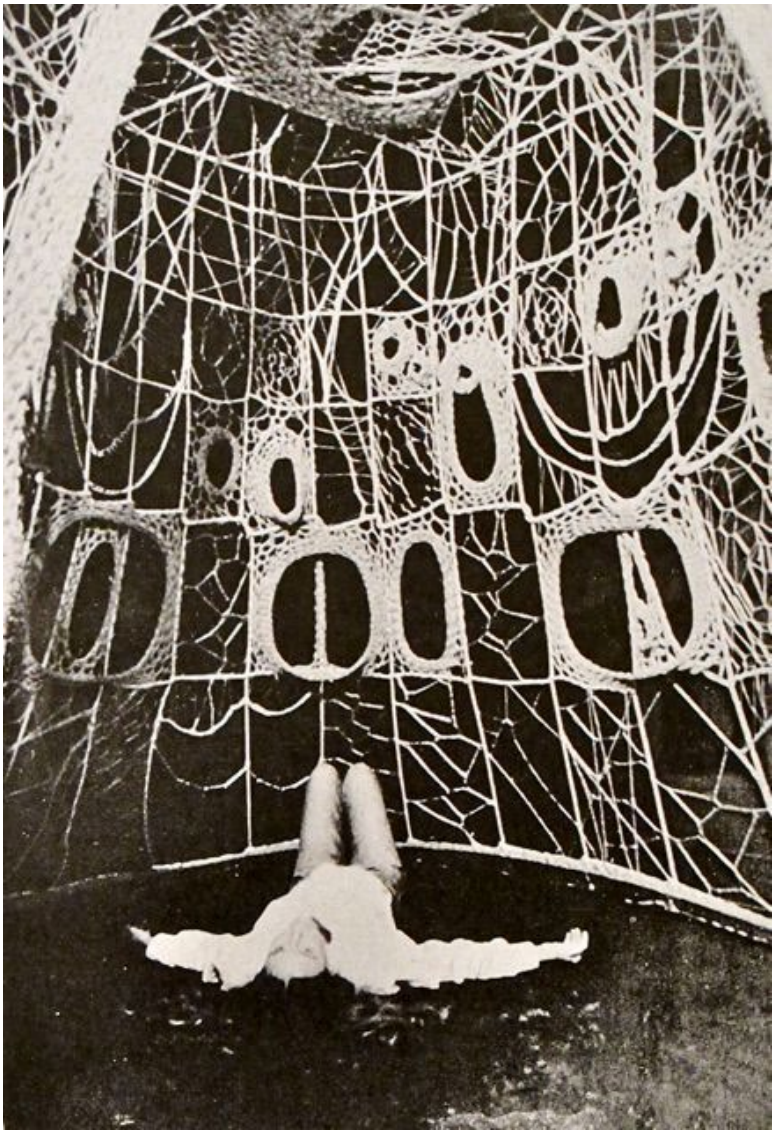
"The installation has gone on to inspire numerous works of art around the world and has contributed to significant changes in the very nature of art and expanded the conversations around which materials are considered suitable for artistic expression." (Chicago, n.d.)

The various spaces of the house were reimagined according to themes of societal expectations, gender roles, and ideals of femininity. In most cases this was done by exaggerating domestic elements often pushed into the private sphere and exposing them to the public.


WOMANHOUSE


WOMANHOUSE
JANUARY 30 - FEBRUARY 27
WEDNESDAY THRU SUNDAY 12-5
PERFORMANCES FRIDAY & SATURDAY 8:30 PM OPEN 7:30 PM
533 NORTH MARIPOSA, 666-9313
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS

Karen LeCocq and Nancy Youdelman, Lea's Room from Collette's Cherie from Womanhouse, 1972



Faith Wilding - Crocheted environment / The womb

The women of the Bauhaus

The Bauhaus art school was founded in Weimar in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius, with a vision to change the approach to design. The school's success and influence in the modernist movement is linked to its core philosophy of Gesamtkunstwerk – comprehensive artwork – unifying art, craft, and technology. Adding on to this philosophy of inclusion, the Bauhaus gained notoriety because of its progressive declarations of gender equality, being one of the first institutions to allow women students to enrol.

In a 2009 article for The Guardian titled "Haus proud: the women of the Bauhaus", Jonathan Glancey asks the much-needed question: *"When the Bauhaus art school opened in 1919, more women applied than men – so why have we never heard of them?"*

The answer to this question uncovers a deeper truth about the so-called progressive philosophy that the Bauhaus is famously known for. And while female students were indeed able to enrol, their education was limited to the participation in the weaving workshop. The realms of architecture, painting, and carving were left exclusively for the men.

The school's students produced radical work, but Gropius's vision was, at heart, medieval, if apparently modern, and he was keen to keep women in their place – at looms, primarily, weaving modern fabrics for fashion

houses and industrial production. He believed women thought in "two dimensions", while men could grapple with three. (Glancey, 2009)

Despite the limitations that the women of the Bauhaus faced, the work they created has left a legacy of immense value to the field of design, particularly in the acceptance of textiles as a dignified art form.

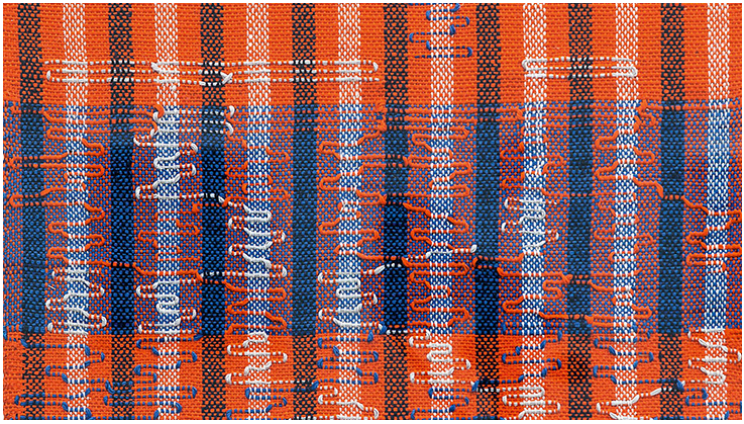
Women at the Bauhaus weaving workshop - T. Lux Feininger/Bauhaus Archive

Below, some notable women and their work:

Anni Albers

Despite being turned down in her first round of applications at the Bauhaus, she became a student in 1922. During her second year at the school, she was rejected from her application to join the glass workshop, and was redirected to the weaving workshop instead, the only available option for the female students at the time. Under the guidance of

master Gunta Stölzl, Albers came to appreciate the value of textile crafts. Her textile work gained recognition due to her innovation in design, composition, and material experimentation.



Anni Albers, Intersecting, 1962

Anni Albers, La Luz I, 1947, linen and metallic thread

Gunta Stölzl

Gunta Stölzl joined the Bauhaus from the first year of its foundation in 1919. A year later, she was asked by Walter Gropius to lead the female class, the weaving workshop, which made her the first female master in the school. Following her time in the Weimar school, she goes on to lead the workshop in the Dessau school, which becomes the most financially successful program in the Bauhaus. Stölzl's leadership and absolute devotion to her work left a valuable mark for women in the arts.

Stilt Tapestry Red-Green, 1927-1928

Marianne Brandt

A painter, photographer and metal artist, Marianne Brandt's story within the Bauhaus is unique. Following the recommendation of her mentor László Moholy-Nagy, she

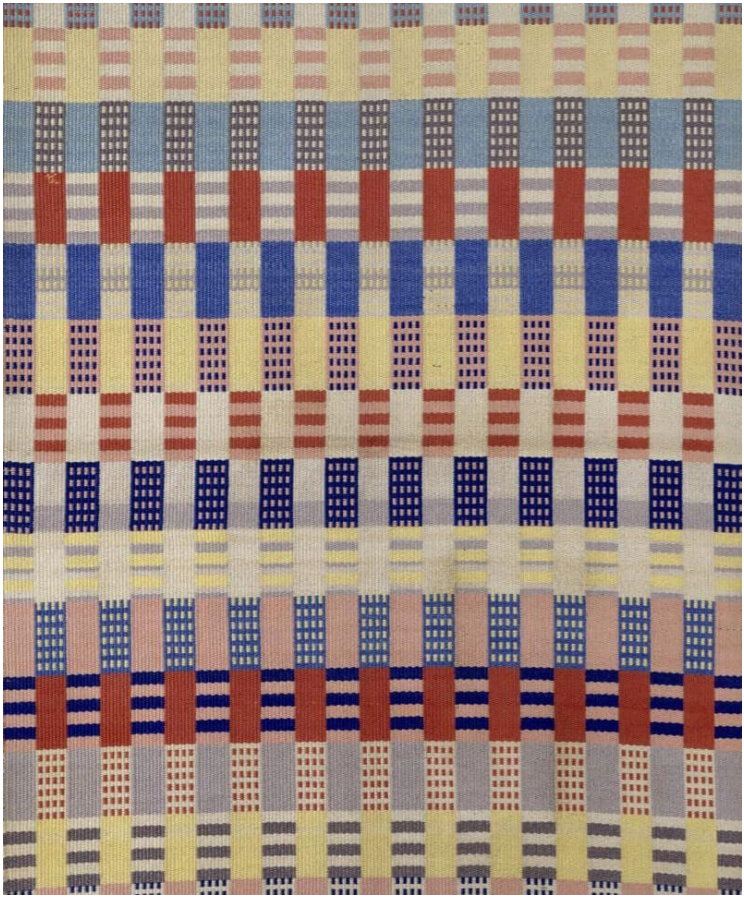
applied to the metal shop department of the school. As the first woman in the workshops, which had previously only accepted men, she had to fight for recognition and respect from her peers. Brandt's work was revolutionary within the field of industrial design, with some of her designs being acquired by famous brands like the Italian kitchenware brand Alessi.

Coffee and Tea Set, author: Marianne Brandt, 1924

Otti Berger

During her time as a student in the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus, Otti Berger was interested in experimenting with material alternatives in the creation of textiles. Her experimentation led her to write a treatise on textile

methodology, though her work was unfortunately never published. She led the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus after Stölzl but was later replaced by Lily Reich.

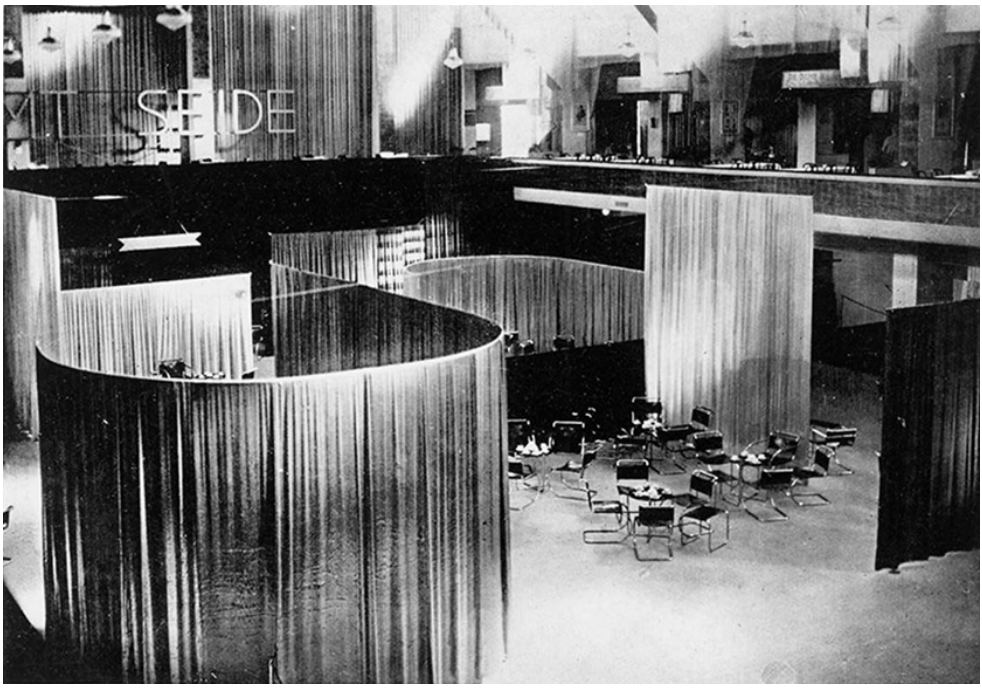


Geometric textiles from Otti Berger

Lilly Reich

Lilly Reich already had experience in textile, clothing, and furniture design prior to her time in the Bauhaus. After her partner Mies van der Rohe became the director of the school in 1930, Reich was invited to become the head of the interior

design department in 1932. Like with the case of Stölzl, Reich was only one of the few women to become teachers at the school, and by this point, only the second to hold the title of master.



Lilly Reich and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe - Café Samt & Seide

The women of Gee's Bend

In the remote town of Boykin, Alabama, better known as Gee's Bend, there is a community of quilters whose generational craft tells a story of freedom, resilience, and black pride.

The history of quilting and its significance for the black community is one that is rooted in slavery. Under Jim Crow laws, enslaved workers in plantations were denied of basic needs including proper shelter and clothing. The cold winters were particularly difficult without access to warm clothing and blankets, and so out of necessity, the craft of quilting came to be.

But transcending necessity, quilting became an art for its ability to recycle memories into sophisticated collages of beautiful colour compositions, patterns, and rhythms. Beyond their use, quilts physically stitch together generations worth of stories together in a single piece, portraying culture and identity.

Furthermore, the women in Gee's Bend have played a significant role in the resistance and empowerment of the black community. Amidst the Civil Rights Movement and following a visit from Martin Luther King Jr in the 1960's, the community became an active participant in the fight for black rights. As a means to get much needed funding, the women of Gee's Bend founded the Freedom Quilting Bee in 1966, which brought economic independence and political empowerment to the people of their community (Gee's Bend, n.d.).

Ever since, the town's masterpiece tradition is being kept alive by women who pass down their knowledge of the craft through generations.

Hailed by the New York Times as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced," Gee's Bend quilts constitute a crucial chapter in the history of American art and today are in the permanent collections of over 30 leading art museums (Gee's Bend, n.d.).

Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935), Work-clothes quilt, 2002

Martha Pettway (1911–2005), "Housetop"—"Half-Log Cabin" variation, 1930s

Jessie T. Pettway (b. 1929), Bars and string-pieced columns, 1950s

Irene Williams (1920–2015), "Housetop" variation, c. 1975

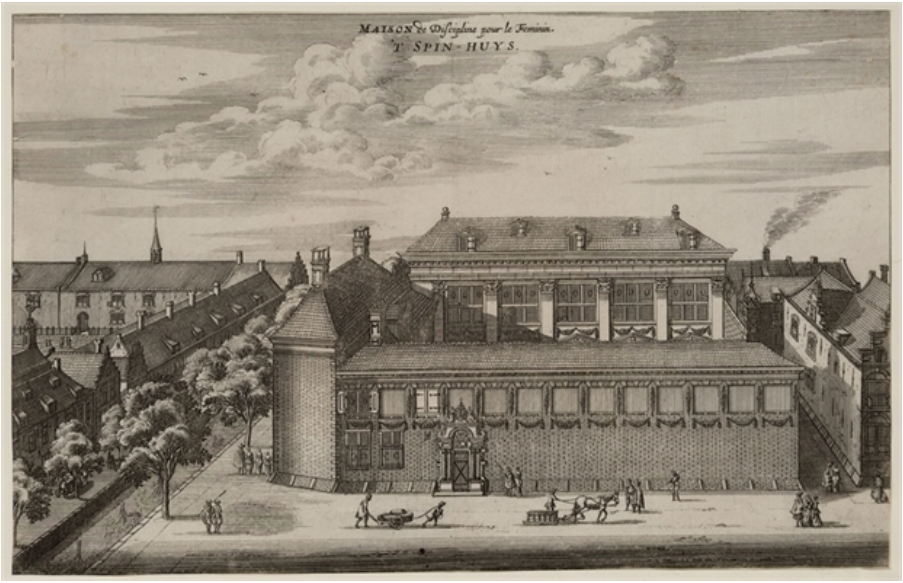
The Spinhuis

"Prostitution is the world's oldest profession", or so we believe. Yet, discourse on bodily autonomy and the ethical and moral implications of sex work has constantly remained relevant and ever changing.

Around 2.5 million tourists visit Amsterdam's Red-Light District every year, a neighbourhood that has gained international fame for its red-lit windows under which female sex workers stand, attracting passersby. The neighbourhood of De Wallen, as it is known by its locals, is one with a much richer history than that exploited by tourism, some of which is unfortunately lost or hidden.

This story isn't about the red-light district, or prostitution perse, but it does bear some connections to it.

In 1597, on what used to be the Sint Ursulaklooster – a monastery on Amsterdam's Oudezijds Achterburgwal – the Spinhuis was founded as a penitentiary for criminal women. In a period where the idea of punishment was changing from mere imprisonment to physical labour, the Spinhuis was founded as a workhouse in which women were forced to spin hemp for the manufacturing of textiles. The women committed into the reformation home were in their majority prostitutes, or brothel owners, operating a business that though illegal, was very much booming only a couple of blocks down the same canal upon which the Spinhuis stood.



The Spinhuis on the Oudezijds Achterburgwal. In the foreground the Spinhuissteeg with the entrance with gate by Hendrick de Keyser.

The Spinhuis, like other reformation houses built in the 16th century, sought to reinforce the idea that there is dignity behind hard work, and that for women in particular this was under the labour of textile-making. Once again in history, textiles were equated to pure and dignified, and presented as a means of redemption for sinful women. But what is interesting, and even more horrifying, is how reformation homes were also tourist attractions for the public, where crowds would come in to spectate on the women labouring away.

The fact that the Spinhuis doubled as a tourist attraction brings up an interesting point of contrast with the history of the red-light district where, in both cases, women's bodies are exploited as a form of entertainment. How could these workhouses justify that they were offering women a more "dignified" form of labour as an alternative to sex work, while simultaneously dehumanizing them for the enjoyment of the public?

Life in the Spinhuis: behind a spinning wheel all day. In the middle is the supervisor, with female guards in between to keep the prisoners in line. From behind the fences on the left and right, visitors could pay a fee to marvel at the criminal women.

Now, the history of the women of the Spinhuis is nothing but a ghost amongst the current urban fabric, with some parts of the original structure still existing in this space but with no direct recognition of the events that took place within it. The only exception is the entrance at Spinhuissteeg 1. The gate was made in 1607 by Hendrick de Keyser and restored in 2010. The relief above the gate shows three women, two of whom are chastised, with a caption that reads: *"Don't be afraid, I don't avenge wrong but force good, punishment is my hand, but my heart is sweet'*.

The entrance to the Spinhuis at Spinhuissteeg 1.

In 1779, the Spinhuis on Oudezijds Achterburgwal was given a new function and all women were transferred to a brand-new disciplinary house on Roeterstraat, the current Sarphatihuis. The Spinhuis was then adapted to house a police station, and was renovated so extensively that little was left of the original 17th-century women's correctional centre.

Until 1941, the police headquarters were located in the former Spinhuis. In this photo from 1930 we see the courtyard where Chief Commissioner HJ Versteeg presents medals to officers.

In actuality, the building houses two research centres for the University of Amsterdam – the Meertens Institute and Huygens ING. The building's interiors have been adapted to house the modern offices, and the stories within its walls erased.

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