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In this essay I will be exploring the 3 key words: *Feminine Influence*, *Process* and *Embracing the Ordinary* in relation to ideas discussed by authors including Anne L. MacDonald, Steve Duncombe and Steve Lambert, and Soetsu Yanaji. It will be in relation to the textiles industry with heavy focus on the designer and their way of work.

Feminine Influence

Feminine influence is an integral part of the development of the textile industry, as well as continuing to be a common theme for present day female designers and textile artists. Acceptance of textiles as an art form can be greatly credited to women throughout history, such as influential women from the Bauhaus like Anni Albers, and current design groups like The Profanity Embroidery Group. *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (Stevenson, 2010) defines the word 'feminine' as "having qualities or an appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness". The mention of women's roles and the traditional association these suggest can be directly linked to the tendency within the Bauhaus to encourage women to pursue textiles rather than fine art (Weltge, 1993, pg. 42).

Within the book *Bauhaus Textiles*, Weltge details how Female students – who had a range of artistic talents – arrived at the school under the assumption that they would be treated as equals, only to be segregated to the weaving workshop, regardless of their own desires (Weltge, 1993 pg. 9). Originally, the intention had been that both men and women were to be treated equally upon admission to the Bauhaus – "there was to be no difference between the beautiful and the strong gender, absolute equality, but also

absolute equal duties. No deference to ladies, as far as work is concerned, we are all craftsmen” (Weltge, 1993, pg. 41). Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus who had first laid out this policy did not expect the large number of applications from women, and shortly after, concluded that they were “too strongly represented” (Weltge, 1993, pg. 42), suggesting the separation.

Of all the masters of the Bauhaus, only one was a woman – Gunta Stolzl (Weltge, 1993, pg. 46) - who co-founded the ‘women’s department’, as well as teaching one of the most well-known names in textiles – Anni Albers. Despite its potential, the mayor of Dessau wanted to shut the weaving workshop due to budget cuts, however, this was tackled by Gropius after he saw how much success the ‘Woman’s Workshop’ had brought to the Bauhaus exhibition in 1923 (Weltge, 1993, pg. 89). Because that workshop was not shut, Anni Albers was able to receive her diploma alongside 17 other weavers between 1930-1933 (Weltge, 1993, pg. 93), regardless of finding it difficult to work in the studio space, as the limited funds meant limited resources – such as colours and materials available (Weltge, 1993, pg. 94). There is a chain reaction of events that can be seen here, in how the influx of female applications led to success of the weaving workshop, which led to Anni Albers receiving her diploma, who became one of the “leading pioneers of 20th century modernism” (Coxon, Fer and Muller-Schareck, 2018, Cover sheet).

Textiles is an industry that was manufactured by women for women since before the 18th century, as described in the book *Interior Design and Identity*; they “have dominated the realm of domestic interior, however, not only as producers but also consumers” (McKellar and Spark, 2004, pg. 3). McKellar and Sparke discuss the notion of the 19th

century that separated “the sphere of work and the sphere of the home” (2004, pg. 2), instigating gender roles that left women at home – with space to grow more involved and interested in interior design. This played “a key role in refining women’s ‘taste’” (McKellar and Sparke, 2004, pg. 10) and induced an interest in interior design that was not previously popular.

This segregation also led to the practice of textile processes to be used as a form of community between women, as expressed by Anne L. Macdonald in *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting*. She carried out a study in which she interviewed dozens of knitters in order to develop a questionnaire of which hundreds of people took part. One question: “Why do you think more women than men knit?” was responded to with many answers referencing “the tradition of keeping hands busy while talking” (1988, pg. xviii). Later in the book, MacDonald recounts how knitting and other cloth manufacturing’s became a “cooperative social activity” and a “highly anticipated affair” (1988, pg. 14) for women to share their knowledge and co-knit, as well as to come together socially. Similarly, MacDonald herself knitted as a form of community, briefly mentioning her Knit-Wits group and church knitting group when listing the reasons she knits in the introduction (1988, pg. xxi). Many examples of needlework as community can be found throughout history, a current one being the Profanity Embroidery Group based in Whitstable, a group of at least 30 (mostly women) who have met every other week since 2014 to create quilts of swear words. They claim the combined process of stitching and swearing to be “proven to be good for [them]” (2025) and give the impression of it being therapeutic for its members, as well as being a reason for them to meet, “help each other through the shit life throws at [them,] ... have the best

conversations ... and have a bloody good laugh” (2025). Figure 1 below shows one of their pieces - ‘The C Word’ – which would be first interpreted as the profanity that references a woman’s anatomy and is often used as an insult. In this quilt square, however, they have listed other words beginning with C, bouncing from negative to positive, almost taking away the power of that first thought word. This group is being influenced by modern day feminism to create art, whilst simultaneously practicing a process that has been developed and passed down from women before them.

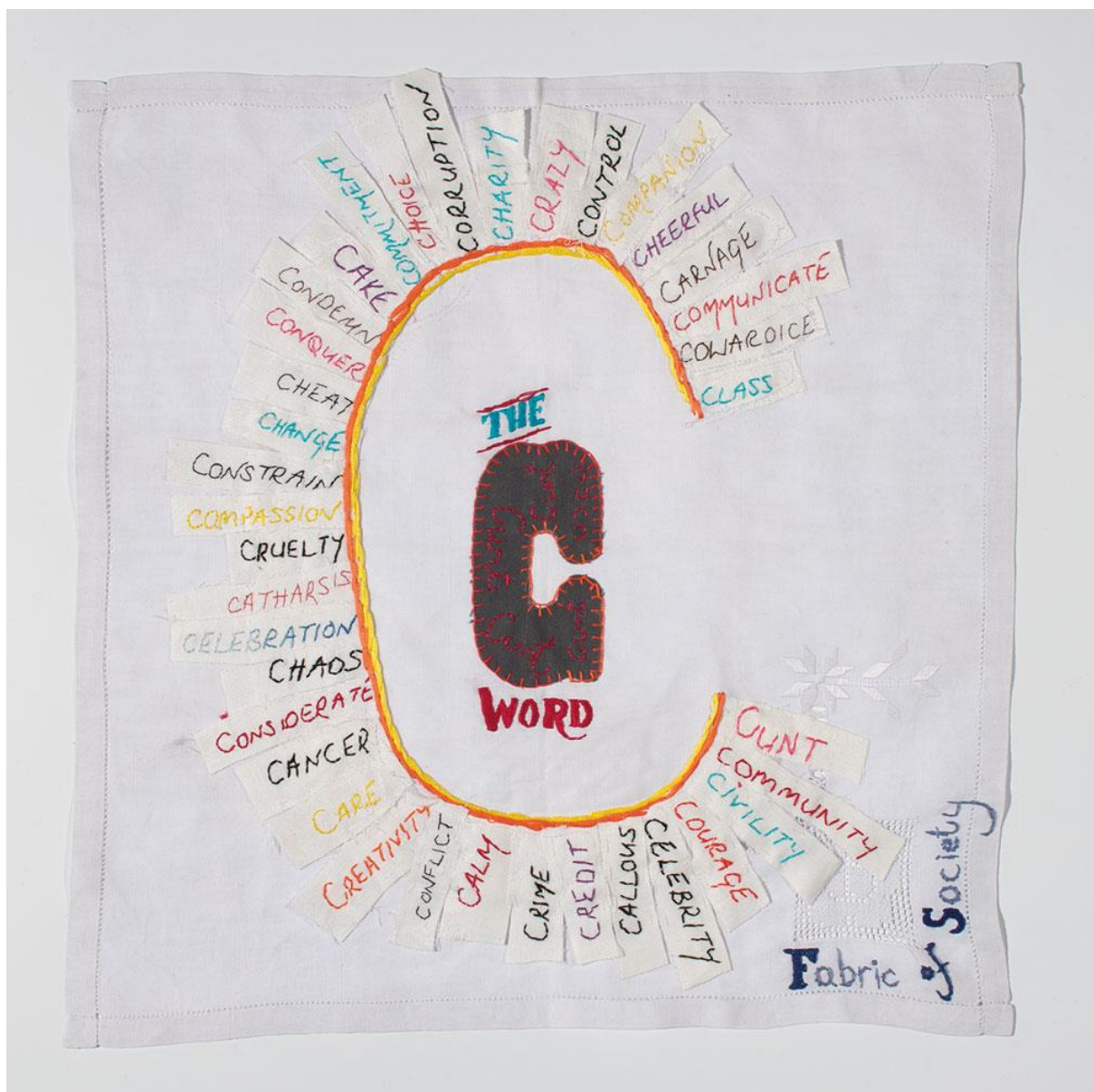


Figure 1: Fabric of Society: The C Word (Profanity Embroidery Group, 2017)

Process

Within the book *'The Art of Activism: Your All-Purpose Guide to Making the Impossible Possible'*, Duncombe and Lambert define the “point of a process [as] the progression towards a goal” (2021, pg. 83), reducing the concept of process down to something quite simple. The underrated process of how art is created has led to shallow perceptions of work as well as minimising the credit given to artists and how they arrived at the product. Despite the earlier statement, the book goes on to describe creativity as a process rather than a product (Duncombe and Lambert, 2021, pg. 51), before highlighting the importance and depth of process, while assuring “there is no one-size-fits-all approach” (Duncombe and Lambert, 2021, pg. 51). Obviously, process is something that is very personal to each individual, yet there is some irony that one must go on a journey to find their ideal process.

In an interview with Jim Biddulph, Laura Slater describes her process - emphasising the importance of the hand of the maker – saying that she “definitely designs through the making process” (Biddulph, 2019), making a point of her creative process as an integral, repeated series of events that she has found to work for her. Duncombe and Lambert also detail the importance of process, breaking it down into 5 main steps that they believe can be applied to anyone. These steps include finding a space, carving out time, creating a routine, turning down the pressure, and bringing the love (Duncombe

and Lambert, 2021, pg. 52-59), adding in that for each individual artist, finding how these steps apply to them is an iterative process (Duncombe and Lambert, 2021, 53).

Finding a space: For Laura Slater, these steps can be clearly seen in the breakdown of her process, starting with ‘finding a space’. Responding to Biddulph’s question of which places have inspired or helped her to form a design, Slater talks about her 5-week residency at Cove Park and how it “allowed [her] to really push [her] approach through new imagery, colour and mark making” (Biddulph, 2019), whilst also relaying how that dedicated time and focus allowed her to experiment. The place she was in not only affected her in a visual sense, but also refreshed her perspective on her work – encouraging her to push new boundaries.

Routine and time: As mentioned previously, *The Art of Activism* also details the importance of setting aside time and creating a routine, comparing the benefit of putting time into creating to that of the training of Olympic athletes (Duncombe and Lambert, 2021, pg. 55), yet describing it more so in the context of repetition and habit – “first forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not ... Habit is persistence in practice” (Duncombe and Lambert, 2021, pg. 49). This is not dissimilar to how Laura Slater structures her design process; always starting with research and mark making, and always returning to print making and collage as methods of creating (Biddulph, 2019).

Turn down the pressure: The next part of Duncombe and Lambert’s process model, is “turn[ing] down the pressure” (2021, pg. 57) suggesting that “in order for our creativity

to progress, we need to allow ourselves the freedom to make fools of ourselves” (2021, pg. 58). Similarly, Anni Albers has relayed “the ability to play with materials ... resulted in ‘amazing objects, striking in their newness of conception in regard to use of colour and compositional elements’” (Coxon, Fer and Muller-Schareck, 2018, pg. 14); clearly, experimentation is an integral part of the creative process as also demonstrated by Laura Slater through her posts on social media.



Figure 2: Painting Practice (Laura Slater, 2025)

An aspect of turning down the pressure within the creative process could be considered letting loose and going out of the artist’s comfort zone, as demonstrated by Laura Slater in figure 2. She talks about how painting adds a layer of commitment that can be avoided when collaging, but how practicing this media regardless helps her to grow. While her paintings are rarely unsuccessful, it is important to note that experimentation comes with acceptance of the fact that most of the time these ideas won’t work out, “but the surplus is required for innovation” (Duncombe and Lambert, 2021, pg. 64). By

sharing and keeping a record of her experimentations, Laura Slater can re-evaluate some of the methods she tried, whilst also receiving feedback from her followers – in her interview she also mentioned collaborative work providing “amazing development” for her practice (Biddulph, 2019). This is similar to how Steve Lambert imagines himself as a judge and a critic (2021, pg. 65), as well as sometimes bringing in a friend or collaborating with someone who might see things he may have previously missed (2021, pg. 66).

Process is an underrated aspect of design, despite being something that everyone uses. It presents itself in different ways for different people, however, can often be linked to habit and repetition.

Embracing the ordinary

In their explanation of process, Duncombe and Lambert mentioned everyday tasks such as people-watching, staring at the clouds, wandering through shops, and walking different routes as sources of inspiration (2021, pg. 62). They describe creative people as “observers” (2021, pg. 60), stating that they should be insightful and able to find inspiration in everything (2021, pg. 62). When paying attention, it becomes clear how much beauty can be found in things people usually don’t notice, a concept that can be closely linked to many parts of Japanese culture.

In the book *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, Soetsu Yanagi defines multiple Japanese phrases that link to the theme, including: “fudan-zakai (the ordinary)” and “zakki” – miscellaneous things (2018, pg. 34). Yanagi assures he is not being eccentric in his

appreciation of miscellaneous things, while confirming that these are everyday, non-special “utensils and tools made use of by the great mass of common people” (2018, pg. 34). He goes on to suggest that such familiarity causes people to ignore the existences of these ‘zakki’, questioning whether this causes the loss of the ability to truly see an object, stating that “habit robs us of the power to perceive anew” (Yanagi, 2019, pg. 34). This is to say that the frequency in which a person views a thing, affects how they perceive the beauty of it.

The unremarkable nature of these objects can be associated with the argument of form vs function. Yanagi argues that their modesty is a result of having common tasks to perform, that their sole purpose “is to serve people’s needs” (Yanagi, 2018, pg. 36), yet notes that beauty comes from this usefulness, proposing that their beauty grows with each use. The common signs of ‘wear and tear’ clearly signify a well-functioning object - one that has fulfilled its purpose – yet these are marks that are unintentional or serendipitous; they are naturally occurring in their own way. This indicates that there is no form vs function, if function influences form; they are intertwined and related.

A similar notion is discussed by Yanagi, who asserts that “the world of utility and the world of beauty are not separate realms” (2018, pg. 36), hinting that beauty can be non-visual – sourced from the places they were made or the people who made them. There is a certain charm in the simplicity of an object, as this simplicity is often caused by its original production being a long process, resulting in humble ‘zakki’. They were created to be used, not to be admired, and so the modesty of the craftsman is translated into their work. The nameless craftsman allowed a shared beauty, something that Yanagi claims is not possible in the era of the individual artist, as their creations can only be

traced back so far as to a group of artisans. It is their “lack of desire for personal recognition” (Yanagi, 2018, pg. 37) and devotion to their craft that manifests as an unseen beauty – the knowledge that everything is deeper than it seems allows for a new perspective on what would have previously been considered mundane.

Evidently, the beauty of an object is subject to how it is perceived whether that be due to the frequency it is seen or previous knowledge of that thing. Arguably, it is beneficial for artists to shift their perceptions, to one in which allows them to recognise the beauty in ‘fudan-zakai’.

Through research of the three key words – *feminine influence*, *process* and *embracing the ordinary* – I was able to deconstruct the way in which textile designers’ work can come from a variety of places. Without *feminine influence*, the textile industry would look completely different today, with women not having a natural connection with textile forms or using it as a form of community. *Process* can be the physical way in which something is made, but a much more interesting perspective is how the concept came about. This is something that is different for everyone, and it is interesting to see how different factors affects the mind’s ability to design. Personally, *embracing the ordinary* is a common theme in my work, giving notice to those things which are often ignored, and how they can be re-seen. Anni Albers’ working conditions in the Bauhaus meant she had limited resources, which meant she had to experiment with textile processes to make new things using the same supplies. This trial and error became part of her process, no doubt influencing other women in the weaving workshop. While Duncombe and Lambert consider habit and repetition an integral part of process, Yanagi argues

that breaking habit is essential for development through a fresh view. As well as this, the process of an interior textile designer today must consider the wants/ needs of the customer who, historically, has been mainly comprised of women. The previous exclusion of women from the arts gives women today motivation to create new things – to no longer be overlooked. Clearly, this can be done by embracing things which are also overlooked – the ordinary. It is interesting to consider how embracing the ordinary informs process, but also represents the hidden power of something that was once overlooked – such as female artists. This has led me to the question:

How can embracing the ordinary within the design process act as a protest to being overlooked as a female designer?

Sub-questions:

How can embracing the ordinary inform process?

Are common forms of design process influenced by past female textile artists?

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Figures

Figure 1: Profanity Embroidery Group. (2017) *Fabric of Society: The C Word*. [Embroidery on quilt square]. Available at: <https://pegwhitstable.co.uk/galleries/> (Accessed: 30th March 2025)

Figure 2: Slater, L. (2025) *Painting Practice*. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/DG-ObfWN0Pj/> (Accessed 25th March 2025)