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Value, Vulnerability and Stitch

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The three key words I chose to explore in this essay are value, vulnerability, and stitch. I wanted to explore a word connected with my practice, whilst focusing on key theories of personal interest.

Value is defined as a unit of measurement for understanding the worth of a service or object (Buchanan, 2018). The meaning of value is entirely hierarchical; the more highly something is regarded, the more value it has. However, value is not a fixed measurement, and heavily relies on labour to create and sustain it. When modes of production changed during the 19th century (industrialisation, revolutionary machinery, decrease in guilds) so did the meaning of exchange (Marx, 2012, p. 75). Michel Foucault (2018) explains that labour was used to define the value of a product (2018, p. 276). The amount of labour that went into producing a commodity was assumed to be equal to its value. In contrast to this, Foucault stated that “any value, whatever it may be, has its origins in labour” (2018, p. 276). Value and labour are not inflexible units that are directly equal – value must be proportionate to its labour, because it *relies* on that labour to exist.

According to Karl Marx, the price of a product or commodity – and the labour that goes into producing it – is equal to the cost of its production (2012, p. 80). The cheaper a commodity is to make, the lower the value of the product. Similarly, the viler and more difficult the labour is to undertake, the lower the wage is for that labour. Occupations that become devalued over time are usually accompanied by an increase in the proportion of women (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 108). Care work is an occupation particularly dominated by women. Half of the hours worked in the world are care work – and yet most of these are unpaid (Thackara, 2023). Carers exist in a complex space, where their work is both idealised and degraded. Women, as a class, are well aware of how care can consume their lives (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). It can take up a vast majority of their time and energy, whilst smothering their ability to pursue personal interests, skills, and relationships outside the relation of care.

Pierre Bourdieu asserts that a class is defined by the value and expectation it places on the two sexes (1984, p. 107). The labour expected of men and women is different; the nature of the labour can change depending on social and economic factors, but it does not change that these roles are purposefully separated. A key example of this is seen within embroidery, as explored by Rozika Parker in *The Subversive Stitch* (1984). Embroidery being perceived as an entirely feminine activity began in the 16th century, though the complete embedding of embroidery within femininity came to fruition in the 19th century, as the Victorian industrial era started to define the private and public spheres more concretely. For the working class, becoming skilled in needlework meant a woman could help elevate the standing of her household. Sewing was used for utility and was taught in

schools (in the early 20th century) in preparation for girls' future roles as mothers and wives (p. 188). For the middle class, embroidery was used to extensively decorate the home. It was considered the ideal pastime for women, due to the subdued and obedient appearance of the embroiderer, focused intently on her cloth.

Bourdieu establishes that social class is not defined through a singular property, or shared group of properties – it is by the structure of *relationships* between properties (1984, p. 106). Each property is given a specific value. Though women were divided through social status, family, and wealth, they were united through their classification as 'woman'. Although this connection was unwanted, when arguing for rights it is important to define oneself within a recognisable group – a community that is bonded through a common feature (Butler, 2006, p. 24). Through values that are assigned, by grouping together communities can lessen the burden of vulnerability.



Fig 1. Andrews, M. *Suffragette Banner*, 1920s.

In recent years, craft associated with women such as embroidery, knitting and quilting has been used in activist work and protest (Robinson, 2011). However, women have often utilised these skills throughout history to support their activism. This image (left) is a suffragette banner, hand embroidered, depicting a woman's silhouette in the suffragette colours of purple, green and white (Andrews, 2021). The words "Wife, Mother, Voter" note the social roles that women were restricted to and asserts their importance in conjunction with the right to vote. The skill of needlework, taught with the expectation of

obedience and subjugation, has been used to fight for the right to influence the governance of their country. The domestic skill is brought firmly into the public, reflecting women's desire to leave their confined domestic roles.

Kirsty Robinson (2011) acknowledges that there has been a deep divide in the feminist movement since the mid-20th century over using these skills, and whether it undermines or supports their position. Stitch has both oppressed women and allowed them freedom; forced obedience and supported creativity.

Although women participated in other forms of art such as painting and sculpture, embroidery was considered as a solely feminine endeavour (Parker, 1984, p. 5). Embroidery was - and continues to be - considered a craft, not in the realms of high art. It was used to decorate items, clothing, and furniture, establishing that it should be isolated entirely within the home. Following the expectations to pursue embroidery, women found a large proportion of their time was spent in the house, focused on a singular activity, with little time for pursuing other interests and skills. The association of lower class to craft was not reserved for women alone, but sewing was exclusively considered a feminine art. As Parker succinctly states, “women embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered” (p. 11). The idea of stitch and femininity became so deeply intertwined that it is impossible to research “stitch” without delving into its inherent socio-political connections.

Care is inseparable from vulnerability. Judith Butler (2006) states that, “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency; the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to the touch, and to the violence...” (p. 26). Our existence as physical beings subjects us to illness, harm, assault, and aging. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa emphasises that the vulnerability of our bodies is intrinsic to our interdependence and is an unavoidable state of living existence (2017, p. 4). She explains that care is not a passive moral stance, but in most cases involves hands on work with material outcomes. Similarly, it does not exist in a singular dimension. It involves practical, ethical, environmental, and political aspects. Each of these interconnects with one another, creating a complex web. Mathilda Tham (2022) further engaged with this complexity through the metaphor of a ball of yarn. She describes the separate aspects as threads which tangle together. The cutting of a single thread cannot unravel the ball of yarn, the same way that changing a single factor will not change the whole system.

Value is further defined as a “standard of behaviour” (Stevenson, 2015), also known as one’s important principles. Whilst working on a housing project that needed to meet the needs of several different groups, Mathilda Tham (2022) used the ball of yarn – examining and understanding each of the interconnecting factors - to integrate the needs of each group. Those working on the project found being explicit in their values contributed to a “more respectful and creative discussion culture” (p. 24). She believes that by making needs and values clear, we can untie knots that prevent understanding, integration, and care for one another. Using the ball of yarn metaphor is deeply impactful to creative practitioners and allows designers to think through tactility. Furthermore, this way of thinking deconstructs hierarchical approaches. A hierarchical approach dictates that certain factors are less important, and therefore considered less or not at all. Attempting to move embroidery and stitch up the hierarchical ladder to make it more respected (perhaps so that all of

women's work can, too, be more respected) does not change the structure of the hierarchy itself. Equally within care, changing the hierarchal order of what should be cared about does not change that it operates within a hierarchy. The ball of yarn expresses that every thread needs to be considered before assessing whether it should be untangled or cut. This avoids obscuring the importance and value of each factor.

Placing care at the centre of concerns is highly political. The way in which issues are studied and represented create and become part of a specific epistemology (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 30). The different threads that create our world, which have been fenced into their own individual boxes, can now be understood through this weaving web of care. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) says that to understand the necessity of care in our current world, people must advocate for relations between the threads that are thriving. John Thackara (2023) supports this, asserting that the wellbeing of humans and the wellbeing of nature are connected. He states that at the centre of production should be a care for life; "it is the basis of a new way to measure and create value" (2023). Furthermore, Tham explains that care allows sustainability to be more accessible, because everybody can take part in it (2022, p. 19). Though an individual may not be able to change the larger system – the fabric of which we are a single thread - by maintaining thriving relationships with others (human, non-human, spaces) individuals are able to create communities. Through community, interdependence, and care as the central focus, people can more effectively begin to change the underlying fabric of our world.

Although care may be an ambivalent and multi-faceted mode of knowledge, some aspects are more difficult to incorporate. Puig de la Bellacasa discusses the importance of thinking with care to create community, by bringing knowledge and thought into the physical world (2017, p. 79). By doing this, it takes a great amount of effort to keep up relationships between human, non-human, and space, whilst acknowledging diversity. There are threads of thought people may not agree with, actively condone, and yet they are still a part of humanity. Puig de la Bellacasa contends that people must accept a certain responsibility in inheriting the world. Even though one may disagree or disengage with these threads – thoughts, cultures, approaches – they are still a part of our collective heritage. These strains of thought need to be acknowledged before they can be unravelled.

Nevertheless, thinking-with care is not simply tolerating differences. Puig de la Bellacasa discusses the need to think-with as well as live-with others (2017, p. 83). Being aware of diversity in opinion and thought is just as important as maintaining caring relationships with others. Appropriating care to help give a voice to another, can confuse, and complicate relations despite the desire to help. If

part of caring is thinking-with, then understanding how types of thinking affects relationships and how it may create vulnerability is vital (p. 83).

As mentioned within this essay so far, there are distinct metaphors that tie thread, fabric, and stitch with the understanding of our complex world system. Especially for designers, these metaphors are useful in understanding the relation between an individual, community and the larger world through a familiar medium. An individual can influence those around them, but they are also taking feedback from the world and allowing it to influence them. Tim Ingold asserts that any kind of material is an active substance that must be worked with, rather than a passive object that can be subjected to the maker's will (2010). "As the embroiderer's thread loops over and under in stitching" so too does the interaction between the maker's mind and the material (p. 100). The relation between the individual and material is based on an understanding, influencing and responding in a continuous cycle. Materials do not always stay in their intended state. Textiles are constantly changing, subjected to damage from external forces and from wear, seams split and threads snap. In this way the material is vulnerable, subjected to the same external weakness as living beings.

Victoria Mitchell (2006) wrote in her article 'Drawing Threads from Sight to Site' that thread plays a "fundamental role in mediating a relationship between body, mind, space and matter" (p. 341). It has played a key part in the understanding of our weaknesses, both in individual vulnerability, in our understanding of interdependence and how we view the larger world. It has clothed us, our homes, and spaces for centuries. Butler (2006) used a material metaphor to describe her past connections to others – that they live on in the "fiber" of her being. The same way that each being is a thread in the fabric of the world, human experiences and relations are threads that make up individual beings. As Butler explains, our relationships do not consist of exactly half of one being and half of the other, but it is the tie between them (2006, p. 22). This tie is robust in difficult circumstances and yet creates vulnerability. Humans are susceptible to their individual vulnerabilities, yet also emotionally and physically susceptible to the vulnerability of others. People care for each other, creating strength and community, and the pain of others influences us. The vulnerability of others reflects the vulnerability in us; people care for one another because it is innate to surviving, and the catalyst for thriving.

Care is not a linear process with an end goal and because of this, it becomes messy and entangled, uninviting, complex (Thackara, 2023). It is not a checklist of tasks, or a singular emotion – it is inherent as a living being in the world. As an emerging designer, the textile industry lacking in care is clear through a multitude of issues; exploitation of workers, non-renewable energy, toxic emissions, pesticides and more (Wellesley-Smith, 2015, p. 17). These issues cannot be tackled by separating out

and fixing individually; the industry relies on these problems to exist at its current state. With priorities solely focused on economic growth, the system cannot change; if the goal of fixing these issues is to be able to continue at an unsustainable, harmful level, the core of the problem remains obscured by hundreds of these tiny, accompanying threads.

Value can create vulnerability through its assigned hierarchical order. Vulnerability is innate in the human experience; our fragility is tightly woven with interdependence and the need to care. Stitch has its own assigned values with its historical connection to women, whose expectation of caring (for the home, family, and children) remains a burden. Furthermore, stitch is susceptible to external damage and aging – reflective of our own human transience.

Proposed question for Independent Project: How can a prioritisation of thinking-with care in textiles improve our interdependent relationships?

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Figure 1. Andrews, M. *Suffragette Banner, 1920s* (2021) Accessed from: <https://www.meg-andrews.com/item-details/Suffragette-Banner/8699> (Accessed: 7 May 2023).