

Key words -Thread- Textile - Making

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Proposed Question Independent Inquiry

Within this Independent Enquiry I will be researching three key words supported by images, visual artists and thinkers. The three key words I have chosen to research are *Threads, Textiles and Making*. I will discuss how thread and textiles are an important and intrinsic part of our daily lives and that the art of making, using thread and fabric to create visual tactile pieces or artwork are also an important component in expressing ourselves.

THREADS

Thread has a few meanings defined in the Concise English Oxford Dictionary, (COED 2011) Thread is a long length of spun fibres used in the construction of textiles when weaved. A length of thread may also be used to sew fabric pieces together to create various items, thread is also used to decorate fabric, attach buttons, embellishments and fastenings to fabric or a chosen material. The word thread is also used to describe the ridges on screws, a group of messages on a message board with a common meaning, a theme in a conversation. Threads is also a slang term for describing the clothes we wear. Thread is around us on a daily basis in some form or other, we wear it, sit on it, sleep in it, use it to make our homes comfortable, we also use it for recreational purposes, it is thread is one of the most important inventions human beings have created.

For Gottfried Semper, renowned architect and art critic, the thread was extremely important, in an essay first published in 1860 he (Semper,

argued that the threading, twisting and knotting of fibres were amongst the most ancient of human arts. From which all else was derived, including both building and textiles

(Ingold, 2016 p.43)

According to Ingold (2016) Semper's opinion was subsequently heavily criticised by the art historical society but Ingold is mostly on the side of Semper agreeing that,

the making and use of threads could be a good index of the emergence of characteristically human forms of life, which would have brought such critical innovations in their wake as the garment, the net and the tent.

(Ingold, 2016 p.43)

Not everyone agreed with Semper, Ingold (2016) explains Semper's most vehement opponent was art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl adamantly disputed Semper's opinion that the line of art began with the thread,

The line was invented, Riegl insisted, not on the back of materials and technique, but in the natural course of an essentially artistic process'. For Semper, the prototypical line was a thread; for Riegl it was a *trace*, the basic component of all two-dimensional drawing and surface decoration.

(Ingold, 2016 p.43)

Who knows what opinions Semper and Riegl may have had if they had been aware of the findings on the floor of a cave in the Caucasus Mountains 2009? Would the findings have changed the opinions of both Semper and Riegl?

In 2009 St. Clair (2019) writes Eliso Kvavadze a botanist and a team of Georgian, Israeli and American researchers found minute fibres on the floor of a cave known as the Dzudzuana in the Caucasus Mountains in the western part of the Republic of Georgia. The fibres seen through a microscope are believed to be the oldest fibres known to have been made by humans. St. Clair (2019) stated that radiocarbon dating suggested the fibres were approximately 34,500 years old.

From those early beginnings of twisted fibres found in caves we now find ourselves overwhelmed today with the array of thread available. Threads, such as cotton, silk, twine, cord, yarn, sashiko thread, metallic thread, linen thread, polyester thread etc. come in an overwhelming array of colour and textures (Baugh 2018). An image, (Fig 1) shows an example of some of the threads that are available to us today. We use threads to stitch and sew, and to make fabrics to wear and textiles for our home.

THREAD



Fig.1

Threads listed from left to right, sashiko, kite string, cotton tapestry, glow in the dark, neon, linen, pearl cotton size 5, yarn, metallic sewing, crochet, wool, yarn, cotton quilting and polyester sewing. (Watson 2015)

Embroidery

Coloured threads are used to decorate fabrics with different types of stitching, collectively known as embroidery (Watson 2015). See example below.

Plants



Fig 2

We also use thread to express ourselves not only in the choice of clothes we wear but also in artwork. Artists Michael Brennand-Wood (Johnson 1999) and Pae White (South London Gallery 2013) use thread extensively in their artwork. Examples of their artwork is shown in the following examples. Fig. 3 and 4 for Michael Brennand-Wood and Fig. 5 and 6 for Pae White.

Artwork by Michael Brennand-Wood, highlighting the use of thread in his composition.

Charlemagne 1978

35 x 55 x 4 cm

Stitchery, collage, acrylic wood, thread and fabric construction.



Fig.3

Skeleton Key 1997 by Michael Brennand Wood
110 x 110 x 4cm
Stitchery, Fabric, wire thread, acrylic onto wood construction

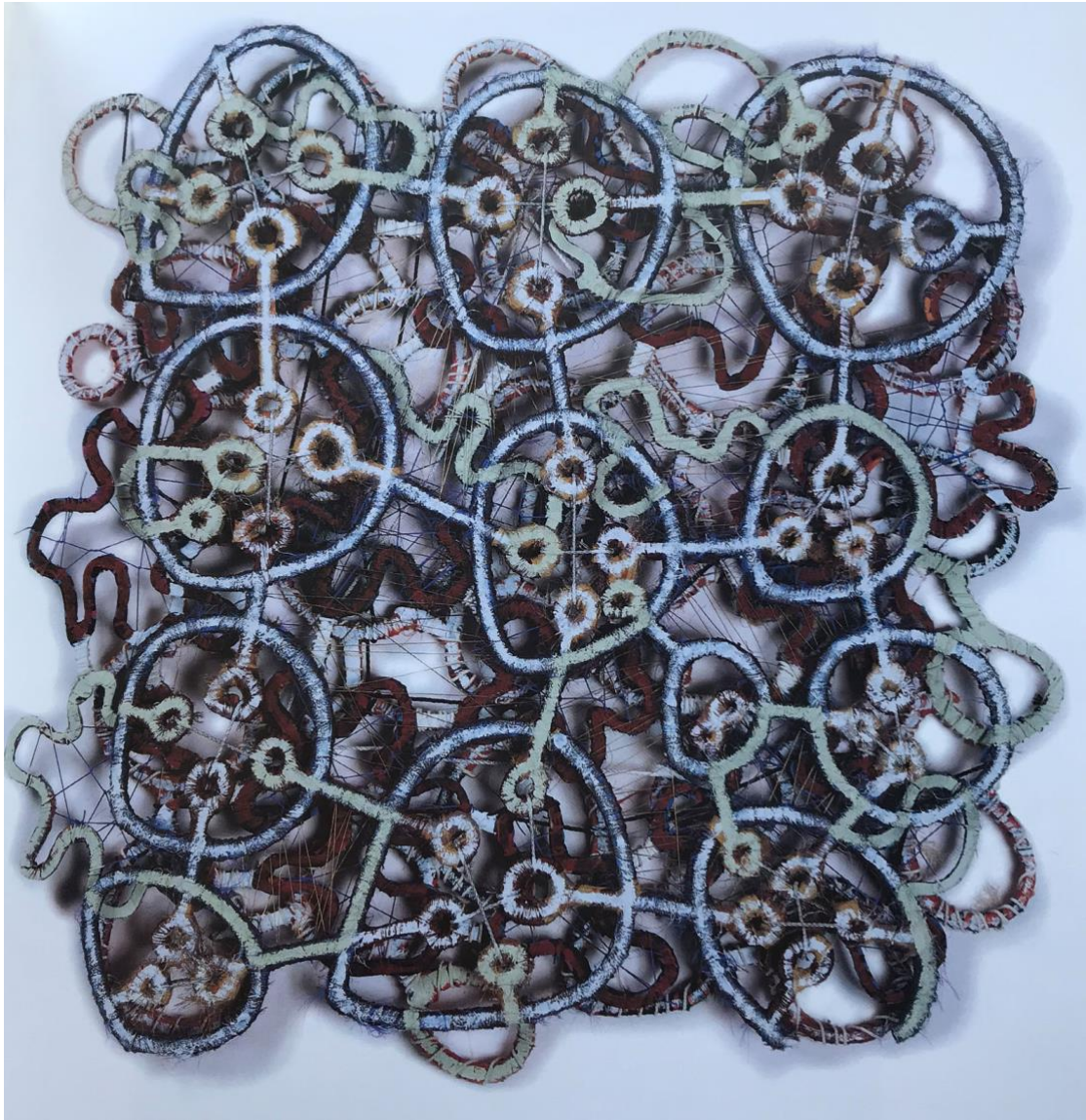


Fig.4

Pae White
'Too much night, again'
Exhibited in South London Gall



Fig.5

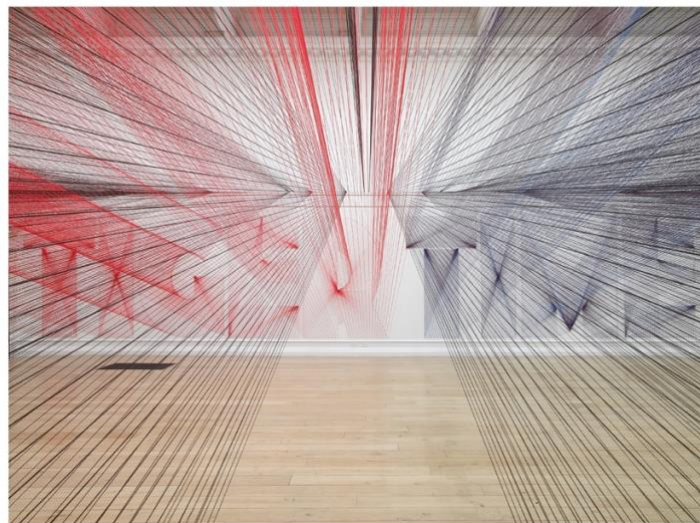


Fig.6

Pae White's installation (South London Gallery 2013) clearly shows thread being used as the main core of the artwork creating text in the way that it is attached to the wall, expressing her frustration at suffering with bouts of insomnia.

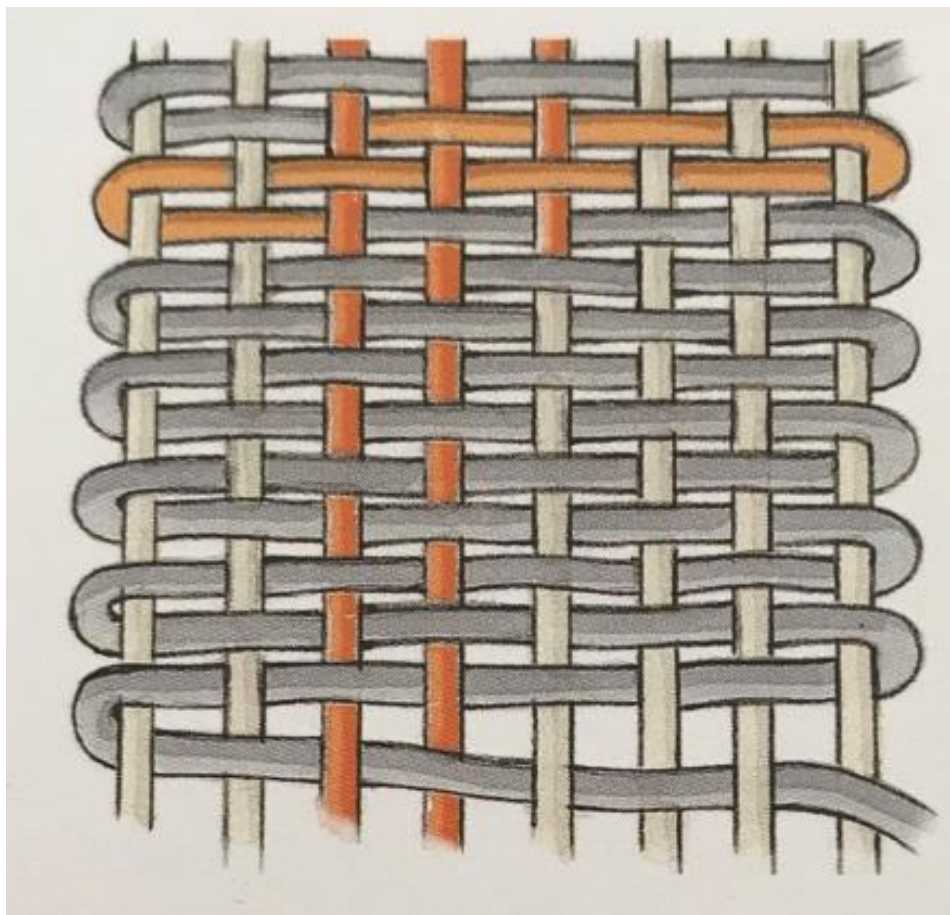
TEXTILES

Throughout history textiles have been made from raw fibres spun into thread and in turn weaved into fabric. According to Albers (2017) hand weaving is an ancient craft,

Invented in a pre-ceramic age, it has remained essentially unchanged to this day. Even the final mechanisation of the craft through the introduction of power machinery has not changed the basic principle of weaving. §

(Albers, 2017. P.1)

A plain weave



“Plain weave. Weft threads pass under and over alternate warp threads forming a criss-cross construction” (Hallet and Johnston 2019 p.10)

Fig 7

As well as weaving textile we can create pliable textile surfaces by other means (Hallet and Johnston 2019) the most popular after weaving are felting, knitting and crochet.

Felt

Felt can be made with manmade and synthetic materials (Hallet and Johnston 2019) the fibres are wetted and are rubbed and beaten allowing the fibres to tangle and intertwine, when dry it becomes a useable surface. Traditional felting is done by hand using soap and water, dry felting or needle felting is done by hand or machine (Fig.8).

Handmade felt



Machine made felt



Fig. 8

Knitting

Knitting an item or garment is achieved by the use of needles and yarn (Johansen 2020). Knitting by hand uses two needles and yarn where looping yarn over one needle and pulling the yarn through, creates a stitch, multiple stitches create the pliable surface. Knitting machines have multiple needles working at the same time to achieve the same result, see Fig. 9

Hand Knitting



Digital Knitting Machine



Fig. 9

Crochet

Crochet creates a textile much like knitting using a single crochet hook, yarn is wound around the hook and pulled through a previously made loop multiple times. Crochet can only be done by hand (Solovay 2020), see Fig.10



Fig. 10

Loom Machinery



Although there are many ways of creating textiles, the majority of textiles produced today are weaved. “Weaving fabric is now an automated process, using a variety of loom machinery” (Baugh,2018, p36). An example below (Fig. 11) shows mass produced textiles being made by machine on an automated loom.

Fig. 11

Although textiles are mainly produced on automated looms textile artists creating handmade creations continue to be on the increase. Chandler (2018) reported that there was an upsurge in weaving, Alan Oliver pictured below (Fig. 12) took a two-year course in the Handweaver's Studio, north London which was set up in 1973 to promote and encourage the art of weaving. Oliver now makes and sells hand woven rugs as well as running weaving courses himself. An example of his work is shown Fig. 13.

Textile artist Alan Oliver at work in his Waterloo Studio, London



Fig. 12

Metamorphic Runner by Alan Oliver



Fig. 13

At the time the article by Chandler (2018) appeared online, the Tate in London was holding an exhibition of Anni Albers' work. The Tate's publication of the exhibition states,

Anni Albers is a retrospective exhibition which explores this pioneering artist's position within the history of international abstract modernism, as well as within the story of textile 'fibre' art. As a weaver, Albers connected one of the oldest cultural techniques with the modern artistic language of her time (Morris, 2018, pp.9)

Six Prayers by Anni Albers 1966-7



Fig. 14

Albers's expertise in textile properties and technologies, and her understanding of their impact in a given space, resulted with Six Prayers, in a memorial which is mindful of tradition yet unapologetically modern

(Anni Albers Tate, 2018 p.145)

Annie Albers inspires many textile artists of today (Tate 2018). Textile artists Sheila Hicks and Sarah Sze have both acknowledged that they have been greatly influenced by her (Albers) work.

Sarah Sze 2017

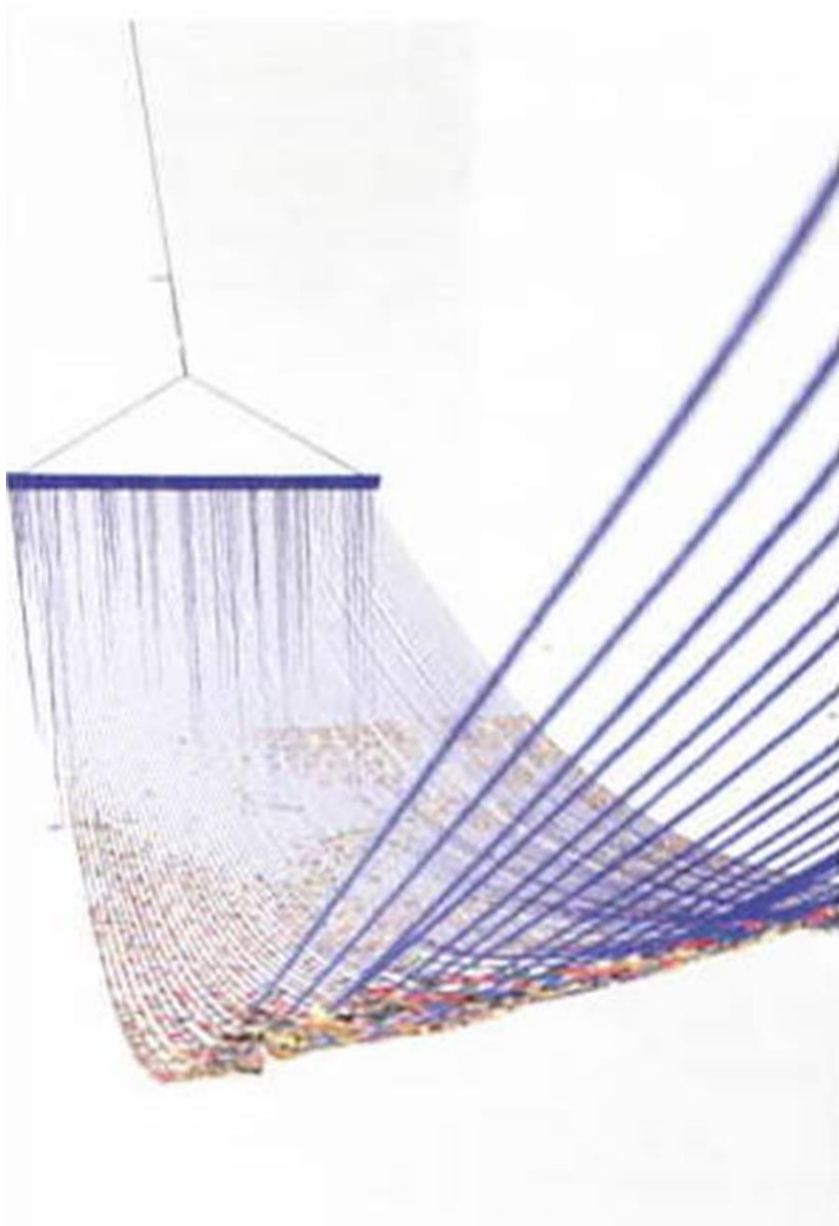


Fig. 15

Sheila Hicks 2017

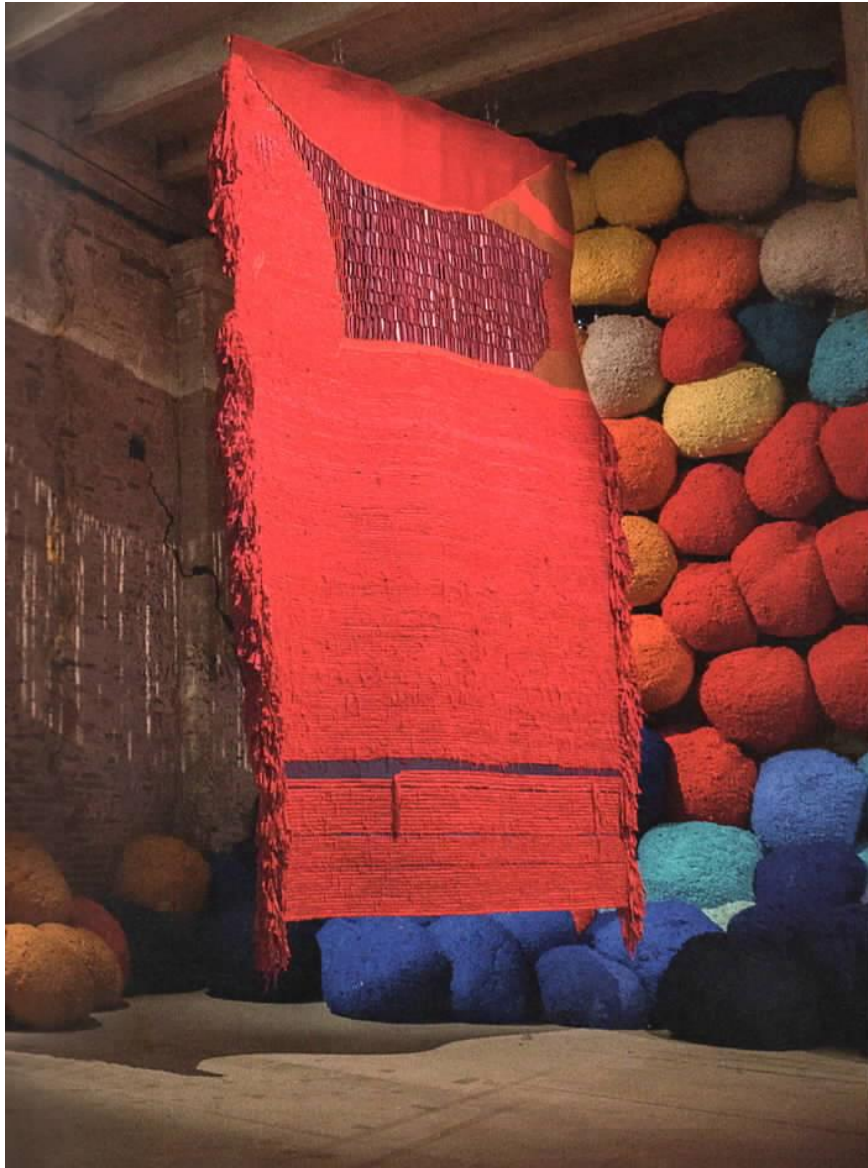


Fig.16

Unlike hand weaved textiles, mass produced textiles are produced to create an even fabric suitable to wear. Fabric is a pliable material, the texture of fabric ranges from the finest silk which slips through our fingers like rippling water to the thickest wool which wraps us in a comforting cocoon of warmth and

security. We can cut fabric, stitch it together in a way that makes the fabric “drape and show the shape of the body” (Baugh 2018, p.143). Fig.17 shows how the sheen of the fabric (satin in this case) catches the light and shimmers, the fabric clings to the body outlining shape and creating movement giving an impression of luxury and sexiness.

SATIN GOWN



Fig. 17

As well as cutting fabric to behave in a certain way fabric can also be manipulated, see Fig.18. According to Wolff (1996) manipulating fabric is an art in itself, either by hand stitching or using a sewing machine fabric can be resurfaced and reshaped by using age-old and well-practised methods such as, smocking, pleating, gathering, tucking, cording and quilting achieving beautifully textured and tactile fabric landscapes creating shadows and movement.

Manipulated fabric

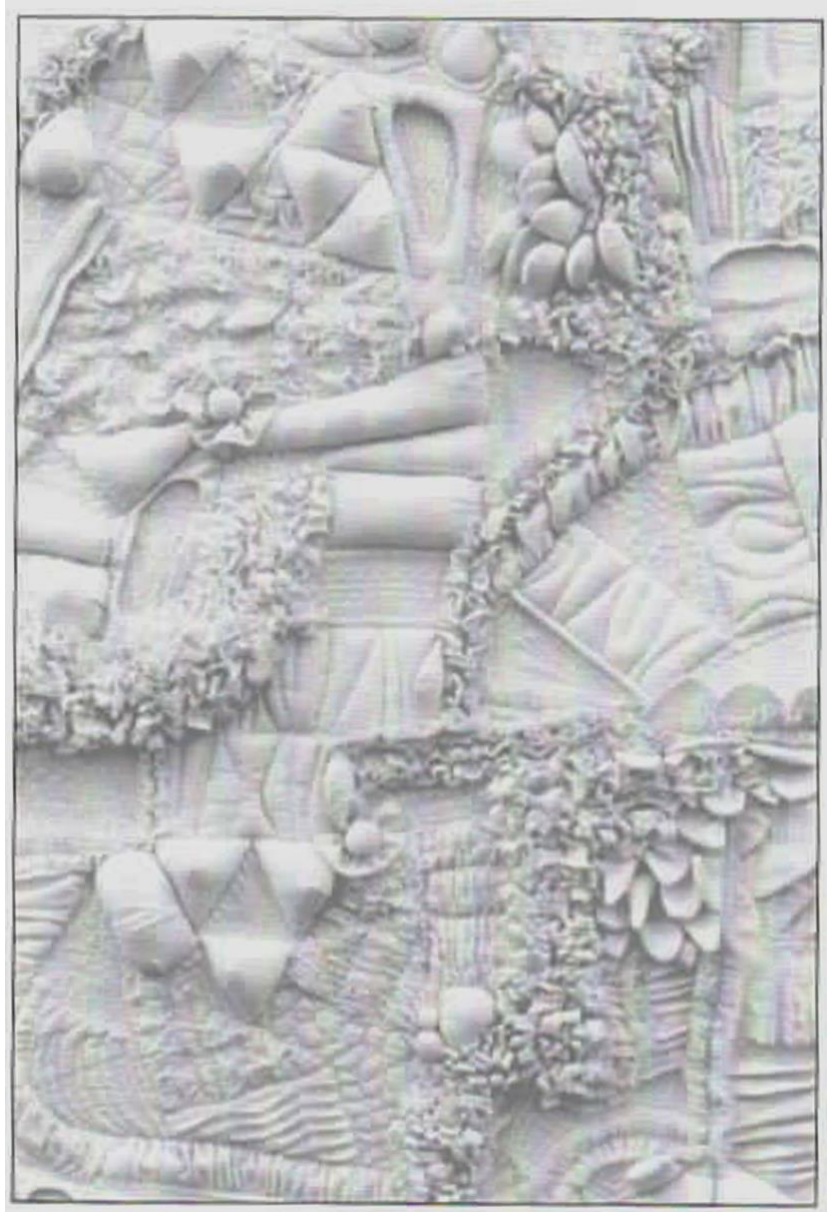


Fig. 18

MAKING

Besides making garments and items for our home etc, textiles play a huge part in artistic creativity. We use thread and fabric to express ourselves in a myriad of ways. In recent years passive protests have been made with textiles being the main form of communication (Hunt 2020). Artists have used textiles to express strongly held opinions (artsandculturegoogle.com 2020), and women during times of adversity, have used textiles to surreptitiously send messages to love ones (Hunter 2019), mothers have also used textiles to identify their children in an era when they could not read and write (foundlingmuseum.org 2020).

(Hunt 2020) is a useful source of information writing that the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump thousands of people, mostly women took to the streets to protest. Two women Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman organised a protest against Donald Trump and his attitude towards women, his infamous remark ‘grab them by the pussy’ sparked outrage. The two women came up with the idea of creating easy to make knitted or crocheted cat eared pink hats, later to be known as Pussy Power hats, as illustrated in Fig.19. The mass of pink was meant to be a visual message against the vulgar comments made by the president during a casual conversation in a recording known as the Hollywood tapes.

Pink Protest by Yvonne Hills 2018
Gouache painting 50cm x 50cm

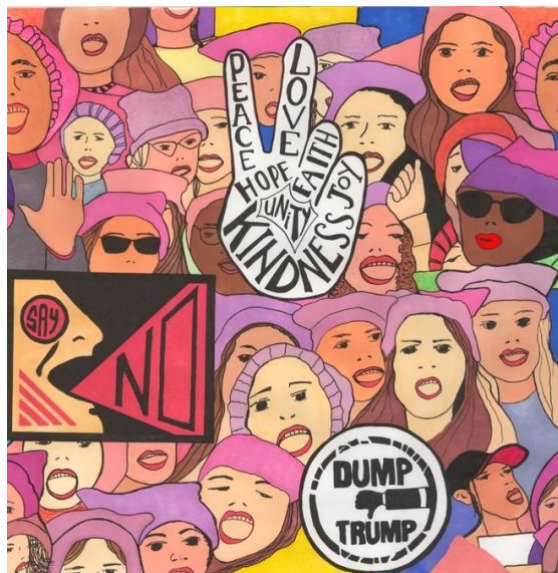


Fig. 19

Artist Tracey Emin's artwork title *Psycho Slut* (Fig.20) is an appliqued story in text and imagery relating to a very personal time in her young life, depicting childhood abuse and abortion. She describes the fabric she used to create this piece of work as sacred as it includes pieces from her own clothing, that of her parents, and furnishing fabric. (artsandculturegoogle.com ND))

Psycho Slut 1999 by Tracey Emin
Appliqued Blanket



Fig. 20

Hunter (2019) describes how a group of women imprisoned in Changi Japanese prisoner of war camp during WW2 came up with an idea of how to stay in touch with their menfolk, they decided to make a quilt, each woman was allotted a six inch square and all sixty six pieces were sewn together, each piece included an autograph and a personal image. They made three quilts, an Australian quilt, a Japanese quilt and a British quilt which was the one for reaching out to their menfolk, the Japanese quilt was made to convince the Japanese guards that the purpose of making the quilts was quite innocent. Despite the terrible cruelty they suffered in dire conditions and being parted from their loved ones, these women were determined to do something positive. It is a touching story made of thread and fabric. The quilt is now kept at the headquarters of the British Red Cross in London.

The British Changi Quilt 1942



Fig. 21

In 1741 the Foundling Hospital opened its doors to take in foundlings (foundlingmuseum.org.uk ND). Quite simply mothers were too poor to feed their children, if it were not for the hospital many babies would have been left abandoned on the street. Between 1741 and 1760 swatches of fabric were the only means of connecting mother and child. During that time many people could not read or write, the hospital devised a way of registering the child without the use of the written word. A piece of fabric was cut from the clothes of the baby and cut into two again. One half was attached to the papers containing details about the child and the other half was given to the mother. In that very simple way, a mother could be sure that she would be united with her child when the time was right. The mothers also left tokens as another form of identification; in case the original swatch of fabric became lost. Tragically many children died within a short time after being admitted to the hospital. Of the 25,000 (approximately) children taken in between 1741 and 1954 only 1,500 were reunited with their family.

Between October 2010 and Mar 2011, the Foundling Museum held an exhibition of all surviving swatches of fabric (foundling museum.org.uk ND). The exhibition gave people an opportunity to view items that had never been seen previously. The pieces of fabric gave a fascinating insight of how working mothers dressed as baby clothes were made from old clothes the mother wore, it was a study in social history and textiles of the early 18th century.

Images of Foundling Fabrics



Fig.22

Concluding my research into the three key words prompts many questions regarding the future of thread, textiles and making. In the fashion world there is a movement towards re-using and re-purposing but are the demands of the fashion designer strong enough to influence the billion-dollar textile industry. How long can we support the way threads and textiles are manufactured in our world today? There is an increase in the making of handmade textiles, should we as consumers turn away from mass manufacturing and be more discerning about our threads and textiles, make the decision that it's about time quality mattered over quantity? Should any artist using threads or fabric in their artwork today consider only using pre-owned and pre-used materials? Will there ever come a time in the far-off distant future when, for whatever reason the mass manufacturing of textiles ceases, or is greatly diminished? My final concluding question for my Independent Inquiry is:
How will the future of the textile industry affect designers, artists and makers?

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Images

Fig 1 – Thread Watson, S. (2015) *Pen to Thread*. Ohio: Interweave pp. 9, illus.

Fig. 2 – Plants Watson, S. (2015) *Pen to Thread*. Ohio: Interweave pp. 126, illus.

Fig. 3 – Charlemagne Johnson, P. (1999) *Michael Brennand-Wood You Are Here*. Sand; Hare Print Press. pp. 19, illus.

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Fig 14 – Six Prayers by Anni Albers 1966-7 Anni Albers Tate (2018) *Anni Albers*. London: Tate Publishing pp.145, illus.

Fig. 15 - Hammock (for A. Albers) 2017 by Sarah Sze Anni Albers Tate (2018) *Anni Albers*. London: Tate Publishing pp. 168, illus.

Fig 16 - Escalade Beyond Chromatic Land by Sheila Hicks 2017 Tate (2018) *Anni Albers*. London: Tate Publishing pp. 169, illus.

Fig 17 -SATIN GOWN Baugh, G. (2018) *The Fashion Designer's Textile Directory*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. pp.143, illus.

Fig 18 – Manipulated Fabric Wolff, C. (1996) *The Art of Manipulating Fabric*. Wisconsin: Krause Publications. No page number, illus.

Fig 19 – Pink Protest by Yvonne Hills Gouache painting on paper.

Fig 20 – Psycho Slut by Tracey Emin 1999 Available at http://www.artsandculture.google.com/asset/psycho-slut-tracey-emin/lgFDgQ_w?h=n Accessed 12 May 2020)

Fig 21 – The British Changi Quilt 1942 Available at <http://museumandarchives.redcross.org.uk/objects/7766> Accessed (April 24 2020)

Fig 22 – Images of Foundling Fabrics Available at <http://www.foundlingmuseum.org/events/threads-of-feeling/> Accessed 2 May 2020)

