

Explore how artist have approached the concepts around 'gender' in art practise, providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

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Creating with textiles has been a way for women to create forms of artworks for centuries, even if at the beginning it was not a recognised form of art, it however was still a way for women make work inside of their homes with materials they had available, in times where they would not be considered an artist. I will be exploring the importance that this material has had for women and artists alike, how the use of this and its connotations have changed over time through perseverance. Also looking at how and why textiles began as 'women's work' and stayed with the title for so long with expectation leading into craft. I will be looking at woman reclaiming the use of the material, moving away from its title of craft, as an act of rebellion and protest, and artists that have used textiles throughout their work, to explore themes such as feminism, body politics and sexuality. I will be comparing and highlighting the different ways textile has been used by artists and the uprising of this material entering the art space, and the impact this has had when we look at the creation of art that is not made with traditional materials.

To begin with, the reason that housewives over time have been assigned these textile related roles jobs in the home was simply because it fit into the schedule of being a stay-at-home mother and raising children. Jobs such as weaving worked because it was a slow time-consuming process that did not require much thought to complete, and it could be done at home while watching the children. In her, *note on the Division of labour by Sex*, Brown mentions that there are distinct specifications that allow for a job to be suitable for a mother and wife.

“The participant is not obliged to be far from home; the tasks are relatively monotonous and do not require rapt concentration; and the work is not dangerous, can be performed in spite of interruptions...” (Brown. 1790 p. 1074)

Barber talks about how if as a society we could not afford to lose the labour of women during the childbearing years, this became the perfect work to do because it needed to be something that could coincide with the labour and time taken to raise children. (Barber. 1995. p29). Which I find an interesting point because now many contemporary artists have used processes like embroidery to create work about motherhood and share the good and bad from their experiences.

For a long time, textile work had been seen as a form of women's work and part of her contributions and expectations to the house and her domestic duties, in contrast to the current moment in time where it has been seen as a domestic craft for some time, often not taken seriously in the professional art world. Parker mentions in *The Subversive Stitch* “The family's position was ensured and protected through the constant exercise and reinforcement of femininity embodied in embroidery” (2012 p. 159) she also mentions how this represented the bourgeois family's ideal identity (p159). Explaining the purpose of textiles in the home at this point has moved from essential weaving that needed to be done in her household and eventually turning into embroidery as a hobby particularly for middle class women who could display their skills and become a trophy of pride like an asset to be shown off within her family. The wife's embroidery skills would've been a signifier of her class and wealth. This was also a way to make these women feel included in contributing to the house, when it was much more common for the male to be the dominator and bring the pride to the family. However, this also translated to being a way to keep these women happy, becoming an activity to keep them busy, perhaps to stop them from rebelling and falling out of the restraint of their restricted lives. This was purely a domestic craft; the connotations of the material did not allow

for anything crossing the path into art to be made, it was an accessible way to create but held limitations.

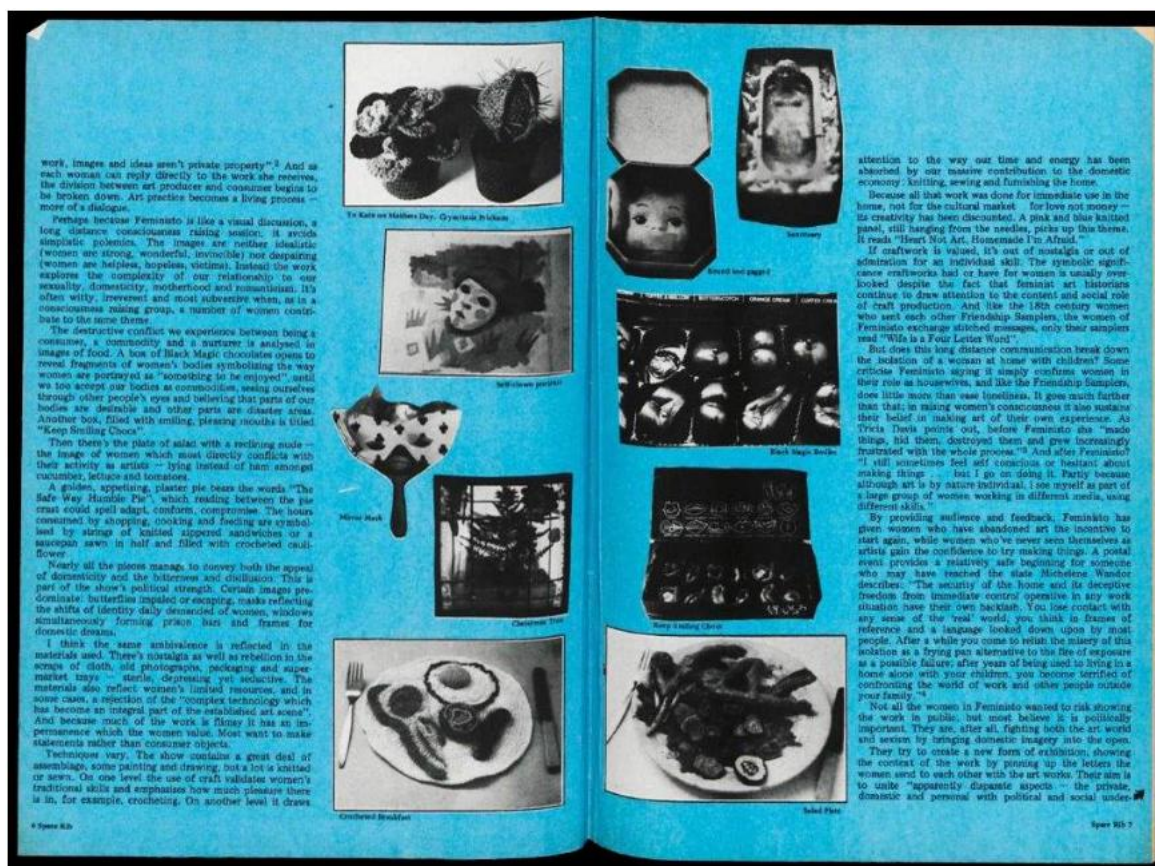
“Contrast the idea of swinging a pick in a dark cramped, and dusty mine shaft with a baby on one’s back” (Barber, E. J. W. 1995 p. 30) motherhood and becoming the ideal housewife was a direct correlation as to why textile work is still somewhat seen as a women’s job. This still carries weight today as many works of made today with materials still seen as just ‘craft’ are still unrecognised by the art world and not taken seriously. Which has led to a trend of female artists particularly ones that work using textile to be left unrecognised or only to gain any sort of major recognition in the late stages of their careers, artist like Alice Adams and Louise Bourgeois both faced this. There is a good chance this has also led too many lots of pieces of art not ever being shown or recognised, because these were not taken seriously and kept hidden away for many years, that it was then up too these artists to keep and save this work, but now lots of these are stored by major institutions, but there is still gaps and artist overlooked.



Figure 1

Skills like embroidery were later used as acts of planned rebellion and protest which showed up many times in the 1970s- and 1980s-Women's Peace Protest banners. At the Greenham Common protest, which began in Cardiff in 1981, led by a female fronted group that walked to Greenham on foot fighting against the housing of missiles in the Common, banners were used to express their voices loudly and clearly. "The banners declared the fence a boundary between femininity and

masculinity, between life and death” (Parker, 2012, p210), a key part of their protest identity using bold writing and intentionally stitched together letters using these typical ‘feminine’ materials created into skilful tapestries. Thalia Campbell one of the key figures in the organisation of the marches created many of these that were powerful in their words and can be considered works of art. In *Figure 1* she is using applique to sew together loud words using silky materials that give them a polished and lustrous look an integral part of these protests. She has said that they allowed for an immediate, direct message not allowing anything to become misconstrued or important points to be lost (Bourton, 2021). She describes these banners as “art, politics and sewing all wrapped up in one beautiful parcel” (Bourton) acknowledging the overlap and importance that textiles has had within politics. These often-had important women’s names stitched on very intentionally to ensure these names would not be forgotten. I think the particular use of textile here stands out because they have been able to reclaim a skill that has been expectedly placed upon them, as their form of protest.



Textile, particularly fabric has been a material women could secretly use for rebellion especially from inside of the home as this would have been a regular material to have around. Today this serves as a reminder today of the freedom of choice we once did not have. A group called the *Postal Art Event* (1975) started by Sally Gollop and Kate Walker, became a collective of women that connected themselves by sending small pieces of art they had made with each other, often textile or made from materials found from around the house. Taking the action of crafting at home and turning it into art and community connecting these women together from home to home. As shown in *Figure 2* a snippet of the collection that was recorded, showcasing work made with crochet, fabric and found materials some of the domestic household mediums used to make these pieces. They were exhibited

as The *Postal Art Event* but unfortunately many pieces today are lost or unrecorded as found with many women's textile related art. These objects were small and domestic natured as a direct correlation to where they were created, the home, and being at home did not allow anything to be created on a larger scale, these objects became a way for women to exchange and support each other creating art from inside the home (Amy T, 2016). Kate walker speaks about her choice to utilize embroidery and says that it is "...more appropriate than male-associated paint for making feminist statements" (Parker, 2012, p. 211)



Figure 3

An artist who grew up surrounded by her family's tapestry business, and then later explored textiles in her own work is Louise Bourgeois. She created many works using textiles ranging from soft sculpture, tapestry and found object installations. She made work with uncomfortable meaning using materials that are soft and light in nature, creating a feeling of discomfort and heaviness. Bourgeois began as a little girl helping to mend and create drawings for her family's tapestry business, being praised for her drawing skills which she continued later in her life. Her growing up around all this fabric clearly having a lasting impression on her and her work as an artist. When first asked to help with the drawing, which was not yet seen as a useful skill for her, she recognised her need to be proving herself particularly as a female from a young age, "And I was supposed to make myself forgiven for being a girl" (Greenberg, 2003 p. 13). This more submissive side of her is very contrasted by her later works where she does not apologize for her crude behaviours and themes she explores in her works particularly within soft sculpture.

Bourgeois's works often involve strong themes of her childhood and reverting to use textile materials, something heavily involved in her childhood, in the later stages of her career. She explored soft sculpture works creating heads, bodies or even just hinting at a body through the manipulation in the fabric. In *Figure 3* we can see rough sewn together patches created into a torso made from a fleshy pink fabric, depicting what seems to be a mother figure in the centre of what looks like an industrial surgical style table. She is attached with thread to five cotton reels placed around her, where they seem to be feeding from her body and taking away from her, attached at the breast. Her use of stitch in her artworks is almost incomparable to how embroidery has been used within art in a more traditional sense. She rejects the clean precision and carefulness that was upheld for so long and takes a much more provocative approach. Messily stitching seams that look to be just holding together like they have been mended or attached together from scraps. She has a way of using the

softness and malleability of the fabric to create body parts, using small hints to personify the body she creates in her hands. Her use of materials is always very intentional to how she wants each piece to feel, and her fabric works become human with the features she creates on them. Her works follow no constraints or rules that might have surrounded textile and embroidery in the past, but she is able to use this material freely.



Figure 4

Another artist, Tracey Emin an established artist from the YBA era creates artworks that are very personal, often confessional pieces storytelling of dark points of her life. Mostly known for her large size paintings and prints, she has also delved into creating a series of quilts, with confrontational words and thoughts stitched together. These also remind me of some of the original protest banners used in the marches for women's rights, one of the original ways this style of textile was used in a rebellious way. The implications of hand stitching these words hold lots of weight because of the associations of time and intentionality. "Emin employs embroidery as the prime medium of personal life" (Parker, 2012 p. 15) as shown in *Figure 4* she is once again subverting the domestic material and comforting quilt to spill and reveal these dark secrets and intense statements. She used an array of bright colours and kitsch fabrics to say her sharp words, almost masking the power behind them, seeming inviting from afar. Her use of the quilt is also a juxtaposing factor because a quilt is usually a memory of warmth and comfort or perhaps a labour of love created by someone with honest thoughts and intentions, but Emin removes this feeling when you begin reading and realise this is an admission into her mind. "The incorporation of text, and the appearance of misspelt words, garner greater impact because they are rendered in cloth and fibre" (Hemmings, 2002) I think this is an important point regarding the material because the planning and effort to sew or applique these letters takes more thought and planning than perhaps painting or print would have, rendering every move very intentional and labour intensive.

In conclusion I believe textile art has been one of the integral ways gender has been explored in art practise, allowing women to find and use their voices in ways not always possible before, being able to explore the meaning behind it. It has been an essential material used in the movement of taking the domestic outside of the home and creating a new wave of accessible art. It has inspired many women to rebel and directly take the material into art spaces and pushing against its 'craft' connotations. Used by many as protest banner art to fight for theirs and other rights, using

courageous and eye-catching words, working with material that they finally have an advantage using from years of building the skill in a restricted way. The material also used by many majorly influential artists such as Louise Bourgeois, establishing the medium as fine art, revolting against the constraints once put upon women in the art space that were using domestic materials. The material holds great power and weight regarding the history and undertones of where it began to how it can be used now, so I think its very important we keep recognising this space within art and remember all the women before who were fighting for a chance to be seen.

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Figure 1: Thalia C. D 1983, *Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp*, Available at:

<https://www.hasta-standrews.com/features/2025/3/31/we-will-meet-your-violence-with-a-loving-embrace-remembering-the-greenham-common-womens-peace-campTA>

Figure 2: Tate 1977, Page Spread from *Spare Rib*, Available at: [I'll Show You Mine, If You Show Me](#)

[Yours: Collaboration, Consciousness-Raising and Feminist-Influenced Art in the 1970s – Tate Papers | Tate](#)

Figure 3: Louise Bourgeois 2003 *The Good Mother* Available at:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-the-good-mother-t14862>

Figure 4: *Helter Fucking Skelter* (2001) Tracy Emin, Available at: [https://www.mrxstitch.com/tracey-](https://www.mrxstitch.com/tracey-emin/)

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