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Invisible Labour: Women and Craft

Craft, as defined in *The Culture of Craft* (Dormer, 1997) is a “skilled labour” that utilises the hands as tools. The relationship between women and handcrafts is complex, tied by matrilineal heritage (Stein, 2021) and limitations on women’s labour (Schiebinger, 1992). This exhibition explores the physical and societal divide between inside and outside (Bachelard, 1958) and how this has affected the visibility women’s labour. It also investigates the historical connection between crafts and femininity, and how this connection can be used as a tool of expression, connectivity, and activism.

To greater emphasise the theme of inside and outside, the exhibition takes place around central London. Opening with Lorina Bulwer’s embroidery sampler outside the Houses of Parliament, Magda Sayeg’s crochet bus will follow next to Westminster train station. Westminster Bridge displays Tracey Emin’s appliqued tent, and Zoe Preece’s hand-made ceramics are lined along The Queen’s Walk. Finally, Janine Antoni’s *Slumber* installation ends the exhibition next to St Thomas’ hospital.

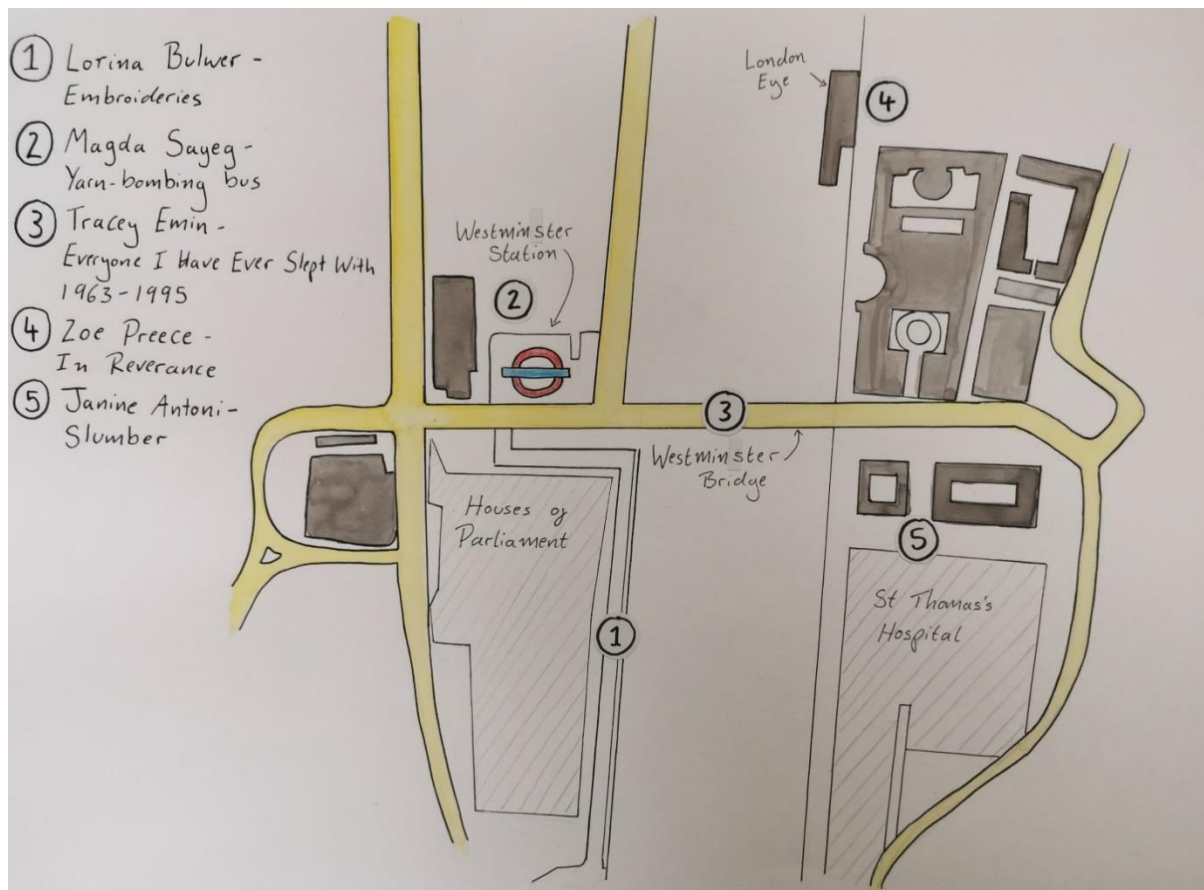


Fig 1. Map of the exhibition in central London.



Fig 2. Lorina Bulwer, *Details of an embroidered letter stitched by Lorina Bulwer, 2022.*

The exhibition begins outside of the Houses of Parliament, with an embroidery sampler by Lorina Bulwer. Created around 1900, the sampler consists of handsewn words sewn through thick layers of quilt (Hill, 2022). Bulwer expresses her anger and frustration of living in a workhouse through the aggressive stitching techniques (*Sampler sewn in Workhouse*, 2014). In a time where women were encouraged to attain “docility, obedience, love of home and a life without work” (Parker, 2012, pp.11), Bulwer subverts expectations with her often offensive, entertaining pieces.

Embroidery was used in the 17th – 18th centuries as a creative outlet for young girls, but also as a means of control. In *The Subversive Stitch* (2012), Parker states how embroidery was used “in maintenance and creation of the feminine ideal” (pp. 11). The expectations for women during this period were to be obedient, quiet, and docile. The highly focused, independent work of embroidery helped encourage this ideal. Although samplers were meant to promote obedience, they inevitably became places where young women rebelled against expectations placed on them (Parker, 2012). Bulwer’s embroidery replaced what she had lost in her social isolation – her voice. The domestic craft that meant to restrict her gave her the freedom to be angry, rude, and questioning.

Positioning her work next to the Houses of Parliament calls into question not only the personal struggles women have faced historically, but also systematic oppression that still affects women’s lives today, such as women’s higher risk of poverty due to the gender pay gap (Abdel-Raouf and Buhler, 2021).



Fig 3. Harrow Independent College, *Educational Visit to the Houses of Parliament*, 2018.

The second artwork, placed outside of Westminster train station, is the multi-coloured crochet bus by Magda Sayeg and the guerrilla knitting group Knitta Please (Saidi, 2009). This was originally displayed in Mexico City, 2008, when domestic crafts such as knitting, crochet, weaving and embroidery started to resurge (Robertson, 2011).



Fig 4. Magda Sayeg, *The Mexico City Bus Project*, 2008.

Sayeg approaches crochet with an air of spontaneity not usually associated to the craft (Peterson, 2019). This evokes a sense of freedom; to experiment, to take up space and influence one's surroundings. Historically, women's freedom to work outside of the home has been tightly restricted (Schiebinger, 1992). Taking a domesticated, stereotypically feminine craft into the public is a direct confrontation against this ideology. Both the bus itself and the train station have connotations of travel, emphasising the feminine no longer being confined to the domestic realm.



Fig 5. 10 A302, Google Maps, 2021.

The concept of domestic and public realms, however, are not always concrete. As stated by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), “outside and inside are both intimate – they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange hostility” (pp. 218). Our understanding of public and private changes; the line between both is not solid but can fluctuate. The third piece of the exhibition, Tracey Emin's *Everyone I have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, addresses this with both formal qualities and its placement on Westminster Bridge.



Fig 6. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, 2020.

The doorway of the tent exposes applied names embroidered throughout the interior. Emin created this piece in the 1990s, in which feminist resources became more accessible and yet further criticised in the media (Whelehan, 1995). The title produced unexpected shock value, with the term “slept with” being immediately sexualised (Emin, 2003). In reality, the names are people Emin physically slept next to, and shared intimate moments with.

Existing as both object and space, the tent is placed outside as a shelter - yet it remains open for the audience to crawl in. The outside is not entirely separated from the inside; the audience must cross this boundary to view the work. Outside and inside, public and private, industrial and domestic; these dualities have founded women’s restriction to the home, and subsequently their struggle to exist autonomously in the outside world. (Schiebinger, 1992).



Fig 7. Google Maps, *Westminster Bridge Rd*, 2021

The evocative placement of this work on Westminster bridge creates a link to the city’s homelessness. While women make up a smaller percentage of the homeless, the largest percentage of reasons why is a direct result of domestic violence (Moss, 2015). The

expectation of women to stay in the home, even if this is an unsafe place, can lead to more danger once this boundary is broken.



Fig 8. Zoe Preece, *In Reverence*, 2021.



Fig 9. Zoe Preece, *In Reverence*, 2021.

Lined along the wall of The Queen's Walk, Zoe Preece's ceramics will look out over the River Thames. Hand-made out of delicate porcelain, these ceramics were made between 2021-2022. In a contemporary era that is pushing for women's equality, Preece chooses to focus on the domestic labour that often goes unnoticed (Preece, 2021).

Preece utilises the connection between domestic objects – cooking utensils such as pots, pans, bowls, and colanders – and the craft of ceramics to create a powerful connection to women's labour. According to Buckley (2000), history paints women as mostly absent from the industrial production of ceramics but does not take domestic production into account. Women's labour within household and guild production of crafts was extremely common until the 18th century, when the boundaries between public and private life became more exclusive. This was also due to a lack of accessibility to apprenticeships and policies within academy structures limiting women's access to higher education (Schiebinger, 1992). By recreating ordinary domestic objects in ceramic, Preece elevates them into art, re-drawing the line between fine art and handcrafts, domestic and public, the visible and the invisible.

The ceramics' placement along Queens Walk further removes the original object from the home and places it in an incredibly public environment. In this way, women's domestic labour is no longer allowed to be hidden.



Fig 10. Google Maps, *The Queen's Walk*, 2014.



Fig 11. Janine Antoni, *Slumber*, 1993.

The final stage of the exhibition will take place outside St Thomas' Hospital. Janine Antoni's *Slumber* – an installation using a loom, yarn, bed, and EEG machine – implicitly addresses the concept of repetitive, endless labour. At night, Antoni sleeps on the bed and records her brain activity with the EEG machine. The next day, she weaves the patterns made by the EEG machine onto the loom.

Made in 1993 during the development of third-wave feminism (Snyder-Hall, 2010), *Slumber* investigates the reality of women's endless labour and the cycle of work expected of them.

Antoni links the ideology of femininity with weaving, which has largely been regarded as a woman's domestic pastime as with other textile crafts (Stein, 2021). Placing herself in the centre of the performance, Antoni denies objectification by engaging with the audience while weaving (Fisher and Drobnick, 2020). By connecting with the audience, this replicates an important aspect of craft for women: community. As outlined by Stein (2021), for women through many different cultures and periods in history, craft has represented "support, companionship, information sharing" (pp. 58) within their communities. It creates strong matrilineal bonds and allows women the space to express themselves creatively away from male-dominated society.

Simultaneously, there is an element of the seen and unseen. During the day the audience comes to look at Antoni's work, talk to her, and experience the performance. At night, when the EEG machine records her brain activity, Antoni is alone, communicating the seen and unseen labour undertaken by women in their daily lives.



Fig 12. Guy's and St Thomas' Private Healthcare, *St Thomas' Hospital*.

Fisher and Drobnick (2020) suggest that in *Slumber*, the use of medical equipment has associations with the "intrusive surveillance of women" (pp. 2). Antoni's body is the driving factor of the work, and her identity as a woman is a central aspect. For many years, there has been suggestion that the reason for women not having greatness in the arts is down to a biological disadvantage of being female (Nochlin, 1972). These expectations, placed from birth, have been the reasoning behind women's exclusions from many professions (Schiebinger, 1992). By placing this final stage of the exhibition outside of a medical institution, it represents the continued effort to access and rebuild social structures necessary to forge further opportunities for women.

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