

# DECORATING DISSIDENCE: MODERNISM FEMINISM & THE ARTS

ABSTRACTS & PROGRAMME:  
FRIDAY 3RD NOVEMBER

# PANEL ONE: CRAFTING COMMUNITY

11:45AM-1PM

## Angelica Falkeling | 'Pass This On'

How do you carry on movements, rhythms, energies and tones? To feel, I have so many voices inside of me who resonate, vibrate and speak through me – past, present and future? How to articulate this interplay in the spheres of art, politics and feminism? Through the details of pockets? Yes! No matter if they are dead or alive – trans, queer and women. It is a cross-generational dialogue in the social through the intimate craft of textiles, when hands touching with my background as a seamstress. Some suffragettes movements put visible pockets on their clothing. It made them walk differently in public space. What a provocation! A pocket can be a place for some coins, a gum or a place where you can hold your secrets. What do you carry, hold and let fall into your pockets when today's queer- and trans movements visible on the street are co-opted by multi- international companies? In this paper, I will speak through these questions with examples in my artistic practice. This, via my recent research on pockets, colour and politics in the mixed media installation Pass This On exhibited as a living room.

Pass This On is a mixed media installation, a wall frieze function as a backdrop in the space. It is the artists staged performance work which becomes a history of feminist embodiment in modernism in the home into the present.

This project wants to be a reality with potential and takes place in an office, a space which appears public when the owner opens or closes the door. In this paper I will speak through these anecdotes, images and video footage how the spirits of collage and painting passed on to contemporary queer clothing breath feminist history of daily motions – detail and decoration.

## Kate Dunstone | Craft as Conversation

“Conversation is always about giving.”

The joy of communal craft is familiar to many, be it through social knitting groups, educational workshops or simply making objects with friends. This paper seeks to understand the particular power of communal craft by viewing it through bell hooks’ idea of “conversational learning”, and identify key aspects of communal craft which allow it to function as a space for informal learning and the sharing of knowledge.

In “Teaching Critical Thinking” hooks’ encourages a “conversation-based model of learning”, which breaks down “defensive barriers” and encourages students to learn through compassionate communication. This theory of “conversational learning” provides a theoretical framework through which to understand how conversation through and with the act of crafting can function to generate and share knowledge. hooks’ definitions of “conversational learning” as democratic, non-hierarchical, compassionate and fun, as well as able to enhance understanding, can be applied to the act of communal crafting, especially in small workshop groups, and this parallel is explored to indicate its value as a radical means of informal learning.

The methodological framework of autoethnography is used as an outline for the use of personal experience in this research, with first-hand experiences drawn from teaching craft-based workshops with female and LGBTQ identified young people providing a data set for consideration and reflection. This particular environment and participant group indicates the potential for conversation with and through craft as a tool in generating and sharing self-care knowledge in youth communities.

The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for developing communal craft environments with a variety of audiences, which allow craft to function as conversation and encourage knowledge sharing.

## Claire Mead | Queering craft: Community, activism and resistance

Craft is deeply embedded within queer feminist modern art practices. Traditionally associated with feminine identity and domesticity, its reclaiming and subversion from a queer perspective allows for a visual language that is both autobiographical and deeply rooted within the LGBTQ community. From the 1970s onwards public art DIY practices have defined queer artists' involvement with activism in the LGBTQ community. Making craft a part of this queer public and activist dynamic within contemporary art practices allows for new conversations to emerge around its visual and symbolic power. Liz Collins' *Knitting Nation Phase 4: Pride* (2008) associates knitting with participatory public performance in a group recreation of Gilbert Baker's 1978 Pride flag, reclaiming its identity as both a public protest and celebration of community away from corporate interests.

Alyson Mitchell's installations re-appropriate craft and textile art as new tools for activism and debate, directly incorporating queer protest pieces such as the "Pride Is A Pyramid Scheme" patchwork quilt used in a Toronto "Take Back the Dyke" demonstration for one of her tent installations part of *Micro Maxi Pads Cinema* (2010). Her artistic practice as well as her curatorial work co-managing the FAG (Feminist Art Gallery) in Toronto revolves around the queer re-crafting of public and domestic spaces. Jessica Whitbread's work uses her own experience as a queer woman living with HIV to create activist public projects challenging notions of sexuality and desire. Meanwhile, Rebecca Levi's cross-stitch artwork plays with notions of queer identity, gender non-conformity and intimacy. The *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* exhibition (2014) at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art has shown the importance these practices are within queer visual culture in terms of cultural resistance and domesticity. They allow for craft to become a point of departure for conversations at the intersection of gender and sexuality as well as feminism. Their nature navigating and blurring borders between public and private spaces and activist and domestic states, captures the complexities of queer feminine identities and experiences.

# PANEL TWO: DOMESTIC DISRUPTIONS

2PM-3:30PM

## Chiara Dellerba | Womanhouse Project: Rethinking the Future of Women in Art and Craft

Throughout the history of art, decoration and domestic handicrafts have been regarded as women's work, and as such, not considered "high" or fine art. The age-old aesthetic hierarchy that privileges certain forms of art over others based on gender associations has historically devalued "women's work" specifically because it was associated with the domestic and the "feminine." That hierarchy was radically challenged in the 1960s. The transformation to fine art was defined by craft moving into the public sphere where women were creating works of art that surpassed the anonymity of domestic craft and could be viewed by the spectator.

It is in this historical context that Womanhouse project subverted the role of women in the private sphere and in the public sphere, radically redefining the importance of woman's craft labor as a fundamental element to fight against male hierarchy. Womanhouse, 1971–72, was the first the large-scale cooperative project executed as part of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts under the direction of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. For the first time, a group of 21 women artists had been called to organize themselves into putting on a female self-sufficiency art program to disrupted the commonplace that the woman could carry out only minor and domestic manual work. Ignored for years by the hegemonic narratives of art history, the project "Womanhouse" emerges today as an indispensable work for understanding artistic practices of the 1970's as well as for rethinking the future of art pedagogies and the relationships between visual art, performance and social craftivism.

Today, the craft movement is still struggling to break down the stereotypes that marginalize women's art. This is why it so important to underline the changes that woman house project has been achieved, reminding us an important statement: "The joy in producing craft comes from working with other women, learning from them and sharing experiences. Craft empowers women; it brings them together. It allows them to bypass consumer culture and reclaim traditional women's skills devalued by society. It is essentially a collective act, and still now a subject with political and subversive implications.

## Morgan Thomas | Domesticity, Décor, Radical Destruction: Forms of Refusal in the Work of Marguerite Duras & Haegue Yang

According to an article in the December 1919 issue of *Vanity Fair* (1913-1936), Anne Harriet Fish was one of the “most cosmopolitan of living black-and-white satirists”. Cited as something of a celebrity in the period, her work appeared throughout the 1910s and 1920s in a range of British, French, and American magazines. Most frequently her work was published in *Vanity Fair*, repeatedly characterised as the modern magazine. *Vanity Fair* has often been viewed as something of an oddity among critics; in that it engaged with both the popular and the experimental, featuring celebrity features and advertisements alongside modernist art and literature. Yet this assumes an inflexibility when it comes to the categorising of magazines, viewing highbrow, lowbrow, avant garde, slick, quality, mass, or any other label as fixed and impermeable. These assumptions are informed by a dualistic understanding of high and low culture which ignores the middle ground and leaves no room for what Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker refer to as “cross-fertilization”. Indeed, as recent work in periodical studies confirms, the interplay between different genres, contrasting features, and disparate forms is essential in the consideration of magazines as multifaceted objects of study. The relationship between the visual and the textual is a notable example of this.

Fish’s illustrations—signed simply and consistently “Fish”—were distinctive in style, with her female characters in particular demonstrating a clear evolution of her highly popular “Eve”, drawn for the British *The Tatler* (1901- ) throughout the 1910s. In *Vanity Fair* her work appeared on covers, but also regularly as satirical cartoons alongside annotations often written by Frank Crowninshield, Dorothy Parker, or George S. Chappell. The interplay between image and text is crucial in these pages and the efficacy of the humour and satire depends on it. Yet, both Fish and her work have been largely overlooked in terms of scholarly interest, subordinated to footnotes and passing references. This paper seeks to dedicate specific attention to Anne Harriet Fish; considering her contribution to *Vanity Fair*, how her work—on multiple levels—can be understood as part of a collaborative text, and the extent to which her work can be seen as evidence of transnational print cultures.

## Rachael Alexander | “Who, under the sun, is Fish?”: Anne Harriet Fish, Illustration, and Vanity Fair.

In a series of readings of Marguerite Duras's novella *The Malady of Death* (1982) produced and staged in various cities in Europe, Asia, and the North and South America by artist Haegue Yang since 2010, each involving a woman reading to the audience from the open book in her hands, the only mobile element on stage is a burning mosquito coil. In Duras's epochal film *India Song* (1975), the death of Anne-Marie Stretter (Delphine Seyrig), the woman at the centre of the story, is already prefigured in the array of objects placed on the grand piano at the center of film's *mise-en-scène*, to which the camera recurrently returns: a small vase of flowers, a photograph, a stick of burning incense. Here, it seems, the incense immortalised in *India Song* and the burning coil in Yang's minimalist reworkings of Duras's novella distill a logic of 'radical destruction' (Yang) running through both her work and Duras's writings and films. The motifs of the coil and the incense highlight Yang's and Duras's insistent gesture of situating their shared poetics of destruction in spaces that are generally categorised as domestic, decorative, 'feminine'. I suggest, then, that the truly radical aspect of Yang's and Duras's approaches to writing, cinema, and artistic production lies in this insistent enfolding of a domestic, 'feminine' décor with a destructive (or deathly) poetics. In order to propose an account highlighting the role of this radically destructive poetics vis-à-vis their shared artistic concerns, I draw here on several accounts of community and 'feminine' sexuality (e.g. via the work of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Lacan, Duras herself) as well as related investigations of systemic relationships between design, religion, and the bourgeois family (Weber, Baudrillard).

## PANEL THREE: CREATIVE LABOURS, FAMILIAL POETICS

3:45PM-5PM

### Dr. Julie Bates | Louise Bourgeois's fabric works: time-charged materials and radical family portraits

In the mid-1990s when Louise Bourgeois was in her 80s she asked her assistant to gather together clothes stored in wardrobes and the attic of her New York home; these had been worn by her mother, her late husband and her children, and by Bourgeois herself in her childhood and earlier life. Bourgeois used these worn garments as the basis for a series that marked a decisive change in her creative practice and saw her move from large-scale, hard materials to work instead with items of clothing and, later, with household fabrics. Rending and stitching she pieced together and converted these lived materials into fabric books, sculptures, collages and drawings in what she described as a 'reparative' dynamic.

A 'drama of the self' is how Louise Bourgeois described her creative practice, and she frequently equated her work with a complex form of self-portraiture. Bourgeois began making fabric works at an advanced age, when it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to manipulate heavy or large materials. On one level, her fabric works were a way of transforming these long-hoarded and precious items of clothing from clutter that was at risk of being lost or thrown out into artworks that would be protected after her death in 2010.

This paper draws on research in the Bourgeois archive in her former home and studio in Chelsea, where daybooks and diaries chart the unrelenting imaginative force of Bourgeois's childhood memories and relationship with her parents, and the anxiety and desire that characterised her relationship with her own children and husband. I contend that Michel Serres's topographical theory of time as a series of folds or gatherings in cloth or dough, as something that can be 'folded, wadded up' or 'crumpled' like a handkerchief offers a productive means of



## Jules Findley | Craft, Absorption and Maternal Loss

My research integrates creative practice working with fibre based materials with the scholarly and cultural exploration of the literatures and theories of maternal loss. Using paper as a means of connoting affect and grief in the practice, paper becomes the metaphor to discuss research questions that connects the maternal with affect in maternal grief. The process is auto-ethnography, using subjective experience as a medium through which to reflect on the relationship between materiality and affect. The substrate using play; judgment is suspended, is hand made to create individual materiality. The hand is essential in making and learning tacit knowledge of paper. The paper is a metaphor for absorption, we absorb the stresses of life in our work and mop up the daily spills. The theory of culture and society, which enabled the methods of auto-ethnography and creative practice research to emerge, is the paradigm of post modern and post positivist accounts of new relations between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. Moving forward from Glaser and Strauss's ideas on Grounded Theory, using contemporary mixed methods of display together with reflective practice are compatible with the emergence of feminist thinking on the significance of subjectivity and affect. There are many losses mothers have to bear, including losing our own mothers and in the process becoming unmothered. Making new sense of the conventional silence surrounding complex mourning, the practice itself connoting affect through the materialities of paper. Creative practice is connected to subjective processes of grief, mourning and reparation. The second, more enigmatic, is that all losses evoke, in some complex, enfolded way, the first ontological loss of the subject's first object of attachment.

## Eleanor Careless | 'Anna Mendelssohn's Implacable Art'

'It's those thin lines of thought onto paper which are my *raison d'être*,' wrote artist, poet and activist Anna Mendelssohn in 1987. Profoundly influenced by the work of modernist and Surrealist women artists such as Sonia Delauney (whose painting *La Cible* is the cover artwork for Mendelssohn's only fulllength volume, *Implacable Art*), Eileen Agar, Leonara Carrington, and Eva Hesse, Mendelssohn saw her late modernist poetry and artwork as the antithesis of decorative.

Refusing 'any division between Art and Life', Mendelssohn insisted that her creative work was recognised as vital, non-ornamental work, without being strictly 'productive' in a capitalist sense. Work for Mendelssohn was an all-consuming mode of existence, as the tens of thousands of unpublished drawings and poems in her Sussex archive attest. Her texts and images inscribe her own lived experience of radical activism, persecution and incarceration. In 1972, Mendelssohn was convicted of conspiracy to cause explosions and sentenced to ten years' in HMP Holloway. The trauma of that time registers in her highly experimental poetry and line drawings that blur the distinction between the drawn and the written, between inside and outside. Words and sentences are legible, often half-submerged, in her intricate line drawings; images, art materials and mediums punctuate and interrupt her poems. In the interplay between cell-like drawings and fractured poetic lines, Mendelssohn's work moves between figures of enclosure and escape.

In this paper, I will explore how the aesthetic struggle between images and sounds, decoration and vitality, the line and the text, produces its own form of hermeneutic dissidence. For Mendelssohn, this struggle is highly gendered: her embattled lyric or artistic subject is always, insistently, a woman, and the battlelines are drawn between modernism and domesticity, reproductive and creative labour, radical activism and feminist politics, a policed present and a concentrationary past. 'Those thin lines of thought' that constitute Mendelssohn's darkly humorous, decorative art never settle fully into image or text, suspend classification and deflect conventional reading strategies. 'Thin lines' might operate as thread, as 'poetry is... the suture', or facilitate 'composition in the narrow space between things'. Mendelssohn's implacable (that is, unappeaseable, unsparing, often angry) art exhumes but also departs from modernism's vexed gender politics and proximity to fascism, via strategies derived from subversion, her modernist foremothers, and craft.

## PANEL FOUR: CREATIVE LABOURS, FAMILIAL POETICS

3:45PM-5PM

### Maryanne Saunders | Women taking the cloth: fabric and the Jewess' body in the work of Jacqueline Nicholls

'The material body' (so termed by feminist scholar, Elizabeth Grosz), its presence and the so-called 'impurities' that arise from it hold particular significance to Orthodox Jewish women. A representation of the body that encompasses these multiple associations and processes of the body is part of the powerful corpus of the London based Orthodox Jewish artist Jacqueline Nicholls (B.1971). Nicholls, like Grosz, accounts for the multidimensionality of the body, as a material and symbolic construct and as a corporeal and psychic entity.

Nicholls uses textiles and clothing as the prominent medium of expressing her identity as a practicing Orthodox Jewish feminist. Her pieces range from ritualistic, daily projects to collaborative installations all relating back to what could appear to be a contradiction in terms. The artist references aspects of The Torah and Talmud (including its coverings, the Tefilin and its textual motifs) in her work, making garments that embody the tensions between the corporeal body and scriptural schemas contained in midrashic commentaries.

Through analysis of Nicholls' work, this paper will contemplate the relationship between the Jewish female body and textiles. This paper will address how Nicholls' provocative and radical use of textiles and fashion showcases her extensive practical abilities as well as her deeply pedagogical outlook on her own religious life. It will contemplate how this particular medium best conveys the way in which gender and sexuality are firmly stitched together in the artist's religion and Orthodox Jewish women's daily lives. Examining pieces such as *Maternal Torah* (2008) which selected by Sarah Lightman for the *Schmatte Couture* (2008) clothing exhibition at Ben Uri gallery and the later series *The Kittel Collection* (2012) this paper will demonstrate how Nicholls constructs these garments in a traditional manner but with small and highly affective semantic shifts. I will argue that these shifts permit the viewer to reassess the position women's bodies occupy in a religious practice and daily life.

## Paula Chambers | Materialising Dissent: Pussy Hats and Pussy Riot,

In February 2012 the Russian feminist punk group Pussy Riot were famously arrested for staging a performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. The media attention the very public trial brought the group ensured worldwide attention helped by the striking visuals of the women who performed as Pussy Riot wearing brightly coloured balaclavas, a strategy adopted by people all over the world who supported the women's stand on gender equality and women's rights. This politically resistant manifestation of materiality has parallels in other revolutionary forms of material engagement that operate as intentional anti-commercial and anti-establishment creative strategies. On January 21st 2017 in Washington DC, approximately 500,000 women, men and children marched to protest against the inauguration of Donald Trump as president. Calling itself 'The Women's March on Washington', this political demonstration, and its sister marches throughout the world, was remarkable for many reasons, not least the proliferation of pink knitted hats worn by a huge number of the demonstrators. This was an intentional strategy to make manifest through the materiality of craft, women's global solidarity. Conceived by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, the Pussyhat Project was an exercise in community action similar to other craft based activist projects such as 'yarn bombing.' This paper examines the political context of these two projects as evidenced through the materiality and processes of material engagement that have become the symbolic representation of a specifically feminist dissidence. Referencing Ele Carpenter and Alexandra Kokoli on activist materiality, Maurizia Boscagli and Daniel Miller on the feminine resonance of specific forms of material culture, and Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson's system of feminist objects, I propose that the balaclavas of Pussy Riot, and the pussy hats worn at The Women's March on Washington can be seen as a materialization of feminist dissent.

## Sarah Yoon | Race, Word, and Image: Representation and Strategies of Conceptualism in Recent Work of Kara Walker

Since the wide success of the mural *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994), there has been vigorous debate over the art-historical genealogies and politico-aesthetic valences of the work of Kara Walker. Discussion concerning Walker's conceptual reappropriation of historical, often highly sexualized imagery of African-American women has been particularly contentious, with some commentators accusing Walker of, however inadvertently, essentially reiterating racist visual tropes and reinscribing them in the contemporary imaginary. Central to this debate is the question of representation in Walker's drawings, paintings, silhouettes, and other mixed media. Though clearly drawing on conceptual strategies in her various uses of text, found imagery, and institutional critique, Walker nevertheless restores mimetic representation as a principal technique in her approach. Framing Walker's work between conceptual intervention and realist representationalism presents a particularly relevant extension of recent work by English and others on the place of race in the heyday of American conceptual art. Examining the process, material, and presentation of several salient works, this paper argues that Walker's representational strategies are meant to politically and aesthetically provoke, as well as to confront the burden of a racist past embodied within viewers. In spite of her embrace of traditional mediums, Walker remains robustly conceptual in her work's rhetorical strategies, positioned against violence, racism, and norms in art. Realizing the disharmony created by her artistic identity as a black woman artist and oil painter, Walker abandoned the medium that was heavily associated with masculine power. Her usage of everyday materials, such as sheer paper, reaffirms the canonically conceptual commitment to ephemerality and decommodification. In fashioning her own dialectic of conceptual strategy and representationalism, Walker opens a space for a narrative politics of visual identity within modes of art-making from which such content was traditionally excluded.

## Ehryn Torrell | Rip, Copy, Flatten, Stitch and Cut Again: How I turned British Vogue into Wall Art & Garments

This paper will explore my artwork as a practice of material feminism and dissident art-making. I use collage to explore the contemporary gaze, screen addiction and visual overwhelm. My research compares our contemporary experience of global and technological expansion with that of the early 20th century modernists. In particular, I am interested in how female artists like Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) and Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962) ignited avant-garde movements, producing multi-faceted work as costume designers, graphic artists, painters, sculptors, designers and illustrators. They each employed various technologies and established creative networks. Collaboration was key. Sonia Delaunay produced varied and ambitious artworks through her network of artists, poets, choreographers and manufacturers from Diaghile to Liberty. In this paper, I will discuss how feminist strategies - including acts of translation, material exploration, and collaboration, can offer more dissident practices of looking and reading images today. I will discuss how my work in collage has led me to work with various collaborators, including a digital designer, digital embroiderer, fashion designer, academic and dancer-choreographer. I use collage with full awareness of its affect as a medium. Images point to numerous signs and signifiers at work in the world.

I use imagery from British Vogue because I am interested in the persistence and popularity of fashion media images, despite their homogeneous representations of women, race, class and desire. For me, collage is a way to practice images – to read them, play with them and to rupture and refuse their power, which has flourished and profited through capitalism, technology and globalisation. In my work, content is glimpsed at, continuously interrupted and resistant to quick reading. Flat areas of colour contribute to the sense of flickering, shallow space. Last year, I began to scan and print my collages as digital textiles. Digital technology is used to enlarge and flatten the images, allowing me to play with their visual operations.

Exploring ways to position images and materials into new critical frameworks is key to my work. To get there, my operating procedure is to translate, deconstruct, reconstruct, alter, print again and insert noise. I aim to create dissident material – a form of resistance to consumption, homogeneity and visual seduction.

FROM 7:30PM, PLEASE JOIN US FOR THE LAUNCH OF  
THE 'DECORATING DISSIDENCE' EXHIBITION, ALSO  
HELD AT THE ART PAVILION. WITH A WORKSHOP  
(nb: limited spots), DJ SETS & DRINKS RECEPTION