SOFTNESS IS POWER: A FEMINIST DISCUSSION AND SUBVERSION OF SOFTNESS, RADICAL KNITTING AND SOFT KNOWLEDGE

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Image // Freddie Robins in studio by Douglas Atfield

I am known as a radical knitter[1&2] . Knitting is a process stereotypically linked to women and the domestic, although much of my work is produced using industrial machinery, which is usually associated with men and masculine labour. Whichever process I choose, the work that I produce always comes off the needles the same way: soft.

I am researching, and writing, about softness whilst simultaneously hand knitting with the softest yarns that I can buy. These are both natural, (silk, wool, mohair, cashmere and alpaca), and manmade, (nylon, acrylic and polyester), plus mixes of the two. The research is underpinned by my on-going questioning of notions of 'normality', and an embracing of the non-binary: the subtleties and differences that lie between two defined points.

I write as I knit, with ideas linking together like stitches on a needle that grow to become a single work. But I am a much more experienced and skilful knitter than I am a writer. Speaking to an artist friend about my struggles to write about knitting, he asked, "Why don't you knit it?" All of the ideas contained within this written text are also embodied within my textile work, but many people in Western society don't know how to 'read' material objects. As a society we have long privileged sight over all other senses, and generally we value and trust the written word above all else. Here I am reminded of quipus (or khipus), the knotted cotton, or camelid fibre, string devices made by the ancient peoples in the region of Andean South America to record information, instead of written language, which they did not have. This is soft knowledge. Today no one can 'read' the quipus that still exist. In her essay, "Making Something from Something: Toward a Re-definition of Women's Textile Art," curator Ann Coxon discusses women artists working with textiles and their challenge to the hierarchy of the senses:

> "…the techniques and processes of making employed by women artists throughout the 20th century may be seen to return time and time again to what they term 'handwork' – a word suggestive of a tactile, haptic sense of making and experiencing art that no longer privileges the visual or cerebral."[3]

The contemporary importance of material practitioners' writing was made evident through *Crafts Magazine's* "The Power List" published in the May/June 2018 issue[4]. In this list they named the twenty most influential people in British craft as nominated by thirty leading figures in the field. The list made it clear that "clay is the material that carries the most clout" with three out of the top five, and six out of the twenty, identifying themselves as ceramicists. The top two were writers, and the top four were all published authors. The gender split was 3:2 in women's favour, and the list represented some diversity in terms of race, culture and LGBTQ+, but what of the soft stuff, namely fibre and cloth? This was barely visible, with only two makers listed having worked with soft material, and neither have a practice committed solely to it.

The difficulty of displaying soft work

Soft and floppy are two of the key properties of knitted fabric, along with it being warm and stretchy. These properties are valued when producing garments, but for art and crafted objects that are exhibited in a gallery or museum setting, they present problems when it comes to installation and display. In the British craft historian Jessica Hemmings' lecture at the 2016 Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art, she observed:

> Cloth sags. It creases, wrinkles and droops. In response, some artists stretch and frame their work. Others trap cloth behind glass where there is no chance of knowing through touch. Worse still, endless miles of monofilament suspend installations without ever really managing to be invisible.[5]

Having employed these, and other, unsatisfactory and often time-consuming methods of presentation, I have become frustrated and bored with conventional display practices for craft objects. In desperation I have started to fill my knitted forms to make them rigid and self-supporting, giving them the properties of traditional sculptural forms. While this has solved the problem of display, as well as issues associated with classification and acceptance of the works, it does bother me that I am denying the fabric its inherent fluid, shape-shifting qualities, qualities that we should not avoid, or ignore, simply because they do not sit comfortably within the gallery context. As Hemmings goes on to say, "Textiles occupy a meaningful and deserved place in the art gallery. But display strategies often do the particular qualities of cloth a disservice."[6]

My own experience of exhibiting in a textile-themed exhibition curated by artists exploring the medium resulted in the following query when the work didn't hang flat: "We are hanging your work today and would like to know how you feel about the textiles. It is warping at the bottom. What do you suggest?" I responded: "That's fine. It is a floppy textile so the warping is what it does. In my current work I am embracing the quality and behaviours of fabric instead of trying to control it and make it 'behave' like more conventional and accepted material used in the production of art works. Don't be afraid."[7] "Don't be afraid" references the title of the work that I was exhibiting, a three-metre high knitted 'tapestry' entitled *Be afraid* (2019), which has the words, 'Be afraid, be very afraid' knitted into it in reference to many people's fear of softness.

In the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of soft materials and textile processes by a new generation of artists, with a number of high-profile exhibitions at key international institutions such as *Entangled: Threads and Making*, Turner Contemporary, Margate, 2017; *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024 and *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, Museum of Modern Art, New York and touring major museums in USA and Canada, 2023-2025. As part of this resurgence of interest in textiles from the contemporary art world there has also been a repositioning of artists who have, or have had, a long-term commitment to working in the soft textile medium, but whose practices have been overlooked, or under-exposed. The American artist, Sheila Hicks, is one such artist who has recently had a number of significant international exhibitions and major retrospectives such as her installation, *VIVA ARTE VIVA* at the Venice Biennale, 2017, *Sheila Hicks: Lignes de Vie* at the Musee National d 'Art Moderne – Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris, 2018, *Sheila Hicks: Off Grid* at the Hepworth, Wakefield, UK, 2022 and *Sheila Hicks 1* at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Germany, 2024/25. Hicks is a committed textiles practitioner, having worked with the medium for over sixty years. She doesn't just use textiles processes and materials; she thinks through them. Her work sits firmly within the field of textiles and is undeniably soft; however, neither of these words are used to describe her work in the overview of her practice published on the website of her London-based gallery, Alison Jacques. Instead, more ambiguous terms and descriptions are given:

> Working to manoeuvre colour, texture and form, the Paris-based artist has produced a rich and complex body of large-scale bas-reliefs, sculptures and installations that indulge in material tactility and the collective experience of space. On a contrasting scale, Hicks's intimate *minimes* allow a valuable glimpse into the artist's habitual, incessant making process, as well as her enduring interest in construction and material relationships. Regardless of scale, hers is a project of tactility, sensuality, hapticity; of felt connection and the communication thereof.[8]

Is Hicks' use of process and material insignificant to the contemporary art world or is it simply that the words 'textiles' and 'soft' are unappealing to those outside of the textiles' world? Despite the resurgence of interest in textiles in recent years, it appears that the art world is still scared of the soft stuff.

Soft Art

Even during the late 1960's and early 1970's, the ostensible heyday of fibre art in the United States, soft materials were not always welcome in the gallery. There were a number of high-profile exhibitions of 'soft art' and 'soft sculpture.' These hybrid categories were an attempt to override the art world's artificial divide between art and craft, and to encompass the work of fibre artists who were overlooked because of the materials they worked with. All the exhibitions demonstrated a commitment to softness through the repeated use of the word "soft" in their titles, for example Ralph Pomeroy's *Soft* Art at New Jersey State Museum (1969), Lucy Lippard's touring exhibition, *Soft and Apparently Soft Sculpture*, curated for the American Federation of the Arts (1968-69), and *Soft as Art*, New York Cultural Center's touring exhibition (1973).

Image // *Fire*, 2020, hand knitted yarn and nails photo by Ciara Leeming

The art critic James Collins was unimpressed with this kind of soft art. In his review of *Soft as Art for Art Forum* he stated that, "From the evidence of "Soft as Art" one of the things artists shouldn't do today is to make art with anything soft."[9] Collins struggled with the curatorial rationale that brought works together because they shared the same physical property of being soft. He was unable to accept this as a critical framework, so he created his own categories: object identity, process concerns, revamped painting, craft/ fetish and novelty art. However, it was only the works

Image // Freddie Robins, *It's all the same*, 2019 machine knitted wool_600x230x20cms(photo by Justin Piperger)

that he categorized as 'object identity' (Claes Oldenburg) and 'process concerns' (Richard Serra and Robert Morris) that he valued, stating that they "come across very strongly because of the theoretical underpinnings of their work."[10]

The works in the other three categories were damned for being "neither experientially nor theoretically interesting."[11] Collins was particularly dismissive of the works that he categorized as 'craft/fetish', attempting to justify his negative use of the term 'craft' in the following statement: "To argue about certain works having craft associations is only to say they give the impression of manual over mental dexterity and people who are manually dextrous aren't necessarily interesting artists."[12] And to ensure that his criticism wasn't dismissed as purely sexist he stated: "Labelling a work as craft orientated isn't an attack on women." Collins's criticism of the exhibition appears to be based on the fact that he was uncomfortable with the blurring of the divisions between established art forms, shoring up the existing boundary between art and craft.[14]

According to Elissa Auther, African American feminist artist

Faith Ringgold's "turn to fiber in the early 1970's provided her with a new, important tool in the creation of works of art directed toward the critique of racism and sexism in the art world."[15] Although most well known for her "story quilts," Ringgold continues to identify herself as a painter, challenging the Western art/craft hierarchy through her soft works. Ringgold has stated:

> Who said that art is oil paint stretched on canvas with art frames? I didn't say that. Nobody who ever looked like me said that, so why the hell am I doing that? So I just stopped; and now I do sewing and all kinds of things… Feminist art is soft art, lightweight art, sewing art. This is the contribution women have made that is uniquely theirs.[16]

Ringgold was optimistic about the dissolving of the boundaries between craft and art, soft and hard. In an interview with American curator Eleanor Flomenhaft, the artist was asked if she determined whether other quilts were craft or art before agreeing to enter a quilt exhibition. She responded: "I'm not that uptight about that. I realize that people will want to make that distinction, and I feel that maybe by the year 2000 people will be asking what that was all about."[17] However, Ringgold's optimism has not been realised, over twenty years later these boundaries still exist.

The Welsh-Ghanaian artist Anya Paintsil also works with soft materials to critique racism and sexism, communicating her personal experiences through textiles. Paintsil uses hand latch-hook rug-making techniques, learnt from her grandmother, to construct large, tufted wall hangings. Paintsil's work is figurative, naïve, humorous and spare, with facial features and body parts floating in large, solid areas of neutral coloured tufted yarn. Her works are highly tactile, super soft and fluffy. This extreme softness is not always well received. In an interview from 2021 with Malaika Byng for Crafts magazine, Paintsil recalls how at London's 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair a man told her he didn't like the work at first because it was "fluffy," but when he looked closer he understood it. According to Paintsil: "By making them 'fluffy' and 'fun' I can draw people in to interrogate these issues."[18] Paintsil has also incorporated her own soft Afro hair into some of the works, hair being symbolic of the Black experience, from slavery to the present day. Hair is also a "subversive tool for questioning the female status and the human condition."[19] Paintsil has talked about the intersections between Afro hairstyling and rug-making techniques. With both processes you use the same latch-hook; with rugs you are hooking yarn through canvas, in Afro hairstyling you are hooking extra hair through cornrows. Both skills are associated with marginalized groups, namely people of colour and working-class women.

Paintsil has experienced commercial success since completing her undergraduate degree in the summer of 2020. Just a few months later, her work sold out at the Contemporary African Art Fair, 1- 54, with works being bought by both private collectors and public collections. However, her work, materials, and processes were not so well received during her fine art studies: "none of my tutors liked textiles. They all thought that we were beyond this point in history; feminist art had already been done and there were no more points to be made with it. I was heavily criticized on the materials I used."[20]

These criticisms did not only come from male staff: "Even with my dissertation I had a (female) tutor who was really critical of the idea of women's art, craft being used, historically or today, in any form of art. They completely tried to stop me from making textile art and tried to make me find other ways of making the work that I wanted to make. With the female lecturers I dealt with I think there was this absolute not wanting to make work that was clearly made by a woman. They wanted your work to be genderless but that doesn't really mean genderless it means it should be read as male work. Men are the default. If you don't make work that looks like it's made by

Image // *Slate*, 2024, hand knitted yarn, shoe laces, leather glove, slate. photo by Douglas Atfield

a man, then it's made by a woman, and that's a bad thing."[21]

Paintsil's reflections on the attitudes towards her soft, obviously female-made work, bring to mind Mark Hudson's review of *Entangled: Threads and Making*, which was exhibited at Turner Contemporary in Margate in 2017. He gave the exhibition four stars out of five, but concluded his positive review with the following statement:

> At a time, indeed, when women artists are everywhere, it might seem odd to mount an exhibition of art solely by women, celebrating "feminine" ways of making things. This is, however, a lively and consistently entertaining show, which will be particularly instructive for the male visitor. There is, in the very tactility of this art, an unmistakable whiff of oestrogen that is for the male quite alien, but undeniably life-enhancing. [22]

In summing up Paintsil's interview, Byng mentions the power of the softness in the work, which enables Paintsil to deliver difficult messages:

> I find myself wondering, with some soul-searching, if I would have responded to her work so strongly if her message was more direct, with a harder edge. Instead, her delivery is soft, unthreatening and warm, which makes it more palatable – and therefore more pervasive.[23]

The Control of Softness

American painter Lydia Pettit has a strong "personal, domestic connection" with soft materials having grown up with quilts "all over" her family home.[24] However she didn't turn to the processes of sewing and quilting until the second year of her MA in Painting at the Royal College of Art in London when she wanted to make something to celebrate the birth of her first niece. This process also helped her to move through artist's block. Pettit has now incorporated these processes into her creative practice, using padded quilting techniques to represent the topography of her own soft body. On Instagram, a photograph of the peppermint green circular quilted Tencel body portrait of her breasts, stomach, and parted thighs, which Pettit likens to the traditional sculptural form of bas-relief, *Rubenesque 2* (2021), is accompanied by the words, "an ode to the words people use to describe me when they are dancing around 'fat.'" In an interview, Pettit spoke about her relationship to her own body and quilting:

> …it's changed over the years, but it's so contentious. I'm really fighting to embrace it and I think creating these little homages to my body, and something so tender as a quilt, I think it's a lot more reverent sometimes than my paintings are.[25]

Both Pettit and Max Kozloff, an American art historian and critic, reference gravity in their discussions about softness and soft works of art. However, they take very different standpoints. When discussing soft works of art, Kozloff, a male critic, observes: "Their surrender to gravity introduced a pessimistic inflection into our sculptural empathies; and their acceptance of chance shapes contradicted formalist criteria."[26] Pettit, on the other hand, embraces the lack of control, surrendering herself to softness, stating that a quilted work is "like a living object. When I first make a piece versus months later the thing has changed. Gravity has affected it, compression has affected it and it's going to constantly change, there really isn't a guarantee for longevity."[27] Pettit's comments on people's discomfort with softness are also revealing:

> The aversion to softness is also clearly about an aversion to emotional softness. It's all vulnerability and people are so uncomfortable with softness in every form. They're uncomfortable with the tediousness and the perception of softness in the art world, but also with the labour of being vulnerable and those are things that are commonly tied to women.[28]

Ironically, one of the roles of softness is to make people more comfortable.

The Value of Softness

American author Siri Hustvedt has written:

> We, all of us, men and women, encode masculinity and femininity in implicit metaphorical schemas that divide the world in half. Science and mathematics are hard, rational, real, serious and masculine. Literature and art are soft, emotional, unreal, frivolous, and feminine.[29]

We all know that this division is constructed, but for a minute let's just pretend that it is true and that everything could be divided in this simplistic way. Why would one be better, more desirable or more valuable than the other? Can a non-binary approach to gender free us from these stereotypes? Can it dismantle these schemas and the hierarchy that assigns greater value to the metaphors associated with the masculine so that each quality can be appreciated and valued for its individual merits?

We have the 'hard' sciences (the natural sciences), and the 'soft' sciences (the social sciences), with the implication that some kinds of knowledge are harder to acquire than others, and thus more valuable. These presumptions are illustrated by a technical training exercise delivered by Debbie Stack, a textiles technician at the Royal College of Art in London. In 2019 Stack was asked to teach a machine sewing skills workshop to a group of MA Design Product students who were predominantly male but not exclusively. They learnt how to make a cloth bag and were very surprised at how difficult it was. Working with the soft stuff was harder than they had anticipated.

Conclusion: Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Softness

Swiss transdisciplinary artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp's (1889 – 1943) soft textile work has been largely ignored for many years; it was even excluded from retrospective exhibitions of her work at both the Museo Comunale d 'Arte Moderna, Ascona, Switzerland (1983) and the Städelsches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt, Germany (2002). Although Taeuber-Arp did distinguish between the different art forms that she engaged with, namely 'crafts and marionettes' and 'painting and reliefs', to her there was no hierarchy; she treated the art forms as being of equal value.[30] In her 1970 monograph on Taeuber Arp's work, the German writer Margit Staber discusses the marginalization of the 'applied art' work that Taeuber-Arp produced:

> Jean Arp [Taeuber-Arp's husband] feared more than anyone at that time that the inclusion of these practical activities would reduce her artistic achievements to the level of arts and crafts. Arp believed that she ran this risk of misinterpretation particularly in relation to her embroidery and woven works.[31]

In 1976, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin wrote about the conflict women faced when working with mediums and processes that were associated with craft:

> On the one hand, for a woman artist to 'return' as it were, to her traditional role in the minor arts, generally less conducive to fame and fortune than a career in painting and sculpture, can be viewed as a retrograde step. Yet from another vantage point, we can say that advanced women artists involved in the decorative arts in the early twentieth century were contributing to the most revolutionary directions – both social and aesthetic – of their times.[32]

The 2021 retrospective exhibition of Taeuber-Arp's work at Tate Modern in London contained the most radical object that I have ever seen in a gallery of contemporary art: a cushion. It is a much-derided object, the epitome of softness and usually confined to the gallery gift shop. The fact that Taeuber Arp's soft textile work is now receiving equal exposure to the other art forms that she practised offers evidence of a move towards the wider acceptance and valuing of the creative practices, materials and objects associated with women.

The Textile Society could further my work in the future by exposing the two areas of my studio practice, making and writing, to a broader range of textile professionals and textile lovers than I currently engage with. I write in an accessible style, which enables a wide audience to engage with my work. This echoes my approach to textiles where I work predominantly with knitting, a 'common art', widely recognised and understood, if not fully appreciated for its skill and cultural value. Writing is a relatively new practice for me, and to date I have only had a few articles and papers published. My name is not associated with writing and publishing. I would like to increase the visibility of my critical writing, and be recognised for this activity, but not at the expense of my studio practice. I see the two as mutually supportive activities and work hard to keep them in balance. Words can easily dominate.

As I write in the text that I have submitted, "….*generally, we value and trust the written word above all else*". As an artist and maker, I find this frustrating. As I also state in my text, "*I write as I knit, with ideas linking together like stitches on a needle that grow to become a single work.*" In my writing I relate to my favourite author, American writer, Paul Auster (1947–2024), who had no relationship to textiles but said of writing, "…*it's a tactile experience, as if words are somehow coming out of my body.*" And that it [a book] "*starts with a shape*." I work on my writing, and my knitted works, until they are the right 'shape'. I would like my 'shapes' to be seen and read by more.

NOTES

[1] The title, *Softness is Power*, is taken from the statement that Scottish artist, Jean Oberlander, used in her knitted banner for *PROCESSIONS*, a mass-participation artwork across the UK, which celebrated one hundred years of votes for women, held on 18th June 2018. For more by Jean Oberlander see "Softness – A Meditation on Knitting", Common Threads Press, 2025.
[2] Charlotte Abrahams, "Out on a Limb," *Crafts*, issue no.242, May/June 2013 and Janis Jefferies, "Loving Attention: An Outburst of Craft in Contemporary Art." In *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 232.
[3] Ann Coxon, "Making Something from Something: Toward a Re-definition of Women's Textile Art." In *Entangled: Threads & Making*. ed. Karen Wright (Margate, Kent: Turner Contemporary, 2017), 33.
[4] The Power List," Crafts, no.272, May/June 2018.
[5] Jessica Hemmings, "Floppy Cloth: textile exhibition strategies inside the white cube," TEXTILE, 17:4 (2019): 412-434, doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2019.1588688.
[6] ibid
[7] Personal communication with the author through instagram direct messaging, 20 October 2020.
[8] Sheila Hicks, https://alisonjacques.com/artists/sheila-hicks Accessed June 24, 2025.
[9] James Collins, "Soft as Art", Art Forum, Summer 1973. https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/197306/claes-oldenburg-sig-rennels-richard-serra-robert-morris-alan-shields-al-loving-frank-viner-nina-yankowitz-rosemary-mayers-jacki-ferrara-francoise-grossen-brenda-miller-and-pat-oleszco-73595.
[10] Ibid
[11] Ibid
[12] Ibid
[13] ibid
[14] For further discussion see Elissa Auther, String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 44-46.
[15] Elissa Auther, String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 103.
[16] Auther, String, Felt, Thread: 105.
[17] Auther, String, Felt, Thread: 117. Taken from Eleanor Flomenhaft, "Interviewing Faith Ringgold/A Contemporary Heroine." In Faith Ringgold: A 25 Year Survey (Hempstead, NY: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1990), 12.
[18] Malaika Byng, "Packing a punch," Crafts, issue no.286, January/February 2021
[19] Kathryn Lloyd, "Women and Hair: Materialising the Abject." In Entangled: Threads & Making. Ed. Karen Wright. (Margate, Kent: Turner Contemporary, 2017),137.
[20] Anya Paintsil interviewed by the author, 1 July 2021.
[21] ibid
[22] Mark Hudson, "Material benefits of crafty women - Entangled, Turner Contemporary, Margate, review." The Telegraph, 30 January 2017. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/material-benefits-crafty-women-entangled-turner-contemporary/
[23] Malaika Byng, "Packing a punch," *Crafts*, issue no.286, January/February 2021.
[24] Lydia Pettit interviewed by the author, 13 May 2021.
[25] Lydia Pettit interviewed by the author, 13 May 2021.
[26] Max Kozloff, "The Poetics of Softness/1967." In Materiality, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt. (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 90-92. Originally published in American Sculpture of the Sixties (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967).
[27] Lydia Pettit interviewed by the author, 13 May 2021.
[28] ibid
[29] Siri Hustvedt, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (London: Sceptre, 2016), 84
[30] Medea Hoch and Bettina Kaufman, "Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Direct Abstractions." In *Sophie Taeuber-Arp* (London: Tate Publishing, 2021), 26.
[31] Hoch and Kaufman, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, 26. Taken from Margit Staber, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp* (Paris: Edition Recontre Spadem, 1970). 83.
[32] Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950,* ed. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), 60.