Unraveling Crochet

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of “craft” has a long and tangled history, a history that once unwound, sheds light on the way that we relate to the world. Craft objects (like all objects) have meaning and the way that these objects are used and discarded, categorized and perceived, bought and sold, speak to the values of a culture at a given time. This all may seem self-evident, but in tracing the popular perception of craft objects through time, the ever-changing values regarding such important concepts as self-conception, individualism, autonomy, and sincerity, become apparent.

In Part I, I will begin with an historical discussion of craft and its shifting definitions, definitions made especially clear during four distinct historical (or intellectual) periods: the European Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Arts and Crafts movement of the turn of the 20th century, and the 20th century Avant-Garde. The distinction between art and craft that seems common sense today was not, in fact, always present.

This historical discussion of craft serves to contextualize contemporary craft practice, which picks up threads of reasoning from these earlier conceptualizations. Part II of this essay addresses textile craft specifically for the significant role it has played in women’s history. According to Roszika Parker, “the history of embroidery is the history of women” (Parker 1984:3). Even so, for some time the “world of the needle” was neglected by scholars, seen as trivial because of its ubiquity, or later, understood as demeaning and oppressive by many feminist scholars (Goggin 2009:3). Thankfully, however, there exists today a significant literature on textile craft, most notably focusing on embroidery and knitting. These crafts have enjoyed a long
history and thus are ripe for theorization. In Part II, I will look specifically at another “domestic craft,” a practice related to both knitting and embroidery, but distinct from both—crochet. Crochet is a particularly interesting case study for the exploration of the complicated and contingent understandings of craft, art, domesticity, femininity, labor, and leisure, as it exists somewhere between embroidery and knitting on the “decorative/utilitarian” continuum. While knitting has existed mostly as a means to produce utilitarian objects both commercially and within the home, embroidery has always been understood as “decorative.” Underlying these discussions is also an attention to the concept of the individual that produces and is produced by these understandings of craft. Changing notions of individuality, autonomy, and authenticity, are the warp to this story’s weft, existing invisibly and nearly imperceptibly beneath the surface, rarely understood as anything more than “common-sense,” but holding the whole tapestry together nonetheless.

PART I

CRAFT IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

The majority of literature dealing with contemporary craft practice makes cursory mention of medieval Europe as a hallowed time for crafts, a time when arts and crafts were one. This is most notably the result of the Arts and Crafts movement, especially the writings of its most famous members, John Ruskin and William Morris, who at the turn of the twentieth century, offered up what was perhaps the first theory of craft. Their writings set an imagined and romantic version of medieval Europe as
the standards to which craftsmen, and society as a whole, must strive. It speaks to the rhetorical power of the Arts and Crafts movement that Ruskin and Morris’ understandings of the European Middle Ages still hold considerable sway over the popular conceptions of craft today.

While it is widely noted (Lucie-Smith 1981; Boris 1986) that Morris’ and Ruskin’s understanding of the Middle Ages was overly simplistic and romanticized, it is also true that the European Middle Ages supported an outlook on craft production that was very distinct from the understandings of craft that would come later. It is not so much the change in attitudes towards craft that is compelling, but what caused this change, the type of self-concept that prefigured the desire for certain craftspeople (painters and sculptors, specifically) to assert themselves as distinct from other craftspeople.

In the History of Craft, Edward Lucie-Smith contrasts the nebulous and contested definitions of craft necessary today, with a time when a definition would not have been so difficult to assign, a time when “everything [was] craft. All processes of making [were] hand processes, everything made, whether utilitarian, ritual, or merely decorative [was] essentially a craft object” (1981:7). During the European Middle ages, a number of arts that we now would think of as fine-art or high-art belonged to the category of the “practical arts.” Painting, sculpture, saddle-making, sculpture, goldsmithing, embroidery, pottery, all belonged to the same category, that of the “manual arts” (Carroll 2010:3).

Attitudes towards work in the Middle Ages were influenced by the ubiquity of Christianity in Europe. Whereas labor had been despised in pagan Europe, by the
Middle Ages, thanks to Christianity, though not revered, handwork was bestowed with a special dignity, and was understood as a means to connect to God (Lucie-Smith 1981:114). This understanding had significant bearing on the developing mind/body binary that would lead eventually to the devaluation of craft work. Writing of the philosophy of Rene Descartes, Charles Taylor explores the disengagement of the body from mind:

> Coming to a full realization of one’s being as immaterial involves perceiving distinctly the ontological cleft between the two, and this involves grasping the material world as mere extension. The material world here includes the body, and coming to see the real distinction requires that we disengage from our usual embodied perspective. (1989:145)

It would be reckless to argue that it was the philosophy of Descartes that caused craftwork’s precipitous fall from its previously well-regarded position. The underlying understanding of the material world and body as distinct from the soul or the mind was an idea that Descartes illustrated rather than invented. Still, it was this idea, already present in certain discourses by the Renaissance, that allowed for the eventual valuation of “art” over “mere” craft. By the Renaissance, the distinction between art and craft had begun to emerge, instead of both being united pursuits of an integrated body/mind, there began to be a perceived difference “as one between intellectual and purely physical endeavors--the life of the mind as opposed to the life of the body” (Lucie-Smith 1981:160).

Taylor illustrates this prioritization of the mind over the body with the increasing emphasis on “inner prayer” and individual faith associated with the Reformation. This is in contrast to the widespread religious practices of Medieval Europeans, where “belief content was very rudimentary, and devotional practice was
largely a matter of what one did” (Taylor 2007:63). For Medieval Europeans, belief could be a bodily practice; belief could be expressed through “what one did” as opposed to “what one thought.” Fasting, “blessing the candles” and “creeping the cross,” were no longer sufficient for a robust religious practice, but became, especially among the elite, “mindless diversion from real piety” (Taylor 2007:71). The “real piety” came of one’s individual, private relationship with God. These new religious forms represent both a growing individuation and also a devaluing of the body in relation to the mind.

Both of these concepts have obvious implications for the role of crafts in society. Whereas “in premodern times, the arts were simply any practice whose exercise required skill, based upon training, rather than solely upon some innate capacity,” (Carroll 2012:3) the Renaissance saw a rift appear within the once broad category of “arts.” Lucie-Smith notes that this rift is not only a product of the Renaissance, but perhaps is one of the defining features of the Renaissance itself (1981:165). By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this split became even more distinct as artists began to rise in the social hierarchy of the day, accumulating numerous “outward honours and signs of respect” (Lucie-Smith 1981:165).

The devaluation of the work of the body in relation to the work of the mind had especial consequences for women artisans around the time of the Renaissance. As Lucie-Smith writes, “manual labor, if demeaning for men, was not so for women” (1981:116). Up until the Renaissance, women had played a significant role in the craft guilds of Medieval Europe. While women participated in a number of crafts, not all limited to textiles, women’s experience with the craft of embroidery is a perfect
example of the historical feminization and domestication of a craft once practiced professionally by both men and women. Popular understanding has it that embroidery has always been women’s work (Parker 1984:1). However, the development of an ideology of femininity that embroidery now embodies coincided with the art/craft divide of the Renaissance. During the medieval period, both men and women worked together in professional embroiderer’s guilds (Lucie-Smith 1981:137). These guilds were highly regarded, in fact, within the guilds, embroidery was considered of equal status to what would later become the high-arts of painting and sculpture (Parker 1984:42). Even earlier, embroidery had been practiced in both monasteries and nunneries alike. During the Renaissance, however, “a new and powerful link was forged between women and embroidery” (Parker 1984). It is not a coincidence that this link was produced just as embroidery was deprofessionalized, becoming increasingly the province of women working from home without pay.

All of this is to illustrate the fact that “the deep-rooted trouble in making connections between head and hand, in recognizing and encouraging the impulse of craftsmanship” (Sennet 2008: 9) is not an ahistorical problem, but has slowly emerged over time as the result of specific historical and material conditions.

REUNITING BODY AND MIND: THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT

The Arts and Crafts movement began as a response to what was perceived by its leaders and theorists as the de-humanization of the industrial age. Its goals were political as well as aesthetic. For its founders, industrialization, understood to include the division of labor, the use of machinery in production, and pollution of the urban environment, resulted not only in misery and squalor, but also in inferior, and soulless
goods. The proponents of the movement found inspiration in the European Middle Ages, a time when art and craft were one, and a single craftsman was in charge of the production process from start to finish, from design to fabrication. Of course, as Lucie-Smith notes, the Arts and Crafts image of the medieval guild was largely a romanticized one. For a number of trades, a division of labor was already in place by the Middle Ages. One example of this division came in 1390 when the English Parliament passed a law forbidding shoemakers to tan leather or leather tanners to make shoes (Lucie-Smith 1981:14). Other crafts, especially weaving, an industry requiring many repetitive processes, was, by the Middle Ages, already controlled by entrepreneurs who oversaw laborers, not by autonomous craftsmen (Lucie-Smith 1981:14). Although much of the anti-capitalist critique of modern industrial civilization was inspired by a version of the Middle Ages that was largely romanticized, it was this idealized image that served as the inspiration for the Arts and Crafts movement (Lowy 1987:891).

Though the movement was officially founded in 1887 when a group of designers met in London to form the “Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society,” (Kaplan 2004:11) the theory the Arts and Crafts movement was based on originated with the Romantic art critic John Ruskin. John Ruskin “advanced a Romantic critique of industrialism by analyzing the relation of art to labor and the relation of both to the human soul” (Boris 1986:4). Contemporaneously with Karl Marx, Ruskin decried the alienation of the modern worker from their nature, an alienation that both destroyed their pleasure in labor and “unhumanised” them (Boris 1986:5). In his treatise on Gothic architecture, *The Stones of Venice* (1851), Ruskin writes:
You must make a tool the creature or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them.

In addition to opposing the rigid, exacting labor of the industrial factory for political reasons, Ruskin also took issue with the objects of industrial production, objects he believed to be soulless and empty of art.

By the late nineteenth century, conditions were ripe for social reform. William Morris carried Ruskin’s mantle forward, turning his writings into a genuine political movement (Boris 1994:7). Unlike Ruskin, whose contribution was mainly literary and theoretical, Morris was an active and organized socialist and was more specific in his critique of industrialism, noting that “art grew out of conditions of labor and that maintaining the beauty of the earth required the establishment of a just society” (Boris 1994:10). In an effort to bring about this “just society,” Morris established a number of workshops and guilds dedicated to the craftsman ideal, and the movement’s slogans, “Unity of Art (artists and craftsmen working together), Joy in Labour (the creative satisfaction of ordinary work), and Design Reform (making manufactured objects better)” (Krugh 2014:283).

Ruskin, Morris, and their followers decried the by then well-established division between workmen and artists, seeking the unity that they perceived to have existed during the Middle Ages. For these men, society could be reshaped for the better through intentional engagement in creative work. Creative work, as practiced ideally in the movement’s small workshops would “improve the environment, lead to an equitable system of distribution of wealth and generate psychologically fulfilled peoples” (Greenhalgh 1997:34).
Unfortunately, although Morris envisioned a total restructuring of society, “starting with the individual, human animal, and then moving to the societal level,” the workshops and the items Morris’ craftsmen produced were subsumed into the capitalist economy, ultimately, becoming objects imbued with a particular design aesthetic, but not necessarily a moral corrective. Even in his own workshop, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and co., Morris was forced to institute a division of labor in order to make his products affordable, and even still they were only accessible to the middle and upper classes (Krugh 2014).

The role women played in the Arts and Crafts movement is ambiguous. While Morris’ rhetoric was certainly radical for the time—he “envisaged a time when the sexual division of labor within the domestic arts would vanish forever…” (Parker 1984:180)—once again, his high ideals were not able to match with the reality of production. As with the case of the deprofessionalization of women workers in the Middle Ages, embroidery again proves an especially apt case study. Women staffed Morris’ workshop, and while the movement reasserted women’s embroidery work as Art with a capital “A,” women were not given much control over the design of their work, and instead of designing their own embroidery, as would befit the crafts(wo)man ideal, they instead worked from patterns designed mainly by Morris himself (Parker 1984:180).

The Arts and Crafts movement had different implications for women outside of Great Britain. Once the movement reached American shores it entered the hands of American social reformers, mainly “women of leisure.” Middle-class social reformers started their own workshops, targeting the recently immigrated and the
rural poor. Despite their origins as philanthropic reform, these workshops often resembled industrial homework, widely understood to be the most exploitative form of sweated labor, a reality where “paid and unpaid labour seemed to flow into each other, creating a timeless web of work” (Boris 1989:179).

Still, for some, including Paul Greenhalgh, the Arts and Crafts movement can be seen as “the most successful construction of a theory and practice of ethical art” (1997:35). Though the movement successfully generated a rich body of literature on craft, the movement also had the more ambiguous effect of “[transforming] craft from an essential skill for earning a living to a nonessential enrichment of leisure” (Edwards, qtd in Krugh:2014). In a certain sense, the arts and crafts movement domesticated crafts, bringing craftwork out of the public economy and idealizing it as a hobby, an activity undertaken for love, not wages.

THE RISE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

The Arts and Crafts movement is an important locus in the study of craft both historical and contemporary as it serves as a fulcrum for modern understandings of craft. After the separation of art and craft around the period of the Renaissance, the Arts and Crafts movement reasserted them as one. With the fall of the Arts and Crafts movement and the rise of the artistic avant-garde, however, art and craft would once again be constructed as incompatible.

While the followers of the Arts and Crafts movement were campaigning for the inclusion and integration of art into everyday life, leaders of the avant-garde campaigned for the separation of art and life, under the banner of asserting art’s superiority over craft. According to Greenhalgh, by 1918, people associated with the
fine arts had begun to re-legitimize the idea that art and craft were two completely separate realms and that craft, in its connection to the body and the material world, was subordinate to art (Greenhalgh 1997:42). While the Arts and Crafts movement sought to reunite mind and body through craft, the thinkers and artists of the avant-garde sought to reassert their separation. This separation was asserted in the name of all that was new and different against all that was traditional.

To demonstrate what is certainly a humorous exaggeration of this trend decrying tradition of all kind, Carroll quotes the Futurists:

The futurist Theatre is born of the two most vital currents in the Futurist sensibility which are: 1) our frenzied passion for real, swift, elegant, complicated, cynical, muscular, fugitive, Futurist life; 2) our very modern cerebral definition of art according to which no logic, no tradition, no aesthetic, no technique, no opportunity can be imposed on the artist’s natural talent; he must be preoccupied only with the creating synthetic expressions of cerebral energy that have THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF NOVELTY” (Carroll 2010:53).

What is ironic in this belief in “THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF NOVELTY” is the fact that the belief itself is relatively traditional. Starting in the Renaissance, texts on fine arts often reflected a “suspicion of traditionalist attitudes” (Lucie-Smith 1981:156). This trend continued, intensified, and became something of a cultural norm, remaining mostly uncontested until the Arts and Crafts movement. Bourdieu shows how the definition of art itself relies on “the social conditions of its production,” importantly including “the discourses of direct or disguised celebration” which allow for the production of “the work of art qua object of belief” (Bourdieu 1993:35). For much of modernity, the understanding that an object or an act was a work of art was predicated on its assertion of originality. This is such a part of dominant social conditioning regarding art that we hardly notice it at all.
The articulation of this desire for originality, spontaneity, and thus authenticity, first allowed for the avant-garde’s definition of art and continues to play a large part in the way we understand art and the artists today. Like the Futurists who sought an art outside of logic, tradition, aesthetic, or technique, the Romantics sought an art that was “unfettered” by any external imposition on the artist’s individual creative “genius” (Greenhalgh 1997:42). This concept of an individual genius relied upon what Taylor calls the development of the “buffered self,” around the time of the Renaissance, and also relied upon a belief in true individuality (Taylor 2007:32). Individuals were believed to each be the bearers of a “radical uniqueness and capacity for self-determination” (Wilf 2011:466). In the case of art, the belief in “radical uniqueness” and “self-determination” allowed for the belief that the goal of art was an expression of a true and natural essence, the “authentic” expression of a shuttered interiority. Bourdieu shows that this obsession with all that is unique, free, “disinterested creation” came about at least partially as a result of changing systems of economic organization. When artists were freed from the confines of artistic patronage, art began to emerge as a commodity. For Bourdieu, the production of “symbolic goods especially for the market,” “prepared the ground for a ‘pure theory of art’ by dissociating art-as-commodity from art-as-pure signification, produced according to a purely symbolic intent…” (Bourdieu 1993:114).

Most notable for the consecration of “art-as-pure-signification” was art critic Clement Greenberg. For Greenberg, technical skill, even the fabrication of any object at all, had nothing to do with art. In the world of the avant-garde, technical skill was replaced by intellect, and the making of an art-object did not even require an object at
all (Greenhalgh 1997:42). In his famous essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” (1939) Greenberg makes clear that any art produced without sudden and spontaneous inspiration was suspect. For Greenberg, “Kitsch” was a case in point:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money--not even their time.

Kitsch then, is distinct from high-art, “true” art, because its purity is tainted by material mechanics, by formulas, and here, formulas can be read as harkening back to traditions, as imitative and derivative. Because kitsch is “vicarious” experience, it does not plunge to an inner individual depth, a depth understood to hold some universal truth, but instead belongs within the world of things. While Greenberg asserts the possibility for art to exist outside of a “field of forces,” to be the result of “pure creation,” Bourdieu would disagree, noting the many forces at play in the creation and reception of a work of art.

In his discussion of avant-garde art, Bruce Metcalf asserts that “the essence of contemporary art is based on a culture of writing and reasoning” and that while the “artworld places its highest values on verbal and logical cognitive abilities, the craftworld places its value elsewhere” (Metcalf 1997:72). According to Metcalf, “the craftworld accepts the meanings of felt experience and the body, whereas the artworld remains dedicated to meanings embedded in texts and discourses” (1997 80). Ironically, however, this distinction does not hold water. One of the great hallmarks of the Arts and Crafts movement was its “intellectual rigour” manifest in the theorization and writing surrounding craft practice (Greenhalgh 1997:41). At the turn
of the century, the literature surrounding craft was just as diverse and lustrous as that surrounding high-art over the course of the 20th century.

Aside for its implications for craft practice, Greenberg’s writings, which for some time held considerable traction within the art world, were another blow against the artistic practice of women. The “decorative” has, for the past century or so been “deeply gendered,” and for Greenberg, “the decorative was associated with superficial surface embellishment, skilled labor, derivativeness, and precision in a mechanical rather than ‘felt out’ manner of working” (Author 2010:xvii). In this way it was a cousin to Greenberg’s “kitsch,” and marginalized as such. Thus the work of women, at this period still largely confined to arts constructed as “domestic,” most notably embroidery, exhibited none of the “heroic struggle between the artist and the blank canvas” that Greenberg felt was necessary for the creation of true, pure, universal art.

CRAFT’S RESURGENCE: FIBER ARTS IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

Backlash against Greenberg’s hegemonic and deeply influential theories on art began in earnest by the 1960s. It was during this decade and the following that artists began to revisit the use of materials traditionally associated with craft, especially fiber materials like string, cloth, and thread. In her book, String, Felt, Thread, Elisa Author explores the various motivations and objects produced by artists who were “drawn to fiber’s aesthetic possibilities, structural potential, and semiotic form” over the course of the 1960s and 1970s (Author 2010:xii). Author shows the ways that the art/craft hierarchy serves as an “illuminating example of power and authority at work in the art world” (Author, 2010: xx).
Three broadly defined categories of artist made use of fiber during the period, artists whom Auther calls “Fiber Artists,” whose work remained relatively unpolitical and was not met with substantial critical appreciation; “Postminimalist” or “Process Artists,” nearly all of whom enjoyed greater legitimacy in such institutionally recognized fields as painting or sculpture before beginning to practice in fiber; and finally the explicitly political “Feminist Artists” who intentionally explored the art/craft divide for its gendered connotations in an effort to make visible the relations of power that allowed the hierarchy to exist in the first place (Auther 2010).

According to Auther, the fiber artists created works including “wall hangings, tapestries, sewn objects, quilts, embroidery, beading, hand-dyed fabrics, basketry, and a wide array of other objects” that, while not explicitly political, “probed aesthetic boundaries” and sought to expand what was at that time a limited and limiting aesthetic. One important hierarchy that these artists sought to uphold in their struggle for legitimacy was the boundary between the useful and the decorative. While textiles have long been made for use, these artists sought to “defamiliarize technique and cultural expectations about fiber” by making objects that could in no way be associated with utility. Weavers worked off-loom to create abstract, organic shapes that in an effort to establish fiber as a medium for high-art sought to deny connection to loom-woven textiles that were “essentially functional, rectilinear and two-dimensional, or more popularly, feminine and wedded to the domestic realm” (Auther, 2010: 17). So, unlike the Arts and Crafts movement, which sought to bring both art and craft into the realm of the everyday, thus making it accessible to all, fiber artists working in the 1960s worked to *elevate* their art objects, raising them up to the
status of high-art and thereby doing little to chip away at the art/craft hierarchy. Fibers artists sought to “[transcend] technique and materials” (Auther, 2010: 41, emphasis added). For them, materials associated with the domestic were something to be overcome.

The idea that craft materials could be used in spite of their connotations with domesticity and femininity continued in the work of post minimalistic and process artists. Even more than the fiber artists, these artists generally had high levels of cultural legitimacy before beginning their work in fiber. For the most part, they possessed degrees from celebrated art programs and had already shown their work to critical acclaim. Auther explores the work of Robert Morris, a male post minimalistic artist working in materials traditionally gendered feminine. Over the course of the 1970s Morris constructed a number of works in undulating pieces of industrial felt (Figure 1). Unlike the work of most of the fiber artists, Morris’ earlier artistic success afforded his new, unconventional work, “critical attention, even full legitimacy” (Auther, 2010: 60). While critics noted the sensual and haptic qualities of the work, they also notably emphasized the intellectual worth of his work and the “triumph of the idea over the material,” “rhetorically rescuing these aspects of the work from the realm of the feminine or the decorative where they might otherwise reside” (Auther 2010: 62).

By the 1970s, feminist artists began to explicitly challenge the hierarchical and often gendered assumptions about what counted as art and what did not. Like the leaders in the Arts and Crafts movement a century earlier, feminist artists sought to politicize the art/craft divide, using craft practices in art making to “[expose] the way
cultural associations of craft with women’s work had contributed to fiber’s historical marginalization in the art world” and “played a significant role in fiber’s legitimization as a medium of fine art” (Author 2010:94).

Faith Wilding was a leading feminist artist and teacher at the California Institute of Arts Feminist Art Program and a member of the prominent feminist art scene in 1970s Los Angeles. In 1972 she constructed “Womb Room” or “Crocheted Environment” (Figures 2 and 3), a room filled with contrasting crocheted doilies that build a shelter of sorts, “linking the male domain of architecture with the female world of needlework” (Lord: 1995).

Another prominent work, perhaps one of the most famous of the feminist art movement, was Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” (1979) (Figure 4). In researching the work, Chicago initiated what was at that time an unprecedented exploration into the traditionally feminine arts. The work began with Chicago’s foray into hand-painting china which led her to explore other feminized practices like embroidery and crochet. The work culminated in a large scale collaboration between a number of women both amateur and professional who created an elaborate and lusciously decorated re-staging of the last-supper at a triangular, three side table, complete with hand-painted vaginal ceramic plates (Figure 5) and hand embroidered and crocheted altar cloths. Chicago’s work sought to address the binaries, including the distinction between art and craft which was in a number of ways the nexus of various oppositions reflecting on the value of women’s art including, “the genius artist versus the anonymous maker; the uniqueness of individually made art versus the collective production of serial objects; intellectual, reflective, creative work (art) versus rote,
non-intellectual craftwork; and the ideal and the non-utilitarian versus detail or
decoration” (Auther 2010:98).

This re-centering of what was deemed the “female sensibility” or the “female
aesthetic” included “traditional domestic craft-based skills, pattern and repetition,
fragmentation and the use of pastel colors” (Adams 2013:8). The use of female
imagery and traditionally feminine techniques was critiqued on several fronts as
problematic and essentializing, but the impacts these practices have had on
contemporary art are far reaching. While female subject matter and “feminine style”
was once seen as “low in status and associated with hobby, amateur, or minor arts”
these practices are still present in contemporary art today and have “radically
expanded the notion of what art is, what it can be” (Adams 2013:5, 8) and
“revolutionized women’s relationship to art making” (Auther 2010:159).
PART II

The historical context of craft is perhaps impossibly broad, but certain threads continue in the theorization and specificities of the contemporary craft practice of crochet. In this section, I will first address the history of crochet, its changing use and understanding over time, and its unusual and conceptually rich location as located as a craftwork somewhere between the decorative and the utilitarian. I will then use contemporary crochet to explore the domestication and feminization of fiber craft. An analysis of craft labor using the online marketplace “Etsy” will connect the rhetoric of contemporary crochet in the marketplace with the notions of labor prevalent in the Arts and Crafts movement. Other contemporary crochet practices including “free-form crochet” and “craftivism” respectively illustrate the continuing power of Romantic ideology in communities of makers and the politicization of craft practice.

HISTORY OF CROCHET

Though the history of crochet is inextricably bound up in the history of other domestic fiber arts such as embroidery, weaving, sewing, and knitting, its relatively recent invention allows us to trace it back to its origins and understand the shifting role it has played in popular and material culture over time. Also, unlike other feminized crafts, crochet exists between decoration and utility. It began as a purely decorative art, with little utilitarian use until later makers developed new techniques and materials that increased its utility for producing quotidian household objects.
Today, crochet can and does inhabit both of these spheres, the decorative and the utilitarian; moreover, it is used not only in the fabrication of objects, but in the construction of selves, as high art, and as a political tool.

Unfortunately, unlike other fiber arts, the history of crochet is not particularly well documented. Crochet first began in the 1800s as a way to imitate other more complicated forms of lace-making, and the first crochet pattern was published in Holland in 1824 (Kooler 2002). Unlike its close sibling, knitting, crochet began not as a means to produce utilitarian textiles and clothes for home use, but as a decorative art and traded commodity. One of the first international expansions of crochet came in the 1830s when French-trained Irish nuns brought the technique to Ireland, where Irish home home-workers, impoverished by the potato famine, labored at making what became known as “Irish Lace.” This “Irish Lace” (Figure 6) was then sold to upper-middle class women in other parts of Europe and America.

The practice of crochet traveled to America with European immigrants in the mid-19th century. In the U.S. crochet was adopted as a middle and upper-middle class pursuit. Women of leisure crocheted lace as a status symbol to be displayed liberally in Victorian homes. The crocheted and starched mats adorning the backs of sofas, and arms of chairs, tables, and jars of jam alike came to be called doilies, after the London draper D’Oyley (Brown 2012:60). With the rise of women’s magazines during the late 19th century, and the widespread publication of crochet patterns, the practice became more democratic, and was soon so popular that by the mid-twentieth century, crocheted doilies were no longer associated with the elite, but instead were deemed kitschy and their use became indicative of low class standing (Paludan 1995).
It was not until the early twentieth century that crochet left the class of decorative arts and became used in the production of practical, utilitarian items for the home. Since its inception, decorative crochet had been made with fine thread or floss that allowed for the elaboration of intricate designs, but that also made the construction of larger, more durable items nearly impossible. When women began crocheting with wool yarn, the fabrication of quotidian objects such as blankets, sweaters, slippers, and hats became feasible (Paludan 1995).

The most well-known crocheted item today, the often many-colored or patch-worked, “afghan” became popular during the Great Depression as a means of transforming leftover yarn into something useful, and in the 1940s crocheting sweaters became an act of patriotism as homemade clothing helped to conserve resources for the military. By the mid-20th century, crochet had firmly exited the realm of the purely decorative and entered the realm of utility.

After World War II, crochet once again came to be viewed as tired and kitschy, only to undergo a resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, crochet re-entered popular culture on two fronts: the practical and the political. As resourceful back-to-the-land types made increasing use of crocheted hippie-wear, its presence began to be felt in popular fashion. By the 1970s, as elaborated in Part I, crochet was also repurposed for political ends by feminist artists, the most famous of whom include, Judy Chicago, Faith Ringold, and Miriam Schapiro. The late 1970s also witnessed the revival of the crocheted doily. In 1979, Patricia McDonald, Curator for the National Trust Centre in Sydney, Australia, mounted the feminist
exhibition The D’Oyley Show: An Exhibition of Women’s Domestic Fancywork (Brown 2012).

Crochet is still a part of the art world today, though some of its overtly political associations have cooled with time. Many contemporary crochet artists characterize the exceptional material qualities of crochet as more salient than any political overtones. Still, crochet’s political past lives on in contemporary DIY craft culture. The resurgence of online craft culture, or what authors Bratich and Brush call “fabriculture” has brought together crocheters from around the world who share patterns and stories in communities that are sometimes overtly political and other times only implicitly so through their troubling of the public/private binary.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DOMESTIC

In The Culture of Knitting, Joanne Turney, links the gendering of knitting with the fact that it is largely a domestic pursuit, writing that knitting is “associated with the home and, by association, with women” (2009:8). Though Turney focuses on knitting, crochet shares a number of landmarks with knitting on its way to being “domesticated.” The political implications of the domestic are profound, and have been explored by a number of feminist scholars. According to many second-wave feminist scholars, knitting, or crocheting, for that matter, is unilaterally oppressive; work done within the domestic sphere is “invisible labour, unseen and unrewarded, and as a consequence is socially and culturally deemed without value” (Turney 2009:9). This linking of the domestic and femininity, and understanding of the domestic as devoid of cultural value is not an ahistorical fact. Numerous historians
Lucie-Smith, Parker, Staniland, Cumming and Kaplan) have shown not only the importance that women had in medieval craft production, but also the legitimization and recognition of this importance. Women worked for pay in craft guilds and were named in the production of highly regarded embroidered texts. With the Renaissance however, women were increasingly barred from professional embroidery and the majority of the production moved to the home, becoming the province of unpaid domestic workers, “motivated by love and not money” (Tucker 2004:114). By the Victorian age, embroidery, and the production of other home textiles as well, were “equated with virtue because they ensured that women [remained] at home and [refrained] from book learning” (Parker 1984:75).

This love should manifest in “joy in labor,” a slogan originating in the Arts and Crafts movement, encouraging work motivated “by love and not money,” a construction that continues to be an important feature of contemporary craft culture, especially for women. Following Marx and Freud, Michael Hardt notes that affective labor, laboring for love instead of capital gain, can be conceived of as “desiring productions” and also, as numerous feminists have used the term “kin work and caring labor” (Hardt 199:89). One particularly salient aspect of contemporary crochet culture, as gleaned from a number of online craft communities, is both the intense focus on domesticity and the affective charge of the labor. These sites offer patterns for making blankets and hats, pot-holders and “casserole caddies,” quotidian objects of everyday nurturance. The blogs combine the personal with the (deprofessionalized) professional, displaying patterns and tutorials interspersed with photos of family or journal style entries of personal narratives. Most of the patterns shown on these
personal craft websites have a domestic bent, emphasizing the intimate associations with the home and everyday routines of nurturance, culturally associated with “women’s work.” One blog, “All Free Crochet” posted an announcement on November 3rd celebrating National Housewife Day. “There is no better way to celebrate than with crochet patterns!” (All Free Crochet). These patterns included a “Chic Crochet Casserole Carrier” (Figure 7) and a “Kitchen Chair Topper” (Figure 8)

What is notable on these sites is not only the crocheted objects themselves, but the tone that the pattern makers adopt in the explanatory text of the pattern. The chatty tone used in the “personal” sections of crochet blogs often continues into the text of the pattern as well. The chatty or personal pattern is apparent on the blog “Crochet Geek” run by a middle-aged woman in Savannah, Georgia named Teresa. Notable is Teresa’s emphasis on improvising, on making do. Regarding a project that she made for the Iowa state fair (Figure 9), Teresa writes:

“This is a past project of mine that I view as flawed...I started out following written instructions that I had purchased, but in the end, it is probably half from the instructions and half from improvising. It just did not seem to be working out right. So instead of scrapping it altogether, I started to improvise.” (Crochet Geek 12/16/2008)

Crocheters active on these forums make and communicate about these patterns in a way that emphasizes the relational character of their knowledge, its open-endedness and its adaptability. Richard Sennett addresses improvisation in craft work by comparing it to the way that New York tenement architecture was transformed through use. In these buildings, stairs designed to be functional passages became meeting places, public spaces that changed the character of the design. Sennett makes it clear, however that these changes are not spontaneous, but compares
them to jazz improvisation in that, “like a jazz musician, tenement dwellers who improvise follow rules” (Sennett 2008:236). The makers of personal and craft blogs anticipate this improvisation in the making and describing of their patterns. Many (though certainly not all) offer alternative ways to make a given pattern--inviting makers to use different color schemes, yarn weight, needle sizes, or stitches and often offering advice on ways to make these variations. In the comments section people often post a description of the item they made with the pattern and the variations (sometimes numerous) they made.

The improvisatory nature and open-endedness of craft, allows for crocheters to express themselves creatively within the home. The contemporary view of knitting and crochet moves away from the necessity of the work as “an extension of thrifty housewifery and chores towards one of personal pleasure, leisure and luxury” (Turney 2009:11). In recent years, crochet is no longer viewed as a repetitive, arduous chore, but instead is constructed as a luxurious hobby filling a need for personal fulfillment.

ETSY AND CRAFT CROCHET

Although the Arts and Crafts movement positioned craft as “a moral corrective to alienated forms of industrial production,” (Dawkins 2011:262) crafting and craft objects still exist within the logic of capital and, as Groenveld asserts, “the practices of production and consumption are thoroughly enmeshed in third-wave crafting practices” (2010: 263).
One major location for contemporary craft consumption is the website, Etsy, an ecommerce site founded in 2005 that brings together craft producers and craft sellers (Cuervo 2012:2). It is an overwhelmingly female space--according to Etsy’s 2013 report, “88% of Etsy sellers are women.” According to some studies, they have higher levels of education but lower income than the American national average (Krugh 2014:291). While many use Etsy as a way to support their hobby, for other sellers it is their full-time job.

A quick Etsy search of “crochet” showed 430,830 items for sale. These items fell mostly under the categories of “housewares,” “clothing,” “children,” and “accessories.” Etsy is a website of the 21st century, and as such illustrates a new marketplace, one ruled not by the producer, but by the consumer, with a “greater emphasis on personal choice; and the targeting of consumers by lifestyle and taste” (Krugh 2014).

For Etsy sellers, perhaps more significantly than for the “hobby” crocheters discussed in the previous section, the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure continues to be a major theme in craft production. Despite these blurred boundaries, for the mostly middle-class Etsy crafters, a combined work/leisure activity is rarely experienced or expressed as bearing any resemblance to the industrial homework of the early 20th century. Instead, as Nicole Dawkins in her ethnography of DIY (do-it-yourself) crafters in Detroit, succinctly states, “pleasure and self-fulfillment are often exchanged for what might otherwise be felt to be unstable, precarious, and even exploitative work” (Dawkins 2011:262). For Dawkins,
the core values of DIY culture express a particularly contemporary subjectivity through “a form of highly individualized, affective work…” (Dawkins 2011:263).

The “About me” sections of Etsy sellers’ websites make clear the strength of the ideas that seeking pleasure and self-fulfillment through craft carry even among those whose crafts enter the market. The following is a pretty typical “About me” narrative:

About Dusty:
I taught myself to crochet when I was 11 years old. My dad printed me crochet instructions off of the computer and my mom bought me a 1970s stitch book from a yard sale. I've been crocheting ever since.

After selling my crochet products online for a year and a half, I was able to quit my job as a 911 dispatcher and be a full time stay at home mom and Crochet-Prenuer <3 I love what I do, and my goal is to bring you super unique crochet patterns at a fair price. Come on in and take a peek!
Dusty <3
visit me on facebook

The craftswoman often begins her dialogue with how she learned to crochet (most often from an older female relative). People also tend to assert how much they “love what [they] do.” This assertion is reminiscent of Morris’ neo-romantic ideal of “joy in labour,” but also gives an affective charge to the product the craftsperson is selling. In displaying this joy the maker shows her connection to her work, her lack of alienation. This lack of alienation, following the craft ideology still prevalent since William Morris’ time, translates into a higher quality product for the consumer. Each item is “super unique” because Dusty, the craftsperson imparts some of herself into each creation. This sort of affective work can be seen as “fundamental both to contemporary models of exploitation and to the possibility of their subversion” (Weeks 2007:233).
Another preoccupation that often comes up in these “About” sections is how
and why the item is made:

About Me:
Hi! I am so glad you find your way to my little corner here on Etsy.
Everything you see here is handmade exclusively by me in my home in Florida
where I live with my husband and two little boys.
Each item is made by hand one at the time without the use of any machines. So
take your time browse through my shop, and if you have any questions feel free
to contact me.

This vendor felt the need to make it clear that the pieces were made
“exclusively by [her] in [her] home in Florida...by hand one at a time without the use
of any machines.” The use of the hand is central here, and also the fact that the maker
identifies herself as a housewife, a woman devoting herself to the care of others.
While crafters express interest in the material nature of their work, the fact that it is
crafted by hand “without the use of any machines,” is perhaps more integral to the
work’s perceived value. The material labor that goes into the work’s production
involves what Hardt and Negri define as immaterial labor, labor “involved in
communication, cooperation, and the production of affects” (Hardt, Negri 2000:53).
The “About me” sections of these crafters profiles are completely indispensable to the
sale of their products as the subjectivity and affect supposedly embodied in the
product personalizes the item and thereby increases its exchange value.

LIBERATING CROCHET

The discourse surrounding craft crochet does not often address originality
explicitly, or even state it as a motivation for producing crafts. In fact, one oft cited
reason for learning to crochet is a desire to connect with the past, a Eomantic desire
reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts ideals of making crafts that were “‘wholesome,’ ‘untainted’ by the modern industrial world of mass production” and a “source of stability in an unstable world” (Turney 2009: 46). This breed of Romanticism is akin to the sort that enabled the followers of the Arts and Crafts movement to equate the generalizable past and folk culture with the authentic, authenticity being one of the most important goals for the Romantic (Berlin 1999:15). In the same way that two trains might start in nearly the same location, the location here being a desire for authenticity, but by running along not-quite parallel tracks will end up in two radically different locations, the Romantic longing for authenticity diverged into two alternate worldviews/artviews that were in many ways diametrically opposed. Craft crochet and a variant of crochet called “free-form” crochet can serve as living metaphors for the divergent understandings of authenticity by the Arts and Crafts followers to the artists and thinkers of the avant-garde.

The most explicit discourse on originality and authenticity within crochet community comes from a sub-group of crocheters that practice “free-form crochet” also called “scumbling” or “patternless crochet” (Figure 10). While the relationship that the crocheted object has with the individual who crocheted it is certainly apparent within the discourse of craft crocheters, as it was in the objects of the Arts and Crafts movement, the variety of form mirroring the supposedly infinite variety of the Romantic individuated human “essence” or experience, is even more blatant within the discourse of the “freeform crochet” movement.

Freeform crochet communities actively seek the same emancipation from conceptions of crochet as rigid and uncreative craft as the avant-garde sought for their
art. These communities orient themselves against what they call “paint by numbers crochet,” a derogatory reference to the way the vast majority of crocheters go about their practice, working from patterns that delineate the final product stitch by stitch. These patterns were historically circulated in magazines and books, and are now very easy to come by on the internet.

Eitan Wilf’s work on creative agency and artistic training is particularly relevant in understanding the motives of those practicing freeform crochet outside of established artistic institutions. Wilf uses contemporary Western artistic production and patterns of production to explore the “modern ideal of self-expression.” This is fitting to understanding the modern subject, because, as Wilf shows, “art was the context in which Romanticism, as a more or less unified ideology, originally emerged and received its fullest form prior to informing notions of the modern subject in general” (2011:464). For the majority of freeform crocheters, their work is not defined as art by any institution other than the invisible institution of modernity, and with the theoretical backing of a particular Romantic/charismatic ideology they are able to class their artistic production as art by virtue of its mode of creation, a mode directly linking self-expression and rule-breaking with art-making.

Wilf foregrounds an “emphasis on radical uniqueness and the capacity for self-determination of each individual…” as characteristic of a modern subjectivity (2011:466). The explicit distancing from rules and patterns, often passed down over time, is a clear articulation of this emphasis on self-determination. Why follow a pattern when you can pave your own way? Following Colin Campbell, Wilf traces this emphasis on self-expression back to the emergence of a middle-class aesthetics at
the end of the 18th century “that provided an alternative to the aristocracy’s neoclassicist aesthetics.” While neoclassicist aesthetics relied on strict applications of well-established rules, the new middle-class aesthetics, specifically Sentimentalism, a precursor to Romanticism, brought feelings to the fore. With Sentimentalism, feelings and interiority became more important than rules as authenticators of sincerity.

This disdain for rules is carried on in the manifestos and pronouncements of makers of freeform crochet today. The author of the blog “Crochet Liberation Front” (the title in itself is a distancing from crochet as craft or hobby) uses the language of rules and noncomformity explicitly:

“On the one hand I am at heart an academic, I love to study and learning the rules to any given matter is exhilarating to me...On the other hand, I have this rebellious streak. Once I learn as much as humanly impossible about a subject, I MUST test the waters and see how strictly those rules must be obeyed...I didn’t start questioning creative rules until less than a decade ago...Yet deep inside me was a little girl who broke the rules. Do we really know the bounds of our own creativity? If you know a few rules in crochet, see how many you can purposely break today and let your creativity flow!” - Laurie Wheeler

For Wheeler, crochet must be “liberated” in order to allow for individual creativity. In order to let your own creativity flow, in order to respond to the impulse “deep inside” (interesting here, that this impulse is characterized as a child as Romantic representations of creative production tend to idealize the ‘childlike’ and ‘playful’) one must get in touch with their “rebellious streak.” Because each individual is distinct from everyone else, and one must express this distinction in order to act authentically, “each individual has his or her own nature or voice with
which he or she must be in touch and to which he or she must be faithful” (Wilf 2011:471).

Another quote, this time from the International Freeform Crochet Group, shows once more the emphasis on original design as something transcending “patterns and restrictions”.

Freeform crochet is like painting—the hook is a brush and the yarn a paint. The result can be abstract or realistic. Freeform is original design, not a reproduction of another person’s pattern—it goes beyond the realm of patterns and restrictions that usually apply toward our art. The outcome is a piece of art like no other, not only functional, but beautiful as well” (International Freeform Crochet Group)

In order for the object to be created as art, or the subject to be understood as an artist, the production of the object must appear to be “unhindered by external structures…” (Wilf 2013:135). For Susan Lombardo, of the blog Fiber Arts Reflections, it is this lack of perceived external constraints that transforms her from a “mere” manufacturer or commodity producer into an artist.

“A “flow” experience is about living in the moment. It’s about the spark of inspiration and the joy of creativity. It’s about asking “what if” and experimenting. No rules. No deadline. No need for perfection. That’s the joy of freeform fiber art for me. It’s the difference between being a manufacturer and being an artist. There are times to follow a pattern and times to create a new pattern. Times to take a pattern and turn it upside down and inside out.” (Susan Lombardo, Fiber Art Reflections)

Lombardo’s description of “flow” is connected to Wilf’s description of the Romantic individual, “an expressive individuation [that] has become one of the cornerstones of modern culture, so much that we barely notice it” (2011:471) Despite the claims of freeform crocheters, or avant-garde artists, for that matter, the notion of
unhindered, and unimpeded flow is certainly not unstructured, and is dependent on an entire set of assumptions about the value of art, or even what it is.

CONCLUSION

Today, much of the academic discussion on crochet centers on “craftivism,” which “highlights the activist components of craft culture…” (Bratich 2011:246). Because of fabriculture’s long and tangled history and its complicated relationship to power hierarchies surrounding gender, race, and class, crochet can serve as a useful tool in challenging dichotomies between private and public, art and craft, and labor and leisure. Since the time of the Arts and Crafts movement, almost all craft practice is political in some way. Bratich’s “craftivism” can come in many forms, from the opening up of the formerly private domestic spaces through online and in-person craft communities, to large-scale public exhibits of community crochet work. According to Betsy Greer, founder of craftivist.org, it is the intention behind the project that can make it activist—it is “thinking about your creative production as more than just a hobby or ‘women’s work,’ and instead as something that has cultural, historical, and social value” (Greer 2006, qtd in Bratich 2011:248).

Crochet can be practiced by almost anyone and has a diversity of meanings, of objectives, and purposes. It can be a hobby, an art, a leisure activity, a business, a social critique, or all of these at once. Its prominence in the lives of women, along with other textile and fiber crafts, makes its elaboration and theorization as important as the study of any text or work of “fine-art”.
APPENDIX

Figure 1. Robert Morris, ‘Felts’ Exhibition (1968)

Figures 2 and 3
‘Womb Room’
1996, "Division of Labor: Women's Work in Contemporary Art,
http://faithwilding.refugia.net/wombroom.html
Figure 4
Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 x 576 in. (1463 x 1463 cm).
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10
© Judy Chicago. (Photo: Donald Woodman)
http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/

© Judy Chicago. Photograph by Jook Leung Photography
Figure 6. Irish Lace, unattributed

Figure 7 “Sunflower Casserole Carrier”
Design by Debra Arch
Ravelry.com

Figure 8 “Kitchen Chair Topper”
Unattributed
allfreecrochet.com

Figure 9 Iowa State Fair Project,
Teresa
Craftgeek.com

Figure 10 Free Form Crochet, Melanie
http://www.freeformcrochet.com/designs.html
Bibliography


