

# PARTICIPATORY NEEDLEWORK AS TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Since the start of the twenty-first century, there has been a resurgence of interest in participatory textile processes (Shercliff and Holroyd 2020). Needlework groups are emerging as knots in a supranational art movement. A 'textiles turn' has occurred that raises new questions about alternative art histories, notably those of fibre art practitioners outside a Eurowestern context, such as Cecilia Vicuña, the Tejedoras de Mampuján, Memorarte and Nengi Omuku. This session explores needlework as a practice, a methodology or an object of study. Crucially, we seek to expand existing scholarship tracing different threads that run through the transversal and heterogeneous networks of textile artists and sewing groups emerging across the globe. We disregard structural biases in the art world, dissolving the dichotomy between individual artists and grass-roots embroiderers or patchwork quilters.

We called for papers on participatory and artistic needlework practices that consider the economic, historical, political, and creative contexts for sewing groups, or the haptic and visual quality of quilts, embroideries, appliqués and other kinds of textile-based practices. For example: How does the materiality of fabric lend itself to activism and memorialisation? What role do embroidery, appliqué and quilting play in voicing responses to health and humanitarian crises, conflicts, and human rights abuses around the world? How does the therapeutic element of needlework practices sit within the art world? What is the relationship between the labour of needlework and identity? In what ways can participatory needlework projects be considered as tangible and intangible heritage?

## Session Convenors:

**Lorna Dillon**, University of Cambridge

**Emma Shercliff**, Arts University Bournemouth

**Rose Sinclair**, Goldsmiths, University of London

## Speakers:

**Chinelo L. Njaka**, Research Fellow, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK

### Quilting the Black Atlantic: Exploring Storywork as Methodology for Black Quilt Study

The paper explores storywork methodologies as ways to explore relational comparisons of Black quilts and quilting in the United Kingdom and the United States. Quilting has a long tradition in both national contexts as a form of gendered cultural production that reflects the everyday lives of people throughout history. The broad, Euro-Western quilt literature is far from inclusive, however, leaving the rich and often-marginalised histories and narratives of quilters of the Black Atlantic diaspora missing from the story.

Quilts by Black makers are powerful vessels for storytelling and understanding socio-cultural history throughout the Black Atlantic diaspora. Despite its material cultural significance, quilting remains understudied as a means to explore the cultural practices of craftsmanship, artistic expression, documentation, and storytelling across generations.

The paper develops Black feminist and womanist storywork methodologies to explore underrepresented Black US American and Black British quilts and quilting communities from 1945 to the present. Based in Black-centred epistemologies, storywork—a theoretical and methodological framing that centres the making, telling, and understanding of stories—is applied to a sample of quilts to make connections between the story, the teller, and the listener; as well as to locate links between the storyteller and her/his/their life experiences. This experimental approach provides an affirming lens through which to explore the stories and meaning that are created and lived through quilts and creative practices, and positions Black makers as agents of their own cultures and societies. Moreover, the relational comparative lens allows for the US American and British quilts to be put in conversation with one another to create space to understand similarities, divergences, and interactions among quilters connected within the Black Atlantic.

**Pragya Sharma**, No affiliation

### Indian Women, Wartime Knitting and Participatory Spaces of Production

Historical sources are replete with evidence of women knitting for soldiers during the World Wars but literature remains silent on the contributions of Indian women. The practice of wartime knitting provided a huge impetus in bringing the private practice of knitting into the public realm. The Indian women's relationship with knitting thus found a new dimension. As a craft skill that was taught in schools as well as in domestic spaces in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Bassi, 2020; Chanana, 1997), the practice evolved to bear completely different meanings under imperial rule. Indian women were compelled to contribute to wartime efforts. They started assisting the Red Cross by knitting socks, banians (vests), shirts, caps, waistcoats and other items of clothing (Cohen, 2009; Das, 2007; Datta, 2019) as part of Ladies' Clubs like with women in purdah were knitting as well (Das, 2007). With the menfolk away, knitting found new meanings, as an alternative site of expression, affording the maker, in times of chaos, 'a sense of control and an altered state of time' (Csikszentmihalyi et al, 2014). Further, Ludhiana's woollen garments were supplied to the army under contracts of the Munitions Board (Roy). A craft that the Indian women have only recently been acquainted with, did knitting as part of these different groups became 'a site of production of knowledge' (Arantes, 2020)? These knitting centres came to mean much more than churning out items for the war in the sense that it was bringing together women workers from across the globe, as Das (2007) puts it – '...at once united and devastated by the war'. Through an archival study of newspaper accounts, documentary records, gazetteers, census and other unpublished records such as Provincial Archives, the paper thus sets out to explore these hidden histories of women knitting groups during the World Wars.

**Éva Bicskei**, Institute of Art History, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for the Humanities, Budapest, Hungary

### 'Presents of Hearts': Participatory Needleworks, Women Activism, and Nation-Building in Hungary, 1848–1867

The paper aims at offering an alternative social art-historical narrative of women's contribution to nation- and state-building in Hungary, drawing on the participatory needleworks done by women during a formative historical period, between the 1848/1849 Revolution and War of Independence against the Habsburg Empire and the 1867 'Reconciliation', leading to the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. These collective embroideries executed by women were very diverse: they ranged from revolutionary flags for husbands serving in the national militia to undergarments for soldiers, lint for the wounded, civil dresses for convicts and victims of Absolutism, handsewns commemorating the deeds of great patriots for their national shrine, covers of chairs for public political halls, and, finally, a huge carpet consisting of 160 units donated for the main hall of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (a leading institution of national resistance that became the meeting place for parliamentary sessions). Thus, women's community-based works transformed embroidery, an age-old female occupation limited to the private sphere, into a revolutionary activity facilitating new social and political roles for women. The collective textile works turned 'invisible' daughters, wives, and widows of the private sphere into 'visible' sisters in the public sphere: in the process, women could organize their informal circles into local communities and nationwide networks that later served as a basis for reorganizing and reviving the conservative feminist Pest Charitable Women's Society. In conclusion, I will use these forgotten applied-art artifacts to re-evaluate the specificities of the Hungarian women's activism in the second half of the nineteenth century. I will also situate this case study in a larger, Central European, comparative perspective on the role of gender in the construction of modern nations.

**Giulia Priori**, Phd Candidate, History of Art, University College Cork, Ireland

### The Derry Linen Shirt as a Metonymy for the Gendered Memorialisation of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

The Shirt Factory Project is a year-long participatory practice initiated and facilitated by artist Rita Duffy (b.1959) that took place in 2013 in Derry, Northern Ireland. Duffy, working with a group of former factory workers transformed part of The City Factory, once one of the most successful linen shirt factories in the area, into a creative space for memorialisation. Throughout the year, local women's memories of the conflict in Northern Ireland were explored in connection with their collective identity as the main labour force of Derry's shirt factories. Shirts were produced and sold, laundered and embroidered with poems, exhibited within the factory, and hung across William Street in the city centre. This paper seeks to explore the haptic qualities of these linen shirts as a metonymy for the gendered memorialisation of conflict and post-conflict experiences in Derry. This will entail exploring transnational feminist theory as the epistemic framework through which collating global art theory, and heritage and history work, whilst engaging in a visual analysis that scrutinises the multiple levels of signification embedded within these shirts. Thus, providing a reading of the ways in which the materiality of these linen shirts, charged with the work of the artist in conjunction with the former factory workers, can act as an agent of memorialisation. Ultimately, regarding these shirts as a material anchor, whereby the underrepresented substantial presence of women in the local shirt industry, and their collective identity as a labour force, could enter local and national heritage narratives of the Troubles.

**Mariah Majolo**, Master in Fashion and Visual Arts, Università IUAV di Venezia, Italy

### FuxiCO project: The textile handicraft of Brazilian fuxico as a feminist tool for women's empowerment through social design and co-creation

Fuxico is a word of African origin used in Brazil to indicate both a textile technique and a group of gossiping women. In current studies on social design it is essential to consider gender issues, as well as how the designer can, and must, contribute to this process. The FuxiCO project, which was part of my Masters' thesis, has critically analysed the historical development of fuxico as a feminine craft activity linked to cultural concepts of race and social differentiation, in combination with my own family experience with the technique, to serve as a possible design tool for social and feminist content. Developed through online and in-person meetings with various women in Italy and abroad, the project proposed to investigate the process of construction of gender identifications, starting from the recovery of the participants' memories and opinions, and elaborating on fuxico's interpretative ambiguity (handicraft and female chit-chat) as a methodological and research tool to build an empowerment group. In FuxiCO, the afro-brazilian technique was utilized as a means of understanding the relationships woven into the life stories of each of the participating women, which brought to light the relationship between individual and social representations of "be a woman". The project allowed us to better understand the link between individual and collective experiences, which was extremely useful for the creation of a communal space for female social interaction through co-design and needlework.

**Annuska Angulo Rivero**, No affiliation

**Miriam Mabel Martínez**, School of Design, INBA [National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico]

### Knitting collectively in Mexico: a perspective from within the beehive

This paper will talk about our experience as Lana Desastre, a Mexican knitting collective, from the insider perspective of the authors, members of the collective (one of them residing in London since 2018).

As activists, as artisans and artists, as sisters we have knitted together since 2013. We yarnbombed the inside of a subway car in Mexico City one Sunday morning. We have organized knitting picnics, workshops, and knitted many urban interventions. We wrote and published a book about knitting, *El mensaje está en el tejido* (2016). We have connected with other collectives, some of knitting/crocheting people like us, but also other kinds of textile work: sewing, embroidering, weaving, etc. We have come to realise we belong to a large and heterogeneous movement: textile collectives in Latin America.

Taking as a starting point two of our largest participatory pieces up to date, this paper will talk about the tensions inside/outside the collective with issues of authorship, politics, economics, aesthetics and of course, collectiveness. The pieces are *Panal monumental/Somos colmena* (2017-2022), a large honeycomb knitted and crocheted by 280 participants from all over Mexico and Colombia, and *Se-nos* (2022), a piece still in progress shown at the Kaluz Museum in Mexico City consisting of 50+ knitted and crocheted breasts.

Modular, fractal, participatory and collective, some of our pieces have a life of their own, and we had to learn how to care for them.

**Charlotte Bilby**, PhD Researcher, School of Design, Northumbria University, UK

### Keeping in touch: participatory textile making inside prison

Sewing, making and relationships with textiles have a long and complex history within criminal justice systems: picking oakum; learning to mend clothing to improve future employment prospects; making quilts for premature baby units as a mode of redemption; crochet skills as a bartering currency; embroidering soft furnishing for boutique hotels, heritage sites and film launches for money after release.

With a nod to the past, this paper considers the contemporary role of making in the criminal justice system using a textile and mixed media craft project in a women's prison as an exemplar. Drawing on participatory design and aesthetic and sensory criminology literatures, the paper will show how group-based making was used as both a methodology and object of study.

Rather than a form of therapy or personal activism, the project was experienced as a hobby, something to be enjoyed and somewhere to make tokens for loved ones; a counter to both the 'enforced idleness' of the ubiquitous prison experience or the commodification of every activity while inside. Lastly, the affective encountering experienced during the project, the materiality of items made, and their constitutive parts all demonstrate an aesthetic of care in a place – prison and the criminal justice system – that is inherently harmful.

**Eliana Sánchez-Aldana**, Associate Professor, Facultad de Arquitectura y Diseño, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, Columbia

**Margarita Cuellar Barona**, Departamento de Artes & Humanidades, Universidad ICESI, Cali, Columbia

### Encrypted stitches: documenting the everyday

Despite the vast iconography of women working on their own, needlework has never been an exclusively individual practice. Many well-known textiles (tapestry, embroidering, quilts) attest to this form of collaboration, even though history has erased the names of those who worked on such pieces. Remendingo afectos and La Puerta a la reconciliación are examples of how textiles can serve as documents of the work produced collectively and, at the same time, document what takes place during the working sessions or the projects they are part of. As an alternative or complementary narrative to the verbal/oral, needlework (in these cases embroidery), is used to encrypt memories and emotions in real-time. Due to its dispersive labour, this documentation practice requires a careful and mindful selection of what is embroidered, which leads to an intense presence of what is important for its participants. Such work arouses questions such as: what is a document and what is worth documenting? Is history a matter of the past? Can textiles bring a myriad of times together? Can a textile piece express a variety of voices and versions, and techniques as well? This paper aims at recounting the stories behind two different textile pieces that result from collective needlework practices from diverse groups of women in Colombia.