

Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, eds, *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*. Toronto, YYZ Books, 1998, 254 pp., 38 black-and-white illus.

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Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

INGRID BACHMANN and RUTH SCHEUING, eds, *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*. Toronto, YYZ Books, 1998, 254 pp., 38 black-and-white illus.

In the immaterial world of electronic and instant communications, virtual reality and the World Wide Web, textiles as a technology associated with hand production and tangible physical product has surprising potential for comment on contemporary culture. Historically associated with craft, the domestic and the feminine, textiles have played a leading role in industrial development and figure prominently in contemporary art practice. This complicated and often contradictory relationship of materials with contemporary culture is the subject of Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing's thoughtful and concise collection of essays. Within a framework of feminism, structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, the articles explore textiles' capacity to embody local and personal meaning while maintaining a global presence. *Material Matters* includes innovative theoretical approaches and identification of historical and cultural contexts particular to textiles, while also presenting works by contemporary textile artists.

Sophisticated yet succinct, the sixteen essays in *Material Matters* cover the most pressing issues related to the topic in a clear, well-organized manner. Textiles are seen as sites of resistance, as carriers of social and cultural meaning, and as a language used by those unable to speak against a dominant power structure. In clothing, they communicate the wearers' ideological values, their economic status and group affiliation. Many of the selected readings focus on women as art producers and explore their complicated relationship to textiles. As Rozsika Parker has explained in *The Subversive Stitch*, "the development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft."¹ This collection highlights important connections between this hierarchy of the arts and the categories male/female. Using textiles to question traditional art historical divisions between art and craft, the authors provide a useful and thought-provoking alternative to this hierarchy. The commonly held perception of textiles as linked to the domestic sphere and, by association, the feminine is addressed and challenged in very different but equally innovative ways in these essays. Both these concerns have received very little critical attention to date, making *Material Matters* a significant contribution to the fields of art, craft and design history.

Ingrid Bachmann's remarkable opening essay "Material and the Promise of the Immaterial" sets the tone of the book. Bachmann reminds the reader that "even in our newest technologies we remain firmly rooted in the structures of the past" (33). In this unusual approach to textiles, she traces the history

of textile media in the industrial and technological revolutions. She highlights the contradictions between the material and physical conditions of daily life and the promise of immateriality advanced by the rhetoric surrounding emerging digital and virtual technologies. Using Gwendolyn Zierdt's *The Unabomber Manifesto* (1997), Bachmann emphasizes the striking contrast between the speed of digital telemedia and the slowness of hand production.²

Central to this essay is the view of textiles as a technology. Bachmann examines the discourses around both textile and computer technologies and explores the ways in which these practices are scripted in contemporary culture. Her assessment of the values and attributes that are ascribed to these technologies raises several valid questions: Why is weaving considered antiquated, artisanal, slow, gendered female? Conversely, why are computers considered fast, new, state-of-the-art, virtual, gendered male?

These questions lead her to examine the gendered connections between art and its producers. Bachmann believes that textile as a practice is still quite firmly rooted in the popular imagination as an artisanal activity, a sometimes quaint, historical craft. Usually associated with women, whose site of production is historically the home, textile production is often viewed as an antiquated process operating outside the economy of commodity goods and exchange. In *Old Mistresses*, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker have suggested that such perceptions become petrified into a stereotype by their repetition and ultimately carry the force of natural, obvious truth.³ Identifying these perceptions allows Bachmann to scrutinize the process by which art by women has been separated from the dominant definitions of what constitutes art.

Bachmann deals with computer technologies in important new ways, while also raising complicated issues. For Bachmann, the tactility and materiality of textiles appear to be in direct opposition to the antiseptic sterility of the design of computer hardware. While still generally true, new products like iMac computers, offered in a selection of colours designed to be more aesthetically pleasing, are clearly attempts to bridge the gap between design and functionality. The changes represented by iMac blur the gendered distinctions laid out by Bachmann and hopefully signal a change in the characterization of computer technologies as male. In addition, a greater awareness of the fact that most people access their computers and the Internet from home has prompted some theorists to question how this affects our perception of this space.⁴ The blurring of physical and geographic boundaries around the question "where is home" is a significant result of new technologies. The ability to work and play online across vast geographic distances expands the definition of public and private space. This has the

potential to alter the gendered meanings associated with these spaces considerably.

In "Three Dresses, Tailored to the Times" Renee Baert analyses clothing as a means of constructing gender identity in contemporary art practice. In this innovative approach, the dress is seen as a medium capable of depicting the crossovers between female existence and the elements of interiority, affect, fantasy and memory (90). Baert insists that dress is the "visible interface of self and social – and not always a tidy fit" (75). Using three "dressworks," Baert examines gender roles, explores female sexuality and desire, and revisits colonial history.⁵ The dress is seen here as a quintessentially gendered garment, the very emblem of femininity, and an external surface transmitting countless cultural messages, roles and codes. Baert considers it a potent symbol and vehicle through which to investigate concerns about identity as these operate through bodies, social spaces and representational sites. The images in this essay are rich and textured, complementing this complex investigation into dress, identity and cultural performance.

The social construction of gender is the subject of Robin Metcalfe's exploration of Robert Windrum's embroidery work. Windrum's work blends traditional embroidery techniques with gay tattoo imagery, transgressing gender boundaries and socially accepted roles.⁶ According to Metcalfe, in tattoos "the act of stitching, which we today understand as feminine, merges with another act of piercing that is read as masculine" (102). Suggesting tattoos as a protest against the aesthetic poverty of the dominant masculinity, Metcalfe sees Windrum's work as asserting an alternative to and revealing suppressed dimensions of male experience.⁷ Metcalfe's provocative exploration of masculinity is an important counterpoint to the other analyses of gender identity which focus on femininity.

Through two specific examples of collaborative textile practices, Mireille Perron questions assumptions about women's work, femininity and domesticity.⁸ She also offers an excellent summary of the complicated history of textile art within art historical discourse, a recurring theme in this anthology. Based on the concept of textile practices as social sites of ideological resistance, she concludes that "women who are caught up in and formed by domestic practices have the power and the responsibility to construct new social selves" (132).

The most moving and personal account in this series of essays is Debra Sparrow's "A Journey." Sparrow recounts her experiences as a contemporary Salish weaver who learned to weave as an adult along with her sisters. Believing textiles have the capacity to reactivate tradition and cultural history, Sparrow established a weaving programme in her community (Musqueam). In this account, Sparrow conveys the importance of this experience for the people involved. Although her concluding remarks are reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's "aura,"

Sparrow writes movingly: "Every time we stand in front of our looms, working with our wefts and our warps and mastering the tabby, we know that our ancestors used this same weaving. ... We will pay attention to the messages that are being sent to us [from those women] through our spirits and through our souls and our thoughts" (155–56).

The eclectic nature of this collection is most evident in the contrast between Sparrow's intensely personal account and Sarat Maharaj's theoretical, interdisciplinary attempt to develop inter-cultural studies in textiles. The longest essay in this collection, Maharaj's complex discussion uses the Greek myth of Arachne as the basis for a comparison of cultural identities and power structures. This is completed by an investigation into Gandhi's political strategy which used the production of hand-woven textiles to alter Indian society radically. Reiterating a concern for the hierarchy of the arts, as well as women producers of art, he claims that Arachne's space can be seen as a metaphor for contemporary textile practice, in which handed-down notions of art practice and gender are overturned and displaced. This essay makes excellent use of widely divergent sources to convey a series of critical points. Theoretically dense, but comprehensible, this essay is a useful example of how to incorporate theory into a discussion about art.

Ruth Scheuing offers a feminist reinterpretation of mythological weavers in her contribution to this book. She argues convincingly that "perceptions of mythological figures shift throughout history and reflect how we, as a society, ascribe value to certain behaviour" (201). In her exploration of three myths involving women weaving, Arachne, Philomela and Penelope, Scheuing attempts to address the intersection between actual stories about weaving and the way in which history is told and retold. For Scheuing, the weaving enabled these three women to assert their own wills against a dominating power structure, for which they were either punished, maligned, misrepresented or forgotten in historical records. They all use weaving as a language to communicate. Significantly, in each situation weaving is more strongly connected to storytelling than it is to domestic needs. The most intriguing aspect of this essay is Scheuing's description and analysis of what was actually woven by these women, in particular Arachne. This is overlooked in Maharaj's description of the Arachne myth. In both Scheuing's and Maharaj's use of mythology, the myths themselves are astutely explained and explored through the textiles featured in them.

Seemingly incompatible topics are cleverly woven together in Neil MacInnis' essay "Crimes Against Nature." MacInnis focuses upon the complex histories of textiles, sexualities and technologies. He argues that the parallel use of language that condemns both the Rococo and homosexuality is more than a mere coincidence. With this in mind, he discusses and exam-

ines aspects of contemporary “Queer sexuality” with the “flamboyant and dynamic aid” provided by the example of French Rococo silk woven textiles (217). It is the originality of the parallels drawn between fabric and sexuality that makes MacInnis’ points appealing and thoroughly convincing.

Kiku Hawkes’ essay “Skanda” explores the language of textiles as a material form of oral tradition passed along matrilinear lines. This personal account based on her experience as a mother and a daughter made me consider my own relationships, with both people and textiles. Hawkes claims that the language of textiles is vivid and mysterious, an evocative etymology of ancient knowledge and tradition. Woven into each piece are “loyalties and love, political upheaval and intrigue, beatitude and passion” (233). She intersperses lists of materials with text in a unique and engaging style, asking the reader to listen to the sounds of tulle, taffeta, gauze, organza, percale, pique, linen, triple mousseline. This enticing piece recalls favourite outfits, the particular occasions they were made for, and especially the women who made them – mother, grandmother, close friend. And now, as I pass my hands along the rows of dresses hanging in boutiques, searching for my own wedding dress with my mother, I do hear the sounds of each of the fabrics. This is indeed a language and tradition retold to me by the women in my life.

This very individual reaction to *Material Matters* may seem surprising, but this book has the potential to stimulate theoretical debates as well as personal reflection. In their introductory remarks, Bachmann and Scheuing claim textile is a unique medium – ubiquitous, banal, luxurious, celebrated and diverse – accessing a range of human experiences from the private to the public spheres. Everyone has experiences with cloth on multiple levels. In this collection of works, such an everyday practice no longer appears as the obscure background of social activity.⁹ All of the essays in this collection are excellent work offering a body of theoretical questions, methods, categories and perspectives

from which to penetrate this obscurity and articulate the importance of this everyday experience.

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Notes

- 1 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York, 1984), 5.
- 2 Zierdt’s piece is a hand-woven textile, measuring two by four metres, consisting of horizontal strips that translate the first four paragraphs of the Unabomber’s Manifesto into a pattern.
- 3 Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London, 1981), xviii.
- 4 I am thinking in particular of Susan Leigh Star’s “From Hestia to Home Page: Feminism and the Concept of Home in Cyberspace,” *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, eds (London, 1996), 30–46.
- 5 The three “dressworks” are: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s *Arborite Housedress*; Anne Ramsden’s storefront installation *Dress!*; and Buseje Bailey’s little girl’s dress in *The Viewing Room*.
- 6 Born in 1963, Windrum grew up in a fundamentalist evangelical Christian family in Lethbridge, Alberta, where his father was a Baptist minister. Since 1989, he has lived in Toronto, Ontario. Out as a gay man, he has been involved in AIDS activism in the arts community (93–94).
- 7 For example, Windrum’s *Summer Camp/this is paradise* (1992); hand-embroidered phalluses on Calvin Klein briefs, size 32, worn on mannequin legs.
- 8 Perron discusses Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello’s two-part project *Current Connection – On the Elbow River and Current Connection – At the Deane House* as well as Karen Elizabeth McLaughlin’s *Remnants: A Videotext, Part I* (1992).
- 9 This concept of the “politics of the everyday” comes from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984).

GRISELDA POLLOCK, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*. London, Routledge, 1999, xviii+345pp., 111 black-and-white illus.

Griselda Pollock, a seasoned participant in the “culture wars,” returns to the fray with a new strategy for engaging the chief opponent of female and minority group artists – the canon of Western art. Beginning with a keen critique of the canon as a gendered and gendering institution intent on excluding those who differ from its hegemonic structure of European male power, Pollock goes on to evaluate the feminist responses to it. These fall into two categories: attempts to annex women artists to the existing canon and projects which valorize feminine

endeavours creating a separatist world of female artists and female art forms. Cognizant of the need filled by, yet serious limitations in either the theoretical sophistication or political effectiveness of these approaches, and aware that a concerted challenge to the practice of canon formation and perpetuation must be launched, Pollock offers a third way.

Her strategy, which she calls *differencing*, involves two actions. The first is to reject the phallogocentric concept of binary gender difference while simultaneously using this very structure of difference as a means by which to locate, within the dominant culture’s visual and/or written texts, traces of the unacknowledged other. Pollock chooses the verb form *differencing* so as “to stress the active re-reading and reworking of that which is