



String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art by Elissa Auther

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wrongdoer in those circumstances, but, even so, suppose that she does not in fact do so? Is the wrongdoer doomed to a failure of atonement? Radzik argues no—that the victim need not actually be reconciled for the wrongdoer to have successfully atoned. This is an extremely interesting claim because it means that forgiveness, in the sense of reconciliation, is not morally optional when the wrongdoer has satisfied conditions for atonement. Recall that Norlock made a similar claim, though for different reasons. Generally, we tend to think that it is up to the victim to forgive, or not, at her own discretion. But Radzik is clear that a wrongdoer can be redeemed even without the cooperation of the victim. And in those circumstances, the victim ought to be reconciled with the wrongdoer.

These two books both make for fascinating reading and are very relevant to contemporary discussions of forgiveness and reconciliation. I strongly recommend them to anyone interested in the topic. ■

String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art.
By Elissa Auther. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

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Crafts . . . in general are totally invisible because they are based on such conventional practices that you don't see them," declares Mike Kelley, whose hip, snarky mixed-media works are often animated by found crocheted toys.¹ At least since the 1960s, when Claes Oldenburg's wife began sewing his outsized sculptures of commonplace objects, male artists have been rewarded for daring to prospect in the "conventional" realm of craft. Until recent times, however, the greater daring was shown by their female peers—such as Yayoi Kusama, whose sewn abstract phalli, disturbingly proliferating atop found objects, evidently inspired Oldenburg's vaunted "soft" sculpture.² Fiber and craft generally were coded as feminine and aligned with the decorative—a cardinal "art sin," in sculptor Eva Hesse's words, and one that female artists were chronically, reflexively

¹ Mike Kelley, interview by Michael Archer, 1993, in *Speaking of Art*, ed. William Furlong (London: Phaidon, 2010), 133.

² See Midori Yamamura, "Re-viewing Kusama, 1950–1975: Biography of Things." In *Yayoi Kusama: Mirrored Years*, ed. Jaap Guldemon, Frank Gautherot, and Kim Seungduk (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2009), 82–88.

charged with committing.³ But, from a certain perspective, more risky still than the assays of Kusama and Hesse (who inhabited an avant-garde milieu open to medium experimentation) were the initiatives of, say, Lenore Tawney or Kay Sekimachi, who quixotically aimed to have their radical weaving practices (devolved from the more conservative milieu of craft) upwardly revalued as fine art. In *String, Felt, Thread*, Elissa Auther provides a long-overdue critical analysis of these persistently marginalized female and male fiber artists, usefully comparing their ambitions and achievements with those of their avant-garde peers, such as Hesse or Robert Morris, whose so-called process art often also entailed the use of fiber (cord or cordlike materials for her, felt for him).

Some of the most inventive, intriguing artwork to emerge in the hugely generative moment of the 1960s and 1970s that centrally concerns Auther can now be seen to have emanated from female practitioners who navigated the treacherous brink between art and craft while defying larger trends toward the suppression or removal of the artist's hand (as exemplified by the minimalists).⁴ Besides Hesse and Kusama, consider also the case of Gego (née Gertrude Goldschmidt), whose Reticulárea consist of entrancing freeform nets of wire, or the compelling results of Jackie Winsor's relentlessly wrapping (minimalist) wooden armatures with sisal. These artists all in a way revived challenges to entrenched cultural hierarchies instigated during historic episodes of the avant-garde (e.g., the Bauhaus). But so too did Sekimachi, who wove dangling, captivating, three-dimensional objects not out of fiber but from ethereal monofilament. Auther deftly delineates the cultural prejudices and the divergent artists' strategies that together conspired to keep the fiber artists' initiatives quarantined from those of, say, Hesse while admitting only the latter (in time) to the canon. Regrettably, Auther's by now parochial-seeming decision to restrict her discussion to the American (by which she means U.S.) field keeps some highly engaging examples, such as the Japanese Kusama and the German Jewish-born, Venezuela-based Gego, out of her purview.

As for the revisiting of craft practices promulgated within the feminist art movement of the 1970s, here too Auther proves an astute, nuanced guide to the complex cultural and identity politics entailed, but here again her range of examples somewhat disappoints. Her focus on the relatively

³ Eva Hesse, quoted in *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists*, by Cindy Nemser (New York: Scribner's, 1975), 217.

⁴ See Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003); Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); and Anna C. Chave, "Sculpture, Gender, and the Value of Labor," *American Art* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 26–30.

overexposed cases of Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Ringgold, whose now dated-looking projects earnestly, didactically illustrated their polemics, diverted her from a potentially more significant contribution: the (re)habilitation of overlooked figures who worked with fiber in more sly, oblique, poetic, and so more premonitory ways. Recent efforts at excavating histories of feminist art practice (most notably the 2007 “WACK!” show originating at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art) have likewise bypassed much of this work, such as (in the United States) by the undeservedly unsung Kazuko, Rosemary Mayer, Anne Healy, Judith Shea, and Maureen Connor.

“I come out of textiles,” and “I was made aware of a lot of textile-related work specifically tied to developments in feminism,” affirms the celebrated installation artist Ann Hamilton. “I feel there is something very political in a larger sense extending from some of textile’s vocabularies.”⁵ As proof of the fruitfulness of the examples set by artists deploying fiber in the 1960s and 1970s, Auther concludes her study by noting, “Today, fiber seems to be everywhere in the contemporary art world” (163) while briefly widening her lens to encompass Do-Ho Suh, Ghada Amer, Hu Xiaoyuan, and others—to which list I would add the dazzling kente cloth-haunted assemblages of El Anatsui. Auther thus successfully whets our appetite for more: more studies and exhibitions tracing contemporary artists’ engagements with fiber and textile production. ■

⁵ Cited in Carey Lovelace, “Weighing In on Feminism,” *ARTnews*, May 1997, 140–45.

Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters. Edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

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While race and ethnicity scholars often highlight inequities based on race, Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* explores the many facets of colorism that actively shape social interaction, thus providing a vital perspective on the differences between colorism and racism. Glenn’s volume highlights how tones of color are crucial to concepts of beauty, success, and social hierarchy. Indeed, the chapters in *Shades of Difference* provide a complex theoretical and empirical framework in which colorism acts as a key component in all aspects of life, in a variety of cultural environments.