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The Arts of Urgency: textile practices and truth-telling

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I wrote this abstract and started thinking about the arts of urgency some time before the global pandemic emerged, as part of a collective response at an event called ‘The Urgency of the Arts’ at the Royal College of Art in March 2019. It seems even more apposite today when we are all living under constrained conditions, the economies of the world are struggling, and the arts are under their greatest threat for many generations.

I still want to talk *not* about the urgency of the arts, but the arts of urgency. I want to focus upon tactics for making public realities and ‘truths’. I want to ask how can art and artists express horror, suffering, collective and individual trauma with intelligence, rigour, truthfulness, integrity and ethics? How can textile practices speak into this urgency and how can we do this collectively in the current and emerging contexts.

In this essay I propose to approach these ideas through the concept of textile as spatial logic, drawing on artists deploying textile practices as acts of resistance: Chinese artist Lin Tianmiao and US artist collective that initiated the Pussyhat Project (Janya Zweimann, Krista Suh and Kat Doyle). What they share in common are an aesthetics and politics of spatiality and collaborative action, and through this they produce discourse around female agency and disempowerment, negation and erasure. These are acts of truth-telling through textile actions which purposefully use feminine intimacy as a feminist strategy for producing spacious rubric.

Textile thought of in terms of spatial logic offers scope to focus upon its agential strategies and thus textile’s capacity to address the vulnerable self. Here I want to approach this in two ways: firstly, taking the lens of Judith Butler and her re-presentation of vulnerability and its structures as agent for change. This will be expanded through the work of Lin Tianmiao. Secondly, following Julia Bryan-Wilson’s textural politics, I will discuss aspects of the Pussyhat Project. Taken together, vulnerability and textural politics offer textile as an agential force for truth-telling and resistance through ambiguity and malleability.

Textile Practice as Mediating Materiality

Alexandra Kokoli, in her essay ‘Do Textiles Think?’¹ considers upon feminist textile strategies as ambiguous practices, and notes that ‘some subject matter is more slippery or perhaps more knotted than others’. In this she draws together not only the very properties which render textile practices ‘feminine’ and ‘soft’ but also through the textural surfaces created by their slipperiness and knottiness she reveals their capacity to be agents of material intimacy. Textiles are in everything and are witnesses to everything. Textile becomes the ultimate metaphor and a strategic mediation: its practices, in their ambiguity, see and speak truth.

To think of textile practices in terms of texture, slipperiness and knottiness is a way to approach and think *into* what they might offer in nuanced and enriching articulation of truths and truth-telling.

¹ Alexandra Kokoli in Efi Kyprianidou, *Weaving Culture in Europe* (Nissos Publications, 2017), 99.

If, as Kokoli suggests, textile practices and their outcomes, are both ambivalent and ambiguous, then they occupy strategic and potent ground within and between formal and informal language, textural ground within the interstices of culture. Textile practices, as mediating materiality of intimacy, function everywhere and nowhere. They are in a perpetual place of flux between banality and refusal, slipping and sliding into these intimate interstices, knotting expansive and texture-full structures as they do so.

To speak of textile practices as a mediating materiality of intimacy is to speak of their capacity to address the vulnerable (female) self. Judith Butler proposes vulnerability and resistance as two fundamental concepts² suggesting that the dominant conceptions of vulnerability pre-suggests protection of the vulnerable as the key site of agency. This positions vulnerability within a framework of victim and passivity, potentially rendering the vulnerable as inactive.

Vulnerable Ecologies

To conceive of resistance as oppositional to vulnerability is to further retract the space of agency to the vulnerable and to further incapacitate them as they await protection and support.

If, however, as Judith Butler proposes, vulnerability and resistance are reset, they become strategies for reckoning, creating a space of agency and belonging predicated not upon the politics of power and spatiality and occupation, but upon ambivalence, intimacy and an ecology of truth.

To speak of an ecology of truth, specifically in terms of textile practices is to harness its ambivalence and textural forms, but also Butler's re-dressing of the relationship between vulnerability and resistance. Didier Fassin³ expands this and shows how the portrayal of the recipients of humanitarian actions (the vulnerable) sets the subjects as the 'suffering other' – mute, helpless, violated and deprived and thus demanding affective responses. We are all implicated in this ecology. In taking those bodies into the politics of the street as agential, resisting bodies, an ecology of truth comes into action and vulnerability becomes entangled with agency. Oppositional structures are dismantled and confounded.

Such dismantling of structures sits at the core of Lin Tianmiao's work, most specifically her domestic objects, intricately bound with silk and cotton threads and fabrics which form recognisable and yet obscured assemblages of elements. She blurs hard and soft edges, and this is the core of Lin's visual language. It speaks initially to childhood memories of helping her mother sew and make clothes for the family. And through this real objects become symbols of themselves, vulnerable to shifting meanings and yet solidified in space and time. Women's domestic work, often a concealed duty, is brought to the foreground here, resisting its silencing through an act of binding the forms – spatially silenced. In *Bound and Unbound* (1995-97), behind the bound objects a large thread screen plays a close-cropped video of scissors cutting hanging threads. Women's work, the endless and repetitive acts and actions, are brought to the fore here, given voice and agency. They take up the whole space, emboldened and loud. As the scissors repeatedly cut through the threads, the truth of the female body and its silencing are made public.

²Judith Butler et al., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2016.).

³ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason* (University of California Press, 2011).

Lin's practice, in its return to the repeated winding and binding, speaks to the domestic and industrial production of textile and clothing, most often undertaken by impoverished women in impoverished parts of the world and in unsafe conditions. Clothing the world that demands ever more for ever less. There is both confusion and ambivalence, and her extensive labour brings and oscillation between what is known and what is seen.

Writing of Lin's practice, curator Peggy Wang notes that she uncouples descriptions of her as a Chinese woman artist, resisting essentialising titles and in so doing offers an assertion of Butler's unpacking of vulnerability/resistance relationships. In 2001 Lin targeted her frustration at such classification for the ways in which it encouraged double marginalisation (both Chinese and Woman) and imposed deepened expectations of her work. 'My art is an expression of my life, as an artist, as a Chinese, and I suppose, as a woman.'⁴

The 2001 exhibition *Threads of Vision: towards a new feminine poetics* in Cleveland, Ohio positioned Lin with four other female artists from across the world who also refute 'woman' or 'feminist' artist titles to offer scope for viewers to reflect upon resistance to framing. For these reasons I want to focus predominantly upon Lin's use and articulation through thread in this paper. Taking thread as a formal, material and spatial element of her practice, Lin sets up a dialogue between that which is described and that which actively emerges from its own material and spatial elements. Her works challenge the notion of an artwork as a final/finished form, setting them more as sites for exploration and ongoing expression. The works give a materialisation of her own voice as an artist. They speak into Butler's tactics of resistance, and in so doing, challenge practices of classification. Lin says of her work that it 'perhaps six months or a year after you produce a work that you understand why you did it, and what you were trying to say.'⁵

In an early work, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995) 20,000 needles protrude from a rice paper-covered bed, each attached to an individual strand of white thread. Here thread and its winding take on Kokoli's ambivalence, allowing space to be both drawn in and cut free: an act of vacillation, vulnerability *and* resistance held together in the bound forms. Curator Liao Wen, in a catalogue essay writes '*The Proliferation of Winding* utilises simple and complex, unified and repetitive knotting textures'⁶, pointing the viewer back to the threads. As Peggy Wang notes 'what appears at first to be a soft layer of fur in the bed is revealed to be thousands of piercing needles, leading the viewer to swing wildly from tactile curiosity to surprise and perhaps event trepidation.'⁷

Lin's works hover ambivalently in their materiality, questioning truths and knowns persistently. We can see this again in a more recent work *High* (2000), a video projects of the artist's face slowly moving from neutral to smiling. Individual knots of thread pierce the scrim screen and reach back to a wall-mounted piece of fabric that acts as a sound baffle. Here textile and thread become not only silently witnessing substrates but the very material that make image and sound possible, the threads register the capacity to make the invisible visible. This work also offers the viewer a route into the work that addresses the marginalisation of women and textile practices through practice of ambivalence that embraces vulnerability not to render passive, but as a tactic of agential expression. Lin's

⁴ Karen Smith, *Lin Tianmiao: Non Zero* (Asia Art Archive, 2004) 21.

⁵ Smith, 21.

⁶ Wen Liao, *Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art*. (Beijing Yishu Bowuguan, 1995).

⁷ Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 131.

threads and screens talk of truth and establish themselves as the agents for truth, whilst allowing themselves to remain tentative, provisional and ambivalent. This is the precarious ecology of truth-telling. The threads, like light rays, form a connection between vision and sound, lending both material presence and, in so doing, announce thread as a materialising force, but also a rhetorical device. Each knotted thread, as it reaches back or forth, makes the bodily labour of art making visible; the massing of threads' volume, amplifying. The material, spatial and formal properties of Lin's work, her threads, become dialogic interventions, resisting through their vulnerability. Peggy Wang asks, 'what is thread when it isn't a metaphor for being bound ...?' She answers, 'they become platforms through which [Lin] could announce and declare and disagree.'⁸

'Grab 'em by the pussy'

Thinking in terms of threads as platforms for announcing, declaring and disagreeing; for resisting, Jayna Zweiman (a Jewish artist), Krista Suh (a Korean Chinese screenwriter) and Kat Coyle (designer) conceived of the Pussyhat Project. At the end of Donald Trump's presidency, with all of its violence and rejection of truth, the pussyhat acts as a visual symbol of protests against his 'grab 'em by the pussy' remarks through visual and material reclamation of the word. It is an extraordinary truth that our present moment is one in which women in America and beyond feel compelled to wear pussies on their heads as a visible and unmistakable reminder to all who dare (or care) to look that it is not acceptable to make women's oppression a policy recommendation. We see echoes of these discussions across the globe. In Poland, for example, OSK (All-Polish Women's Strike) have moved their protests beyond abortion rights towards increasingly oppressive regimes on women's bodies as the ruling party's ties with the Catholic Church in Poland intermingle. The protests temporarily suspended enactment of the abortion law tribunal. As Polish journalist Katarzyna Wężyk wrote in her Facebook manifesto:

'Get the fuck out means we hit the wall. It means that this ruling regime, who are in bed with the Church, deserves nothing else. It means that we have been kicked, punched and spat on one time too many. It means that this time too many rights have been taken from us in the name of political games. It means that the consent to torture, the order to give birth to deformed children, the acknowledgment of our suffering and our will as invalid is finally too much. This pussy bites back.'⁹

Whilst the pussyhat can be interpreted to be a wearable way in which to 'grab back' control over our bodies, surveys from the protests of 2017 and afterwards found the symbolism of the hat remains confusing and complicated. Some argue that it suggests and reasserts an overly close and essentialist association of women with their bodies and that it is this biology that has been used to silence them and render them vulnerable and thus in need of (male) protection, but it could be countered that that is precisely the point. As with the protests in Poland, women are demanding their bodies be returned to them.

Katja May, in her article 'The Pussyhat Project' moves the debate away from binary notions of good/bad activism or feminism arguing that these become constructs aimed at de-railing

⁸ Wang, 143.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/catarynka>.

the project and the agency it expresses.¹⁰ This is a tactic of oppressive regimes to destabilised and disrupt collective actions.

Instead, she proffers the term ‘texture’ as a lens, drawing upon textile language of threads, knitting and entanglement to permeate into these debates. In rehabilitating the material and materiality of the pussyhat into this discussion May helps us to reflect upon the agency and potency of such textile actions on their own terms. And to think in terms of texture also allows us to bring into relief the language of textile’s materiality as a force for political agency by, and for, women’s bodies.

What is the pussyhat? The V&A Museum in London holds a Pussyhat and labels it thus:

‘Pussyhat worn at the Women’s March in Washington on 21st January 2017’

It states also that it is ‘a global symbol of female solidarity and the power of collective action’¹¹. This symbol is an unremarkable pink knitted hat with a wide cuff knitted in stocking (stockinette) stitch and with two pointed ‘ears’ on each side of its upper end. This also happens to be the very hat that Janya Zweiman wore to the march.

Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests that ‘to textile politics is to give *texture to politics*, to refuse easy binaries, to acknowledge complexities.’¹² Texture returns us to Kokoli’s knotty and slippery material. Whilst texture gives rise to uneven and nubby surface, it invites closer inspection; it gives rise to relief and shadow and the shift from smooth to rough. It makes visible its own uneven surface and, in this shift, it becomes ambiguous and agential.

The knitted pussyhats as a textural form, act as a reminder of the ways in which women’s communal and individual bodies become shaped. This occurs across public, intimate, private and political spaces. At the same time those shaped bodies permeate and perform within the spaces that shape them. This interplay between body and space creates texture that is spoken collectively through the pussyhat. The pussyhat transcends its pink-eared knitted head piece form; it speaks about anger, discontent and solidarity. It is about refusing the power structures of vulnerability and giving agency to resistance in collaboration *with* vulnerability. As the Polish women march, with flags, banners and a sea of pink and black, so the pink sea of pussyhats across the globe marked refusal, refusal for their bodies to be subjected to controlling, misogynistic powers.

There are many arguments and criticism that can be fairly levelled at the women’s marches and the use of the pussyhat as a supposedly unifying symbol for all women. The craftivism movement of which they form a part is a predominantly white middle-class movement and, of course, draws on its own pink here. Craftivism invokes the labour of hand production with activist intentionality – it is about action and activity. Its critics, with some justification, struggle with the notions of leisure and privilege that lie within these crafting activities. Such rhetoric of division across class, colour and socioeconomic fissures could also serve right wing anti-feminist factions well. Is craftivism itself being used against its own agents for change? It would seem that the hat is at once too overtly bodily, too playful, too aggressive, too cute. The pussyhat speaks into all of these, imperfectly, but audibly.

¹⁰ Katja May, ‘The Pussyhat Project: Texturing the Struggle for Feminist Solidarity’. *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020), 14.

¹¹ V&A caption, nd

¹² Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 7.

May contends that the Pussyhat Project faced scrutiny on all of these levels specifically because it was part of a women-led action and made use of a stereotypically feminine practice – knitting. In this it chimes with Lin’s winding thread practice. This is not to dismiss the critics of pussyhats and craftivism, but more to think about ways in which this knotted, knitted, textural form can act as a language of resistance and challenge through its very form and mode of construction.

What is interesting about knitting is that in its ubiquity, it enables different relationships with and about it to coexist at and within its nubbly, textured surface. Its ubiquity and domesticity has often resulted in an inattention as a set of expressive practices, but as an act of resistance it harnesses vulnerability heroically. In the case of the 1980s Women’s Peace Camp at Greenham Common in the UK, their self-defined image of women knitting, and their fibre installations allowed for their presence to be dismissed initially as unimportant and ineffective. Kokoli has commented¹³ that when the predominantly male police force came to remove the women from the camp perimeter, they found them entangled beneath webs of yarn and had to engage in disentangling – an embodied crafting and protesting wound up in one another. Their looped yarns created nubbly structures on and around their bodies, which lay passively awaiting removal, disrupting in softness. The men had to enact ‘female’ detangling to control these women’s bodies.

Shannon Black suggests that the Pussyhat Project should be thought of as a textile craft-based initiative that whilst encouraging activism is also accessible and multi-scalar¹⁴. It is this capacity to function at personal, community, national and international levels that gives it its agency for political and cultural change. In its texture and looped form, the knitted hat enables engagement from multiple platforms and spaces. It complicates into itself the individual makers as well as the marchers, different and individual trajectories and experiences of discontent and drivers for resistance.

Through such collective action, participants and viewers become more aware of their/out own positionality in relation to other bodies and the texture of that spatiality.

Ecology of Truth

What emerges from the Pussyhat Project and Lin Tianmiao’s work is the notion of textile’s texture functioning both as symbolic and material act and action. It becomes a framework for an ecology of truth. The knitted, knotty looping of knitting, and the bound objects, with the bodies that make and wear it/them become agents for change through the act of becoming vulnerable. The hat, in its ubiquity, softness and playfulness, in its girly pinkness, enables engagement and textural interplay between diverse groups of people, to take action together. Lin’s silenced objects, in their silken forms, give voice and volume to the domestic acts. As May writes:

¹³Alexandra Kokoli, ‘Pre-Emptive Mourning Against the Bomb: Exploded Domesticities in Art Informed by Feminism and Anti-Nuclear Activism’. *Oxford Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (March 2017), 153–68.

¹⁴ Shannon Black, ‘KNIT + RESIST: Placing the Pussyhat Project in the Context of Craft Activism’. *Gender, Place & Culture A Journal of Feminist Geography* 24, no. 5 (2017), 16.

‘it is in this mode of bringing people together to explore and create the texture of a joint struggle for liberation that I located the project’s potential for fostering feminist solidarity.’¹⁵

Through such repeated actions of making, sharing and wearing the hats, through winding, binding and knotting, a texture of truth-telling emerges that is knotty, holey, entangled, fluffy and messy, but it allows for ambivalence and complexity to co-reside. The texture of textile as agent for truth-telling allows for further entanglements and unravels binary structures.

Textile’s Texture

I want to close by referencing a series of events held in London in September 2014, *Re-Materialising Feminism*. Its ambition was to create a space in which different feminist voices could gather to share commonalities across differences.

The title was intended as ambiguous and open-ended and provisional, but it was also a reaction to the scant attention paid to the invisible and immaterial female labour. The events coalesce around a materialistic subject – a subject fractured through collective struggle, but also the subject of each singular woman.

This is textile’s texture: it is smooth and nubby; it slips and slides into and out of the everyday and ceremonial. Textile allows us to name and speak of female oppression, misogyny and bodily control through its ambiguity. It allows us to embrace empathetic exchange. Through entering into its texture, it offers scope to resist binary structures and strategically deploy entanglements as an ambiguous strategy of truth-telling and confusion. The one and the collective come together at and in the surface-structure formation

In its texture, knottiness and slipperiness, textile is rendered active: it resists and enacts truths.

In this bizarre pandemic situation of social distancing and non-touching, in our masking and policing of our boundaries like never before, many are spending increased hours in the home and in roles of domesticity. In Lin Tianmiao’s winding threads, the Pussyhats, on Poland’s streets and at Greenham Common, threads continue to enable truths to be articulated and formed and for control to be resisted. Their textile forms slip and slide as mediating materiality of intimacy and resistance.

Vulnerability and resistance, as strategies of reckoning, offer agency and vocal amplification with and through the texture and form of textile practices.

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¹⁵ May, 86.

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