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Weinberg, Tali, "Making (in) Brooklyn: The Production of Textiles, Meaning, and Social Change" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 755.

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Making (in) Brooklyn: The Production of Textiles, Meaning, and Social Change

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Two young women with backgrounds in weaving and textile design opened the Textile Arts Center (TAC) in an old sweater factory in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn in the summer of 2010. The Center serves a cross section of populations linked by their engagement with textiles, acting as a meeting space for fiber artists, fashion designers, crafts people, and residents of surrounding neighborhoods. It hosts classes for children and adults in a variety of textile processes including weaving, felting, knitting, dyeing, quilting, garment construction, upholstery, book making, and more. Their programming now also includes a natural dye garden, a 9-month artist residency, a storefront, and a variety of events.

This paper was developed from ethnographic fieldwork centered at TAC. From January-July 2011, in the early stages of this organization, I participated in TAC's artist residency program as one of six artists with full-time access to a shared studio space. Over this time I was able to form relationships with TAC staff and the five other working artists as well as a number of adults who passed through the Center to take classes and attend gallery openings, artist talks, fashion events, and public workshops. I also became an active participant in the development of *Sewing Seeds*, a natural dye garden that TAC started in Spring 2011.

In Context

TAC is located in the formerly industrial, but now gentrifying neighborhood of Gowanus, a new hub for arts venues. It is between Park Slope, an upscale neighborhood that boasts many options for the consumption of artisanal goods, and Red Hook, a working class neighborhood that has become a center of artisanal production. And it is across the river from Manhattan, home of the Design District—once the Garment District.

In Brooklyn, TAC is just one example of a growing population that seeks authenticity, accountability, and direct relationships by choosing to purchase “locally made” or “handmade goods,” or by making goods themselves. Such interests are evident in the growth of the online marketplace Etsy.com, the fashion industry-led campaign to “Save the Garment Center,” and the opening of other creative work/workshop spaces such as 3rd Ward. One can now purchase Brooklyn-made (and labeled) beer, chocolate, coffee, honey, pickles, beef jerky, and a whole host of other prepared foods and artisanal and light industrial goods.¹ These brands follow the burgeoning support for local agriculture and farmers markets. Any number of weekly markets now feature artisanal goods and foods. And co-working spaces have opened around the borough to host the increasing number of freelancers, entrepreneurs, designers, and artisans.

¹ See for example Adam Bonislawski. “Is the ‘New’ Brooklyn Economy for Real?” in *Brooklyn Magazine*, 2012; and Steven Stern. “Brooklyn: Now the Brand.” In *The New York Times*, 2012

“Local” and “handmade” textiles have, themselves, emerged as significant cultural presences in the context of globalized systems of production, exchange, and consumption. TAC has increasingly become an essential and active space for those with these interests. Because of this, I find it to be an ideal location from which to explore this growing culture and practice of local and handmade amongst makers and consumers in New York. The “local” and “handmade” labels attached to the practices at TAC belie much larger questions. How and why are the producers of these objects inscribing their practices of making and the materiality of textiles with new meanings and intentions as they navigate the systems they seek to change? And how are their practices, and their understandings of these practices, linked to globalized systems and ideologies that both constrain and make possible their abilities to make the changes they desire? In these pages, I describe how the women at TAC articulate their intentions and then pose questions about where these emergent cultural practices might lead us.

Why Local and Handmade?

As local and handmade production gains interest amongst scholars and the popular press, discussions tend to focus on Do-It-Yourself (DIY), Craftivism, the ways that makers are “resisting” capitalism and the mass production of commodities.² From the fashion industry, many cheerleaders of eco-fashion and fair trade clothing claim design as a site for corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental sustainability while others lament the loss of local US production and the demise of the New York garment industry.³ Meanwhile, critics of “craft as a vehicle for social change” accuse participants of romanticism, perpetuating commodity fetishism, and embracing the same markets responsible for gross inequalities.⁴

At TAC the predominant politically and socially engaged practices do not fit simply within these bounds. The young women I worked with in Brooklyn express their practices in terms of connection, intimacy, and engagement rather than of resistance. At the same time, they move beyond a language of CSR or pastoral romanticism. Around TAC I generally heard three expressions of why these young women are pouring their love, energy, and time into their work. Broadly these are: 1) the importance of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, 2) a commitment to environmental sustainability, and 3) a need to increase the value of textiles. I will discuss these one at a time to elaborate on how the desires for connection, engagement, and intimacy shape the work at TAC .

² For example Colin Campbell, “The Craft Consumer: Culture, Craft and Consumption in a Postmodern Society” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 23–42; Faythe Levine. *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*. 2008; Debbie Stoller, *Stitch ‘n Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook*. 2003; and David Revere McFadden, *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*. 2008

³ Sass Brown. *Eco Fashion*. 2010; Earth Pledge (Ed) *Future Fashion White Papers*. 2007; Kate Fletcher. *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles*. 2008; and Worldwatch, *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*. 2010

⁴ Ethel Brooks. *Unraveling the Garment Industry*. 2007; Gay W. Seidman. *Beyond The Boycott*. 2007; Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg. *Fair Trade and Social Justice*. 2010: 7; John Connolly and Andrea Prothero. “Green Consumption Life-politics, Risk and Contradictions.” In the *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2008

Knowledge and Skill

The mission to preserve and share textile knowledge and to re-skill and revalue textiles underlies much of TAC's work. This mission, in turn, is motivated by a number of common anxieties amongst the women at TAC about mass production and modern life. One TAC program, *Sewing Seeds*, is particularly revealing of both these anxieties and TAC's approach to addressing them. *Sewing Seeds* is the umbrella-name for the natural dye garden, adult and children's natural dye classes, free and paid workshops, and most recently, the sale of raw materials for dyeing and hand-dyed goods. The community garden across the street from TAC provided the space for the original dye garden. This summer they expanded to a bigger garden to produce plants for sale using a CSA model: selling shares to members who then received batches of raw material throughout the summer. Their move to the bigger garden has also allowed them to increase the educational programs they provide, including free workshops in the garden.

Knowledge for the Sake of Knowledge

Those I spoke to at TAC usually discussed their motivation to support knowledge for the sake of knowledge as driven by one or more of three anxieties. Some respondents worry that the textile knowledge, skills, and objects that are a basic part of what make us human are being lost to history. These objects and skills are viewed as integral to daily life and are often part of the family history of my respondents: a grandmother who produced all of the family's linens; a mom who made one's clothes; or an aunt who went to work in a garment factory and financially supported the family. Others sought out local and handmade goods to quell their anxieties resulting from a culture of disposability, speed, and feelings of instability. In this case, these goods imply visible social relations, an alternative to those otherwise obscured by complex global systems of production and consumption. Finally, for some, this knowledge-driven mission is a response to the commodification of education: TAC has a real respect for skill, knowledge, and craftsmanship that exists in tandem with a critique of the professionalization of art that requires one spend upwards of \$80,000 for an MFA during which one may or may not actually learn skilled textile processes; and this after already acquiring significant debts from undergraduate degrees.

TAC's programming around natural dyes emphasizes the knowledge of what materials are (flowers, roots, heartwood); where materials come from (the earth, a garden); and the historical, geographic and scientific context of each dye. Materials are at the heart of natural dyeing. The fibers, the water, the soaps, the mordants, and most of all, the sources of color are all materials that must be understood that affect the outcome of the process. For the women at TAC, knowing that madder red comes from a root and that indigo is a green leafy plant is just as important as knowing where our food comes from. In part, this is so that one can achieve the desired results. But of equal, maybe even of greater weight, is the understanding that this knowledge is knowledge of connection: connection to materials, to places, and to history.

The emphasis on connection is primarily personal. These practices are a way in which my informants connect with their own bodies. I was told repeatedly that these acts of production are healing, calming, grounding, and body-regulating. They are also a way for developing intimate connections between oneself and materials as symbolic connections between oneself and other people and places. The practice of knitting, sewing, or dyeing connects practitioners to mothers and grandmothers; to those who have passed or are alive and far away; and to those with whom they form a community by making together. The talk in classes, the use of raw materials, and the garden reinforce natural dyeing as a way

to connect to place, whether that place is the earth one is cultivating or somewhere distant in space and time.

In the spring of 2011 TAC created their first container garden. Each dye plant was given a separate pot so that it could be labeled with the plant's common and scientific names and the colors they produced. This collection of dye plants was grown outside of TAC's walls, alongside food and flowers tended by other members of a community garden. Now TAC offers free workshops in their garden, providing hands-on experience to a growing audience. For the women at TAC, to know is not just to read or hear: *practice* is key. Where, when, and how the plant was grown is important because the dye compounds are affected by how much sun a plant gets and what is in the soil and the water. These skills cannot be learned in a lecture or book alone, but rather, through practice and participation. This is what TAC provides through their classes and the garden. This approach to teaching suggests that practice at TAC is not just about connecting dyers to other places and people, but also forming connections between different forms of knowledge. Cerebral knowledge and the embodied knowledge acquired through practice are taught as one, inseparable form of knowledge at the Textile Art Center.

Sustainability

For the women at TAC, however, knowledge is also about much more than the personal experience of learning. The women at TAC consider knowledge of material and process vital to their work as engaged social actors who support environmental sustainability. Their desire to make work that is "environmentally sustainable" is motivated by the anxiety that we are destroying the earth through consumption. The thought goes: we undervalue raw materials and the objects they are turned into, which leads to over consumption, which in turn must be curbed in the face of climate change and environmental destruction. The primary response to this anxiety from the fashion industry has been the proliferation of eco and ethical labels and certifications. But the women at TAC and others are becoming increasingly skeptical of the lack of transparency and accountability in these labels. Instead, at TAC, the emphasis for change is placed back on embodied knowledge. The hope is that learning the skills of textile and garment production will reduce one's desire to consume: either by increasing the meaning one invests in garments produced oneself or by increasing how much one is willing to spend on an ethically produced garment. The detailed knowledge of material that TAC emphasizes in classes and in the garden is, at least in part, a conveyer of these ethics of sustainability: knowing how things are made, knowing how to make them yourself, and being a responsible producer and consumer that is careful about the source and the amount of material one uses. Learning to produce a garment should result in a greater understanding of the skills and materials involved, leading to a decreasing need to consume and dispose, as one finds meaning in the results of *their own* labor in a way they wouldn't in mass produced clothing. In this case, when speaking of connection, intimacy, and engagement, the attention is to engagement with materials and connection to the fruits of one's own labor.

While the practices themselves are vital, it is also important to ask how they are inscribed with meaning through language. The talk in the natural dyeing classes tends to reinforce the tie between natural dyes and the environment. Anthropologists Webb Keane and Brian Larkin argue that value and meaning are produced and managed through the materiality of objects in combination with language and social action. Materials may index and signify people, places, meanings, and values, but they do so because there is work being done to manage this meaning and value.⁵ Further, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger

⁵ Webb Keane, *Signs of Recognition*, 1997: 8; and Brian Larkin. *Signal and Noise*, 2008: 249; See also Brian Spooner. "Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet." In *The Social Life of Things*, 1988: 195-235

find that while talk is an important component in learning, one learns *to* talk rather than learning *from* talk. In the process of learning to work with natural dyes, students learn to become the kind of person who works with natural dyes. The talk that accompanies these classes demonstrates the connection between cerebral and embodied knowledge, specifically in the formation of students as subjects. The talk that makes up much of class time leads students to further understand these practices as intellectual and embodied, as rooted in history and places, and as part of a set of broader ethics concerning production and consumption.⁶ So it is not just the practices themselves, but the talk that accompanies them, that have the potential to move textiles beyond discussions of sustainability or even resistance. A language of connection, intimacy, and engagement further opens up discussion to labor, value, and women's work, all integral to a conversation about ethical textile production.

Value

The third expression of why the women at TAC do what they do is the desire to raise the value of textiles in society. Raising the value of textile objects and processes sometimes refers to raising exchange value, but also refers to value as it is a measure of social meaning and respect. The women who run TAC have an intuitive sense that their labor, creativity, and skills should have worth, that they should have worth, and that the objects they value highly should also be valued in society. For many of the women I spoke with, experiences in the worlds of art and fashion, particularly working in entry level positions, produced anxieties that their own labor and creativity as designers, makers, and keepers of textiles is undervalued and that the objects they find so meaningful are undervalued by society as a whole. They are continually witness to textile art's lesser economic value in high art and sexist jobs at the frivolity of women who care about clothing. While we hear of a growing creative class, many young designers work as peons in larger corporations for little pay and little credit.

Of course, in discussions of textiles such as this, value is the elephant in the room. I don't have to explain to anyone reading this that textiles and women's work continue to be marginalized in various ways despite much advancement. But I want to explicitly bring it into today's conversation about sustainability. The gendered labor of textile production is marked as unskilled under a capitalist system and patriarchal worldview that values intellectual labor over physical labor and views the two as increasingly separated. Despite high levels of knowledge and skill required to be textile designers, conservators, curators, independent artisans, garment workers, or the operators of industrial looms, this work is often precarious—meaning part time, temporary, overworked and underpaid.⁷ This experience of devalued textiles exists in the world of art as well. In *String, Felt, Thread*, art historian Elissa Auther writes of the work done by feminist and conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s to shift fibers from “low” craft to “high” art. Whether taking advantage of, or fleeing from, the medium's association with femininity, decorative arts, women's work, and craft as domestic, these are associations to be overcome both then and now.⁸

⁶ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. 1991:107-9; and Lave, et al. “Coming of Age in Birmingham.” In *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1992:268

⁷ Jane Schneider. “The Anthropology of Cloth.” In the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1987 and “From Potlatch to Wal-Mart.” In *The Fabric of Cultures*, 2009: 17-18; Thuy Lihn Nguyen Tu *The Beautiful Generation*, 2010; Lou Taylor. *Establishing Dress History*, 2004: 315; and Taylor, 2002: 59

⁸ Elissa Auther. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in America, 2010*; Maureen Sherlock. “Piecework: Home, Factory, Studio, Exhibit.” In Joan Livingston and John Ploof's *The Object of Labor*, 2007: 1-30

The women of TAC hope that in the face of these problems their efforts will keep textile skills alive and raise their value in society, leading to an increase in the meaning people ascribe to their garments, a decrease in conspicuous consumption, and an increase in the market value of textiles—be they in the forms of craft, garments, or art. Here, I want to emphasize that at TAC, “engagement” refers to a direct engagement with capitalism. This is not a retreat from or resistance to capitalism. This is a demand that their labor be valued fairly within the capitalist economy. On the one hand, it is a demand full of contradictions. They continue to embrace the same ideologies responsible for their marginalization. On the other, while not articulated by TAC in this way, demonstrating that labor is indeed knowledgeable and skilled is vital to the defetishization and re-valuing of feminized labor in the global economy.

Learning to work with materials changes the way people understand themselves in the world. This, in turn, has the potential to engender new ethical subjectivities. The language of ethics currently expressed around TAC is primarily that of environmental sustainability. But learning at TAC can also include a change in the way participants value their own labor, and potentially the labor of others in the global economy.⁹

This is why I argue that it is important to shift our language around these practices from an emphasis on resistance or sustainability to an emphasis on connection, engagement, and intimacy in all of their overlapping and even contradictory meanings. I propose this language adds nuance to our concerns about capitalism and contemporary culture. Changing the terms of the debate can lead us into a franker discussion on the value of time, labor, and creative practice while moving us away from what is essentially a sexist critique of the conspicuous consumption of fashion.¹⁰

Conclusion: Connection, Intimacy, and Engagement

The Brooklyn I described above is either celebrated or mocked in its branding as a new frontier for the creative class. But this creative class is also a precarious labor force trying to survive and thrive within an inherently exploitative economic system.

The women at TAC see themselves as social actors interconnected with places, materials, and other people. As such, they are committed to building a socially minded institution that will endure time rather than seeking celebrity. They are actively asserting their place in the public sphere: in markets and as an organization that can and does partner with existing industries and institutions. The women at TAC know they need to advocate for themselves as they struggle to have their own labor, creativity, and knowledge valued. While struggling for economic sustainability (as individuals and as an organization), value, as it is espoused around TAC, means something that far exceeds the economic realm. Through their efforts they are fighting to be a part of the capitalist system rather than to dismantle it. Considering the varied ways that textiles are marginalized these efforts are necessary and have the potential to benefit their communities of practice. TAC is also an explicit critique and challenge to the status quo: a demand for social relations that exceed the market and for clothing and textiles that exceed the realm of the commodity.

I do not want to romanticize what TAC is doing. In terms of pursuing radical social and economic justice there are clear limitations to their work. I do, however, want to take TAC on its own terms. The

⁹ Jane Collins. *Threads: Gender, Labor, and Power in the Global Apparel Industry*, 2003

¹⁰ Sheryl Kroen. “A Political History of the Consumer.” *The Historical Journal*. 2004: 17

women at TAC are not the ones proclaiming a “handmade revolution.”¹¹ They believe, however, that knowledge should not be restricted to an elite; that textile processes that are taken as deskilled at the level of mass production are indeed skilled; and they care about the world and see themselves as responsible for engaging in it. Further, they have nuanced understandings of skill and knowledge that they share through their classes and public programs. Their awareness of interconnection between people, materials, and places and their shifting understandings of the value of their own labor are potential and necessary steppingstones from “awareness” to social change. The focus on knowledge as practice at TAC helps us better understand the potential for change in textiles in the current moment. *Sewing Seeds* and other programs at TAC are important in how they demonstrate that textiles processes are highly skilled and involve inseparable embodied and cerebral knowledge.

There are inescapable limitations to TAC’s efforts to rescue textiles from marginalization, particularly as textiles continue to index “unskilled” feminized labor and signify domesticity and “low” craft rather than “high” art or “skilled” metal labor. My concerns are twofold. First, that the work TAC does to revalue skill is intimately tied to market values, continuing to embrace the same ideologies that are responsible for their own marginalization. And second that TAC and others who value “local” and “handmade” as ethical alternatives to mass produced goods face the ongoing challenge that while certain social relations are revealed and prioritized, others continue to be obscured. Is there an imaginary of the local economy that is more robust than the circulation of artisanal goods? What of the many other local businesses? And what of women who labor in factories in New York and around the globe?

Above, I have explored how women at the Textile Arts Center articulate some of their underlying anxieties about value and their desires for connection and intimacy. I have also shown how these women engage in the teaching and learning of skilled practice as inseparable cerebral and embodied knowledge. My hope is that placing these explorations side by side will point us towards possibilities for social change. I see possibility as TAC participants gain an increasing understanding of the skill of their own material production as related to that of other laborers and artisans around the world. I see possibility in the expressed desire for intimacy with people as much as place and materials. And I see possibility in the ability to expand the ethical subjectivities engendered through these practices from an attention to environmental sustainability to an attention to all forms of labor.

¹¹ Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good!: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change Stitch by Stitch*, 2008

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