Woven Frames: Feminist Craft Corner and the Technology of Craft

Shifting Materialities

The Feminist Craft Corner started with a performance. It started with wet felting in the small faculty gallery space in Porter College. I donned thick magnifying lens glasses and a garish sweater and performed my best Olympia public access show impersonation. I showed people how to felt with wool and dish soap in cake tins while talking to much about my personal life. The performance of the craft show is a parody and a homage to the low-fi public access television that I watched as a youngster but unlike those shows my project was to create a critical shift in the discourse of craft towards a radical queer framework.

Queer references a change in vocabulary. It’s meaning is mixed with the production of shame, ambiguity, and illegibility. Queer remains undetermined, it’s orientation shifting, affectual. The queer here is contextualized by location, by a movement of queer people on the West Coast who are committed to DIY (Do-It-Yourself) or DIT (Do-It-Together) arts communities. The creation of queer space, queer time, and queerness within these communities is informed by the radical histories of punk rock, anti-capitalist, feminist and civil rights movements. Queer becomes here a method for exploring the intersections between gender, sexuality, race and technology.

Craft is illegible as a technology. It’s produced within the framework of nostalgia.

Shifting Temporalities
The Feminist Craft Corner public access show *Jerkwaterburg* riffs upon multiple registers of televisual representational practices. *Jerkwaterburg* is found within the schedule of other public access television shows like *Dance-O-Dance, Look Mom, I'm on TV!, Coolymia* and *Lunatics in Limbo*. The show airs on three different public access networks in San Francisco, Santa Cruz and Olympia, Washington. The location of *Jerkwaterburg* within a public access megatext is important to the show’s reproduction and reflexive transgression of televisual history. The show produces a pastiche of references to children’s television programming from the 1980s (*Zoom, Square1, 3-2-1 Contact*), early nineties craft shows (*Aleene’s Craft Show, Glass with Vicky Payne, This Old House*), late nineties sketch comedy shows (*Mr. Show, Upright Citizen’s Brigade*) and the Warhol screen test.

In creating a television show for Feminist Craft Corner I question how I am constructing this temporal and experiential space for viewing. I find myself and my collaborators both produced and undone by the processes of videomaking. We constantly fail to affect a performance and the tape is littered with examples of failed performances, which belie the artifice of our project. I’ve put aside the desire to seem real. We contextualize the space for our performance in a fictionalized space called *Jerkwaterburg* as a means of localizing the absurd sexual space of our misadventures. The theme song for the show refers to the city of Jerkwaterburg as the space where “yetis and rainbows and unicorns and yetis are waiting for you”. We find that we are invested in the exploration of magical animal sexuality as a means of producing transgressive performances within and between gendered, racial and sexual affects. This interplay of performance and identity operates in a serious way within the work. The production and
interpellation of bodies within the digital frame of camera and computer machinery actively discipline the body and the viewer’s relationship to it. In my editing of *Jerkwaterburg* I’ve attended to make transparent the processes of producing the show while at the same time preserving the strange space of *Jerkwaterburg* for some moments.

The roughness of public television’s aesthetics and the possibility (and perhaps enjoyment) of failure is a productive framework for thinking about *Jerkwaterburg* as a public artwork. In the 1970s public access television stations were constructed as an important avenue for political and artistic expression. Public access television has since been superseded by other modes of publishing and broadcast particularly the internet but also commercial and other institutionally constructed forms of television that have a space for viewer submitted content. Before there was a youtube there was an *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. The simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity of *Jerkwaterburg*’s form and content acts as a kind of destabilizing force for the unsettling normativity of its influences.

Nostalgia has a particular function within the discourse of new media. Children’s shows tend to have an unfortunate didactic and moralistic quality that forecloses the complex, the sexual and even the creative. Many public access television shows also function on a didactic level and reveals a kind of contention between between roughness and realness.

**Quilt Lines**

I told her that I had become quite crafty. I told her “Grandma, I’m making a quilt for my art project. It’s digital. That means it has a computer in it.”
She says “what? What? And I’m not sure if it’s because she can’t hear me or because she thinks what I’m doing is really weird.

Miki Y. Foster (Talking Quilt)

So the object we aim for, which we have in our view, also comes into our view, through being held in place as that which we seek to be: the action searches for identity as the mark of attainment (the writer becomes a writer through writing). We can ask what kinds of objects bodies tend toward in their tendencies, as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward [553]

Sarah Ahmed.

My 95-year-old grandmother was the inspiration for making this quilt. She sewed all the time as part of her work as a seamstress as well as for her own pleasure. She produced thousands of pieces of clothing over her lifetime and several framed embroidered pieces. This artwork is my own kind of assemblage of two crafting practices that my grandmother did for pleasure and out of her own necessity.

I made a mechanical quilt that pronounced a personal story and a collaboratively written and interactive story. What I desired through this object was to create a space for narratives that wound around the intersections of technologies with race and gender. I wanted to enable the viewer to experiment with the narratives and produce new interwoven texts out of pieces of our texts thus actively producing a kind of collaboration through the quilt. The quilt is the physical site where these narratives are produced. The narratives are active and contingent on the physical objectivity of the quilt; its objectness grounds the narrative. “Talking Quilt” came about as a means to tell as well as to create
a story. For this project I chose two other people: my friends and collaborators Alejandra Abreu and Kaori Suzuki. I gave them vague directions: “Tell a story about yourself through five different objects, real or imagined” and “write the story out then speak out loud. Send me the text and the recording” and “send me a picture of yourself”. We all live in different cities so we must interact now virtually. The blanket connects me in Santa Cruz with Kaori in Portland with Alejandra in Olympia.

*But is not this absence merely a distant presence, one which is delayed or which, in one form or another, is idealized in its representation? This does not seem to be the case, or at least this distance, divergence, delay, this deferral [difference] must be capable of being carried to a certain absoluteness of absence if the structure of writing, assuming that writing exists, is to constitute itself. It is at that point that the difference [differânce and deferral, trans.] as writing could no longer (be) an (ontological) modification of presence” (Derrida, 7).*

The active talking of the blanket creates a presence for our collaboration with the viewer. We are simultaneously “there” and “not there” in the space of the blanket. Our bodies are absent but they are represented by embroidery, our voices are present but as electronic reproductions vibrating through the cones of speakers. The looping of our stories as well as their transformation through user input speaks to a notion of difference (differânce) as a production of the event of writing, of speaking with, of being present and nonpresent. It is important that this presence takes the form of a quilt, a crafted object made of pieces. The crafted object is a queer object.

*If queer is also an orientation toward queer, a way to approach what is retreating, then what is queer might slide between sexual orientation and other
kinds of orientation. Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away, a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet” Sarah Ahmed.

The craft is a gendered practice located within a heavily gendered economy of technicians. Crafting movements are a kind of analog for the mechanized movements of bodies at work with machines. Programming looms, teleoperation, microchip assembly. The quilt is made of twisted thread with lines running in all directions. The quilt is also not a precious object; it is a useful one, one that begs to be touched. The electronic components housed within the quilt are designed to run programs. The microcontrollers read, write, and run. They actively receive and transmit information.

In writing these narratives I was looking for the way in which our identities are produced and reinscribed by objects. My rendering of the written and spoken object differs at times from the analog of these objects, the way they were and are imagined by my collaborators. I sent my blanket through the sewing machine and produced a quilt from the four layers of cloth along with fabric switches, microcontrollers, conductive thread. This is an ongoing investigation. Perhaps I will make more quilts and I will come to number them “Talking Quilt 2” or “Talking Quilt 67” or giving them subtitles like movie sequels or academic articles “Talking Quilt: The Return” or “Talking Quilt: I’m Feeling So Affected”. This versioning of quilts reproduces the act of this inquiry. How do quilts tell stories? How can I modify the technology of the quilt’s telling of stories? How can interaction change stories?

We perceive the object as an object, as something that has integrity and is in space, only by haunting that very space, by coinhabiting space, such that the
boundary between the coinhabitants of space does not hold. The skin connects as well as contains. The nonopposition between the bodies that move around objects, and objects around which bodies move, shows us how orientations involve at least a two-way approach, or the “more than one” of an encounter. [555]. Sarah Ahmed.

My grandmother, was born Yukiko Murakami in 1913 on a sugar cane plantation on the big island in Hawai’i. Like other Japanese families the Murakami family immigrated from Japan with hopes for economic stability. From before dawn to dusk they chopped down sugar cane with machetes. My grandmother talks about having to carry big bundles of sugar cane all afternoon into the evening when she got back from school. After my great grandfather died in a mill accident my great grandmother married again. This man, known only to me as Mr. K, moved the whole family to Honolulu. In Honolulu my grandmother went to seamstress school where she learned how to sew and alter clothing. Before rheumatoid arthritis took her hands she constantly worked on projects in her small converted garage studio in Honolulu. The large dusty metal drawers in the room contain over five hundred patterns dating back to the 1940s. I always admired this psychedelic quilt she made for my mother in the late 1960s. This quilt is the inspiration for the creation of my digital quilt “Talking Quilt”. The quilt is constructed out of left over fabric from my grandmother’s other sewing projects. The quilt is an assemblage of strategically arranged pieces.

“The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks...His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’” (17). Claude Levi Strauss.
I was never formerly given my mother’s quilt but I spent my entire childhood admiring this object partially because it reflected a bond with my mother’s family that was difficult to maintain thousands of miles away. The quilt also serves as evidence of the creative compulsion of my grandmother who made three of these quilts, all the same yet different from each other, for each of her three children. My grandmother also versioned her quilts. She did not number them but she created them as reproductions of each other. Eventually this object also came to represent to me a much more exciting time for textiles (not a single store quilt comes close to the bombast of the fabrics on this quilt). I scoured for interesting textiles for my own blanket as well. I used hand-stitched embroideries to signify parts of a story. The assemblage of the quilt out of pieces of narratives reminds me of the process of creating zines, short publications produced through collage.

*This notion of emulation- turning your readers into writers- is elemental to the zine world. Emulation is facilitated by the fact that most zines don’t copyright their material…material is expected to be shared and reprinted, or ‘borrowed’ as zine writers delicately put it (123). Stephen Duncombe.*

Like the zines I created in the past the quilt is collaborative, it assembles different stories, perspectives, and images but it does so differently. The touching of the quilt’s pieces transforms the object.

I learned how to stitch by hand first. I found working with a thimble cumbersome. The metal cup would fly off my finger and I would clumsily stab myself in multiple fingers and the palm of my hand. All of my early sewing projects contain trace amounts of blood. Recently a friend of mine commissioned me to help her hand sew a
projection screen to these short plastic poles, suspended six feet in the air. We climbed up on ladders and sewed the perimeter. My legs fell asleep from locking my knees on the ladder. A few days later my friend found a long trickle of blood in the fabric. She was unsure if it were hers or if it were mine. I couldn’t remember. Even now that I embroider everyday I catch myself poking my fingers repeatedly.

I bought these pieces of conductive fabric from a store in New York that caters to the chronically paranoid and people living with cancer. They mostly manufacture conductive and shielding fabric used to protect from radiation poisoning. The use of this fabric by crafty artists is somewhat accidental. The purpose of these fabrics is for a personal protection from the unseeable electro-magnetic waves emanating from everything. Creating electronic objects induces a similar paranoia in me. Sewing anything requires a great deal of thread sucking and licking and placing the conductive of thread in my mouth even for a few seconds seemed a bit dangerous.

_The sampled sounds, processed words, and digitized images of multimedia reconnect all the arts with the tactility of woven fabrications. What was once face-to-face communication runs between the fingertips strung across the world, and all the elements of neatly ordered, hierarchically arranged systems of knowledge and media find themselves increasingly interconnected and entwined. This is only the beginning of a synaesthetic, immersive zone in which all the channels and senses find themselves embroiled in “the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance,” leaving the author, the artist, the reader, the spectator “with no_
halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore.

(186). Sadie Plant.

My tendency to swear under my breath at my injuries makes me nervous about sewing with children and their parents together. Would I lose my ability to perform in the moment and succumb to involuntary habits? I actually have no problem with swearing around children but my mind performs parental judgment bearing down on me so my speech retrogresses to a soft parody of itself. Shit becomes shoots, crap becomes crud, and fuck becomes fudgesicles. I’m sure even this conversion is inadequate to some but perhaps because crafting is one of my passions I am perhaps overly emotionally effusive. I cannot curb my output; I can only change its expression slightly. In my conversation with other crafters it appears that crafting is a kind of obsession, the expression of which must be taken up and released by the physical movement of the body. Crafting becomes both an impulse and a desire. The comic book artist zinester Katie Kaapcke described this desire as “a compulsion to craft”. Further she gestures with shaking hands “I’m crazy. I have to do this. I won’t survive if I don’t”. This radical collapse of crafting and survival is fundamental to an understanding of craft as an art form as much as it is tied to the embodied history of craft as labor, as a way of life.