

Stitching Stories

7 March 2025, 9.30-18.00

Reed Hall, University of Exeter, Streatham Campus (Streatham Dr, Exeter EX4 4QR)

Organised by Tricia Zakreski and Alexandra du Plessis

9:30-9:45 Coffee and welcome

9:45-10:45 **Alice Kettle, “Thread World”**

Textiles, the use and production of cloth, tell the story of the everyday, of histories and of social and political structures. Textiles speak about lives through their formal qualities, their material substance, and their social context. These textile stories describe cross-cultural encounters, spaces in which we can imagine who we are, who we want to be, and how we relate to others. They transmit the transformative potential of making, of emancipation and invention. They access enduring traditional stories with universal themes which carry powerful contemporary relevance. As an artist storyteller I create a threadworld. It is a space entered through the process of making which enables movement back and forth between metaphor as a creative impulse and concrete realization as the work takes shape. It also offers a particular narrative voice that can be appropriated to represent the feminine condition. Rozsika Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* delved into women’s creative practice of the domestic crafts. She explored how stitch both marginalized women within the domestic realm and provided a distinct language to escape this entrapment. Needlework affords an enabling space for women, challenging the denigration of their milieu, by using it ‘for social or political purpose’ and for collective working and creative ends.

10:50-11:50 Panel 1

Madeleine Cowell, “Stitched Together: from *The Fabric of Winchester* to the stories of Britain”

Svenja Keune, Asa Stahl, Hanna Hofverberg, Mathilda Tham, and Donna Maione, “Mending what was never broken - growing a window blind.”

This presentation invites thought and dialogue into what it can mean to mend as acts of caring for relationship and avoiding breakage further along instead of, or as a complement to, mending as fixing the broken. Our invitation starts from the special case of growing a window blind inside the *Holding Surplus House (HSH)*.

This article recounts the collective story of growing a window blind inside the *Holding Surplus House (HSH)*. *Holding Surplus House* is a research project and a mustard yellow wooden mobile house that provides a physical and conceptual framework. We use the Tiny House on Wheels (THoW) to explore transformative practices and imaginaries of alternative realities such as eco-socially just householding with resources, living with climate challenges, and multispecies cohabitation.

One way of exploring transformative practices with the THoW is to work with seasonal interventions that turn creative practices away from universal answers. In the



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summer the sun heated up the THoW to the brink of unbearability if it was placed in direct sunlight. In winter, we felt exposed when staying in the THoW whilst the windows were uncovered. A situated practice was thus to try to make the house a production space for good-enough livelihood for its own inhabitants.

We developed the specific seasonal experiment of growing a window blind from a grassy carpet grown on the floor of the THoW. We also staged a collective experience of harvesting the grass that revealed gaps in the flimsy and fragile root growth resulting from mold and drought. In addition, even more were welcome to try the juice of the barley grass.

Inviting others to give form to a household that takes what is at hand and strives to share a surplus, we invited to a mending *unseminar*, as a practice-based seminar, where we used the vitality of the interwoven roots as the foundation for collective mending while exchanging stories of textile situationships as a dynamic and evolving relationship between textiles, caring, and people. These moments where textiles play a significant role in collective action are often overlooked but can be rich sources of inspiration and communal learning - and perhaps even a cultural heritage to emphasise in addition to object-based cultural heritage. A patchwork of stitching together threads and conversations emerged as a recipe for care, repair, and joy to create advanced artistic practice and life skills.

12:00-13:00 Panel 2

Donna Maione, “A conversation in the making”

After a person dies, our relationship continues if we give it space and time to nurture memories. With the death of my mother, I have seemed to put my loss into a compartment deep into my memory, a place I did not visit often. I may have been mirroring my mother's stoic way of coping with loss. But when faced with the need to purge some of her belongings that I packed away in a closet after clearing out her house, I decided to play with some remaining bed linens I had held on to for nearly a decade.

A conversation with the cloth unfolded as I decided to make a quilt topper from my mother's old sheets. Without a clear plan, I first tested the fabric by tearing at the selvage, and from there, before I realized it, the entire top sheet was in a pile on the floor of random-width strips. What emerged soon after became a time of cherished memories and fanciful conversations with my mother as I assembled the randomly torn strips in a way that would have probably baffled my mother. It was not the orderly, neat, and constricted manner in which my mother thought things were to be done.

Over a few years, the project had many spurts, such as the topper, the choice of sandwich materials, and quilting. Each phase brought new imaginaries, like time travel visits to my mother but with my now mature mind. As I stitched, I recalled moments from bedtime stories to teenage rebellion and threaded new narratives on the recrafted surface and material in between. The quilt becomes a new narrative as a heritage cloth to be cherished and passed on as a story, a remembrance, a space for sharing and remembering. The conversation continues.

Jenny Mitchell, “Redress: Healing the Wounds of Enslavement with Poetry, Colour and Clothes”

In this informal paper, I'll talk briefly about the ways in which some of my poetry draws out the connections between storytelling and dressmaking, from sowing the seeds of a tale, to weaving a story and spinning a yarn. I'll also discuss how I think about this in terms of creatively trying to dress (and address) the wounds of British transatlantic enslavement.



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As part of this long history, clothes and their colour, or absence of colour, were used to mark out and further devalue the enslaved. I'll share poems from my three collections to demonstrate the ways in which I think legacies of this history might be repaired and restored symbolically through colour and clothes.

13:00-13:45 Lunch

13:45-15:10 Panel 3

Sue Green, "16 Hours"

My work entitled '16 Hours' is a tribute to the hidden labour of women in the UK Textiles industry. It particularly celebrates those who worked in the woollen mills of West Yorkshire and has strong familial connections. My family are from Huddersfield, and all worked in the rag trade. I like to think that I am continuing this thread.

During recent MA study I spent time researching in various archives including Sunny Bank Mills near Leeds, Gibson Mill near Halifax as well as visiting several mills in East Lancashire where cotton was produced. I discovered the punishing daily work schedules of the mill workers and 16 hours per day was standard practice and am fascinating in the narratives that cloth can tell us about our (her) history and the deep connections that can be created when we sit and stitch together.

In response to my research, I stitched for 16 hours per day, in solidarity with the workers. This punishing schedule allowed time to think as I remained faithful to the 2x half hour breaks and early starts that was required. It was an emotional challenge to stay focused but I was only stitching for a week!

My MA installation is a 32-yard stitched length of cotton rag paper. The Khadi paper is made from recycled t-shirts and is a nod to the migrant workers from the Indian diaspora who underpinned the labour force and kept the UK Textiles industry going. Latterly, I responded to local mills in Somerset where I now live, specifically Tone Works dyeing and finishing mill in Wellington. This inspirational site is semi-derelict and awaiting funding to restore the roof. It houses original industrial machinery with trapped samples of original cloth. A very evocative space with so much history to tell. This is an ongoing project for me with many rich seams still to discover. I am particularly keen to discover more about those who worked in the mill in the past.

My work acts as a kind of metaphorical veil or a portal to the past, I like to imagine conversations with my great grandparents who produced worsted cloth in the 1900s until a fire destroyed their livelihoods.

I am also fascinated by the recreation of 19th century recipes for black dye at the cusp of the Industrial Revolution. Following archival references, I experimented with over dyeing to achieve a permanent black. I developed my own pigment colour using natural binders and charcoal from my burnings. This was rubbed carefully into the surface to give colour and then emulating the industrial processing of cloth, I processed the paper.

There is, I hope, a power within the large scale and imposing colour of the work but also enough intrigue in the delicate lace-like structure when viewed more intimately as herein lies the deeper narratives to be discovered within the shadows and the liminal spaces here.

Ruth Broadway, "Textiles and storytelling through the lens of art practice"

This paper explores the interconnectedness of textiles and storytelling through the lens of my art practice, which engages with themes of transformation, folklore, and the passing of time. Rooted in traditional folk craft and inspired by narratives woven from fabric



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and thread, my work examines the material and metaphorical parallels between textiles and text. Through hand-stitched pieces such as *You Are Telling Your Story*, *The Silver Lining Coat*, and *By the Light of the Moon*, I investigate the act of stitching as a ritual of mindfulness and a means of tethering ephemeral moments to physical form.

Using red thread as a recurring motif, I draw connections to mythic tales such as Ariadne's Labyrinth and Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumb trail, where thread becomes a guide, a memory, and a lifeline. My pieces embrace slow, meditative processes, embedding them with personal and universal narratives of change and resilience. Works like *Time and Tide Wait for No Woman* and *Kintsugi in thread* reflect on the cyclical nature of life, the scars of growth, and the quiet transformations experienced through ageing, motherhood, and loss. Drawing on the relationship between text and textile, this paper situates these artworks within broader contexts of storytelling, folklore, and feminist craft traditions. It also considers how hand-stitching, with its deliberate slowness, embodies an act of resistance to the relentless pace of modern life, transforming the mundane into the meaningful. By engaging with natural elements, lunar cycles, and personal ritual, my work celebrates the fragile beauty of impermanence and the marks left behind. Ultimately, this paper argues that textiles are more than a medium; they are a profound narrative tool, holding and preserving stories that resonate across time and humanity.

Layla Khoo, “The Virtue of Participation – A Case Study of *A Virtuous Woman* at National Trust Hardwick Hall”

A Virtuous Woman is a participatory textile artwork created by this author, in response to the Ancient Noblewomen Embroideries at Hardwick Hall. Five applique embroideries were commissioned by “Bess of Hardwick” in 1573 to illustrate the virtues she valued, each piece centred around the historic female figures she felt represented these virtues and whom she aligned herself with: Lucrecia, Penelope, Arthemisia, Zenobia and Cleopatra. The textiles are appliqued “upcycled” fabrics, including Catholic vestments acquired from the dissolution of the monasteries and reformation of the Church. Four of the original textiles remain in the National Trust collection, one (Cleopatra) has not survived the years.

The new textile follows the same monumental size and style of the original pieces (including utilising upcycled fabrics) and sought to “reimagine” the fifth embroidery through participation with visitors to the hall. Throughout 2024 visitors were invited to participate through co creation and expression – embroidering words of virtue or value they felt were important to them and subsequently embroidering the names of “Virtuous Women” – any woman they looked to uphold these traditional or modern virtues. Rather than replacing Cleopatra in the final textile, we would create a new central figure, representing all of the women and girls participants wished to see celebrated.

There was lively debate regarding choices and definition of virtue, but the choices of women have elicited the most emotive responses and highlighted the difficulties in allowing meaningful participation in a public site. A staff member expressed concern regarding the choices some participants had made, and the possible offence this could cause both staff and other visitors to the site. What followed was the near impossible task of finding a way forward while balancing the conflicting and competing rights, needs and emotional wellbeing of staff, artists, visitors and clashing marginalised groups.



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Grace Lees-Maffe, “Walthamstow to Wandsworth: Design Reform and Socially Engaged Contemporary Art Practice”

This talk draws on the ideas of three influential nineteenth-century design reformers, AWN Pugin, John Ruskin and William Morris, to examine the HMP Wandsworth Quilt, made by prisoners for the V&A collection.

AWN Pugin was an early critic of the effects of industrial manufacture on design. He dictated restraint in the use of decoration and preferred flat patterns over illusionistic representations (see *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, 1841). John Ruskin’s ‘On the Nature of the Gothic’ (1853) decried the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Responding to Adam Smith’s he wrote ‘It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: Divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments’. William Morris (whose one-time home is now the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow) also ascribed moral value to the applied arts, championing the applied arts and crafts as being equal to fine arts, in the medieval tradition, and seeing art and design as a social salve.

Built in 1851, HMP Wandsworth is one of the two largest prisons in Europe. In 2010, around 40 male inmates from Wandsworth’s Onslow wing participated in the HMP Wandsworth Quilting Group, led by the social enterprise Fine Cell Work, to produce a contribution to the V&A exhibition ‘Quilts 1700-2010’. Their quilt combines multiple thoughts and experiences into one fabric, foregrounding the process of making by hand within the context of socially engaged progressive politics that the design reformers worked towards.

Lydia Donahue, “The Art of the Ordinary and the Pleasure of the Necessary: quiltmaking in South Manchester”

In the post-industrial Cottonopolis, Manchester, northwest England, the architectural ruins of cotton mills and smokestacks are remnants of an industry of textile production. Today, in this historic site of textile labour, there is a dense saturation of small communities of women working with fabric to produce an endless stream of stitched artefacts. These groups meet in church halls, homes, community centres and organise around the practice of the soft craft of quiltmaking and the creation of the quilt. If you ask, quilts and stitching things are everywhere, heirlooms stored in boxes, in spare bedrooms and attics. These textiles are brought out to show, both by crafters and those lucky enough to have acquired them. Partial stories are told about their antiquity, their maker, what charity shop they were saved from, and how they have been kept untouched for decades. During the course of this research, I was flooded with these narratives. The quilting group framing a field of active, making, shaping and producing of a textile culture and women-stitched history. Writing about this tactile practice after long-term ethnographic research within the quilting community demands an approach that reflects the process of making, collecting and construction. Hence, I ask how can the patchwork quilt be used as a metaphor and mode of writing? I propose that an anthropological enquiry into women’s everyday experience can be better understood if we embrace the assemblage of partiality, offcuts from a larger expanse of life/fabric. Employing these partial narratives to challenge the masculine paradigm of academic writing and better represent the tangible nature of craft knowledge. In response to this creative practice of world-making, I argue that there is a more creative/poetic way to write research, one constructed of patches, conflicted and contrasting narratives redolent of the patchwork quilt.



Claire Wellesley-Smith, “Stitching the City: Finding place through thread.”

This paper speaks to engagement sessions during ‘Stitching the City’ (2023) a community-based mapping project in Bradford, West Yorkshire using textile as a medium. The city has a heritage of industrial textile production specialising in wool textiles. Working in community ‘ordinary places of care’ (Morse and Munro, 2018, p.4), conversations-through-making explored experiences of people in the district through their physical engagement with it. Walking/wandering/wheeling routes were made visible using simple stitches. Daily interactions, crossing paths with others, offer new ways of connecting geographies of making, materials and communities in the city and beyond. Textile in this context can be seen as a gatherer, a way of joining together. Using the threads stitched with and the stories of arrival and belonging in the city today they also relate to the global mobilities of the textile industry. Hannah Maughan uses the phrase ‘the small stories’ to describe the glimpses into other lives conversations around collaborative textile work can offer (2016, p. 99). Stitched responses from participants showed hyperlocal routes, walks to the park, the shops, to see friends. Linking these textile maps and the reflections about daily life shared during the making of them gives voice to change and loss in the post-industrial city today.

17:00-18:00 Mishal Husain, In Conversation with Tricia Zakreski on *Broken Threads: My Family from Empire to Independence*

18:00-19:00 Drinks reception

19:00 Dinner



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