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Fray: Art And Textile Politics



Synopsis

In 1974, women in a feminist consciousness-raising group in Eugene, Oregon, formed a mock organization called the Ladies Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society. Emblazoning its logo onto t-shirts, the group wryly envisioned female collective textile making as a practice that could upend conventions, threaten state structures, and wreak political havoc. Elaborating on this example as a prehistory to the more recent phenomenon of “craftivism” — the politics and social practices associated with handmaking — Fray explores textiles and their role at the forefront of debates about process, materiality, gender, and race in times of economic upheaval. Closely examining how amateurs and fine artists in the United States and Chile turned to sewing, braiding, knotting, and quilting amid the rise of global manufacturing, Julia Bryan-Wilson argues that textiles unravel the high/low divide and urges us to think flexibly about what the politics of textiles might be. Her case studies from the 1970s through the 1990s — including the improvised costumes of the theater troupe the Cockettes, the braided rag rugs of US artist Harmony Hammond, the thread-based sculptures of Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, the small hand-sewn tapestries depicting Pinochet’s torture, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt — are often taken as evidence of the inherently progressive nature of handcrafted textiles. Fray, however, shows that such methods are recruited to often ambivalent ends, leaving textiles very much “in the fray” of debates about feminized labor, protest cultures, and queer identities; the malleability of cloth and fiber means that textiles can be activated, or stretched, in many ideological directions. The first contemporary art history book to discuss both fine art and amateur registers of handmaking at such an expansive scale, Fray unveils crucial insights into how textiles inhabit the broad space between artistic and political poles — high and low, untrained and highly skilled, conformist and disobedient, craft and art. *—*

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Customer Reviews

"It is difficult to characterize this vast and ambitious book, but not its achievement, which is magnificent. In short, it will be received as a model of rigorous research, seamless organization, clarity of exposition, and utter persuasiveness. It will set standards of quality for topics beyond craft and textile studies. Indeed, within its pages are examples for art and cultural historians of all periods and media of how to articulate the ever-challenging project of revealing the ideological dimensions of art in terms of very specific historical and political contexts." (Leonard Folgarait, Vanderbilt University)"Bryan-Wilson's groundbreaking approach is rigorously attentive to the moment in which she is writing, considering recent literature and artistic practices, while describing the broader, often overlooked historical and cultural backdrop against which these more current examples operate. If her topic is craft, or more precisely, craftivism—a demarcation that allows the author greater reflexivity—Bryan-Wilson brilliantly utilizes this subject to zoom both way out (examining, for instance, urgent questions around the politics of representation) and way in (offering remarkably close readings of particular objects).... Whether Bryan-Wilson is researching in an archive, conducting a personal interview, or utilizing the unstable space of the web, she articulates how her findings are affected through the means by which she obtains them." (Johanna Burton, Director and Curator, Education and Public Engagement, New Museum, New York)"Fray, Julia Bryan-Wilson's brilliant and compelling new book, explores how political worlds are made and unmade through craft. Her research and analysis of the 'hand-made' objects of feminist, queer, trans, and Global South artists and activists reveals alternative forms of knowing, imagining and crafting in exquisite detail. Astonishing!" (Macarena Gomez-Barris, Pratt Institute)

Julia Bryan-Wilson is professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* and coauthor of *Art in the Making: Artists and Their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing*.

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