

CHAPTER 6

Subversive stitches: Needlework as activism in Australian feminist art of the 1970s

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Needlework is herstory.¹

The 1970s saw a flourishing of interest in needlework as an activist material within feminist visual arts practice. Ridiculed and undervalued within the discourse of male-centred visual arts, needlework was reimagined for its limitless possibilities by feminist artists, ushering in an era of experimentation with formerly neglected materials. For feminist artists, needlework signified the despised domestic feminine, while simultaneously representing women's resistance to and subversion of male dominance. Needlework was a reminder of women's oppression under patriarchy but, concurrently, needlework carried with it its own culture, specific to women's her-story. In an era when women's liberation critiqued the domestic as oppressive to women's lives, feminist artists working with needlework saw a radical possibility in bringing attention to the domestic as not simply a site of oppression, but of creativity. This chapter discusses the emergence of feminist needlework in the 1970s and its relationship to the burgeoning politics of second-wave feminism, using the Sydney-based Women's Domestic Needlework Group (1976–80) as a case study. Particular attention is given to artwork produced by feminist artist

1 Slogan from screenprinted poster, *Needlework is Herstory*, Marie McMahon, Earthworks Poster Collective, screenprint, 1976.

Frances Phoenix (nee Budden),² a founding member of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group, whose contribution to the development and archiving of feminist needlework in Australia has been immense.³

While the Women's Domestic Needlework Group was first and foremost a collective, this chapter primarily refers to the work and writing of Phoenix and Marie McMahon as two of the most active members of the group. Their writing on the topic of feminist needlework, published in various feminist publications during the 1970s and 1980s, has been extremely valuable to the building of a history of Australian feminist needlework.

No great women artists

In her 1971 essay, the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin posed the question, 'Why have there been no great women artists?'⁴ Nochlin's question became one of the key motivations for feminist analysis of the gendered hierarchies within visual arts discourse. In her essay, Nochlin argues that the historical idea of 'great art' and 'artistic genius' were thoroughly gendered male through institutions that enforced patriarchal ideology. Nochlin argued that it is not that women, as feminine subjects, are naturally lacking in the ability to produce great art, as for centuries patriarchal culture had claimed. Rather, ideologies of femininity confined women to the private domestic sphere, thereby segregating women from participating in the arts by their marginalisation from male-defined spaces of art production.⁵ The ideology of 'great art' was based almost exclusively on a male-centred, Western, grand narrative of history, a history that was exclusionary to women and other marginalised groups. As Nochlin argued, it was women's lack of access to education, knowledge and certain institutions that prohibited them from creating art in the same sphere as male artists, rather than an essentialist notion of women's 'nature' being somehow deficient in creativity:

2 In this chapter, I use Frances's chosen name of Phoenix. Her name also appears in various documents of her art and writing under her birth name Frances Budden.

3 The legacy of Frances Phoenix's contribution to the development and archiving of feminist needlework, and Australian feminist art more broadly, was immense. Phoenix's death in 2017 has been a profound loss to this history, and I here pay acknowledgement to her profound contribution to the discourse of Australian feminist needlework, and beyond.

4 Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists', in *Women, Art and Power*, ed. Linda Nochlin (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

5 *Ibid.*, 150.

The fault, dear brothers, lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals.⁶

Feminist analysis of the visual arts encouraged women to understand women's absence from the history of art, not as a failure of women, but as a sign of sexist culture itself. In addressing the inherent sexism of women's exclusion from the grand narrative of Western art, the objective of a feminist art was to challenge the male-dominated fields of painting and sculpture, and to reclaim forgotten female artists from the periphery of arts history.⁷ Feminist art criticism aimed to make women visible within the historical canon of art and, by extension, to further generate a new feminist culture of art-making beyond the discourse of male-centred art production.

The category of the domestic was seen as one such avenue of exploration that could be used in the building of a new culture of feminist art, which referred to the history of women's lives, while also signifying women's resistance to male domination. Importantly, the category of the domestic was largely divorced from a male presence, thereby making it an ideal subject matter for feminist inquiry into women's history and lived experience.⁸ The exploration of the domestic in feminist art gave representational form to the feminist ethos of 'the personal is political', by making visible the connection between the personal, lived experience and the political sphere. Through making the domestic visible in visual art, feminist art of the 1970s transformed the abject domestic space into a wholly political space; it politicised the domestic sphere as a signifier of women's lived experience.

In her influential text *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker argues that needlework has been one of the most compelling signifiers of the historical relationship between women and the domestic sphere. Parker chronicled how needlework was used as a means of indoctrinating women and girls into the European feminine ideal, to uphold the ideology of femininity and domesticity.⁹ The gendering of European needlework as a feminine craft

6 Ibid.

7 Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 5.

8 Janis Jeffries, 'Crocheted Strategies: Women Crafting Their Own Communities', *Textile: Cloth and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2016): 17, doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2016.1142788.

9 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (London: Women's Press Ltd, 1984).

has its origins as far back as the 1500s, when embroidery and other textile crafts began to be equated with the work of women. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, needlework became thoroughly gendered feminine, and it was subsequently defined in relationship to the domestic, in contrast with the public sphere of masculine arts.¹⁰ Needlework was used to enforce the ideology of femininity by equating needlework crafts with 'natural' feminine qualities. However, while needlework was used to enforce the ideology of femininity, it also had the capacity to be used by women for their own subversive purposes. While needlework was used to contain women within the ideology of femininity, women in turn used needlework to communicate covertly in ways undetectable by patriarchal culture.¹¹

It was this tension, between patriarchal domination and women's resistance to it, that made needlework an appropriate material to feminist artists seeking new ways to represent the politics of second-wave feminism, with particular reference to women's relationship to the domestic. Needlework, with its historical associations with women's passivity under patriarchy, was laden with reference to the lived experiences of women in the domestic.¹² Feminist needlework drew upon the abject associations of women's needlework crafts and its culturally maligned status within grand narratives of art, to create a critical discourse surrounding the domestic feminine.

Feminist needlework was a reflection of second-wave feminism's larger critique of the oppressiveness of the domestic. However, feminist artists using needlework did not perceive needlework as only a source of female subordination. Rather, needlework was positioned as a source of women's creativity and knowledge produced within the oppressive conditions of the domestic.¹³ Historically associated with submissiveness, repetition and unoriginality, needlework signified the denigration of women's work by male-centred culture. Utilising needlework as a feminist material was thus fraught with contradiction, seemingly a symbol of oppression, while also claiming to resist patriarchal domination. In addressing these contradictions, feminist textiles historian Janis Jeffries says of the liberating potential of using women's domestic needlework crafts:

10 Ibid., 11.

11 Ibid.

12 Rachel Maines, 'Fancywork: The Archaeology of Lives', *Women's Art Forum* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1974–75).

13 Jeffries, 'Crocheted Strategies', 17.

[T]he potentially radical yet problematic promotion of women's 'traditional' arts in textiles and other craft related processes enabled not only a distancing from an aesthetics of the 'purely' visual, but also provided a strategy for mobilising textiles as a weapon of resistance against an inculcated 'feminine' ideal.¹⁴

As Jeffries argues, needlework provided a radical departure from the dominant visual aesthetics of media such as painting, as it drew upon an entirely different tradition of women's creative work. For feminist artists, needlework seemed to transcend the boundaries of existing dominant forms of visual art, allowing for experimentation with materials that had long been disparaged.¹⁵ The emergence of feminist needlework in the 1970s was thus not only a material practice of art making, but also an expression of activism that signified creative strategies of resistance.

The Women's Domestic Needlework Group

Emerging from within the activist and artistic circles of Sydney University in 1976, the Women's Domestic Needlework Group (c. 1976–80) was established by a collective of feminist artists with the aim to promote needlework as a legitimate form of artistic production. The activities of this group brought together the history of women's domestic needlework, with feminist politics, to critically explore the meaning of women's creative labour. Founding members of the group include Joan Grounds, Frances Phoenix, Marie McMahan, Bernadette Krone, Kathy Letray, Patricia McDonald, Noela Taylor and Loretta Veceli.¹⁶ Between 1976 and the early 1980s, the Women's Domestic Needlework Group facilitated a range of activities that brought women together to explore the history and materiality of needlework as an expression of feminist activism. The strength of feminist needlework, as an activist practice used for political resistance, can be located within the media associated with collective organisation.¹⁷ The Women's Domestic Needlework Group identified needlework as a material practice that carries collectivist meanings and associations, separate from modernist ideas of individual

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Women's Domestic Needlework Group, *The D'oyley Show: An Exhibition of Women's Domestic Fancywork* (Sydney: D'oyley Publications, 1979), 2.

¹⁷ Jeffries, 'Crocheted Strategies', 26.

creative genius. This separateness from a dominant, male-defined field of individual art production enabled the group to utilise needlework as a material to build collective-focused feminist politics.¹⁸

Needlework has long been practised among groups of women in such forms as quilting bees, knitting circles, mothers' groups and in the creation of ritual textiles for specific cultural events. The formation of such groups has historically been a space where needlework knowledge is exchanged among women, creating and building a discourse of shared textiles knowledge and traditions.¹⁹ The needlework group is a collective space where knowledge is not owned by one, it is shared among all who contribute. Additionally, the needlework group has throughout history been a space for women to share personal stories, support one another and build consciousness around issues affecting communities. The Women's Domestic Needlework Group can be seen to continue in this historical lineage of women's craft circles by facilitating a space for women to share needlework knowledge, while simultaneously creating a platform for feminist consciousness-raising.

Central to the objectives of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group was the promotion of women's needlework crafts as a vital site of female knowledge and women's culture.²⁰ Needlework, as separate from a male arts culture, provided a discourse for women's work and a history to draw upon in the construction of new feminist histories of art. Asserting the existence of this history was an entirely political act for the Women's Domestic Needlework Group, as it made visible the work of women made invisible by male domination. In a 1977 issue of *Lip*, writing on their aims of exploring the history of needlework, Phoenix and McMahon state:

With the belief that needlework is the women's art, we have begun a study which includes talking to needlewomen and collecting 'textile evidence for the lives of women'; doilies patterns, tools and books about the story of needlework. We have mainly worked with domestic needlework as it reflects the aesthetic and cultural lives of mainstream women.²¹

18 The Women's Domestic Needlework Group, *The D'oley Show*, 4.

19 Jeffries, 'Crocheted Strategies', 26.

20 Frances Budden and Marie McMahon, 'The Fancywork of the Great Goddess, and other Mainstream Women', *Lip*, no. 2 (1977): 63.

21 *Ibid.*

Phoenix and McMahon identified needlework as an important signifier for, and historical evidence of, 'an expression of women's creativity'.²² For Phoenix and McMahon, a focus on the creative work of 'mainstream' women, 'ordinary' women or 'non-artists' was critical in their investigation as part of a feminist reappraisal of history and the absence of women's creativity from historical records. Phoenix and McMahon were both influenced by the writing of Rachel Maines who, in her 1974 essay 'Fancywork: The Archaeology of Lives', presented one of the first feminist evaluations of needlework.²³ In 'The Archaeology of Lives', Maines examines needlework as historical evidence of a women's culture distinctly separate from men, which could therefore provide a substantial material culture for feminism to draw upon. Maines identified that a subversiveness was intrinsically linked to women's domestic needlework due to its historical position within this separate women's culture. For Maines, needlework signified its own language, knowledge and discourse, which had existed throughout history separate from a dominant patriarchal culture. Needlework was therefore a symbol of women's resistance:

Since men are not now and seldom have been educated in the complex language of needlework symbology, any message transmitted in a textile medium was almost completely safe from falling into the wrong hands. We therefore find stunningly honest and forthright statements in needlework, delivered to us across space and cultural barriers on every subject from politics to sex.²⁴

In a 1976 issue of *Lip*, Phoenix writes of her development of a feminist consciousness surrounding the history of women's domestic needlework, which would become the basis for some of the working methods used by the Women's Domestic Needlework Group. This method of feminist work combined the politics of second-wave feminism with the rich history of women's needlework. For Phoenix, using a domestic material such as needlework to articulate feminist politics was not contradictory to the politics of feminism. Phoenix argues that the feminist use of needlework is an entirely feminist action, as it politicises the denigrated work, and worth, of women.²⁵ In the *Lip* article, Phoenix's feminist exploration into the history of needlework is articulated in a vivid and subversively

22 Ibid.

23 Maines, 'Fancywork: The Archaeology of Lives'.

24 Ibid., 2.

25 Frances Budden, 'A Note on Australian Embroidery', *Lip*, no. 1 (1976): 23.

humorous description of some of her earliest experiments with lace and embroidery: “The first doily was embroidered “Fuck Patriarchy” and the second, “Women’s Work = Slave Labour””.²⁶

The doily archive

Transforming the denigrated status of women’s work was fundamental to the aims of the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group, resulting in the creation of an extensive archive of Australian women’s doilies. The archive was part history project, part feminist consciousness-raising, with the core objective of bringing public attention to the creative domestic work of women. The doily archive project involved the collection of hundreds of examples of lace doilies from the late nineteenth century to the late 1970s. The archive was a celebration of the domestic needlework of women who did not necessarily come from a visual arts context, women who wouldn’t be considered professional artists. The doilies made by women who had worked as domestic servants and housewives, and the gift-giving acts of mothers and grandmothers, were shown as equal in status to the work produced by artists in the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group. In constructing this archive of Australian women’s doilies, the group critiqued the arbitrary distinctions of ‘high art’, ‘low art’, ‘hobby art’ and ‘craft’ in their declaration that all women’s creative work was worthy of examination alongside grand narratives of art.

It is important here to note that the archive focused on collecting artefacts that were created within the specific European traditions of needlework, the type of domestic needlework steeped in an ideology of Eurocentric femininity. The Women’s Domestic Needlework Group also actively acknowledged the rich culture of textiles produced by Aboriginal women, both prior to and after colonial invasion, and further acknowledged themselves as colonial subjects in Australian history. For members in the group acknowledging the specific history and meaning of Aboriginal women’s textiles was crucial to their feminist aims as a non-hierarchical, antiracist collective. Acknowledging these issues as white women living on Aboriginal land, the group stated in the doily archive catalogue:

²⁶ Ibid.

The D'oyley Show deals primarily with the work of women of European origin; however Aboriginal women were making baskets, woven mats, bead and shell work, netting and string games long before Captain Cook arrived ... Like all aspects of Aboriginal identity, this work has been subjected to systematic assault and destruction by white society. Aboriginal handiwork and Aboriginal life have always been interdependent. For Aboriginal people the loss of their land has meant the breakdown of their traditional skills. The practice of these skills is part of the struggle to maintain Aboriginal identity.²⁷

Beginning with its first showing in Sydney at Watters Gallery in October of 1979, the archive travelled as *The D'oyley Show: An Exhibition of Women's Domestic Fancywork*. *The D'oyley Show* toured through parts of Australia from 1979 to 1980, being exhibited in a range of galleries and feminist spaces. Accompanying the exhibition was a catalogue book that featured images of examples from the doily archive, along with doily patterns, and articles written by group members on the history of needlework. The doilies in the archive had never been exhibited publicly as 'art' and, as such, this was a groundbreaking achievement of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group; they transformed the doilies from objects of domestic ubiquity to the status of art objects. An excerpt from the D'oyley Show exhibition book reinforces the group's focus on elevating women's domestic needlework to the status of art, while also highlighting some of the contradictions of needlework as art:

The work in this exhibition is not revolutionary. It contains the contradictions of work under capitalism. However, the contradictions under which this fancywork has been produced, the functions it has served and the beauty of the designs provide a valuable record of women's work for us today.²⁸

The D'oyley Show was a document of women's creative domestic work produced under the conditions of capitalist patriarchy. For the Women's Domestic Needlework Group, the construction of the archive was a form of feminist activism that highlighted the denigration of women's domestic work, and its relationship to ideologies of European femininity. However, it is important to acknowledge that there was resistance to the celebration of the domestic in visual art during the period of second-wave feminism,

27 The Women's Domestic Needlework Group, *The D'oyley Show*, 6.

28 *Ibid.*, 4.

as it was viewed by those who critiqued its use as merely perpetuating women's subordinate position in society.²⁹ A doily, with its historical and ideological associations with women's oppression, was viewed by some as counterproductive to the objectives of women's liberation. With the politics of second-wave feminism in mind, a politics that sought to free women from male domination, it would be reasonable to suggest that the celebration of the material culture of domestic needlework was still deeply tied to sexist ideology.

The intention of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group was to position the archive as a political document of the domestic work of women who had been otherwise made invisible within dominant narratives of culture.³⁰ The feminist methodology of the group aimed to assert that this form of women's work was valuable to the building of feminist consciousness, regardless of whether its production was tied to the conditions of patriarchy. The group acknowledged the complexities of this issue; that on the one hand needlework signified the very conditions second-wave feminism sought to resist, but that acknowledging this history was in itself a feminist act, as it gave validity to the largely invisible work of women.³¹ The radical claim of the group was that this form of material culture was an important document of the creative work of women who endured under oppressive circumstances. Addressing the invisibility of needlework in historical records, the group state in *The D'ohley Show* book:

There are histories available on 'Art Embroidery' and other styles of needlework produced for the use of consumption by the church and the ruling classes. However, there has been virtually no documentation until recently on the history of needlework produced by middle and working class women for use in the Australian home.³²

Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson argue that feminist objects, feminism's material culture, are of great significance to how feminist politics are read, understood and, ultimately, how they are remembered.³³ Feminist objects articulate feminist politics through their materiality,

29 Jeffries, 'Crocheted Strategies', 17.

30 The Women's Domestic Needlework Group, *The D'ohley Show*, 4.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 5.

33 Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson, eds, *Things that Liberate: The Feminist Wunderkammer* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

across space and time. Just as all objects do, the meaning of feminist objects transform through their historical location, 'their meanings are neither fixed nor stable'.³⁴ The majority of the doilies collected and archived by the Women's Domestic Needlework Group were not made by women with feminist intentions. They were largely made as objects for the home, as decorations, keepsakes and as tender gifts of love exchanged within families. However, when held together in the form of an archive, as an articulation of feminist activist work, these decorative doilies were given new meanings as feminist material culture.

In reflecting upon the activism of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group, it can be argued that their activities, and the archive they produced, were far more revolutionary than they credited themselves for at the time. In an era when needlework was still perceived by heavily stereotyped ideas of unoriginality, repetition and domestic submissiveness, a collective of women elevated the domestic needlework of women to a status equal to art being made in the contemporary moment of the 1970s. They were not simply championing needlework as art, but arguing that it signified an important example of women's lived experience and unique culture. An archival record of the lace doilies of Australian women at that time was unprecedented. The Women's Domestic Needlework Group were the first to survey with seriousness this material culture. Given the group's efforts to archive the history of Australian women's needlework, it is the greatest tragedy that the entire doily archive was destroyed by fire in a Sydney storage facility in 1985.

No goddesses, no mistresses

The abject and undervalued status of needlework was not only appealing to feminist art for articulating the lived experience of women in relation to the domestic, but also for challenging the very structures of hierarchy that had excluded women from narratives of history. Needlework was revolutionary for feminist art as it was thoroughly separate from the arts establishment, the commercial art marketplace, the concept of male 'genius' and the canon of Western art. Among feminist textile artists, needlework was considered a form of countercultural production that was free from the associations of the commercial, male-dominated art world.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁵ Jeffries, 'Crocheted Strategies', 17.

The real revolutionary potential of needlework as art/activism was in the medium's very separateness from male-centred cultural production. Feminist needlework was radical in that it transcended these hierarchies, and searched for less hierarchical methods of organisation.

The Women's Domestic Needlework Group used needlework to foster collaboration, and create networks for knowledge sharing, and rejected hierarchical organisation to instead embrace shared participation. The focus on collaboration enabled the dynamic of the group to avoid following the hierarchical tendencies that were still heavily entrenched within male-dominated visual arts in the 1970s.

The Women's Domestic Needlework Group's non-hierarchical methods were, of course, not reflective of all feminist methodology during the era of second-wave feminism. While hierarchy was entrenched within the traditions of male-dominated art, hierarchical organisation was still practised by feminist artists and within second-wave feminism more broadly. Phoenix and McMahon's involvement with the production of Judy Chicago's feminist art installation *The Dinner Party* (1979) is a revealing example of the type of hierarchical organisation that was practised, in contrast with how the Women's Domestic Needlework Group operated. When Phoenix and McMahon volunteered to assist with the creation of Chicago's seminal feminist artwork, the two artists became disillusioned with what they saw as Chicago's authoritarian approach to art making.³⁶

Chicago's *The Dinner Party* was initially premised as a collaborative project that would bring women together in an environment of collectivism to create an artwork celebrating the artistic achievements of women throughout history. *The Dinner Party* consisted of a triangular dinner table setting, with placemats made for 39 women of cultural significance; Chicago's reimagining of forgotten women of history. To construct the large-scale installation, which comprised embroidered table-runners as well as handmade ceramics, Chicago was assisted by a team of volunteer women who donated their time and labour to the monumental project. For many of the volunteers, their involvement with *The Dinner Party* was initially seen as an opportunity to work collaboratively with other feminist women, in an environment that broke away from the hierarchical organisation of male-dominated art.³⁷

36 Isabel Davies, "The Coming Out Show" Discusses "The Dinner Party", *Lip* (1980): 48.

37 Ibid.

In contrast with the initial collective premise of *The Dinner Party*, Phoenix and McMahon found that the project was structured hierarchically by Chicago, with volunteers treated not as equals but as workers used simply to bring the artwork to completion. Chicago's authoritative approach to collaborative art making was at ideological odds with the anarchic, non-hierarchical politics of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group that Phoenix and McMahon had been fostering. The use of needlework in *The Dinner Party* was further critiqued for replicating more of a sweat shop-style production than feminist creative work.³⁸ Those that produced the embroidered table-runners for *The Dinner Party* did not always have their physical bodies considered during the painstaking and physically demanding work involved in its creation.

In a subversive act of defiance against Chicago's dominant/subordinate structure of labour, Phoenix created a small embroidery of her own. The embroidery read, 'No Goddesses, No Mistresses', a play on the anarchist slogan, 'No God, No Master'. Phoenix's small, subversive embroidery critiqued what was seen by many as Chicago's extreme use of hierarchy, rather than employing more egalitarian methods of collaborative work. Phoenix's embroidery was sewn into the underside of one of *The Dinner Party's* cloth panels, a small, defiant act of rebellion within the monumental installation. The embroidery itself was signed, not with Phoenix's name but instead with an emblem—an 'A' in a circle—a symbol of anarchist-feminism. By using the anarchist-feminist symbol, rather than her name, Phoenix distanced herself from association with individual artistry. In transforming the anarchist slogan 'No God, No Master' into the feminine 'goddesses' and 'mistresses', Phoenix critiqued the role of women in creating hierarchical power structures over other women. Her embroidered statement is a reminder that feminism is not immune from carrying out dominance over women. Phoenix's hidden embroidery was eventually discovered by Chicago, removed and discarded.

The small non-hierarchical group model was seen by those who critiqued hierarchical feminist organisation as a revolutionary alternative to large-scale leader/follower structures. It was believed that small groups allowed individuals to contribute to a collective aim, while also gaining personal development, rather than performing as a single body within a larger system. The small group format was felt to enable all feminists to contribute to the development of feminist culture and politics by celebrating all women's

38 Ibid., 49.

contributions, rather than focusing on leaders. In the essay ‘The Tyranny of Tyranny’, Cathy Levine argues against hierarchical organisation in the women’s movement, in favour of women working in small groups where leadership was disbursed amongst all:

By working collectively in small numbers, the small group utilises the various contributions of each person to their fullest, nurturing and developing individual input, instead of dissipating it in the competitive survival-of-the-fittest/smarest/wittiest spirit of the large scale organisation.³⁹

Levine’s description of the small, non-hierarchical collective is reflected in the working methods of the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group, based on an anarchist principle of shared collective responsibility and a rejection of leaders.⁴⁰ Here is a distinct example of contrasting approaches to methodologies of collaborative work in feminist art during the 1970s, with the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group representing an embrace of shared participation, in contrast with Chicago’s reliance on the leader/follower format. In a 1980 interview for ‘The Coming Out Show’ on ABC radio, Phoenix and McMahon retold their experiences working with Chicago on *The Dinner Party*, with Phoenix stating:

I was pleased to leave after six weeks. I was exhausted and most of the time pretty unhappy in that environment. I didn’t find it the supportive environment it was made out to be.⁴¹

A disobedient doily

This chapter has concentrated on an examination of the collective work of the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group. In this final section, I turn attention to analysis of an artwork created by Frances Phoenix in 1976, to further illustrate the blending of feminist politics with the history of domestic needlework. As much as Phoenix was a member in a collective, and collective work deeply informed her feminist politics, she was also an artist in her own right, with her artwork representing some of the most compelling examples of feminist needlework produced during the 1970s.

39 Cathy Levine, ‘The Tyranny of Tyranny’, in *Quiet Rumours, An Anarcha-Feminist Reader*, ed. Dark Star Collective (Oakland: AK Press, 2012): 77.

40 Ibid.

41 Davies, “‘The Coming Out Show’ Discusses ‘The Dinner Party’”, 49.

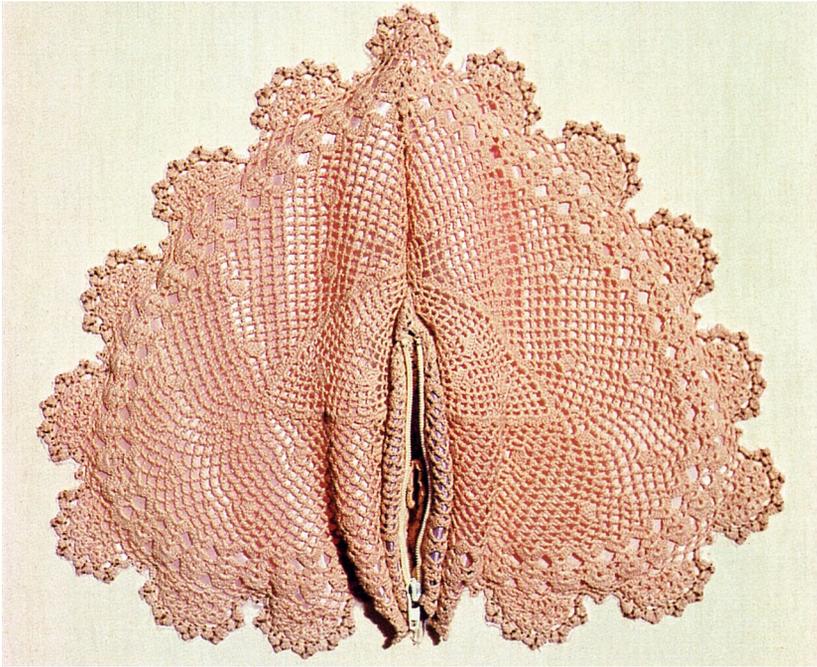


Figure 6.1: *Kunda*, Frances Phoenix (Budden), 1976, crochet doily and zip.
 Source: Image reproduced with the permission of the estate of the artist. Courtesy of Sally Cantrill.

The abject status of domestic needlework was used by Phoenix to critique the denigrated position of women as subordinate bodies under patriarchy, and her 1976 artwork *Kunda* (Figure 6.1) is a powerful articulation of this.⁴² *Kunda* is a crochet representation of a vulva, made using a scallop stitch method of crochet in soft pink hues of thread. A zip has been sewn into the centre of the artwork, representing the entrance of a vagina. In *Kunda* Phoenix refers to the ubiquity of the doily as a common domestic object, but she also refers to the history of doily making as an expression of women's knowledge and discourse. As Maines argues, doilies were not simply made to be decorative objects for the home, they carried symbolic meaning often only detectable to women who understood the

42 *Kunda* has been exhibited with the alternate title and date *Queen of Spades*, 1975, in the exhibition *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on Art and Feminism*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, December 2017 – March 2018.

language of needlework.⁴³ Phoenix's appropriation of the traditional doily aesthetic pays homage to the history of women's doily making, as a discourse of knowledge, not mere decoration.

Kunda refers to the subversive history of women's domestic needlework, but as much as it subverts it can also be seen to *pervert* this history, through its explicit and unapologetic use of the vulva as central motif. The doily as an object of ubiquitous domesticity, functional and frilly, is made perverse in Phoenix's gesture toward the intimacy of the sexual body. The scalloped frilly edging along the outside of the artwork references traditional decorative lace, while also alluding to pubic hair and the physical shape of the vulva. In her use of vaginal iconography, Phoenix refers to women's relationship to the domestic space as one that has been oppressive toward women's identities and sexualities. However, Phoenix's artwork also suggests liberation from these conditions in the subversive humour and tactility of her creation; she presents a subversive interpretation of so-called 'domestic bliss'.

Kunda can be described as a most feminist uncanny object, as Phoenix uses the familiarity of feminine domesticity to unsettle and disorient the category of the domestic feminine. In Phoenix's *Kunda* the uncanny, as a de-familiarising of the familiar, is met with a feminist revision of the denigration of the category of feminine. Alexandra Kokoli articulates that in the feminist uncanny:

The return of the feminine bears the mark of its imposed exile, from which it broke free; its scars are what is uncanny and its return against the odds is terrible. The feminist uncanny is thus perpetually suspended between revision and revenge.⁴⁴

That revision and revenge form a central theme in feminist uncanny artwork is evident in *Kunda*, as an object that revises women's subordinate position within patriarchal culture, then taking revenge upon this subordination by reasserting the domestic feminine in a perverse and rebellious manifestation.

43 Maines, 'Fancywork: The Archaeology of Lives', 2.

44 Alexandra Kokoli, *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 39.

Kunda is a disobedient doily, one that escapes its traditional place as docile, passive object, to instead possess an unnerving and menacing aura, as though it were in fact possessed. The unsettling appearance of *Kunda* centres on Phoenix's use of the inserted zip with its reference to vagina, reproduction and the despised feminine. The reference to the vulva and vagina reflects the interest of 1970s feminist art in central core imagery. Central core imagery refers to the representation of the vulva and vagina in art as a way to reinsert women's experience into a phallogentric culture where women's bodies have been at the mercy of the male gaze.⁴⁵ The dominance of the masculine phallus was challenged by the feminist positioning of central core as a source of feminine power. The use of central core imagery enabled a visual means for centring women's experience, by giving particular focus to reproduction, menstruation, motherhood and sexuality. Jude Adams states that the power of using central core within feminist art was that, 'It reasserted the despised feminine'.⁴⁶

However, the use of central core imagery also came under critique within feminist debates for focusing too heavily on an essentialist view of womanhood as linked to biological embodiment. Central core imagery was eventually viewed by some feminist artists as problematic in what it appeared to assume about the experience of women's embodiment.⁴⁷ This critique of central core raised important questions about feminist claims of womanhood as a universal experience, bringing to the centre critical debate around essentialist ideas of womanhood. Despite its limitations, central core imagery was still a powerful activist strategy in its time, which made visible the despised feminine, when such subject matter was almost entirely taboo within art.

Kunda is an artwork that potently reflects the climate of feminist politics at the time of its production. It is very much an object of its historical context and the politics that influenced its production. Phoenix's use of central core imagery makes a political subject out of the feminine body by putting on display all of its taboo corporeality, making visible the lived experience of the abject body. *Kunda* is alive with its bodily references, as it simultaneously refers to the history of women's subordination as well

45 Jude Adams, 'Looking from with/in: Feminist Art Projects of the 70s', *Outskirts* 29 (November 2013), www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-29/adams-jude-looking-with-in.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

as to women's resistance to domination. Phoenix's artwork is at once an object of activism as much as it is an object of art; a wholly politicised tribute to the work, bodies and histories of women.

Conclusion

Feminist needlework of the 1970s was revolutionary in its claim that the creative work of all women was worthy of serious examination. In elevating women's domestic needlework to the status of art, feminist needlework was as much an expression of activism as it was a creative material. In its separateness from a male-centred art culture, needlework was experienced as liberating for those feminist artists who engaged with its history and materiality. Needlework transcended the hierarchical boundaries of an elite art world, providing limitless possibility in its application as a material. Needlework, like women, was an outsider. It was its status as abject outsider that was in fact what gave needlework its freeing quality for feminist art; like the status of women, needlework was neglected, denigrated and treated with derision. While European ideals of femininity had been constructed in connection with the ideology of needlework, women in turn used the tools of this ideology to create their own culture, subversively separate from a male-centred culture. Feminist needlework artists continued the legacy of women's work before them, and located this past within the subversive stitches made in their present.

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