



University of Brighton

VANESSA MARR

WOMEN AND DOMESTICITY

Eliciting women's narratives of domesticity
through participatory practice

RESEARCH OUTPUT



Women and Domesticity is a series of participatory exhibition events, resulting in a growing collection of traditional yellow dusters, hand-embroidered by the artist and participant members of the public.

Elements of the collection are regularly exhibited as a touring installation, alongside workshops and talks, with each instance part of the process of eliciting new research contributions.

The exhibition series displays and elicits embroidered responses to the provocation: 'Women and domesticity - What's your perspective?' This is widely advertised to encourage a diversity of participants. The evidencing of these perspectives and experiences is fundamentally auto-ethnographical and seeks to develop social understanding and change through activities of visual performance.



Marr uses the exhibition to foster participants' recording of their individual expressions, using words or designs, limited only by the fabric and thread supplied. Participants can contribute independently or can join the workshops to embroider and talk. She describes the rhythm of piercing and stitching the dusters as 'drawing with thread' (Marr, 2019), detaching it from the practice of embroidered embellishment and establishing it as a phenomenological embodiment of experience. The resulting expressions include poetic quotes, resentful statements, graphic representations and sculptural manipulations of the cloth. The installation collects the newly embroidered dusters, which are displayed on lengths of washing line using traditional clothes pegs.



Participants are given the opportunity to make their own 'perspective' visible, as part of the collective experience and display. The intensive iconography of the roles and responsibilities associated with domestic chores, traditionally allotted to females, develops these individual perspectives into a means through which modern women can consider the historic legacy of the domestic environment and of women working with cloth.

Through these exhibitions and workshops Marr explores two research paths: firstly, an investigation of how iconography and haptic experience contribute to and transform a collective narrative expression; and secondly, a contribution to the understanding of contemporary relationships within the sphere of women's domesticity.

Women and Domesticity

(top to bottom) Sample embroidered duster from collaborative exhibition

Workshop at Merton Abbey Mills, invited by the funded project *Object Book*, July 2016

Workshop run with the homeless, invited by Justlife art group, June 2017

Since 2014, the project has been the focus of a number of conference papers, exhibitions and accompanying workshops in locations such as the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill (2016), Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft (2018), University of Brighton (2017, 2018 and 2019), Loughborough University (2017 and 2019), University of Bedfordshire (2017) and Tampa, Florida (2020), plus a number of libraries, galleries and pop-up creative events.

Women and Domesticity



Women and Domesticity

(top) Exhibition, De La Warr Pavilion, March 2016

(right) Examples from one-day pop-up exhibition of the collaborative collection, February 2015, attended by over 70 contributors plus their friends and family



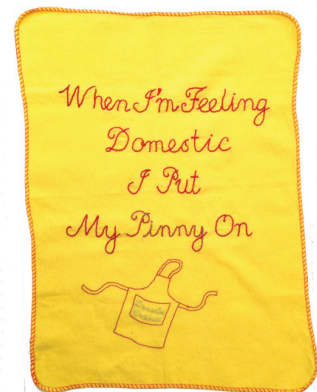
A SAMPLE OF DUSTERS DEMONSTRATING THE RANGE OF PERSPECTIVES EXPRESSED BY PARTICIPANTS



Rage, threat and injustice



Invisibility and underappreciation

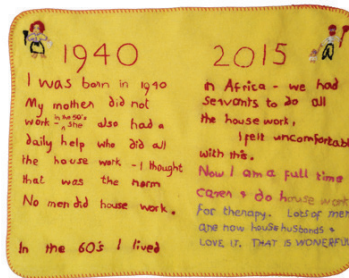


Celebration of domesticity and of the home as a place of safety

Women and Domesticity



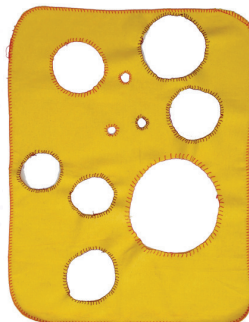
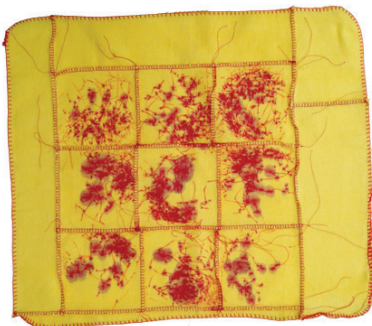
Humour and rebellious nonchalance



Evocative memories, stories and reference to mothers



Choices, duty and expectations



Responses that make references to Marr's own artistic methodology and practice

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



Exhibition and workshop at Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft, August 2018

The impetus for *Women and Domesticity* comes from the context of craftivism, a term popularised by Betsy Greer (Greer, 2008) for the use of group craft production as a subversive tactic. Predicated upon this, Marr's investigative practice seeks an understanding of how craft operates as activism, particularly through symbol, iconography and haptic experience.

The direction of the research process is governed in part by questions around the crafting process, but also by the particular question at the heart of the provocation: what diverse perspectives are there on women's domesticity and how might these be expressed?

Two specific questions have been articulated from this:

1. How can a personal understanding of historical, cultural and current female domestic experiences be explored through collective mark-making using techniques and materials resonant of traditional domestic occupations?
2. In what ways does the traditional yellow duster operate as a catalyst for narrative expression of modern female domestic experience?

RESEARCH CONTEXT



Ma collection de proverbes
[My Collection of Proverbs] (detail)
Annette Messager
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville
de Paris, 1974

Marr's investigation utilises and critically investigates the tradition of 'craftivism' and considers the power and meaning of performative crafting, especially where it provides a means of expression for disempowered people.

There is also a fine art context for the form of exhibition output, one that draws upon the understanding that artists have brought to the use of cloth, stitching and woven fabric. Marr builds on the work of fine artists such as Annette Messager (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 1974; MoMA, New York 1996), Tracy Emin (Saatchi Gallery, 1995) and Louise Bourgeois (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992), by harnessing the power of cloth to voice experience, and Cornelia Parker (Tate Gallery, 1991) who produces installations from ordinary objects. Further artistic context is provided through practitioners who explore collaboration and sharing through the 'domestic arts' such as Judy Chicago (Brooklyn Museum, 1979) and Suzanne Lacy (Walker Art Center etc. 1985-87), while critical publications such as Roszita Parker's *Subversive Stitch* (1984) also address how female stitching can both repress and empower.



**Cold Dark Matter:
An Exploded View 1**
Cornelia Parker
Tate Gallery, 1991

The collective narrative is a key element in the process Marr designed for this research. By positioning the made object as a catalyst for expression, Marr joins process and personal story, drawing on shared experience and the reformulation of narrative as participants witness an ordinary object transformed into something compelling and extraordinary. With this narratological context, Marr has also brought an understanding of the context of fairy tales, domestically preserved narratives that have been a rich source of creative inspiration for many women, discussed and re-articulated in the work of Anne Sexton (1971) Angela Carter (1995), Carol-Anne Duffy (2010) and Marina Warner (2014). Marr's response is to take inspiration from these narratives as fragments of female stories that are held together through a commonality of experience and visual context.

By interpreting domestic experience as art through drawing, object manipulation and presentation, personal narratives emerge that can be created and analysed as both a 'mode of reasoning and a mode of representation' (Richardson, 1997:28). Richardson and Ellis (2004) explore this idea autoethnographically within the context of imaginative writing, and Marr's study extends this further towards narrative expression onto the object, the duster.

Women and Domesticity



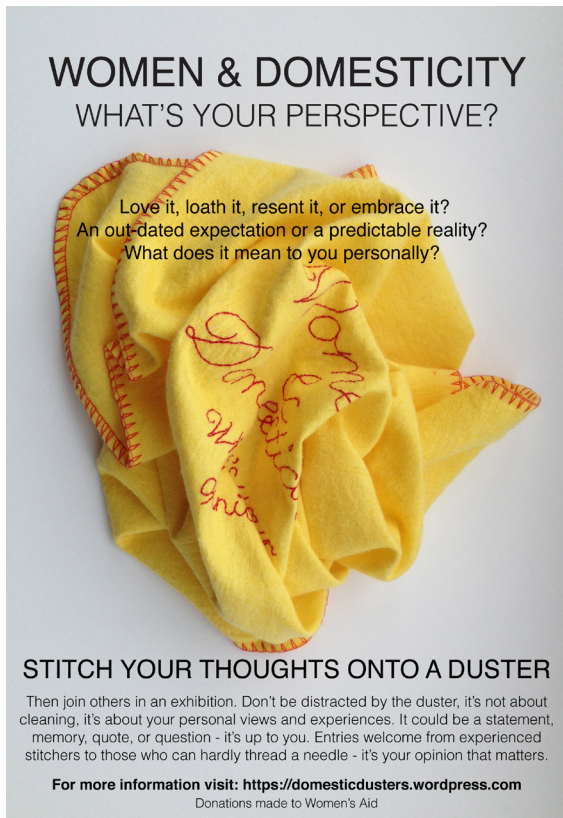
Promises and Expectations
Vanessa Marr, 2014

You Shall go to the Ball!
Vanessa Marr, 2014

Marr's own artwork questions the promises told to women and girls in context of the popular fairy tale phrases, juxtaposed with definitions of domesticity, brutality, protectiveness and femininity. In 'You Shall go to the Ball!', texts on rubber gloves refer to Cinderella's domestic plight.



RESEARCH PROCESS



Cover of pack and contents designed by Marr to invite participants to join the project

These are given out at workshops and exhibitions and have also been sold through outlets such as the shops in the Hove Museum and Art Gallery and Ditchling Museum of Art and Crafts

Marr's research process is designed to engage participants with the theme of female work in a domestic environment, and to elicit diverse and personal responses through creative making.

The exhibition and workshops are carefully structured to allow for a wide range of participant experience, to include non-artists and inexperienced embroiderers, and to develop an exhibition of diverse and personal work made from identical materials.

Fundamental to the output exhibition series is Marr's engagement with the wider community through an ongoing call for participants in person and through social media, workshops and pop-up exhibitions. Participants are provided with a pack designed by Marr, which contains a duster, needle and red embroidery silk. While artistic ability is not a requirement and nor is skill with a needle and thread, those who choose to participate often have both, and the productions often display considerable skill. The focus, however, as dusters are exhibited, created and discussed, is on the expression and recognition of each participant's voice through the duster with stitch. Submissions do not privilege any skillset or attitude, and the exhibited embroideries are not selected or curated.

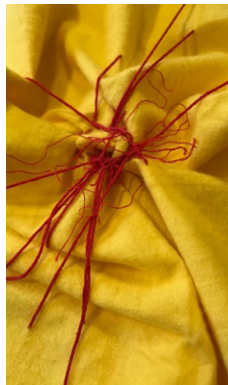
Marr's research practice is inclusive and collaborative. The process and materials provided allow critical reflection on the use of embroidery and stitching as physical and narrative process and a focus on the duster as a catalyst for narrative expression, display and performance.

This is facilitated through an autoethnographic practice that situates Marr as a participant observer and both Marr and the participants contribute to the output exhibitions. Marr is able then to share through oral and textual presentations, the understanding of stitching as an investigative process and embodiment of experience.

This research built on Marr's earlier work, 'Promises and Expectations' which commented on the original role of fairy tales as domestic narratives that empower women (Warner, 1984:131). This prompted submissions that predominantly featured

statements or descriptive images. However, as the project evolved it became apparent that prolonged engagement with the duster through hand-stitching had an impact on the participants that went beyond sharing experiences and displaying their work. In response, Marr developed alternative workshop structures, informed by the narrative memory methodologies of Haug (1983) and Crawford et al. (1992).

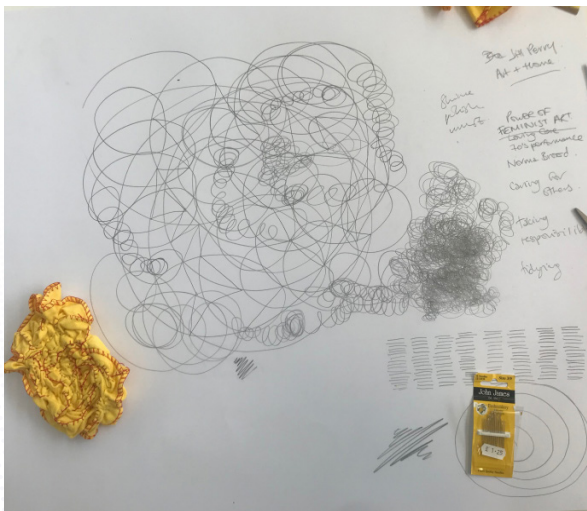
These were object-led, considered contemplations of the duster through touch, smell and manipulation, underpinned by investigative drawing processes, supporting a realisation of the phenomenological experience of engaging with this cloth. In these examples the duster has transformed into a haptic catalyst for participants to form, mould, embellish, damage and mend as an expression of the experience of contemplating, touching and drawing it.



Women and Domesticity

Example outputs

These tell their own visual autoethnographic narratives, which include housework, domestic violence and childbirth, therefore connecting personal biographies to the social issues they discuss.



Women and Domesticity

Example workshop practice

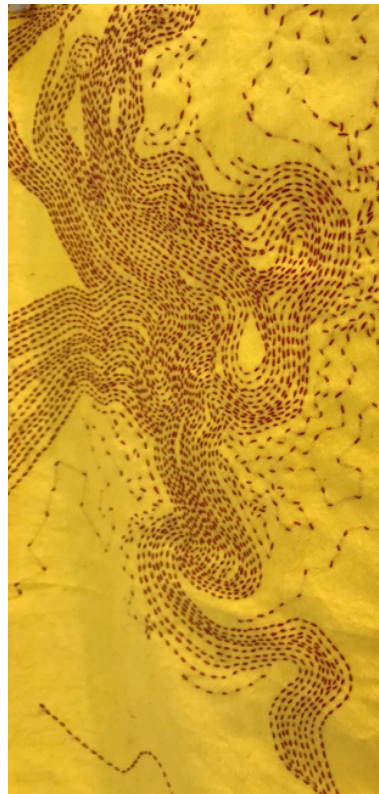
Typically, marks are first made in pencil then subsequently used to prompt further 'drawings' made upon and into the form of the duster. Sculptural outcomes in this context are also common. When discussing the phenomenology of gesture in drawing Paul Crowther writes that, 'images made by gesture are thence autographic expressions of the imagination' (Crowther, 2017:17). This theory establishes a connection between gesture and a personally identifying mark. Marr, however, seeks to express a recollection of domestic experience, rather than pure imagination, through stitch-drawn and pencil made mark-making gestures.

A further aspect of Marr's research process is her own simultaneous investigation of the duster, which informs her approach with the collective project.

She explores the role of drawing with thread as a means of phenomenologically investigating it. Over the course of one month, she engaged daily with a duster in her home, covering it with intuitive marks that respond to the materiality of the cloth and its significance as a mundane domestic object.

The result is an expression of the experience as well as a personal voice. The marks made with a needle and thread reference those created through drawing, leaving a trace if unpicked and permanence through application and style.

The repetitive process of sewing in this way also mimics patterns of behaviour experienced when completing domestic tasks - motions such as wiping that repeat without conscious thought. The stitching of this duster informed Marr's approach to the drawing focused workshops and through discussion of this process, enabled a connective experience with the participants.



**Mediating the Materiality
of the Duster**
Vanessa Marr
Marks Make Meaning
University of Brighton, 2018

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Women and Domesticity provided insight into the two aspects of investigation: that of the crafting process and collective narrative expression; and that of the ways in which perspectives on the notion of gendered domesticity can be shared. Insight was brought to the artist, participants and viewers through each iteration of the exhibition, and has been extended to critical audiences through conference, workshop and publication.

Marr's research recognised and developed a number of principles that link the study of drawing and phenomenology through the role that haptic engagement with the duster plays in this embroidery process. The investigation revealed how stitching, like drawing, can become a phenomenological tool. This was in part because the participants recognised the process of stitching as emancipatory; the crafting and the subsequent acknowledgement of the message embroidered on the duster facilitated a sense of freedom, control and permission.

The research led to new understanding of the valuable relationship between personal and collective responses. The visual language used by participants found a shared world of alternative iconography that transcended the ever-present objects from domestic cleaning routines. These included destructive anchors and fifties stereotypes or popular slogans, for example 'Home is where the Heart is', and objects that we recognise from our homes such as teacups and PlayStation controllers, all of which were re-appropriated to hold meaning.

It became evident that the narrative importance of making was in the transformation of the originally unadorned dusters, turning them from tool to ornament, changing both purpose and meaning. The role of embroidery was transformed too, revealing 'craftivism' as a tool for power and proclamation through its reconstructing of narrative.

As the study of autoethnography within a creative arts context is relatively new, Marr's work brings insights into the relationship between objects, drawings and narratives, advancing a collaborative autoethnography and prompting an understanding of the stitching into a duster as both the writing and the method.

Through the diversity of the perspectives gained, the research helped recognise that domesticity is both a pleasure and a pain, a source of comfort but also a source of challenge, often through lingering tradition and stereotype. In the participatory exhibition process, there was a demonstration of the complex interplay between personal reconstructions of traditional narrative, including those of the fairy tale, and the transformation of societal symbols through collective making.



Home Symposium
Geffrye Museum
May 2015

Exhibition and workshop
Pre-Pride event, Brighton
July 2015

Made in Hastings
shop window display
February - March 2016

DISSEMINATION



Vanessa Marr introduces her first exhibition
Studio 11, Eastbourne: Exhibition
28 February, 2015

Access to film at:
<https://vimeo.com/121189494>

Marr's research has been disseminated through workshops, exhibitions and talks to the general public, and academically through conference workshops, papers, as well as two peer-reviewed publications.

She presented papers at a range of academic symposia, including events that explored autoethnography ('Storying the Self', symposium, University of Brighton, March 2017) and studies of the home ('Performing and Researching Home', Geffrye Museum with Queen Mary University, London, May 2015).

Talks to the general public include a Pecha Kucha talk at the De La Warr Pavilion, Hastings, East Sussex (attendance 300) and the Eastbourne Soroptimists (attendance 50), both in March 2016. Engagement with the De La Warr Pavilion also included an exhibition and workshop to coincide with International Women's Day in March 2016. The University of Brighton hosted a three-week long exhibition of the entire collection at its Grand Parade Art School site and, over the course of the project, Marr has run a number of workshops for staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Other exhibition venues have varied from pop-up events supporting Pride in Brighton to a weekend-long exhibition at Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft in August 2018 (attendance 200); to a series of workshops and exhibitions at Sutton Library in Spring 2018.

Marr's work has become a reoccurring feature at the TRACEY Drawing conference held each year in Loughborough, including a peer-reviewed publication in their Journal (Marr, 2019), which explores her methodology of drawing with thread.

Workshop and exhibition venues

Studio 11, Eastbourne: Exhibition (February, 2015)

Rock House, Hastings: Exhibition (March, 2015)

Geffrye Museum with Queen Mary University,
London: Performing and Researching Home. Paper
and exhibition (May, 2015)

Pop-Up Brighton: Workshop and exhibition
(July, 2015)

Made in Hastings: Exhibition (February, 2016)

Eastbourne Soroptimists: Lecture and exhibition
(March, 2016)

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill: Workshop, exhibition
and Pecha Kucha talk. (February-March, 2016)
<https://www.dlwp.com/archive/women-and-domesticity-stitching-salon/>

Sussex Coast College, Hastings: Workshop and
exhibition (June, 2016)

Merton Abbey Mills with Object Book, London:
Workshop and exhibition (July, 2016)

Hove Museum and Art Gallery: Exhibition (December
2016 - May 2017)

University of Brighton:

School of Art Research Week: Workshop
(November, 2016)

International Women's Day: Workshop
(8 March, 2017)

Grand Parade Exhibition (March-April, 2017)

Storying the Self symposium. (March, 2017)

Project 78 Gallery, St Leonards, East Sussex: POV.
Exhibition (March- April, 2017)

Just-Life Into Art Group, Brighton: Workshop
(June, 2017)

University of Bedfordshire. Reimagining Cinderella
Conference. Paper and exhibition (June, 2017)

Women over 50 Film Festival, Brighton: Workshop
(September, 2017)

Loughborough University. Drawing &
Phenomenology TRACEY Drawing Conference:
Workshop (September, 2017)

Brighton Embroiderers' Guild. Lecture and workshop.
(October, 2017)

University of Brighton:

MA Inclusive Arts Practice. Lecture and Q&A
(October, 2017)

Marks Make Meaning: Exhibition and workshop
(March, 2018)

Carnival of Invention: Exhibition and workshop
(June, 2018)

Sutton Libraries and Heritage - Sutton library:
Exhibition and workshop (May-July, 2018)

Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft: Exhibition and
workshop (August, 2018)

University of Brighton: Creative Methods Lab: Lecture
and workshop (January, 2019)

RISE, Brighton: Workshop (March, 2019)

Loughborough University. Embodied Drawing
TRACEY Drawing Conference: Workshop
(July, 2019)

University of Brighton. MA Sequential Design and
Illustration: Lecture and workshop (May, 2019)

Doing Autoethnography Conference, Tampa, Florida.
(January, 2020)

Publications

Marr, V. (2019) 'Drawing with thread upon a duster:
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(overleaf)
**Mediating the Materiality
 of the Duster (detail)**
 Vanessa Marr

Women and Domesticity

