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## **Piecing together creativity: feminist aesthetics and the crafting of quilts**

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Piecing Together Creativity:  
Feminist Aesthetics and the Crafting of Quilts

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

June, 2014

BY

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Growing up, I was surrounded by the work of my mother's hands. The work was driven by habits of poverty and necessity, but also by the love and care of her family, as well as by a strong creative impulse. Both my parents grew up in contexts that taught them to value every last scrap, and their skills were put to the test as young parents struggling to make ends meet. Their financial situation had improved somewhat by the time that I, the last of three widely-spaced daughters, came around. But the patterns of life were set, and my life was rich with hand-sewn hand-me-down clothes, newly-knitted sweaters and afghans, and vegetables grown in the back yard.

The making of useful and beautiful things seemed a natural part of life, a continuation of the traditions of my grandparents and great-grandparents. I felt intimately connected to the working hands of my great-grandmothers as I examined the quilts they had sewn, which always took turns covering my parents' neatly made bed. When I was small, I was only able to see a strip of the quilt hanging heavily over the edge of the bed, until my struggling climb up on top revealed a magnificent array of colors and patterns. I could run my tiny fingers along the furrows of nearly invisible stitches and wonder about the life of each piece of fabric in the enormous composition. Was that print from a dress? Who wore it, what was life like for her, what events did that fabric witness? When did my great-grandmother decide that its life as a dress was finished, cutting it carefully into elements that would be recomposed into the new life of a quilt? Did she feel as happy as I did when I drew a picture of an imagined story and filled it in with bright colors? Did the people who watched her sew smile at her and exclaim, "What an artist!"?

From my perspective sitting on the bed, I could only see a small area at a time as I

crawled from one end of the bed to the other to continue reading a subtle narrative, some meaning that tied together all those disparate fabrics and that I was not quite able to understand. Something made sense to me about each quilt's story, but I would be left slightly frustrated that I could not make out the whole picture, and I would often give up on my examinations and simply rest my head against its soft, substantial surface. I could only view a quilt close-up, and no matter how fascinating each area was, I was unable to reflect on its broader significance.

As I grew older and taller, I continued to look fondly at the quilts that I could now view from a distance, but I would usually end up flinging myself down on the bed to bask in the afternoon sunlight and in the warmth of the space that seemed so filled with Mom's presence: her jewelry on top of the dresser, her books piled up in the corner, her vanity at which I would have my hair curled every Christmas Eve and Easter, her cross-stitches on the walls and knitted afghan at the bottom of the bed. From my changing perspective as I grew, Mom's things were still tied to mysterious meanings and the rituals of femininity, but my feelings about some of them began to shift.

In particular, I started to find the cross-stitches on the walls of my own bedroom irritating. I could recall the exciting rituals of their creation: the gazing through several books to choose the pattern I wanted for my birthday each year; the process as groups of colored stitches fused together into the desired picture; the tedious washing, stretching, and framing that finished the piece. But for a teenager who wanted to be a "real artist," the magic of cross-stitches had faded. I now saw them as homey, insignificant, and frankly, embarrassing, so I stuffed them under my bed, both to keep them out of the sight of my friends and to avoid the creeping feelings of guilt that accompanied what seemed like a rejection of my mother. In their places on my walls appeared a growing collection of posters and cards, most of them souvenirs from my visits to art

museums. I indulged myself with reproductions of glossy paintings, especially Pre-Raphaelite paintings of beautiful young women. I longed to be both the lovely women and the painters who created such fantastic images. This was where I looked in order to find a new feminine ideal and a more “respectable” creative ideal.

However, after I attended college, read feminist theory and philosophy, and struggled with my inability to attain the identity of a real fine “artist,” I began to question my perspective again. What did I swallow with my dreams of “high art?” What did it mean to embrace the ideals of femininity reflected in the work of male painters? Where did women artists fit in? And eventually I wondered: Did I lose anything when I pushed away the domestic creativity of my mother?

All of these questions solidified and grew in weight and complexity as I continued to study for my Master's in Women's and Gender Studies. And I happened upon quilts yet again, though this time they were in glossy images reminiscent of the art museum I had recreated in my adolescent bedroom. I became aware of the vast world of quilts, from crafting books, fabric shops, and popular fairs to the arenas of “high art” museums, historical scholarship, and feminist theory. Quilting encompasses every force that had affected my journey with creativity and femininity; it is a major battleground of the opposing aesthetic orientations that I had embraced and rejected alternately. What more than the quilt simultaneously symbolizes feminine domestic craft in America *and* has had a profound presence in the fine art world? Where better, then, to tease out the complexities of femininity, creativity, craft, and art?



*Thesis Statement:*

In this thesis, I argue that a feminist study of quilting opens the possibility of a different characterization of quilts and quilters from the traditional view of quilting as primarily done by grannies and thus not “art,” while also asserting that a feminist analysis of what counts as “art” reclaims the value of quilting's heritage as a feminized domestic craft. A feminist approach allows us to see quilting as a medium that actually bridges “high art” and craft, with the potential of furthering a liberatory feminist project of nurturing human creativity.

**The Context of Quilting**

In the United States, the quilt has served as an icon of domestic comfort and American resourcefulness, as well as a metaphor to describe the piecing together of disparate parts into a whole (Torsney and Elsley 1-6). The popular image of the quilt references its history as a staple item in American bedrooms and as an important creative occupation for American women (Shaw 43). Quilts have been intertwined with American sentimentalism and historical mythology, as both the Centennial and Bicentennial celebrations fed popular quilt movements.

American quilting surged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the wide availability of cotton, due to the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and use of enslaved labor in the south, and growing industrialization and efficient cotton cloth manufacturing in the north (Shaw 37-38). A growing middle class could then afford to purchase fabrics, and quilting was established as a “feminine domestic craft” that figured in several popular trends throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the United States.

Despite its continuation by certain individuals and communities, especially in poor and rural areas, the practice of quilting reached a low point in the 1950s and early 1960s. Quilting

began to be seen as old-fashioned and out-of-date as greater numbers of middle-class women entered the workforce and as cheaply-made manufactured goods became increasingly available (Shaw 253-254). Added to the already existing stigma of femininity was an additional association of quilting with “grannies,” the old women who were assumed to be the only continuing quilters as the popularity of quilting waned in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At best, quilts were “heirlooms,” but they were hardly fashionable decorative items at this time, and the work of ordinary “grannies” was not normally viewed as art.

There were a few instances of recognition given to quilts within the art world during this time, and interest in quilts built up again by the late 1960s, culminating in an explosion into public consciousness with Jonathan Holstein's exhibition of antique quilts at the prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971 (Shaw 274). This is commonly known as the beginning of a great quilt “revival:” a surge of interest in investigating the meanings of historical quilts and a growing enthusiasm for learning the craft of quilting. Since 1971, a multitude of quilting festivals, contests, guilds, and museums have appeared around the country. There now exists a huge market of quilting supplies, fabrics, books, magazines, and websites (Shaw 288-291).

The Holstein exhibition is also often given credit for the “elevation” of quilts to “art,” and this new awareness of quilting's creative potential led to a studio art quilt movement that blossomed in the 1980s. “Art quilts” are made by the many academically-trained artists that have taken up quilting as an experimental artistic medium in the past four decades, and these artists have striven with some success to have their quilts recognized as fine art within the “high art world.” Simultaneously, the majority of quilters in the United States (estimated at twenty-seven million in 2006) are not even at the periphery of the fine art world, but rather practice quilting as

a hobby in their spare time (Shaw 333-334). Quilting has become a practice that bridges the divide of high art and craft, two separate spheres that often want nothing to do with each other but which influence one another all the same.

### **Feminist Aesthetics and Quilting**

While quilting blurs the boundaries between art and craft, the terms upon which quilts and quilters have been welcomed into the fine art world are determined by the aesthetic and creative hierarchies that dominate this competitive arena, which I will describe below. For instance, as opposed to the traditional quilting value of manual skill, quilts tend to be prized as art objects if they display emphasis on the conceptual. And in contrast to the impulse of traditional quilters to examine each other's work by fingering the stitches and feeling for a smooth, even surface, quilts are judged to be fine art on their visual elements alone. The process in which certain objects are accepted as “art” and certain individuals are classified as “artists” involves the rejection of many of quilting's traditions, associations, and practitioners.

The fact that the evaluation of quilts has shifted away from traditional craft ideals and towards the values of the historically male-dominated fine art world is a topic of feminist concern. Because quilting was a woman-dominated craft for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the United States, it became a practice that has provided an outlet for women to express their own visions of creativity and reflections of their experiences. While these expressions have varied greatly according to class and region, there are aspects of quilting's heritage that are widely acknowledged and that can be beneficial for projects of social justice. For example, the AIDS Memorial quilt draws upon the associations of quilts with comfort and community, as well as the quilting tradition of creating quilts as memorials to loved ones. This heritage allowed the

quilt to serve as a useful and understandable icon in the aesthetic revolution to change the image of the disease and its victims, increasing compassion, recognition, and respect for those affected while growing into a massive community and activist art project.

It is important to analyze the potential of quilting as a craft, and to see what quilting might offer to an examination of what human creativity is and how it may be nurtured. For instance, as a craft medium, quilting is widely accessible, and many people can learn to quilt through community classes, networks of friends and family, library books, and internet tutorials. In contrast, relatively few people can become successful fine artists, find a career somewhere in the art world, or even have time and opportunity to visit museums and galleries for inspiration. The craft of quilting provides the potential for the nurturing of the creativity of large numbers of people, without the necessity of competitive or elitist dynamics. In this way, quilting is a prime topic for feminist investigation, as feminism includes a rejection of masculinist concepts of “power over” in favor of the notion of “power to.” In this case, a feminist project can include the promotion of quilting for its power to nurture the creativity of many people, who have few opportunities to have power over others within the fine art world.

Feminism is a process of questioning, analyzing, and deconstructing assumptions and hierarchies of values that are drawn along lines of gender, class, race, and nationality. It involves the attempt “to *understand, criticize, and correct* how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices” (Lindemann 11). In this thesis, I will work from a feminist perspective to investigate and critique the gendered associations of quilting in its context as a creative and aesthetic practice. Feminism describes how things are, and more importantly, how things should be (Lindemann 14). It must be a process of reconstructing, nurturing, and sustaining whatever furthers social justice and enhances the quality of life. Therefore, I will also propose an approach

to quilting that has potential for redressing unjust aesthetics and for the nurturing of creativity in everyday life.

In particular, due to the feminist field of the ethics of care, a feminist analysis of quilting will be attentive to quilting's traditional links to the care of family, friends, and community that I will detail in Chapter 3. In her influential book, *In a Different Voice*, first published in 1982, Carol Gilligan brings to light what she calls an “ethic of care,” or a relation-focused approach to moral problems observed mostly within women’s responses to questions in psychological studies on moral development (Gilligan 74). Before Gilligan’s work in this field, women were largely determined to be morally immature because they were judged by theoretical scales that were based upon men’s experiences and patterns of development. For example, although society is dependent on women’s care, care is devalued by masculine culture, while individuality is valued as maturity (Gilligan 17). Gilligan raises questions about the assumptions made within many psychological developmental theories, in which the experiences of men are taken to be universally human, so that women's experiences and voices do not fit into the picture (Gilligan xiii). She notices that “men were leaving out women, but women were leaving out themselves” through dissociation from their own judgments and feelings (Gilligan xiii).

Due to these patterns within her research, Gilligan offers an alternative theory of development to that which is based on a male model, in order to validate what has seemed puzzling to psychologists in the past (Gilligan 3). She is concerned with providing a better understanding of women's development, especially their identity formation and moral development. She also hopes to generate new theories with more insights into all human lives. (Gilligan 4) In order to do this, she draws attention to a “different voice,” a second mode of thought that is not necessarily gendered, but that has been empirically observed as a divergent

interpretation of the questions asked by researchers, and which is especially common within women's answers (Gilligan 2). The "different voice" of which she is speaking is a relational voice, a method of problem-solving with a focus on staying in connection with others, by providing care and attention to others' feelings and lives (Gilligan xiii). Gilligan argues that sometimes listening to this "different voice" provides insight: attending to the tendencies among women's ways of solving conflicts, one may begin to look at problems in terms of human relations and how connections may be maintained (Gilligan xiv).

As Mary Jeanne Larrabee explains, "Her work thus trumpets aspects of women's experience found defective, deficient, or undervalued by the broader culture. This validation could be carried into any field of research on women and gender." (Larrabee 5) Gilligan's valuing of women's experiences, which cannot be lumped in with those of men due to women's differing roles and socialization, has had a broad affect on many disciplines. Many feminist scholars have adapted or extended studies of care, also attending to differences according to the interconnectedness of history, region, race and ethnicity, class, and sex (Larrabee 10-13). Many feminists have also argued that care is potentially liberatory, if it includes the care of both oneself and others (Larrabee 10). In this case, a feminist study of quilting can retain the potential value of care, promoting the idea that care of others is interconnected with care of oneself, while also recognizing the socialization that propels women's quilting for the care of others.

In fact, quilting has been celebrated by some quilters as a form of art therapy. Quilter Radka Donnell notes that quilting can be a meditative process, involving periods of stillness and silence that can allow for moments of contemplation (Donnell 2). Along these lines, Ellen Olshansky notes that quilting can be a method for slowly and symbolically working through complicated issues and emotions (Olshansky 395). Additionally, as I will explore in Chapter 3,

the personal reflection that quilting may encourage can also be shared within supportive communities that promote egalitarianism, mutuality, and community care. Quilting's strengths as an artistic medium become clear through a feminist lens that aims to link social justice with creativity.

### **Methodology**

The research that grounds this thesis began with a general study of feminism and visual culture, in which I focused on the dynamic that though “woman” has been a common icon within the history of visual art, women artists have struggled for fair recognition and opportunities. In relation to this dynamic, I researched the history of feminist art activism and the potential for women artists to reclaim visual expression to reflect their own experiences. Then I was drawn to the idea that many artists, including women, have lengthy artistic heritages within the realm of craft. I studied the complex divide between fine art and craft, and in particular the unique position of quilts in bridging this divide since the 1970s.

In order to better understand the theoretical context of the art/craft divide, I studied major debates within philosophical aesthetics, including arguments concerning the nature of beauty, the controversial appropriation of craft objects by “high art” museums, and the need to contextualize aesthetic discussions and connect them to everyday experience. At the same time, I examined feminist philosophical arguments about patterns of categorization and competition, such as those within art history and dominant aesthetics, which serve as methods for social control. Feminist scholarship stemming from Michel Foucault's ideas of discipline, classification, and individuality led me to question common assumptions about creative processes and to explore alternative theories of creativity. I then tied this research on creativity to feminist ethics and issues of

feminized domestic labor, pondering the degree to which such work can incorporate creative elements. This varies according to the privilege of the worker, and I looked at the vastly different situations of those who must do domestic labor under poor conditions in order to survive versus those who can choose the amount and style of domestic activity according to their desires. I studied this dynamic within quilting's historical and contemporary cultures, relying on feminist scholarship of craft trends.

In addition to academic sources, I read a small selection of fiction centered around the process of quilting and the significance of hand-made quilts. I also surveyed a large number of quilting instruction books and magazines. My reading was enriched greatly by several trips to quilt exhibitions at the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, NE and the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. Finally, I re-examined those family quilts that inspired my research on quilting, and I learned much more than I had ever known before about their creators and their histories.

### **Literature Review**

Since the “revival” of quilts in the 1970s, the *practice* of quilting has been severed to some degree into two factions: the academically trained artists who create art quilts for display in institutions and galleries, and the more traditional craftswomen for whom quilt-making is a hobby. Hence, most current books on quilts are either celebratory, glossy, coffee table art books, *or* quilting instruction and patterns books for hobbyists. Many of the art books are exhibition and collection catalogs, such as *Quilts: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum* by Elizabeth V. Warren from 2010. Exhibition notes make up another important source of quilting scholarship, especially tied to museums that focus on quilts, such as the International Quilt Study



Center & Museum, on the campus of University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Much of the scholarly literature on quilting focuses on the history of quilting movements, trends, and techniques in specific locations or time periods. Articles on the history of quilting are often published in academic journals of various fields, such as gender studies, textile studies, and cultural studies. The American Quilt Study Group has produced an annual publication of quilting scholarship, *Uncoverings*, since 1980. Also common are exhibition reviews and short topical articles in art criticism and design publications, especially *Surface Design Journal*. On the other hand, from the point of view of quilters themselves, there is a plethora of quilting pattern books, some of which offer a small amount of insight into the craft perspective concerning what counts as “art” or about the traditional values of quilting as a craft, such as the benefits of quilting with scraps.

However, none of these genres captures fully the complex status of quiltmaking in the United States, its gendered associations, its ability to blend boundaries, or its full potential as a creative medium. The pattern books typically include a short introduction from the author about how s/he thinks her or his designs fit into the broad context of quilting aesthetics. These introductions are interesting, because they are from the point of view of as well as intended for an audience of quilters themselves. However, they are usually not very fully developed statements, since the focus of the books is the providing of instructions, of course. The art books are a good general source for information about quilting, but they tend to avoid controversial subjects. They do not delve very deeply into an analysis of the aesthetic status of quilting or a questioning of which quilts count as “art” and why this is the case, and their treatment of gender is usually limited to celebrating quilting as a “women's art.” For example, Robert Shaw provides a good, concise history and survey of quilting in the United States, but he glosses over any debates concerning quilting. He notes one studio quilt artist's observation that the quilting world

in general is largely unaware of the art quilt movement, but he avoids dealing with the reasons for this, or with the implication that studio quilters demand a recognition as artists that they are not necessarily willing give back to traditional or hobby quilters (Shaw 340).

This thesis will delve straight into the politics and controversies underlying the partial divide between art and craft communities. In order to do this, it is necessary to review the body of critical feminist scholarship on quilts and quilting. Patricia Mainardi provides a solid foundation with her essay, "Quilts: The Great American Art." It was first published in 1973, soon after and largely in response to the Holstein exhibition. Mainardi is very critical of the ways in which quilting was stripped of its values as an art form in its own right in order to be elevated to "fine art." Because of this essay's importance in providing an approach to art criticism and art history from a feminist perspective, it was republished in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* in 1982. Also first published in 1973 in the wake of the elevation was Alice Walker's well-known short story, "Everyday Use." Although a work of fiction, this story is also highly critical of the appropriation of quilts in a way that pulls them out of their original context of utility within the everyday lives of the people who make them and pass them on to the next generation.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was a lot of important quilt scholarship that incorporated feminist perspectives. Elsa Barkley Brown wrote the essay "African-American Women's Quilting" in 1989 for an issue of the women's studies journal, *Signs*. Donnell contributed a very personal account of the importance of quilting as a creative practice, *Quilts as Women's Art: A Quilt Poetics*, in 1990. Donnell's book covers many topics critically from her perspective as a quilter, such as the gendered aspects of quilting, its therapeutic potential, its special relations to silence and solitary work, and the problems attending the elevation of quilts.

There was also fiction with Whitney Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt* in 1991, and a movie based upon the book was released in 1995. Unlike many cultural products that reference quilting, this novel goes beyond using the quilt as a plot device in that it details different approaches to quilting as a creative practice that is integrated into the lives of its characters. Instead of relying on a few simple stereotypes of quilting, it deals with issues that are important to quilters themselves, including differences of opinion on aesthetic style, the use of scraps, display versus utility, and the problems with appropriating the patterns of other quilters.

A vital source on quilting is *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, an anthology published in 1994. This book contains many critical essays on quilting, covering important issues such as the significance of quilting as a creative outlet, femininity and the art/craft hierarchy, technology and quilting, and the economic position of quilting. It provides selections important to this thesis, including “A Quilt Is an Art Object when It Stands Up like a Man” by Susan E. Bernick, “Preserving the Social Fabric: *Quilting in a Technological World*,” by Susan Behuniak-Long, “Quilt-Value and the Marxist Theory of Value” by Nora Ruth Roberts, and “Everyday Use: *My Sojourn at Parchman Farm*” as well as an introduction to the anthology by editor Cheryl B. Torsney.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems that there have been fewer feminist and critical sources dedicated to quilting. Teri Klassen wrote "Representations of African American Quiltmaking: From Omission to High Art" in 2009, which outlines the various ways in which the cultural narratives of quilting have changed to suit the purposes of different people over the past few decades. A very important source for this thesis is Elissa Auther's *String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, from 2010. Auther's book is historical and critical, providing both a set of broad conclusions concerning the appropriation of textiles by the fine art

world since the 1960s and a great amount of detailed evidence to support her assessment. Although Auther only includes a small section specifically on quilting, the power dynamics she details are vital to a critical examination of the current status of the quilt as an aesthetic object. Karin E. Peterson focuses specifically on the elevation of quilts with “How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form” from *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, 2011. Peterson's essay also covers many of the issues that are foundational to this thesis, especially the process of the quilt being “made” into fine art according to the tenets of modernism, which I will explain below. In Linda Hunt Beckman’s 2012 article, “Quilt Story: Black Rural Women, White Urban Entrepreneurs, and the American Dream,” she addresses the power dynamics of discourses about the quilts of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. Beckman provides a vital feminist response to problems with the methods of this recent “elevation” of quilts to art; she echoes many of Mainardi’s criticisms while adding valuable insights specific to the situation of the black, impoverished quilters of Gee’s Bend.

In recent years, it is typical to find an essay or section of text here and there about quilting, within a book that covers subjects related to quilting, such as the critical feminist analysis of contemporary craft. I speculate that this is partly due to a current tendency to embrace all artistic media as equally relevant for examination, and that this is also partly because other feminized crafts such as knitting and embroidery are more popular than quilting right now. Additionally, only a small portion of literature on contemporary crafts tackles the full implications of the art/craft divide, especially within the context of feminized, domestic crafts. In order to understand the art/craft divide within quilting, we first must back up and look at the context of aesthetic conventions in which some objects are positioned as art while others are not granted artistic status. At this point, I will survey sources that explain the aesthetics of

modernism, the hierarchies of aesthetics, and the process by which objects are designated “art” according to the identity of the producer.

### **The Aesthetics of Modernism**

Modernist aesthetics are by no means completely representative of current aesthetics, either popularly or within the art world, and many other aesthetic trends have challenged and eroded the dominance of modernism over the past few decades. For example, Auther has noted that, “Artists such as kimsooja, Do-Hu Suh, Yinka Shonibare MBE, and Hu Xiaoyaun work in various fiber and fiber-based techniques in order to bring to the fore, among other issues, the artistic traditions of their home countries (Korea, Nigeria, and China, respectively)” (Auther 172). The canon of Western art has excluded the contemporary art of such countries in the past, but the increasing internationalization of fine art has led to the weakening of the tenets of modernism that shaped the degree of inclusion afforded to fiber art in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Auther 172). However, Auther argues that many of the boundaries and hierarchies associated with modernism, including the hierarchy of art over craft, still shape the production of art, as evidenced by the continued existence of parallel arenas of craft (Auther 176). Modernism still has a strong influence on the fundamental ideas of what art is and can be, especially when it comes to inclusion within fine art institutions.

As Peterson explains, modernism in art incorporates three basic elements: formalism, originality, and artistic autonomy (Peterson 100). *Formalism* is “the notion that works should be appreciated by examining the combination of line, shape, and color” (Peterson 100). This approach focuses the analysis of art on certain aspects of its appearance and composition. In this way, formalism is centered on visual elements, and as I will discuss more later, this visual

perspective often serves to de-emphasize other aesthetic aspects, such as smoothness to touch or sturdiness of construction. *Originality* is an important aspect of what defines creativity. However, originality is also often overemphasized within dominant aesthetics, to the neglect of other creative qualities, such as skill and communication. Additionally, what counts as “original” is strongly dependent on *whose* work is being examined, which will become clear through my analyses in Chapters 2 and 3.

*Artistic autonomy*, also known as Art for Art's Sake or the doctrine of autonomy, is the element of modernism that has encouraged the separation of art from everyday life. As Jane Forsey describes, within the historical movement of Art for Art's Sake, art was seen to be untied to other aspects of human life (Forsey 589). The doctrine of autonomy reached its height within the writings of Clive Bell in 1958, but it still remains in bits and pieces in more recent aesthetics (Forsey 590-591). Many artists themselves have historically supported this idea in order to protect art and give it a special place in society (Forsey 591). However, the movement of Art for Art's Sake furthered the isolation of art from the rest of life to a much greater extent than its original proponents intended (Forsey 593).

When art is physically isolated from everything else, its viewing is confined to conventional, prescribed forms at specific times and places. In this way, art and its audience are separated, only to be brought together for certain occasions. Within this approach to art, often referred to as a “spectator model,” the prototype of experiencing art involves taking time out of normal life to visit a museum or attend a concert. Art is reduced to mean “fine art,” and aesthetic experience is also reduced to the viewing of fine art. Not included are beauty in nature or craft, the viewing of which is more casual, and possibly more frequent or immediate for many people, depending on their context. (Forsey 593)

Artistic autonomy demands the elevation of art to a realm above those of work, utility, and politics. In “Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics,” Michèle Barrett remarks:

It is clear that we have inherited a conception of art as something removed from other forms of social activity. Art is seen as the antithesis of work. It is mythologized as an oasis of creativity in the desert of alienated mass-production capitalism. It is idealized as the inspired product of a few gifted and privileged people, constructed on we know not what principles and existing in a kind of other-worldly limbo. It is credited with the ability to transcend the “real world”... (Barrett 309)

This quote illustrates that art for art's sake is tied to various problems in aesthetics. Art, even creativity for the most part, is seen as tied to the inspiration of a “genius,” as opposed to the mundane activities in the lives of the rest of us, and little or no attention is given to the social and political context in which art is produced. Possibly this privileging containment of art is an attempt to keep a sacred space, safe from the bleak realities of everyday life and the necessities of working. However, this separation only serves to restrict conceptions of art to narrow confines while further dulling everything outside its boundaries. Artistic autonomy was a major factor in the rejection of quilts as “real art” before their elevation, since quilting historically has involved issues of mundane life, work, and utility. With the intentional distancing of everyday concerns from those of creativity, many traditions of “feminine art” have been further stigmatized and dismissed from any serious consideration because they are tied to domestic work and concerns of utility. Beyond the basic tenets of modern aesthetics and Art for Art's Sake, several aesthetic hierarchies serve the disregard of many people's creative potential.

### **Mutually Reinforcing Hierarchies of Aesthetics**

The isolation and formalism of modernism has strengthened many aesthetic hierarchies, and these hierarchies are further entrenched due to their tendency to reinforce one another.

Along with the modernist approach to art, each of the dichotomies that I will list contributes to

the stigmatization of quilting and its rejection as “art.” The *separation of art and craft* is one major divide within traditional aesthetics. Craft has been given a low status within our culture, especially in contrast to art. The elevation of art from craft is historically and culturally rooted. In his essay, “Craft and Design. What’s the Distinction?” Howard Risatti explains: “Today craft and fine art are considered distinct fields, each with its magazines, organizations, academic departments and even museums. This was not always the case, as medieval definitions of the words “craft” and “art” make clear. Both words referred to skill and power, to an uncanny ability to do or make something.” (Risatti, “Craft and Design” 116) Despite their similar origins, art and craft split into two distinct realms during the Renaissance, and this division continues in the present. Within this duality, art is deemed higher than craft for numerous reasons, one of which is its supposedly higher demand of mental power, to be used for imaginative explorations or the visual rendering of abstract concepts. The creativity in craft tends to be neglected, brushed off as manual skill alone.

This dynamic is linked with a second hierarchy that reinforces that of art over craft: *the conceptual over the manual*. Within modernist aesthetics, creative work that is seen to involve an emphasis on the conceptual is highly regarded, while the display of skills is not enough to garner praise. For instance, design, whether utilized for fine art or for commercial purposes, is elevated because of its largely mental process. Many fine artists have exhibited works under their name that are of their design, but that have been constructed by hired craftspersons. And when it comes to mass-produced commercial products, the highly-trained designers involved receive high status and monetary rewards, as opposed to the de-skilled factory workers who are employed in the actual making of products. In all cases, the conceptual work is elevated above the manual work. Art and design, supposedly centered around important mental processes, are constructed as



superior to craft, in which the skilled hand is the dominant feature. Therefore, fine art and design are elevated and separated into more prestigious cultural institutions, and collected by major museums of modern art, while craft is often left out or less well represented (Risatti, “Craft and Design” 116-117).

The conceptual's elevation over the manual is related to the general Western cultural and philosophical traditions, which demonstrate a favoring of the *mind over body* and *idea over matter*. And the aesthetic favoring of the conceptual, mental, and ideal aspects of art meld well with the doctrine of autonomy. These processes combine towards the rejection of attention to process and techniques, “fostering the notion that art is the product of theory rather than practical skills” (Auer 35). The hierarchy of *product over process* treats art as a concoction of ideas that is brought mysteriously into existence, as the product of the mind becomes a material product. Even if the process of making art is observed, it must be projected upon with myths of how every move the artist makes is invested with his individual genius (as I will explore in Chapter 3). In this way, the process must be obscured, by either omission or illusions, so that art may be protected as an elite arena. Too much step-by-step information about techniques democratizes art and demystifies its process, making it accessible to more than just the chosen few, individualized geniuses. For unlike conceptual genius, skills may be gained, and crafts such as quilting demonstrate this with their plethora of instructional books. But in a culture that still largely functions with a framework of mind/body duality, craft skills belong to the lower realm of the body.

Also tied in with the hierarchies of idea over matter and mind over body is that of *sight over touch*. Within modern aesthetics, sight is elevated over other senses. We live in a society in which text and images are the primary sources of communication, whether on the internet,

television, film, advertisements, or print media. Sound pulls a close second, as music and sound in movies, tv, and radio are recognized important cultural products. Taste and smell are also accorded respect, increasingly with the popularity of anything to do with culinary arts. However, touch is relatively unexplored as a medium for communication and expression. There has been some artistic experimentation, such as tactile art for visually-impaired/blind communities, interactive performance art, and tactile vibrations of low frequency sounds. But for the most part, touch is considered to be more of a base sense involving numerous taboos, and it is relegated to the private sphere, educational activities for young children, medical care, and “pampering” industries such as massage.

Within the modernist tradition, the influence of formalism places a particular emphasis on visual composition over other material qualities. The visual aspects of art are elevated, as they are associated with the realm of ideas. It is assumed that visual analysis of art allows the distance necessary for “objective” contemplation and cognitive arousal. All that can really be claimed, however, is that touch is rarely utilized to spur contemplation within the fine art world. The use of touch for contemplation in art is relatively under-explored and under-theorized. The emphasis on visual enjoyment of art is also tied to the fact that looking at an object will not affect it materially or cause its deterioration. (I will discuss these issues of preservation further in Chapter 4's examination of utility.)

Again, tied into the hierarchies of art over craft and mind over body, is the hierarchy of *masculine over feminine*. Many feminist scholars have explored what Auther calls “the deep-rooted association of the female with the physical, bodily realm in the history of Western thought” (Auther 63). In many canonized Western philosophical and cultural works, women have been reduced to sexual bodies, viewed largely in terms of their sexual difference from and sexual

attractiveness to men, as well as their capacity for childbirth.<sup>1</sup> These views are further reinforced with women's responsibility for the bodily care of their families and the feminization of the domestic sphere, in contrast to the masculinized public realm of ideas, communication, and commerce. The associations of women with bodies are parallel with broader associations of femaleness with matter itself, which is to be shaped or moved by masculine labor, as in the “cultivation” of the “mother” earth, or the steering of large vessels like boats, referred to with feminine names and pronouns. This dynamic amounts to “the hierarchical relationship between form and matter, wherein form is defined as a masculine principle of creative activity and matter as a feminine principle of unshaped receptivity that is acted on” (Auther 63). Therefore, it becomes easy to see how, when art and craft were split, art became the masculinized realm of the mind and idea, while craft was relatively feminized, encompassing the creative work of the lower classes and women. Craft was seen as inferior as it became “associated with materials as ends in themselves and the haptic rather than the cognitive realm” (Auther 63).

Even within the realm of crafts, historically feminine activities such as quilting and other needlework have been ranked especially low in the hierarchy of creative products. Estella Lauter notes that because needlework has been constructed as “women’s work” since the Middle Ages, its low status has remained firmly in place. This is evidence not just of certain material and stylistic differences, but also of a context in which gender, as well as race and class, has affected the reception of creative works. (Lauter 24) Even carpentry, typed as a more masculine craft, retains a certain dignity, and is more likely to be associated with the higher status realms of design or architecture. Despite its time-consuming and painstaking processes, it is not to be laughed or sneered at, or viewed with disdain in the same way that a currently-feminized craft like knitting or quilting will be. Take a couple of examples from popular culture: In the movie

“Must Love Dogs,” John Cusack's character spends months building a wooden boat, and this aspect of his life is used to emphasize his dignity, commitment, patience, and talent. In contrast, I happened to catch just a few minutes from an episode of the television show, “The Good Wife” (“Taking Control”). In the scene I watched, a political adviser is trying to manage a politician's reputation, and he tells a lower staff member to find a women's group for the politician to speak to. My ear was really caught when I heard the exclamation, “I don't care if it's the knitting needles of America!” This is a loaded sentence, and evidence of the continuation of the pejorative associations with women's crafts as being unimportant, futile, and of the lowest status. It suggests that the political adviser usually would reject such a group as unworthy, but that he is desperate for *any* women's group to serve the purpose of making the politician appear woman-friendly. He is emphasizing his desperation by naming what he thinks would be an especially poor option, implying that a group of women who are organized around knitting will be particularly irrelevant, out of touch, and lacking in influence (and possibly irritating to him as well).

Overall, within popular culture or philosophy, one can see a pattern of interconnecting aesthetic hierarchies, including Art over Craft, Concept over Skill, Product over Process, Mind over Body, Idea over Matter, Sight over Touch, and Masculine over Feminine. As if these hierarchies, along with the basic tenets of modernism, were not enough to disregard many forms of creativity, one may add to these the overwhelming tendency for “fine art” to define its boundaries *around* the producers. Because the existing standards and hierarchies have not been enough to “protect” art from intruders, even these factors themselves have been carefully skewed in favor of certain individuals.

### **Defining “Art” According to the Producer**

To a large degree, the hierarchies of art have been constructed according to artist, materials, and location. The dynamics of this process have tended towards the favoring of dominant groups of artists (white, male, middle to upper class) within the commonly acknowledged history of art as well as within the politics of current art museums, galleries, reviews, funding and scholarship of art. Ronald W. Neperud and Don H. Krug explain the partiality involved in the assessment of creative works: “Art, culture, and aesthetics are interconnected concepts entangled in a web of political discourse and social relations. Things people make are deeply implicated in this web of politics, in the selection and circulation of legitimate and non-legitimate forms of production by makers of art.” (Neperud and Krug 143) In other words, products of creativity mark specific locations and ranks within a complex set of power dynamics. Some things will be assumed to be “art,” while other things will be dismissed or be subject to controversy, and this is always a social and political process. The interpretation of art has tended to be bent toward bestowing a positive analysis to the creative work of artists in the dominate groups. Art criticism discusses the ways in which these artists achieve the standards and superior qualities I have discussed, while ignoring the display of these qualities from many other creative makers that do not have qualifying identities, whether due to gender, race, class, nationality, or simply lack of a favorable position in a fine art network.

With “The Feminist Critique of Art History,” Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews describe how the art historical canon has been subject to the criticism of feminist art historians. Feminist scholars are concerned about the tendencies of art historians to see and write about art with a tunnel vision. Within this sort of outlook, male fine artists of certain regions and periods are denoted as geniuses and important figures in a linear progression of artistic

development. The Italian Renaissance is favored over other European art of the era, as is French Impressionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And of course, non-European art is an afterthought. (Gouma-Peterson 351) All creative works are compared to the standard set by those who are considered central figures, such as Michelangelo, Monet, Van Gogh, and Picasso. Mainardi points out that within this androcentric and ethnocentric approach to art, the work of a number of men in one corner of the world over a few centuries is assumed to be the vital core of art history for endless re-examination. Art from all other places, peoples, and times is pushed to the periphery in the discourses of many museums, texts, and academic courses. (Mainardi 344) The work of artists who exist outside of the fine art establishments and networks regularly is mentioned secondarily, discussed as inferior, or ignored entirely. It will often be qualified as “folk art” or “decorative art,” or described as “primitive” or “naive.” Mainardi remarks that these terms “reveal more about the prejudices of the art historians than about the art itself” (Mainardi 344). Each term is loaded with certain stereotypes and assumptions implying inferior status (such as being ossified, pretty, or quaint), while lacking some of the associations that attend fine art (such as being groundbreaking, intellectual, or culturally relevant).

Any attempt to “elevate” a creative medium depends on one's location within the established, modernist art world, which may absorb the explorations of certain individuals, but which cannot tolerate an aesthetic movement that dilutes its elitism. For example, although the use of fiber in works of art was no longer rare in the 1960s and 1970s, the identity of the creator was vital to the status of the artwork. While well-established artists such as the sculptor Alan Saret garnered great praise for works utilizing fiber, other artists were labeled “fiber artists,” a term which was often used to “particularize the maker as outside the legitimate definition of art.” (Auther 9) When it came to the vastly different evaluations of the work of fiber artists versus

postminimalist artists in the 1970s, Auther explains that the difference cannot be found in the quality of the work itself, in its materials, or even in its supposed subject matter. The scorn of fiber artists versus the praise of postminimalists came down to “privileged institutional positioning,” as the postminimalists were already well-established artists. (Auther 91) Auther's in-depth study makes clear the ways in which the actual qualities of creative work may be overlooked, while the identity of its producer plays a large role in its evaluation.

Whether acknowledged or not, traditional aesthetics have involved decisions about whose creativity is valued, with structures in place to help reinforce and justify those decisions. Barrett sums it up: “The problem posed by ‘aesthetic value’” is related to the “political character of such judgements—they are biased towards the artistic production of dominant social groups” (Barrett 310). This is also true when it comes to the structures that have limited access to art according to class and race. In *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, bell hooks argues that a radical new approach to visual aesthetics is necessary for black people's participation in the viewing and creation of art, in order to avoid simply reinforcing or duplicating a set of aesthetic values that are racist (hooks 8). The structures and conventions of aesthetics contain so many value assumptions inclined towards the elevation of some people over others, that artistic works containing associations with the traditions established by white, Euro-American men will appear to be superior. And this aesthetic dominance is only one facet of the broader cultural, political, social, and economic hierarchies that categorize people according to gender, race, class, and sexuality.

Art by women and by people of non-dominant races or nationalities may gain favor, but it is usually praised in terms of how it lives up to the legends of the art-historical canon. The conventions are only further naturalized when individuals from non-dominant groups produce work that meshes with the mainstream. For example, there is a significant history of women

painters, as described by Frances Borzello in *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*.

However, these artists were consistently considered “exceptional,” and they were forced to exist in a “parallel world” to male artists in which they struggled to create self-images as artists while maintaining their femininity. Borzello explains, “The problem for women—and also the challenge—was that the two sets of expectations were diametrically opposed. The answer was a creative defensiveness... They wanted to show they were as good as painters past and present, but dared not risk looking boastful.” (Borzello 32) In order to be accepted as artists at all, women generally have had to be conservative and careful not to disrupt the establishment, in both their artistic works and their personal images. In this way, women have had relatively few opportunities to push the boundaries of aesthetic conventions.

Even if tokens are admitted to the art world, or the boundaries shift to include different groups of creators, a creative framework based on struggles to maintain or gain privileged positions over others will always exclude a wide spectrum of valuable creative activities by a vast number of people. Regardless of whether it is an intentional or an accidental dynamic, this process of exclusion serves to maintain a carefully controlled progression of change within the art world, calculating who may be allowed into the network without upsetting the stability of the establishment. As Auther's book illustrates, the process of who becomes culturally significant within mainstream art history is also the story of the institutions that have the power to legitimize certain creative products over others (Auther xxvii).

Timothy W. Luke points out the role museums play in the maintenance of exclusivity, by legitimizing certain aesthetics over others, controlling and skewing information, and manipulating reception by promoting myths of genius (Luke 231). Art institutions claim comprehensive authority to make statements about the comparative quality of art objects,



ascribing them with certain ranks and values according to how they mesh with the established aesthetic and social structures of the art world. Museums that attempt to present a central focus on alternative aesthetics tend to be small or struggle for survival. For instance, while “folk art” and craft have a substantial market in private collections and certain museum wings and galleries, it is difficult for a large art institution to be based on either category. Consider that New York's American Folk Art Museum has recently had to sell off its larger space due to lack of funding. The current popularity of folk art and craft does not translate into major institutional presence and cannot compete with the established position of mainstream art museums. Several institutions have also dropped the word “craft” from their names: from the American Craft Museum to the Museum of Arts and Design, from the California College of Arts and Crafts to the California College of the Arts, from the Kentucky Foundation of Arts and Crafts to the Kentucky Museum of Art and Design. In the introduction to *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Maria Elena Buszek somehow takes this as evidence of the “blurring of categories,” pointing to the many contemporary, academically-trained fine artists that are appropriating craft techniques within conceptual art for exhibitions in established museums of modern art. (Buszek 8) However, I argue that this really points to the fact that while crafts are increasingly approved as fine-art mediums, the word “craft” itself is disadvantageous to the status of institutions (with the word “design” being a favorable alternative). While artists must persist in appropriating various “transgressive” elements in order to distinguish themselves, it is the conceptual and fine-art auras that are vital for high status to be granted, and the baseness of “craft” is a liability if taken up in a way that preserves its spirit or content in a holistic manner.

Of course, fine art aesthetics have not remained completely static, and some gains have been made towards a more equitable assessment of artworks. But the changes have occurred in

very particular respects so as not to “rock the boat.” In 1973, Mainardi stated that the sexist and racist art world could not be expanded but only accept token artists to reinforce its boundaries (Mainardi 343). Her view meshes with Borzello's observations on the struggles and creative defensiveness of female painters over several centuries of western art. However, many art-world boundaries have shifted since 1973, in part due to critical and feminist scholarship, such as that of Mainardi herself. Social hierarchies within the realm of aesthetics have been revised a certain degree, and there is more pressure on museums for inclusion across race, sex, and nationality in the past forty years, owing to a great amount of hard work by activist artists and scholars (Peterson 108). There has been some progress too, in the destabilizing of many of the boundaries and hierarchies that have shaped the aesthetics of art. As I noted above, the fine art world has come to have very flexible boundaries when it comes to materials and medium. It is perfectly acceptable for artists to appropriate craft materials and techniques today, even if these artists are not yet highly-positioned within the fine art world. There is now a substantial body of work incorporating fiber in fine art; artist Elaine Reichek embroiders, Anne Wilson works with lace, and Charles LeDray explores the meanings of clothing (Auther 163). Some art shows center on the use of fiber, such as the exhibition “Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting,” at the Museum of Arts and Design of New York City in 2007 (Auther 175). This enthusiasm for craft techniques includes quilting, and as there are many quilters in both the realms of fine art and hobby craft, there is no reason to speak of quilters in past tense anymore (as was common to do in the early 1970s at the beginning of the quilt revival). Definitions of art have definitely been expanded. Nevertheless, this expansion has occurred in very specific ways. What has been left in place, and what has been rejected? What is still required to name creative pieces “art”?

## **Addressing Issues in the Politics of Aesthetics**

Though feminist theorists and artists have been attempting to intervene and transform aesthetics for decades, it is clear that the above questions are still relevant and subject to debate. While many current artists manage to be successful producing art using fiber, building upon the work of feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s, they often avoid dealing with the residual art/craft hierarchy (Auther 164). There are unresolved issues in the art world concerning the relations between aesthetics and the power dynamics that determine what counts as “art.” Sarah James asserts that these issues present ethical concerns regarding many topics, including people's access to creative pursuits. (S. James 8)

This thesis is an attempt to address many of the issues that I think are still relevant and in need of further theorizing. For instance, one problem is the continued reliance on the hierarchies of modernism to determine the quality of artistic work. Another problem is the figure of the “artist,” which operates in similar modes to Michel Foucault's “author function,” representing certain qualities somewhat like a brand name, with a fixed identity for classification within a competitive sphere. Within dominant aesthetics, there are also common stereotypes and aversions to certain creative modes, such as the negative associations attached to “patterns” for crafts, which are mistakenly assumed to involve no creativity or thought, unlike “designs.” Even Mainardi cannot help expressing disapproval for the use of the word “pattern” in relation to quilts (Mainardi 346). Another lingering aversion is modernism's rejection of utility as a relevant quality of art objects. Studies in aesthetics likewise avoid the theorizing of utility and its connection to the aesthetic qualities of art.

When crafts are given scholarly attention as creative practices within their own right, there are often significant gaps in content. Many studies of craft are actually studies of studio

craft, which leaves out the craft traditions of nonprofessional makers (Halper 28). For instance, in Risatti's book, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*, the theory is limited to that of studio craft, failing to take into account considerations of the ways in which the picture changes when the theorizing of function and aesthetic expression in craft includes an examination of feminized domestic crafts.

Additionally, there are issues which are vital to the theorizing of all creative activity, especially problems caused by the pressures of capitalism, consumerism, and divisions of labor by class, gender, and nationality. Feminist theorist's critiques of capitalism, such as that by Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, certainly are applicable to a study of the complexities and meanings of artistic pursuits, including crafts such as quilting. In particular, it is important to examine quilting's relation to the exploitative qualities of "women's work," which I will do in Chapter 5, drawing from Barbara Ehrenreich's essay on domestic labor and Behuniak-Long's essay concerning the effects of technology and labor on quilting. Related to this topic is the consumerism of quilting, especially the large markets of fabrics, quilting tools, books, and even quilting-themed cruises. Marybeth C. Stalp provides an interesting description of the common trend of quilters' fabric hoarding and the endless desire to buy more fabric. The increasing consumerism of quilting can be seen as a threat to valuable forms of creativity, such as the tradition of scrap quilting. Roberts adds a critique of the tendency to reduce all value to economic value, posing that quilts have a different kind of value as heirlooms.

Overall, many issues concerning the politics of aesthetics have been left unresolved, and despite the partial expansion of art, feminized crafts such as quilting and their traditional aesthetic values are undertheorized. The ways in which quilting has been appropriated by the art world, which I will detail in Chapter 2, have lead me to the conclusion that maintenance of

exclusivity and authority are vital to the power structures of the art world, while the exhibition of creativity or exploration of artistic skill are secondary considerations. In this light, hooks is right to call for a radical re-evaluation of aesthetic conventions.

Peterson relates how the power dynamics of the art world are problematic because they confine creative expression to a narrow scope, reserving legitimization for a privileged few:

As long as 'art' exists alongside beautiful, human-made objects that are labeled “nonart,” the label is an unsettling one because it perpetuates a hierarchy of value. Currently, the hierarchy of value, the distinction between art and nonart, is supported by the mechanism of the modern eye, a perspective that, although seemingly neutral, limits other ways of relating to, seeing, and experiencing human cultural production. (Peterson 111)

Art institutions may accept a broad range of artwork in current times, but the conventions of becoming a “successful” artist remain fairly entrenched. As Adrian Wilson comments, the structures that separate creativity from the daily life of the majority of people are difficult to challenge, and even difficult to fully explain because we usually take them for granted, relying on them without thought (Wilson 363). For this reason, I argue that it is important to continue reflecting critically on the category of art and its relation to creativity.

Within this reflection, my goal is not the gaining of access for quilters to the “high” art world, as its very structure and process of granting legitimation relies on exclusionary strategies. Rather, I am focused on the possibilities for creativity for everyone, the ideas that affect/limit accessibility, and fine art only in so far as it influences possibilities for this. Therefore, it is necessary to draw upon feminist thought in order to theorize the current status of popular creative mediums. Many more people, especially women, will attempt a craft even if they refuse to attempt anything associated with drawing or art. Some feminist artists recognize this fact, and they use feminized crafts to explore the politics of aesthetics. In "The Politics of Craft," Julia Bryan-Wilson notes:

With bars hosting weekly crochet nights and knitting cafes proliferating, the current popularity of textile handicrafts in the US is undeniable. A growing number of artists, many of them women, are also producing critical, socially committed, conceptually oriented, collaborative craft-based work—so many that it could be called an emerging genre. (Bryan-Wilson 78)

Bryan-Wilson demonstrates the possible interplay between art and craft when artists appropriate crafts in a way that is informed by feminist theory and aimed at social justice, questioning modernist hierarchies and assumptions about what is necessary for the making of art, and engaging in an artistic practice that is connected to those who are not considered “artists.” Along these lines, I will draw upon feminist theory in order to study quilting in a way that reclaims its value as a feminized craft and that builds upon its potential to expand creative opportunities.

The art/craft divide and its politics are thoroughly examined by a number of feminists. Many recent feminist writings are broadly about the current crafting revival. For example, Betsy Greer discusses the development of the current movement of craft-based activism, or “craftivism.” Bryan-Wilson covers feminist activist artists and their relations to the feminine crafts that they have chosen to reclaim. And Kirsty Robertson explores current trends of the appropriation of feminized crafts within the art world in “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches.” Other feminist scholars have carefully described the status and politics of a specific craft medium, such as Alla Myzelev's analysis of knitting, feminism, and gender; or Adrienne Sloan's article, “Political Knitting: Needling the Establishment.” However, there has been very little critical feminist scholarship specifically on the practice of quilting in the last fifteen years.

With my research on quilts, my aim is *to add critical feminist insight concerning quilting's potential as an art form, without losing sight of strengths that stem from its history as a craft.* To these ends, it is necessary to revisit some issues that were raised by feminists such as Mainardi regarding quilting's “rediscovery.” Mainardi critiqued the Holstein exhibition for its

appropriation of quilts into the fine art world on modernist terms, and she called for a need to view quilts within the context of quilters' intentions, values, and methods (Mainardi 332). In order to become art objects, the quilts in question had been sanitized of the stigma of being associated with “grannies” and their old-fashioned domestic practices. Bernick provides a very useful and clear critique of the process by which quilts were “elevated” to art and the differing responses to this process by three quilt cultures: the art quilt culture, the feminist quilt culture, and the traditional quilt culture. And Peterson's recent essay outlining the ways that quilts were transformed into art objects ties this process to the standards of modernism. Such criticisms are still relevant and worth revisiting, but it is necessary to apply these points to contemporary quilting as the context for quilting has shifted. I plan to bring feminist criticism of the appropriation of quilts into the present by connecting it to the current trends of crafting.

In order to do this, I will attempt to build upon the work of feminist art and aesthetic theorists such as Peggy Zeglin Brand, Lucy R. Lippard, Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, Borzello, Lauter, Barrett, and hooks. I will also draw upon discussions of alternative approaches to aesthetics, including *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* by Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston and “People Who Make Things: Aesthetics from the Ground Up” by Neperud and Krug. Attention to the aesthetics of craft is vital for my aims, especially Risatti's *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* and “Craft and Design. What’s the Distinction?,” in which he explains his conception of creativity in craft, resulting from the imagination and the work of the skilled hand working in harmony. Risatti's praise of the skilled hand, along with Octavio Paz's discussions of the special nature of craft in the essay “Use and Contemplation,” set the stage for me to argue for the reevaluation of utility within creative works. And Walker's story “Everyday Use” illustrates that quilts are a perfect subject with which to

explore the issues involved in the disregarding or embracing of utility.

I will also emphasize what might be lost if quilting's craft heritage were disregarded completely. I attempt a re-evaluation of the "pattern" as an important term within a communal method of creative innovation, and this evaluation of patterns shows how quilting is "art" in terms of its own values and heritage as a craft. With my discussion of patterns, I will also delve into the theoretical issues that underpin the current division of the quilting world into fine art and craft communities. Additionally, I will attempt to reclaim the traditions of utility quilting and scrap quilting, showing how these methods have their own aesthetic significance as inspirations for creativity.

Furthermore, quilting provides many benefits for those who are involved in its continuation as a craft. In "Tending and Befriending: The Intertwined Relationships of Quilters," Kathleen W. Piercy and Cheryl Cheek explain how quilting is a life-enriching activity for many women in that it strengthens relationships with family, builds friendships among quilters, and provides opportunities for leadership and mentoring roles. Ellen Olshansky even views quilting as a form of art therapy. Quilting's traditions of community and craft offer an approach to creativity that incorporates a contingent sense of self, which avoids trapping the creative maker into a fixed identity.

I will incorporate several types of sources to create a picture of the feminist liberatory potential of quilting. For one, Donnell writes a beautiful book describing what quilting means to her and other quilters as an expressive outlet and therapeutic practice. She struggles with many of the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics and problems with the fine art world's appropriation of quilting. She evokes the aesthetic qualities of quilting as an art, but without rejecting its heritage as a form of "women's art." Despite Donnell's tendency towards gender essentialist ideas, her



treatment of quilting is of great value in that it explores many emotionally resonant aspects of quilting that should be preserved because they are beneficial to the quality of people's lives, such as quilting's ability to create connections across generations, its therapeutically slow and meditative process, and its attractive associations with touch, warmth, and comfort.

Finally, hooks gives small and beautiful glimpses into the style of alternative aesthetic that I am proposing would be an empowering feminist project and that I argue is offered within the heritage of quilting. I weave into this liberatory vision some excerpts from hobby quilting instruction books; such as those by Gail Lawther, Nancy J. Martin, and Barbara Randle; because the experiences of these quilters are perhaps most representative of the vast majority of quilters today. Overall, my research brings together disparate elements from feminist theory, craft theory, philosophical aesthetics, and the accounts of quilters themselves.

### **Outline of the following chapters:**

In Chapter 2, “Quilting's Destabilizing of Traditional Hierarchies,” I will explain how the traditional characterization of quilts and quilters as feminine and old-fashioned stigmatizes quilting. This stigmatization fits into a network of hierarchies (such as masculine over feminine, art over craft, and sight over touch) that are used to classify creative work within dominant aesthetics. I will discuss the degree to which quilting can blur the boundaries between these dichotomies. Finally, I will argue that quilting's position bridging art and craft destabilizes the dominant hierarchies of aesthetics and broadens what counts as “art.”

In Chapter 3, “Quilting's Communities of Craft” I will explain that, within dominant aesthetics, individuality and reified identity are assumed to be necessary for a person to attain the status of “artist,” which also restricts what creative productions count as “art.” I will argue that

feminist aesthetics allow us to see a potential within the communities of quilting for avoiding the pitfalls of entrenched individuality and therefore nurturing human creativity.

In Chapter 4, “Quilting's Embrace of Utility,” I will analyze the disregard of utility within dominant aesthetics, examining the ways in which the rejection of art's utility is tied to issues of gender, labor, and preservation. I will argue that as a feminized domestic craft, quilting's tradition of embracing utility provides opportunities to integrate beauty, creativity, and utility into everyday life.

In Chapter 5, “Quilting's Resourcefulness and Heirloom Traditions,” I will explore how quilting's tradition as a domestic craft is related to issues of labor within capitalism and the devaluing of “women's work.” I will investigate how the consumerist tendencies within quilting only contribute to the dynamics of exploitation. Then, I will argue that within a feminist framework, quilting's heirloom and scrap quilting traditions may be used to resist consumerism and to nurture creativity.

I will attempt with these chapters to create a complex picture of the practice of quilting. I hope to show that its status, as a medium appreciated both within the fine art world and within the continuation of craft, allows for an exploration of alternative aesthetics which could further a feminist vision of nurturing creativity.

## Chapter 2: Quilting's Destabilizing of Traditional Hierarchies

Quilts carry many associations: comfort, cushiness, high-quality construction, with a strong dose of maternal care. All the qualities that one wants in one's toilet paper, as evidenced by the brand Quilted Northern. As Robert Shrum describes on slate.com, Quilted Northern began a television ad campaign in 1997 that depicted a group of tiny, warmhearted cartoon women sitting around the edges of a giant sheet of toilet paper. They were proudly “quilting” the texture into the tissue, quilting bee-style. Unfortunately, the first few weeks of the ads mistakenly portrayed the women using knitting needles for their work, doing something that was neither knitting nor quilting. While the company must have heard enough feedback to motivate the release of a more accurate re-animation in a fairly timely manner, people still reference and joke about the blooper.

I remember watching these advertisements and being appalled that the Quilted Northern company conveyed ignorance of even a rudimentary knowledge of what quilting involves, while its branding was centered on making a metaphorical claim to offer all of quilting's beneficial qualities within its toilet paper. It is easy to appropriate quilting as a symbol without actually understanding much about the craft. But, of course, the toilet paper is not really quilted in the first place; if it is multi-ply, the layers are pressed or embossed together. There is actually no practical reason to mimic quilting's appearance on the paper's surface, as texture can be added in many different patterns. The whole idea of basing a brand of toilet paper on quilting is illustrative of the associations that the company wants to evoke for the purpose of selling its product. In order for that branding to be successful, the concept of joining together quilting and toilet paper must resonate with consumers. Quilts and toilet paper both recall ideas of comfort,

soft materials, touch, bodily processes, domestic or otherwise private spaces, and the meeting of people's daily needs. But quilting adds the extra dimension of painstaking craftsmanship, as carried out by those people (largely women) whose work is dedicated to providing personal care to the ones they love. Such care is widely desirable, but that does not mean that its providers are rewarded with high status or power.

Because of quilting's history as a feminized domestic craft, the status of quilts and quilting is determined, to a large extent, by the status of women. Like many other women-dominated fields, the reputation of quilting is negatively affected by sexist stereotypes, such as the idea that women quilters are silly, old-fashioned, and self-sacrificing. The high art world is definitely not dominated by women, and the stigmas against femininity have played a large part in the fact that quilts have been and often still are rejected as "art." However, the partial acceptance of quilts as art by the art world points to a more complicated situation than just simple sexism. The gendered stigmas attending quilting are interrelated with the aesthetic approach of modernism and its systems for classifying what does and what does not count as art. As I explained in my literature review, the hierarchy of the masculine over the feminine is reinforced by a network of other aesthetic hierarchies such as art over craft, concept over skill, and sight over touch. Therefore, the degree to which quilting has been embraced as art is usually related to the degree to which it has been able to shed many of its feminine and craft associations. On the other hand, these feminine and craft associations are very useful in other contexts, such as the marketing of toilet paper. Quilts, like many cultural objects, may be employed for many purposes, and the significance of quilting may be very different for those viewing quilts than it is for the quilters themselves. Teri Klassen explains, "In the case of a large contextual gap between viewer and maker, such as situations in which objects are unfamiliar to their viewer, viewers

may fill in this lack of meaning by either familiarizing themselves with the maker's context or importing meaning from other contexts" (Klassen 298). Spectators incorporate cultural objects into their own worldview, in the manner of utilizing a blank scrabble piece (Klassen 297).

In this chapter, I will discuss the elevation of quilts to “art” and the ways in which careful management of aesthetic discourse about quilts is used to bolster the power of gatekeepers to the fine art world. Within an investigation of the degree to which quilts are employed to reinforce or to blur the hierarchies of traditional modern aesthetics (such as art over craft, painting over fiber, and sight over touch), I will also explore the ways in which artists and quilters negotiate aesthetic hierarchies. I will argue that quilting's complex position spanning fine art and craft provides potential for the destabilization of aesthetic hierarchies, expanding what can be called “art.” Quilting builds upon expanded notions of aesthetics that have been proposed by feminists and craft theorists, increasing the potentiality for the integration of creativity into everyday life.

### **The Elevation of Quilts to “Art”**

Although the realm of feminine domestic crafts had aesthetic values of its own, until the 1970s, quilts were not considered art within dominant aesthetics. Estella Lauter describes how such crafts as quilts did not count as art because of their integration into and use within everyday life (i.e. because of their opposition to Art for Art's Sake values, in which art should be separate from the rest of human concerns). Feminized crafts were also supposedly failing to express a unique vision from an individual artist. (Lauter 23) I would add that quilts were additionally rejected due to their associations with the body and with the feminine domestic sphere. However, quilts were not to remain completely confined to their low status. Perhaps the art world was ready for a fresh addition, or the striking creativity and beauty displayed in many quilts could

just not be ignored forever. More likely, the relative scarcity of women quilters during that era allowed quilts to be appropriated without threat to the art establishment, while at the same time the feminist movement had laid some groundwork for the re-appraisal of “women's work.” For whatever reasons, quilts caught the eyes of the art world and of the general public, complicating their aesthetic status.

Credit for the elevation of quilts to art is commonly attributed to Jonathan Holstein, who along with Gail van der Hoof, curated the 1971 exhibition “Abstract Design in American Quilts” for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. This exhibition was successful in bringing quilts into a fine art context and garnering for them an unprecedented angle of aesthetic attention, thanks to Holstein's and van der Hoof's art world connections and careful management of the quilts' presentation (Peterson 99-100). Susan E. Bernick explains that fire was added to the flame of quilt enthusiasm with the United States bicentennial celebrations of 1976, as working and middle class Americans romantically re-embraced historical icons and American arts and crafts (Bernick 138). The patchwork quilt came to symbolize tradition, resourcefulness, domesticity, ingenuity, and the scrappy and cheerful pioneer spirit.

Although the status of quilting has greatly changed over the past forty years, it is not accurate to assume that quilts were not seen as art until Holstein brought them into the fine art museum. In Bernick's discussion of the complexities of the elevation of quilts to “art objects,” she emphasizes that what is called “art” varies according to who is speaking. In order to dispel cultural myths about quilts and to sort out various narratives, she identifies and describes three distinct, yet overlapping quilt cultures: the art quilt culture, the feminist quilt culture, and the traditional quilt culture (Bernick 135). American *traditional quilt culture* can be seen as a continuation of a craft that was imported from Europe and that has been practiced by many

different groups of people across various regions of the United States. Although the details of quilting vary greatly according to practitioner, region, class, and era, traditional quilt culture is unified by its approach to quilting as a feminine domestic craft. The emergence of the *art* and *feminist* quilt cultures displays a remarkable shift in the evaluation and practice of quilting.

The elevation of quilts to the fine art world was achieved on very specific terms, and it required the emphasizing of certain aspects of quilts and the ignoring of others. Karin E. Peterson points out that the practice of hanging quilts flat on the wall like paintings was used by Holstein to create the impression of quilts as art (Peterson 104). In this way, the quilts were prepared for exhibition in a modern art museum, to be viewed at a distance and isolated from other images. Holstein described this process as giving the quilts a new “dignity,” making them seem more “commanding,” “confident,” and “powerful” (Peterson 105). Quilts were then able to encompass such masculine adjectives: they were “dignified” by being placed in the public sphere, rather than the feminine domestic private sphere. They were able to be viewed “objectively,” as they could be seen as isolated whole images, rather than being draped across a bed or couch in a decorative capacity. They were “powerful” in that they were removed from the private domestic sphere of women, which is lacking in power, and pulled into the public sphere dominated by men. The curators were claiming large amounts of wall space for each quilt, so that rather than being one amongst many elements in a room, each quilt could be seen as bold or assertive in the absence of anything that could distract from it. In other words, the quilts were not just decorative and utilitarian items anymore, but they were transformed into masculine art objects.

Bernick is critical of the art quilt culture because of its claims to have “made” quilts into art, its stripping of quilts from their contexts, and its enabling of collectors to profit from other people's work without properly crediting the creators (Bernick 137-138). Art quilt culture

employs fine art discourse in order to convey the high cultural and aesthetic value of quilts, often utilizing narratives of patriotism, democracy, and women's history for its celebration of quilting. Even recently, in his introduction to *American Quilts*, Robert Shaw conveys his enthusiasm for the history and continuing creativity of quilts in the United States. His discourse, however, is overly celebratory, and it relies on his United States patriotism, as well as on a mainstream, uncritical narrative of quilting's history and current practice. Shaw states, "Whatever forms it takes in the future, quilting will remain a democratic art, quintessentially American in its openness, receptivity, adaptability, and malleability, and available to anyone willing to accord it the time, value, and dignity it deserves" (Shaw 17). But as Bernick points out, quilting is by no means uniquely American. And although quilting is relatively accessible as a domestic craft, the practice of quilting is and has always been shaped by hierarchies such as class and region (Bernick 135). For instance, in the past, fancy quilts, crafted often by wealthy women and incorporating small pieces, curvilinear shapes, and small stitches, were made primarily for their beauty and were likely to be considered art among quilters. They required a large amount of leisure time and many different fabrics, involving some waste due to the intricate shapes that were cut. In contrast, plain quilts were made to be used, and were often comprised of scrap materials, geometrically pieced construction, and large stitches. The likelihood that a quilt would be considered art within the traditional quilting world, then, has often had to do with the time and money that were available to spend on its making, which depended upon the disposable income and leisure time of the maker. (Bernick 139-140)

The approach taken by Holstein and the fine art world in the 1970s was accompanied by a rosy idealization of quilting and a loss of awareness of injustices within the history of quilting, such as the theft of the creative work of enslaved African American quilters by white



slaveholders, the exploited labor of cotton-pickers and fabric mill workers, and the class-based aesthetic hierarchies within traditional quilt culture. At the same time, this approach was also joined by a lack of attention to certain qualities of quilting that challenge the dominant aesthetic hierarchies of art. The fine art world absorbed quilts in a manner to suit the current dominant purposes and discourses within its own realm. Therefore, Elissa Auther notes that, “Also lost in the process of the art world's assimilation of quilts was any recognition of quilt making as an autonomous field with its own definitions, values, and hierarchies” (Auther 132). Certain qualities and values traditional to the field of quilting were necessarily dropped in order for quilts to be evaluated as art. This is true especially of their associations with comfort, warmth, and the bed (including sleep, sex, illness and death). In order for them to be elevated into “fine art” they must be sanitized of these bodily and domestic associations, and isolated from the context of their use and of their maker's lives. This is what Peterson calls an assimilationist strategy for quilts, in that quilts are “passing” as fine art instead of being judged on their own terms (Peterson 108). The assimilation of quilting into the art world is on “fine art” terms, which leaves in place the basic hierarchy of art over craft (Auther 36).

Along these lines, the aesthetic ranking of some quilts over others has been extremely different according to fine art standards in comparison to traditional quilting criteria. As Patricia Mainardi points out, some shallow semblance of certain quilts to modern abstract art has been part of what allowed curators and critics in the fine art world to “see” the art in them (Mainardi 343). Accordingly, those quilts that most closely resembled modern art were chosen for early exhibitions, such as Holstein's. The quilts being considered were judged on formalist standards, by focusing on the visual design of line, shape, and color. For example, *Tumbling Blocks*, c. 1880-1900 (see figure 1) was one of the quilts that Holstein acquired for his collection. The

repetition of red pieces reinforces the optical illusion of stair steps in this quilt. Bold patchwork quilts were elevated and praised due to their supposed “mirroring” of modern abstract paintings. However, chronologically, many of these quilts were made before or during the same era as the types of paintings they supposedly mirror. Indeed, *Tumbling Blocks* employs a common quilting pattern, especially for the era in which this quilt was made, around the turning of the twentieth century. To the fine art curators, it was impossible to think in terms of the quilters being serious aesthetic or cultural innovators, with understandings of color and shape that cannot be reduced to fine art terms or history. (Mainardi 344) Although many quilters may have been influenced by elements of fine art aesthetics, they were also working within a different sphere of art (that of feminized domestic craft) and interacting with communities of quilters (who were mostly women).

In contrast to the fine art world, feminist scholars and artists have been more attentive to quilting's specific history as an art form with its own aesthetic and cultural values. Feminist quilt culture largely consists of feminist scholarship and activism concerning quilts that traces the significances and contexts of quilting within women's lives. It has a complex relationship with traditional quilt culture. Feminism has been central to the creation of a context in which quilts have gained attention and praise from the fine art world. Feminists' research and celebration of the artfulness of women's traditional domestic craft set the stage for the appropriation of quilting into the category of fine art. Bernick identifies tensions between art and craft within feminist discourse, and she counters the feminist narrative of having “discovered” quilting as women's art. Rather, she argues that the resurgence in interest about quilts and quilting should be seen as a rebirth, not a creation or discovery of the artistic tradition that already existed. (Bernick 145) Neither the fine art world nor feminists can claim rights to defining quilts as “art.”

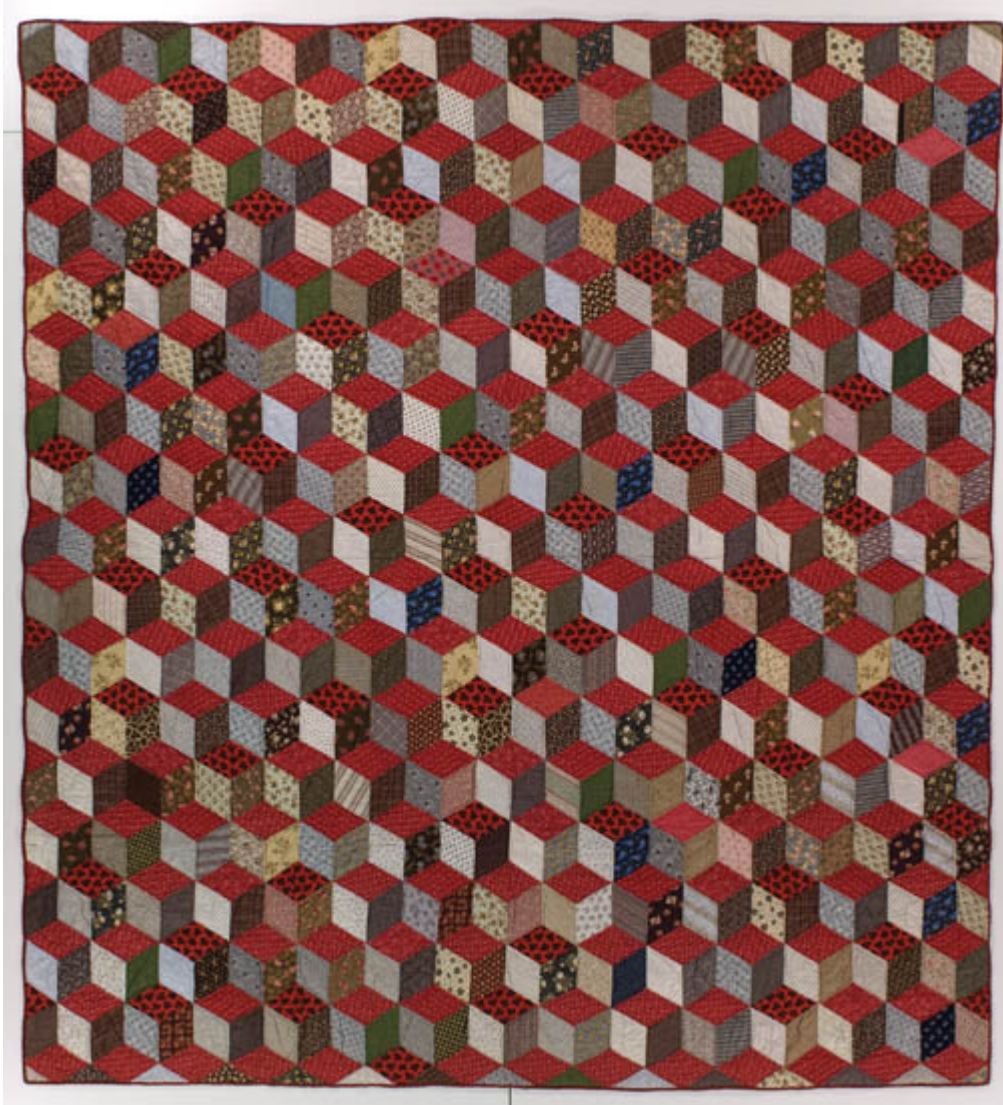


Figure 1. *Tumbling Blocks*. Maker unknown, c. 1880-1900. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003.003.0202.

Nevertheless, there *are* major distinctions between feminists' and fine art authorities' celebration of quilts. Bernick states that, "quilts have been accepted in the highest reaches of the artworld *only* to the extent that they have been taken away from the traditional quilt culture and defeminized" (Bernick 137). Unlike the fine art world, feminists have not gone so far as to

sterilize quilts from the heritage of women's domestic labor. Most feminists have resisted playing into the fine art world's discrimination by attending to the cultural values of quilting within the context of its history as a feminized domestic craft. Bernick appreciates the feminist quilt culture's criticism of the high art world, as well as its researching of the historical and social significance of women's quilting practices.

Feminist quilt research has even impacted the discourse of art quilt culture. Recent occurrences of the “elevation” of quilts to fine art have been much more complex than that of the Holstein exhibition. More attention has been paid to documenting the history and lives of quilts' creators, especially by organizations, such as the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, NE, that treat quilting as an art form with its own aesthetic values. However, even with the impact of feminist quilt culture, the segments of the art world continue to appropriate quilts in troubling ways. The elevation of quilts can become mired in controversy, especially when the quilters are living, not conveniently unknown or long-deceased, as they were for Holstein. Let us look, for example, at the 21<sup>st</sup>-century elevation of the quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama. A series of exhibitions beginning in 2002, starting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and touring many of the nation's most prestigious art museums and galleries, was organized and promoted by Bill Arnett and his family's art dealing and publishing enterprises.

Upon first glance, the elevation to art of the quilts from Gee's Bend seems like a purely beneficial event for the African-American women who created them. After all, the exhibitions have allowed the public to view these strikingly beautiful quilts, and there has been some financial gain for residents of an impoverished community. It is rare that quilters who work from within a craft tradition receive such a great amount of attention for the aesthetics of their creations. And the exhibition notes and books published about the Gee's Bend quilters are

seemingly attentive to their circumstances as poor, black women, which is an addition to fine art texts that feminist art scholars have been demanding for decades.

But upon very little investigation, the methods and texts of elevating Gee's Bend quilts to art are shown to involve financial and symbolic exploitation. The most obvious source for this conclusion are the lawsuits that were filed in 2007, concerning many questionable business practices of the Arnetts. Quilters Annie May Young and Loretta Pettway sued Bill Arnett and his sons Matt and Paul, as well as certain corporations that had purchased designs for the use of commercial products, over claims to intellectual property and unclear accounting regarding compensation for their artwork. The lawsuits were settled out of court in 2008, which keeps the details of their outcome a secret from public knowledge. (Farr 1) Even without such knowledge, however, it is clear that the Arnetts have used their power as gatekeepers of fine art, determining which quilts made in Gee's Bend have “artistic merit” and which do not. And it just so happens that the quilts with artistic merit are the ones that the Arnetts own. The quilts that they have been forced to return to Gee's Bend quilters as a result of the lawsuits have been appraised as relatively worthless. (Farr 1) This situation echoes Mainardi's concerns about the Holstein exhibition, over collectors profiting off of quilters. After all, most quilts are not valuable fine art until they are “made” into art by those with the authority to do so. (I will discuss the financially exploitative aspects of the Gee's Bend elevation more in Chapter 5's exploration of quilting in relation to capitalism and commodification.)

Another exploitative aspect of the Gee's bend elevation is the simple celebratory discourse that masks the Arnetts' controlling tactics of picking and choosing details that bolster their own status. First of all, despite their narrative of a totally isolated and changeless town tucked away from the world, Gee's Bend was no original “discovery” by the Arnetts. In her

article, “Quilt Story: Black Rural Women, White Urban Entrepreneurs, and the American Dream,” Linda Hunt Beckman explains that the quilts of Gee's Bend had been greatly appreciated by outsiders in the past, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, including a folk show run by the Smithsonian, the abstract expressionist Lee Krasner, and high-end New York stores such as Bloomingdale's, which purchased quilts from Gee's Bend (Beckman 6). The press about the 2002 exhibitions failed to research the history of Gee's Bend quilting and simply repeated the Arnetts' tale of saving quilts from being destroyed by their makers, who were painted as ignorant of their artistic value. Reporting for the *New York Times*, Shaila Dewan describes the Arnetts' involvement with Gee's Bend quilts as the starting of a “rescue mission.” (Dewan 1)

This rescuing of art, like that by Holstein, involved pulling them out of domestic environments and treasuring them in the safe, hallowed masculine space of museum and gallery walls. Also like Holstein, the Arnetts chose quilts that had visual similarities to modernist paintings, those with an “improvisational kind of patchwork,” even though Gee's Bend quilters also made patterned quilts (Beckman 4). The Arnetts knew the tastes of those they needed to impress: established fine art curators and critics. When the now-famed quilts were widely exhibited in 2002, they received “glowing reviews from the...stalwarts of the fine-art establishment” (Kimmelman 1) Michael Kimmelman, the art critic for the *New York Times*, compared them to Matisse and Klee, the best quilts in his eyes being minimalist in design (Kimmelman 1).

The Gee's Bend quilts were elevated without shedding all feminine and craft associations, but only on the condition that they are seen as “miraculous,” as Kimmelman describes them. In this way, they are an exception to the normal patterns of fine art, and therefore not a threat to fine art establishments. Kimmelman continues to rave: “Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I'm

wildly exaggerating, see the show) arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee's Bend was a plantation" (Kimmelman 1). I argue that his description, though not untrue, is subtly offensive in that the identities of the quilters as women and African-Americans is discussed not in a way that encourages the audience to appreciate them as complex human individuals, but in a way that is useful to the promoters. The more "humble" the quilters, the more "miraculous" is the Arnetts' "discovery." The quilters were not invited to share about the hardships that they have encountered in their lives due to their location. Rather, they are described in a way that resonates with popular American stereotypes about Southern black women.

In fact, the public identities of the quilters have been tightly restricted to a narrative of humble, poor, isolated women who "take little credit for the impact that their quilts have on a viewer" (Beckman 5). Tinnie Pettway, a quilter who joined the Arnetts' Quilters Collective until Bill Arnett threw her out when she started her own quilting business, remarks: "They always say we humble. But we got some pushy women too." (Beckman 5) The humility and simplicity projected upon the women is more like the Quilted Northern commercials than like a thoughtful, complex portrait of an artist. Instead of needing to shed feminine associations, the art promoters utilized gendered and racialized stigmas (painting the women as silly, old-fashioned, and self-sacrificing) so that the quilts' resemblance to modernist paintings stimulates wonder and awe in the viewing audience.

The quilters are also treated as time capsules or pieces of history that escaped progress, instead of being treated as contemporary artists who developed their skills and aesthetic tendencies over time. The Arnetts' mythology of Gee's Bend is one of an entirely remote community that has changed little since the Emancipation. There is no mention of the changes

that came with the Freedom Quilting Bee that was part of the civil rights movement of the 1960s (and that allowed some of the quilters to earn enough money to send their kids to college), or of the selling of quilts to department stores in New York City (Beckman 6). Pettway comments about Bill Arnett's narrative: "Almost everybody my age—I was born in '38—move to cities and only a few, like me, come back. He act like people who stay here was trapped in the Bend when the ferry was stopped for forty-four years 'cause of our activity for civil rights. You never know there is a back road out!" (Beckman 5)

Beckman notes the disparity of power between the quilters and those who are responsible for elevating their quilts to "art." (Beckman 1) According to Beckman and others concerned with the quilters' perspective, journalists covering the lawsuits mostly echoed the Arnetts' point of view, repeating the art dealers' carefully-constructed identities as sincere champions of Southern folk art, and insisting that most of the quilters support the Arnetts, which made the suing quilters appear foolish and ungrateful for what they had gained. (Beckman 4) Most art world representatives have been publicly or tacitly supportive of the Arnetts, who are their colleagues, by lamenting that the lawsuits are distracting from the art or by avoiding any comment on the controversy.

Although feminist activism has altered methods of elevating quilts to some degree, many of the same problems occur today as they did in 1971 because the elevation ultimately centers the bolstering of power of art world structures and representatives. It is clear from this example that feminist scholars must be vigilant about the continuing problems and politics of the appropriation of quilts. Today, many feminist scholars such as Julia Bryan-Wilson, Kirsty Robertson, Alla Myzelev, Bernick, Peterson, and Beckman continue to attend to the complexities and politics of appropriating traditionally feminine crafts. In addition to the valuable feminist



theory and commentary on feminine crafts, it is important to also attend to the ways in which the status of quilts has been shaped by those who create them.

### **Artists' Appropriation of Quilting**

The elevation of quilts was achieved not just by museum curators, but also by artists themselves. Quilts gained a second foothold in the fine art world with the emergence of “art quilts,” that is, quilts made by academically-trained studio artists aiming to produce fine art. Although art quilts were not immediately accepted into the mainstream art world, Shaw notes that proponents such as Michael James and Nancy Crow used their academic experience to make a convincing case for art quilts (Shaw 315). The art quilt movement was solidified with the 1978 “Quilt National” exhibition, in Athens, Ohio, which was run by and for studio quilt artists, and which continues biennial exhibitions for art quilts (Art Quilts 14). Further development in this direction was marked by the 1986 exhibition “The Art Quilt,” beginning in LA and traveling for about two years, and giving unprecedented attention to contemporary quilts made by studio artists. Like the Holstein exhibition, it focused on displaying bold and innovative quilts, whose aesthetic qualities would demand the respect and interest of the fine art world. (“Revisiting THE ART QUILT”) The elevation of quilts to fine art also became more firmly established than in the past due to Faith Ringgold's 1990 retrospective exhibition, featuring her famous narrative hybrid paintings on fabric with quilted borders (Auther 117).

The complexities attending the elevation of quilts are well-illustrated by looking at the practices of artists who appropriated fiber crafts such as quilting. These artists challenged many of the boundaries and hierarchies within dominant aesthetics, expanding what has counted as fine art. During the 1970s and 1980s, feminist artists employed fiber with a consciousness of the

gendered power dynamics involved in the elevation of fine art over feminine domestic crafts. In the appropriation of craft methods, feminist artists brought light to their vast creative potential. Feminist artists and scholars, such as Miriam Schapiro and Mainardi, also paid careful attention to the contexts of traditional craftspersons, reclaiming aesthetic value for the legacy of “women's art” (Auther 119-120). Due somewhat to their efforts, the value of a work of art can no longer be based on the materials or techniques utilized in its making. Many pieces that utilize traditional craft methods may be seen exhibited in fine art institutions, including those that self-consciously draw from traditionally feminine styles and motifs. For example, Harmony Hammond created art drawing from craft techniques such as rug weaving in order to celebrate what she saw as women's separate artistic tradition (Auther 141-144). Feminist artists from this period contributed vital momentum to the increased blurring between art and craft.

At the same time, the desire for acceptance and success within the art world has caused many of these same artists and advocates to employ modernist values in their quest. Of course, as I have discussed, the non-political work of well-established artists using fiber or other craft techniques in the 1960s and 1970s still depended on the hierarchies of art. While appearing to snub the conventions of the NY art establishment, artists such as Faith Ringgold, Schapiro, Hammond, and Judy Chicago were actually, in a highly competitive atmosphere, also creating distinction for themselves as individual artists. (Auther 139, 160) But even activist and feminist artists were unable to avoid reinforcing the standards and boundaries that they were trying to challenge; both Ringgold and Chicago are careful to maintain that their own work is art and not craft, for instance (Auther 117, 152). Each individual still wanted an “artist's” status, perks, and recognition (Auther 91). It may begin to appear that the whole point of challenging the art world is only for *one's own* entry, as radical ideals often become collapsed into self-service.

The appropriation of “low” creative forms and processes for new artwork has an extensive history in the fine art world, where transgression is valued. Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews explain that this process of appropriation does not necessarily “raise up” the art from which it borrows. Aesthetic and decorative elements have long been borrowed by male artists to expand their scope and spur new experimentation; however, when these same elements are exhibited within feminized crafts made by women, they often are used as reasons to dismiss the artistic merit of these objects as just “women's work.” (Gouma-Peterson 333) As I have previously mentioned, Auther's study of fiber craft in the art of the 1960s and 1970s focuses on the privilege of certain artists to reach down and appropriate craft to “trouble” high art, while other artists (notably those in the fiber art category) who were trying to climb up the hierarchy to fine art did not have the power to legitimate their fiber-based work (Auther xxi). The appropriation of fiber by well-established artists did not immediately result in the status of “art” for all works in fiber (Auther 91).

In fact, the appropriation of “lower forms” in order to transgress may actually reinforce the negative associations of them. To explain, if the aim of a work of art is transgression, it will violate or overstep an established standard. This violation does not erase the standard, but rather draws attention to it and questions it. The art work aims to question, not necessarily to overturn, and therefore, it may serve to mainly recall the impropriety of the transgression that it is referencing. Additionally, the appropriation of the low still relies on the established “artist” to reach down from within the realm of ideas in the art world. The mode of appropriation is kept within the self-contained “bubble” of the art world, due to Art for Art's Sake isolation from everyday life and fine art's propensity to be repeatedly self-referential. (Auther 91) The “elevation” of quilts has not translated into the qualifying as “art” of the majority of

contemporary quilting.

The ability to even utilize “low” elements in one's art and still be taken seriously has depended on the artist's position within art world institutions (Auther 91). Artists who have worked with quilting as a fine art medium, even those whose work is critical of hierarchies in the art world, also have usually been highly invested in “fine art” as an elevated category and wanted to distinguish themselves as artists, not as craftspeople (Auther 119). It is very difficult for artists not to get caught up in the rat race of legitimizing one's own work as “art” by differentiating oneself from those “below,” stepping upon others to climb the ladder. But this failing may also be combined with a great positive influence on the broadening of art world boundaries to include the expression of women's experiences.

Take, for instance, the case of Faith Ringgold. Maria Graulich and Mara Witzling portray Ringgold (born 1930) as an artist who combines feminist and fine art aspirations. In the 1970s, Ringgold collaborated with her mother, Willi Posey, who was a dress designer, to create the patchwork borders to frame her paintings. After Posey's death in 1981, Ringgold developed the artistic form for which she has become well-known: the story quilt. (Graulich 3) Ringgold's story quilts blend fine art and craft qualities; they reference the history of painting, engaging in the discourse of the fine art world, while also drawing upon the traditions of narrative quilts and album quilts. Curtia James asserts that the use of text around the borders reinforces the storytelling element of her work, and many of the stories she tells are valuable, amusing, and touching attempts to reclaim history, telling what could have been. Ringgold's series of work, the “French Collection,” suggests a revised version of the past and adds a layer of her own presence to a canon of art that has excluded women and people of color, but that also inspires and shapes her painting. In this way, she expands aesthetics with the imaginative retelling of

actual events to include more equitable intercultural exchange. (C. James 38) For example, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1991) draws attention to the sharing of subject matter, the sunflowers, by both a famous artwork and a quilt. The famous artist (Vincent Van Gogh) occupies the background, foregrounding a community of important African-American women (such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks) working together on a joint project. In this quilt, Ringgold reaffirms quilting as art, and African-American women quilters as artists, by placing them amid Van Gogh's famous sunflowers.

Ringgold's story quilts, though bridging aesthetic categories and pushing the boundaries of fine art, have garnered her much praise. In "Odyssey of Faith," Debbie Koppman argues: "By tapping so effectively into the traditions of women's crafts and communal storytelling, Ringgold weaves the threads of ancestry, family, women, and community into a continuous chain.

Fragments are ingeniously pieced together so that the resultant cloth, incorporating visual with verbal, is multilayered and lushly textured, becoming both art and craft." (Koppman 41) Bell hooks describes Ringgold's work as representing an important instance in the resisting of the denial of black women's aesthetic history and contributions (Graulich 2). Her success is largely due to her works' ability to resonate with the different heritages which influence her as a woman and an African-American. In fact, it may in part be her incorporation of craft that has led to her popularity. It gives her art associations of folk tradition, increasing accessibility for people who would possibly not have as much appreciation for contemporary "high art."

Ringgold's critical and popular success has not been without external obstacles, however. Art with socially critical or activist content is especially likely to be misinterpreted. For instance, Dustan Knight completely misses the critical content of Ringgold's work, seeing her race (and most likely her gender as well) as incidental. In his review of a 2007 exhibition of Ringgold and

four other African Americans, he claims that they “[go] far to abolish any stereotype of the angry black artist bitterly condemning the white power establishment” (Knight 24). Instead, he simply sees them as “successful participants in the art world...The only clue to their race is that their protagonists are brownskinned. They all share a mainstream American vision.” (Knight 24) Of course Knight is correct that Ringgold is a successful artist whose work has garnered both critical and public acclaim. However, her art is also very much about race, and it is a critique of the very “mainstream American vision” that ignores the experiences and the creative voices of black women. Knight manages to both create a distorted picture of black artists as angry and exclude any basis for this anger from his vision of reality. No wonder then, that the joyful and empowered spirit of Ringgold's artwork confuses him, making him blind to its radical and critical reversal of the largely white, male fine art world into a world in which black women and men actively dominate the aesthetic landscape. Mis-reception is a danger that all artists must face, but especially when the content of the artwork is contrary to the discourses of dominant groups. Despite Knight's willful attempt to read his own wishes onto art with a fairly clear message, I think that Ringgold's art is effective in communicating alternative narratives to a wide audience, especially to those people whose identities increase their likelihood of being excluded from the art world.

Her message is slightly distorted, however, by the fact that her success is to a certain degree dependent on her ability to embody the idea of what is an “artist.” On the one hand, she appropriates a feminine craft with feminist consciousness and with a subversive re-imagining of the aesthetic realm, calling for the “vulgarization” of art (Graulich 17). On the other hand, she also is careful to identify herself as an artist, and she is adamant that her work is art, not craft. She echoes dominant aesthetics with her explanation that art involves ideas, while craft is simply

a repeatable process. (Auther 117) In this way, she reinforces the art-over-craft hierarchy, which is understandable due to the advantages that she gains from being a “fine artist.” Most quilters (the majority of whom are female hobby quilters) have not had the ability to pursue their creative work as a full-time career or the chance to have their work viewed by a global audience, including prestigious critics and curators.

In keeping with this framework, she does not feel it necessary to list as artists or collaborators the craftspersons that she hires to complete the actual text and quilting for her artwork (Graulich 9). This is common practice in the fine art world—to design an artwork, to hire help for certain tasks, but to claim full credit for oneself. This dynamic only serves to further devalue and submerge craft under the design-focused process of “fine art,” reinforcing a hierarchy in which the creative making of some people “counts” as creative while that of others does not. The skills, problem-solving techniques, and aesthetic capacities of the craftsperson are assumed to be simply manual labor within a duality which opposes such work to the “conceptual” creativity of art.

What I have been describing is evidence that it is difficult, even for a dedicated activist artist such as Ringgold, to avoid reinforcing the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics. Her clinging to the status of “artist” may reduce the power of the transgressive messages she means to convey with her artwork. Her failure to acknowledge the quilters and text makers for her work causes her celebratory reclamation of quilting as a symbol of African American women's aesthetic heritage ring a little hollow since she is not supporting its continuation in a material manner. At the same time, Ringgold is an artist that has successfully incorporated many elements into a cohesive artistic vision, and her commitment to the “vulgarization” of art has contributed to the challenging of dominant aesthetics. For example, her use of story quilts in the children’s book,

“Tar Beach,” is an effective means of reaching people far beyond the “art world” in order to convey a valuable new aesthetic (Ringgold, “Tar Beach”). Although she borrows the look of quilting rather than fully embracing it as a craft, her work has been an important step in the bridging of art and craft. And most importantly for my purposes, she is a good illustration of the ways in which artists who appropriate quilting may both utilize its transgressive potential to create radically alternative visions, while simultaneously feeding into a framework of aesthetics that excludes the majority of creative makers. The same could be said of many studio art quilters who occupy an ambiguous position between the realms of fine art and hobby craft.

Ringgold's work and career illustrate how artists who appropriate quilting negotiate fine art hierarchies in complicated ways. Her aim is to destabilize many of the hierarchies of fine art: to center African-American perspective, and to reclaim the history of painting from the monolithic vision of male, white art. Her work utilizes both fiber and painting, and her inclusion of pieced borders and quilted fabrics draws upon associations of femininity, domesticity, and touch. At the same time, the extensive destabilizing effect of her art is dependent on her success as a fine artist, and she reinforces hierarchies of fine art by drawing a clear line between art and craft. After decades of work by feminist and activist artists such as Ringgold, the status of quilting is more complicated than ever.

### **The Complex Status of Quilts**

In the past several decades, feminist artists and theorists have made a significant impact on the art world and on ideas about creativity. Along these lines, the separation of art and craft has been broken down somewhat, due to feminist theorists and artists paving the way. The acceptance of fiber arts in 1970s, which grows more prevalent today, is the result, at least in part,



of feminist pressure (Lauter 28). The interest in quilts is strong, as evidenced by the opening of the International Quilt Study Center (IQSC) in 1997, and then its impressive new location in 2008. The IQSC, connected to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, houses the largest publicly-held quilt collection in the world (3500+ quilts, from the 1700s to the present, and from 25+ countries).<sup>2</sup> The IQSC inherited Holstein's project, even literally gaining the actual Holstein quilt collection. However, this center treats quilts with a scholarly approach, influenced by feminist attention to quilting's context, variety, and values as a practice in its own right. The IQSC displays all types of quilts (whether from 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, 1980s Iowa, 20<sup>th</sup>-century India, or 2012 LA), accompanied by thoroughly researched text. Also, New York City's American Folk Art Museum designated 2011 the "Year of the Quilt," focusing many exhibitions and programs on quilts.<sup>3</sup> Quilting's rise to the status of art has had the affect of spurring extensive conspicuity and admiration for quilts, a rejuvenation and resurgence of quilting practice, and the documentation of quilting as a significant regional and historical cultural form (Auther 133-134).

The elevation of vintage quilts and the art quilt movement have expanded what counts as art, but some barriers remained in place. Although much progress has been made to legitimate craft, the cultural status of quilts is complicated, and quilts, along with other products of creativity, are still subject to dominant aesthetic hierarchies. Quilts are now situated in a complex position, with one foot in a tradition of feminine domestic craft, and one foot in the fine art world. Because of this position, the value given to a quilt is determined according to multiple sets of hierarchies, and the interpretation given to a quilt will depend on the knowledge and purposes of the interpreter.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Klassen explains that spectators of quilts, if they do not understand the maker's context, will project their own meanings onto quilts,

pulling quilts into their own worldview (Klassen 297). This means that those who curate or critique quilt exhibits have often projected their own ideas onto quilts, especially early on, shortly after the elevation of quilts and before feminists pushed for deeper research of history and context of quilters. Of course, projections and misinterpretations can still happen when critics have no understanding of the quilter's situation and aims, as we just saw with Knight's comments about Ringgold's work. African American quilts have been appropriated for many different purposes over the years. Klassen describes the differing ways that African American quilts have been interpreted during various eras: from being omitted from mainstream quilting discourses in the first half of the twentieth century, to inclusion during the 1960s and 1970s, to being seen as distinctive in the 1980s and 1990s, to the high art movement of the early 2000s. Those who interpret African American quilts can focus on some aspects and ignore others in order to serve their own, various purposes (Klassen 298).

The aim of such careful shaping of quilt interpretation is the categorization of quilts into a symbolic duality. Radka Donnell points out that what arose in the wake of the elevation of quilts to art was a new distinction between different quilters: the serious, institutionally recognized, studio quilt artists *versus* the common hobby quilters. The latter make quilts of little note, while the former have the freedom to take on or hire out as much of the labor as they desire in order to bring their design to life. (Donnell 6) The multiple categories of quilters and quilts co-exist with differing standards, values, and criteria. For instance, professional or studio artists who quilt emphasize modernist values of originality and concept, instead of quilting with traditional purposes, such as to benefit relationships to family or community, or to fulfill technical and utilitarian concerns. (Peterson 109-110)

Within the fine art world, quilts are usually valued as deserving the label “art” for one of

two reasons: Either the quilt is valued as a piece of history *or* as a piece of contemporary art. If it has historical significance, it may be read as a document attached to specific historical events, methods, or regions. This often involves the projection of fine art criteria onto crafts, in the manner that Klassen describes, to create such categories as “folk art” or “outsider art.” *Or*, if it is a contemporary artwork, the quilt must meet the current standards, namely that it is made by an artist (who is probably academically trained), it is an original design (so it is not simply the copy of a pattern), it is most likely highly conceptual, and, most importantly, it must be made with the intention of display (not the intention of warming a bed). Thus, fine art discourse is created with a vested interest in maintaining and protecting the category of “fine art,” which requires its distinction from *contemporary*, although not necessarily *historic*, craft. In order for fine art to be at the top of the hierarchies of creative making, it must be somewhat inaccessible to the majority of creative makers. This inaccessibility is achieved by either relegating the creative making to the past or by carefully containing it within a fine art context.

These conditions for contemporary quilts become clear when one reads exhibition reviews of quilts that meet the standards of “fine art.” As I discussed above, Gee's Bend quilters have been framed as historical time capsules, so that their craft can be elevated to art in a safely contained manner. Kimmelman even ends his review with a dramatic statement that “this may be the last moment to record and celebrate” the Gee's Bend quilting tradition (Kimmelman 2). The discourse concerning most contemporary art quilts must stress their distinction from contemporary works of craft in terms of the hierarchies of modernism. In her review of an exhibit of quilt artist Bean Gilsdorf's pieces, Lisa Radon stresses the fact that Gilsdorf's work is conceptual and not decorative, that her compositions are modern and not cluttered, and that her influences are pop and other fine artists (Radon 28). It is clear, according to both Radon and the

artist herself, that Gilsdorf's basis in the craft of quilting is valuable for the "pure technique" alone, but not for any of the cultural or creative aspects of traditional quilting (Radon 29). Likewise, in a review of an exhibition at the Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery in Portland (note that this is a *crafts* museum), Sharon Marcus complains that there is a lack of risky conceptual use of metaphor and irony (Marcus 53). She calls for more "deeply meaningful" content to be achieved by re-imagining quilting in terms of its techniques serving as conceptual devices (Marcus 53). But what exactly is meant by "deeply meaningful" or "conceptual"? Obviously Marcus is not referring to traditional craft values of utility, relationship-building, resourcefulness, or awareness of community, but rather to constructions of the conceptual that are typical of contemporary fine art, such as the reliance on irony.

Neither fine art nor mainstream discourses adequately attend to the largest group of current quiltmakers: the hobby-ists, or what Marybeth Stalp calls "serious leisure quilters," who quilt within a relatively traditional craft-oriented subculture (Stalp 107). Within mainstream culture, quilts, especially those made by hobby quilters, are often associated with negative stereotypes: many non-quilters see quilts as overly feminine, old-fashioned, tedious, and connected with images of stifling domesticity. These views represent the gendered and ageist stigmas that are attached to quilting when it has not been "purified" and elevated to fine art. Quilts may be viewed as pieces of history, as something Grandma or Great-grandma made, but they do not seem to fit into today's fast-paced context, as they are excruciatingly time-consuming and inefficient to make. Without the legitimization of cultural power that fine art maintains for itself, hobby quilting appears to outsiders to be a trivial occupation. Even the term "hobby" is loaded with derogatory associations, being contrasted to true intellectual or creative activity. People take up hobbies as distractions or breaks from their regular routine, side interests as

opposed to their job or career which is primary in terms of energy, passion, and serious investment. Hobbies are viewed at best as healthy occupations for spare time, especially after retirement; at worst, hobbies are seen as stupid wastes of time, effort, and materials.

While many non-quilters look down upon the continuing practice of traditional quilting into the present, traditional quilting of the past continues to be idealized as a symbol of egalitarianism and communal making by a wide variety of people, including toilet paper advertisers and fine art curators. Nevertheless, Bernick describes how hierarchies have existed within traditional quilt culture as well, such as the distinction between fancy and plain quilts, which may be related to class distinctions, as well as the valuing of quilts according to the race or region of its makers. (Bernick 139) There are also hierarchies, which are carried on into contemporary hobby culture, according to such factors as the materials used, the complexity of the pattern followed, and the evenness of the stitches. Whitney Otto remarks on how quilting experience affects one's evaluation of a quilt: "The inexperienced eye will be impressed by the use of color, design, appliqué, and pattern, but the quilter will hold the work between her finger and examine the stitches. Or she will lay out the quilt and analyze the overall pattern the stitches follow." (Otto 161) The fabric used is especially integral to the value given to a quilt by hobbyists. In her pattern and instruction book, *A Treasury of Scrap Quilts*, Nancy J. Martin advises, "For best results, be sure your scraps and any required yardage that you purchase are closely woven, 100%-cotton fabrics. Fabrics with a polyester content may make small patchwork pieces difficult to cut and sew accurately." (Martin 12-13) The emphasis in the current quilting hobby culture is on accuracy and ease, and cotton is *always* recommended.

The differing values of art quilt culture versus traditional quilt culture may be illustrated by comparing two quilts. Notice the different aesthetic styles between quilts made by my two

great-grandmothers, Edith Wilson Hamm's *Stars*, c. 1970s (See figure 2) and Nelida Vessot Gordon's *Flower Baskets*, c. 1950s (see figure 3). *Stars* may appear more striking from the perspective of modern aesthetics. It is made with spontaneity of saturated colors, bold geometric shapes, and highly contrasting patterns on the fabrics. I will give a little background to the making of this quilt: my mother, Kathy, was to have a quilt made for her by her Grandma Hamm, Edith. Kathy choose and purchased brown, turquoise, and a coordinating plaid double knit fabric for the quilt. She expected to receive a finished quilt made from these fabrics with a limited color palate. However, Grandma Hamm did things her own way—she only used some of this fabric that Kathy purchased and mixed in other fabrics she already had. She loved all the bright colors and thought that quilts should have a wide spectrum of color.

The use of polyester means that this quilt has retained its vivid colors through many years of use and laundering. The polyester is also slightly rough to the touch and is not a breathable fabric, which are a couple of the reasons that the majority of quilters avoid quilting with polyester. Of course, these considerations do not matter if one is quilting with the aim to create art to hang on a wall, and many studio quilt artists who embrace modernist aesthetics use materials that are unpleasant to the touch or that cannot be laundered. Another reason that traditional and hobby quilters choose woven cotton is that it has very little stretch, and therefore it is easier to cut and piece shapes with precision. Some studio quilters aim for such precision, especially those who master and then experiment with traditional patterns and techniques. Often the quilts that have been praised as “modern” are not the most precisely made, but rather have expressive or spontaneous use of color, such as quilts from *Gee's Bend* (Shaw 344-345). Most current studio artists seem to aim for precision to some degree, but it is not something that is discussed as a central goal within that realm. Art quilts are supposed to be expressive, conceptual,



Figure 2. *Stars*. Edith Wilson Hamm, c. 1970s.



Figure 3. *Flower Baskets*. Nelida Vessot Gordon, c. 1950s.

and have formal visual interest. It happens to be that Edith Hamm was a very skilled seamstress, so her *Stars* quilt is fairly precise, even though it incorporates fabrics that are difficult to work with. However, even if it were not so precise, I think that viewers with modernist orientations would appreciate its colors and designs, especially as they translate well into the flattened image of a photograph.

In contrast, *Flower Baskets* is made of cotton fabric, and it has a consistency of color usage for the bottoms of all the “baskets.” It is soft from use and has a very pleasing surface to touch, which are aspects that traditional quilters value greatly. After all, for traditional quilters and the hobby quilters who have taken up their legacy, quilts are made to be used in most

instances. Unfortunately, the beauty of this quilt does not translate very well into photographic form; many of the fabrics contain small, decorative patterns that are best examined at a close distance. In the past, such fabrics were often scraps from the making of new dresses or salvaging of old dresses, as is probably the case with Nelida Gordon's quilt, which was made some time before the 1960s when it was given to my mother.

Finely-patterned fabrics were very popular among hobby quilters during the 1970s-1980s quilting “revival,” especially reproduction fabrics inspired by 19th-century quilts. This trend may have reinforced the associations of these small-print fabrics, especially florals, with femininity and domesticity. Today, quilters who use 19th-century-style fabrics might be described even within the hobby quilting world as having “traditional” taste, as opposed to “modern” taste for bold colors and large prints. As one can see by walking into almost any quilting shop, there is a plethora of fabric styles from which to choose, including the trend within hobby quilting in recent years towards reproductions of Depression-era fabrics, which have a limited palate of saturated cheerful colors combined with small patterns. The traditional and feminine associations with tiny patterned-fabrics might cause their use to be deemed “decorative,” and therefore not art.

The differences between fine art and traditional/hobby values go beyond taste in fabrics, patterns, and design. Donnell notes that when quilts were deemed as potential art, the traditional social meanings associated with creating and gifting quilts were put aside (Donnell 6). For the few current quilters who are considered “artists” without formal fine art training, art world appraisal may not even be entirely welcome. Donnell depicts this conflict from her perspective as a quiltmaker:



Contemporary discussions of quilts seem to be mired down in acclaiming them as “High Art,” in appreciation of their formal innovations and the excitement of their designs. But the acceptance of quilts as art comes at too high a price for quiltmakers. To have one's quilts stylized into art objects, and to be accepted as an artist only on design terms, is totally depersonalizing. Yet contemporary women take up quilting in order to make a personal statement. (Donnell 2)

Traditional quilters do not quilt with the intentions of modern design that fine art critics project onto the quilts that they deem to be worthy of their attention. Instead, the value of quilts for traditional quilters usually exists in how the skilled details relate to the quilters' inspirations of personal expression, narrative, family, or community (Bernick 141). Kathleen W. Piercy and Cheryl Cheek detail the dual care of oneself and others that many traditional quilters claim they accomplish through their craft, such as the teaching of quilting, the social bonding between differing generations, the passing on of a legacy, and the improvement of one's community (Piercy 26). At the same time, the integration of quilting into the concerns of quilter's lives is not necessarily a detriment to the aesthetic qualities of the quilts they make, but can actually spur beauty and creativity. (I will discuss the traditional values and purposes of quiltmakers extensively in Chapter 3, in relation to community and care; Chapter 4, in relation to utility; and Chapter 5, in relation to resourcefulness.)

In summary, contemporary quilting exists in two different worlds, with different groups of values, hierarchies, and practitioners. The fine art quilt culture largely disregards the aesthetics of the hobby quilters who carry on traditional domestic quilting, while the hobbyists make up the majority of contemporary quilters and contribute to their own lively and varied subculture. These two worlds, however, have never been entirely separate from one another. Art and craft, studio quilting and hobby quilting, are actually overlapping categories. As I will discuss in the next section, the various arenas of quilt-making increasingly influence one another, and the boundaries between them are growing ever hazier.

## Quilting's Blurring and Destablizing of Hierarchies

Due to the varying discourses of the different quilt cultures, quilting is shaped by multiple sets of hierarchies. Quilts have a complex status, and even though the quilt was “elevated” to fine art, the stigmas that once caused all feminized crafts to be rejected as art remain to a certain extent when it comes to stereotypes of hobby quilters. Hobby quilt culture is likely to remain somewhat stigmatized, due to the facts that it is still largely woman-dominated and it has not absorbed core fine art aesthetic values, as opposed to the studio art quilt culture which includes many men and which upholds many tenets of modernism. For example, the integration of quilts into the domestic sphere still affects the ability for such creative works to be called art, especially when the quilts are not hanging as decoration but are placed on beds and or other situations that invite touch. Hobby quilters' work is likely to be brushed off, by non-quilters and possibly by some studio art quilters, as silly, uncreative, or overly feminine. Another reason for the aesthetic dismissal of hobby quilting is that the fine art world is highly competitive, so “art” must be restricted from the majority of creative people in order to maintain its status and power. Even with further blurring between art and craft, and further reclamation of feminine art forms, certain aspects of modernism seem to remain deeply entrenched in theories of creative practice. (Chapters 3-5 will address some of the most significant remaining problems within dominant aesthetics, as well as describing the potential solutions that the craft of quilting offers to nurture creative practice.)

So one may wonder, which quilts count as “art?” Studio art quilts, such as the quilts created by Faith Ringgold and Bean Gilsdorf, are considered art. Antique quilts are often also art; Holstein considered *Tumbling Blocks* (see figure 1) to be art, even though it employs a common traditional pattern. Possibly some of the quilts made by my great-grandmothers might qualify as

art, if they were examined by gatekeepers of the art world. Of course, if I were to make quilts using the tumbling blocks pattern or the same patterns as my great-grandmothers, my quilt-making would be considered a hobby, not art, within both the fine art and art quilt cultures (unless I were to alter the quilt with some radically “conceptual” element). But when a quilt ages for however long is considered enough time, it may be moved from the bed to the museum wall, and then it suddenly becomes “real art.” This illustrates the difficulty of defending neat categorizations of quilts as either art or craft.

I argue that the very fact that quilting is shaped by multiple sets of hierarchies also contains potential for the blurring of hierarchies, as elements may be borrowed from one discourse in order to challenge the hierarchies within another. As Klassen explains, material culture, such as that of quilts, is useful for whatever purposes one has, whether supporting existing values or posing new ones (Klassen 327). One person might use quilts to reaffirm traditional roles of femininity, domestic labor, and family care, while another person might use quilts to undermine these very same values by playing upon gaps or uncertainties of meaning. Quilts have been elevated to fine art, and due to feminist influence, they have also been embraced by many artists and critics as an art that stems from a heritage of women artists. Therefore, as I claim in my central thesis, quilts bridge “high art” and craft, and quilts also bridge the mutually reinforcing aesthetic hierarchies of both art and craft, to offer the potential of many possibilities for quilters who exist somewhere on the spectrum between art and craft. A close examination of the status of quilting within each quilt culture can allow one to pull elements from each discourse in order to embrace quilting as a feminist practice and to further social change for the nurturing of creative makers.

There is a strong legacy of boundary-breaking upon which artists of today may draw in

this project. For example, Ringgold's *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, like the Quilted Northern advertisements, references the one of the things that quilting most brings to people's minds: quilting bees. In contrast to the toilet paper commercials, however, Ringgold's work portrays quilters as culturally significant. The figure of Van Gogh signifies that the quilters are artists, but he does not overshadow them as he demurely grasps his sunflowers and attends to the foregrounded women. This composition centers women artists instead of the male artists that make up the majority of the high art canon, and uses painting to celebrate the craft of quilting instead of positioning it as inferior to painting. What this image does is to validate quilting as "art," therefore sending the message to viewers that art is accessible through both the mediums of painting and quilting and thereby destabilizing the aesthetic hierarchies of modernism.

Quilting can be a continuation of the feminist project to reclaim feminized crafts as arts in their own right. Already, textiles are accepted as an art medium, even if still not as prestigious as painting overall. However, for quilting to be art in a fully meaningful sense, the appropriation of quilting as a technique for fine art is not enough. Instead, artists who appropriate quilting must incorporate an embracing of its history, development, and traditional uses and meanings. This includes an appreciation for quilting as: an activity that has been and is still dominated by women; a craft with its own culture and values focusing on fine details, process, and skill; a piece of domestic work that is often intended to be used, especially for the comfort of human bodies; and a practice which ties creativity to the care of the quilter's loved ones, community, and self. In this way, quilting is an art in a broad sense, revaluing the "lower" halves of modernism's hierarchies. The feminine, craft, skill, process, body, and touch can then be understood to contain positive aesthetic value.

As the lines between fine art and craft continue to blur, there is the potential that the

stigmas against woman-dominated fields, domestic craft, and touch will begin to break down. Building upon the activism of feminist artists and theorists of the last few decades, some contemporary artists are appropriating feminized craft mediums without shying away from their feminine associations and without having to assert their work as above the crafts from which they are drawing. And feminist scholars like Julia Bryan-Wilson discuss politics with and establish new discourse surrounding these artists, including Cat Mazza and Allyson Smith (Bryan-Wilson 1-2). And as Jill Hilbrenner explains, the values and heritage of feminine crafts are being embraced to some degree on a popular level, within DIY crafts and “New Domesticity,” trends that are popular with a large segment of women across the United States (Hilbrenner 1).

Most quilters may not convey concepts or styles that the fine art world would easily recognize, but quilts have the potential to relate values and messages that are unique to their tradition as a craft. Hobby quilters create for pleasure, for relaxation, and for a means to express their own personal narratives and viewpoints. Unlike fine artists, hobby quilters do not necessarily produce quilts with any intentions of displaying them in museums or galleries, but rather, make quilts for themselves, for family or friends, or for community or charity projects. (Stalp 107) Quilting's tradition as a feminine domestic craft and its current practice as a hobby craft work against the separation of art from life (and working against the effects of the Art for Art's Sake movement), bringing creative practice into the home. And as I will explain, the practice of quilting destabilizes aesthetic hierarchies by spurring reevaluation of the feminine, the bodily, the material, process, touch, craft, and skill in relation to creative expression.

An early pioneer in the quilt revival, Jean Ray Laury, was very influential on the field of quilting and its boundary-blurring direction. She promoted quilts as art and set the stage for the quilt art movement, but she addressed regular women doing art at home with her book, *The*

*Creative Woman's Getting It All together at Home Handbook* (1977). She did not reject the “feminine” or domestic associations of quilting in order to point out its potential as an art medium, and neither did she reject the craft attitude to process and accessibility. In the text for the exhibition “Jean Ray Laury: Getting It All Together,” which ran from March 2, 2012 to September 2, 2012 at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, curator Nancy Bavor stated, “Jean Ray Laury was drawn to the quilt medium for its links with the past, the pleasure of having a handmade object and the joy of creating something that provided physical and spiritual warmth.” In the embracing of quilting's traditional qualities, quilters and feminists such as Laury have promoted an art that includes elements of warmth and touch. For many hobby quilters, the quilts that they create for use on their beds and throughout their homes are literally touchable art.

Even when confined to hanging on walls, quilts incorporate the emotive associations of touch, warmth, and comfort. In his discussion of the associations of quilts, Shaw considers quilts' connection to the bed, a place we live much of our lives, during birth, dreaming, and healing. Touch is one of the first senses to develop for communication. All of this experience resonates when viewing or touching a quilt. (Shaw 4) In particular, the tactile qualities, the impression of the skilled hand of the maker, and the complex associations of quilts encourage a different style of viewing. Donnell explains:

... quilts formulate a critique of the accelerated consumerism of visual consumption by demanding to be **contemplated at length** and not “gotten” as a gimmick. Quilts are able to slow us down, not only by the puzzle-effect of their geometric designs, but more decidedly by their appeal to the sense of touch. Through the graduated, sequential, additive modality of touch in sewing they can arrest the scanning and quickly ingesting gaze. Quilts ask us to study and “feel,” to honor the presence of their makers. (Donnell's emphasis.) (Donnell 116)

In this way, quilts involve communication between the maker and the viewer through the senses of sight and touch. The viewer may take the time to imagine the tactile feelings involved in the

process of creating quilts. The additional layer of tactility enhances the communicative potential of creativity, which Patrick Maynard describes as “the remarkable experience of imagining seeing something as seen by someone else” (Maynard 82). With a quilt or other tactile craft, one may imagine not only seeing with another, but feeling the touch of the material with them as well.

Octavio Paz comments on the material communication that handmade crafts convey:

The trans-personal nature of craftwork is expressed, directly and immediately, in sensation: the body is participation. To feel is first of all to be aware of something or someone not ourselves. And above all else: to feel *with* someone...The handmade object is a sign that expresses human society in a way all its own: not as work (technology), not as symbol (art, religion), but as a mutually shared physical life. (Paz 21)

The physical experiences that we share in our everyday lives may be valued through craft aesthetic in a way that re-centers the “lower” halves of modernism's hierarchies: the manual, body, matter, process, and touch. As a craft, quilting has the potential to encourage more theoretical and practical exploration of the use of touch in artistic expression, to inspire quiet contemplation, and to communicate by drawing upon multiple senses and discourses.

The crafting tradition of quilting also expands “art” in that it does not depend on excluding the majority of creative makers. Hobby quilting is a medium of creativity that is relatively accessible, because its practice can be learned through un-intimidating and inexpensive channels, such as quilting classes at local fabric shops, and the vast array of instruction and pattern books available at public libraries. For example, in her book, *Barbara Randle's Crazy Quilting with Attitude*, Barbara Randle encourages anyone who would like to make art, but who is intimidated, to try crazy quilting:

In this book, I would like to share with you a fresh, new approach to this wonderful old art. Welcome to the crazy world of the unexpected, stretch-of-the-imagination, color-freedom, whimsy, and “outside-the-box” creativity. It's easy, fun, and stress-free. Anyone can do it. All it takes is desire. You do not have to have experience with a sewing machine. In fact, even if you've never sewn, I promise, if you want to learn, you can. Think of it not as sewing, but as creating your own personal art. If you're an “artist wannabe” as I am, this is just the thing for you. (Randle 6)

Although Randle speaks of being an “artist wannabe,” she still claims crazy quilting as “art.”

Despite past hierarchies such as fancy over plain quilts, there is really no clear divide within the current discourse of hobby quilting culture between “art” and “craft,” and therefore the extent of one's creative exploration is not predetermined by a label. The opportunities for variation, as well as the openness about the process of creation within hobby quilting, make it a very accessible means to creative expression. Many quilts reclaim traditional craft-based methods in subversive new ways, and many quilts defy neat categorization as either fancy or plain, as either conceptual or utilitarian, as decoratively feminine or abstractly masculine.

The growing attention paid to quilting as an artistic medium is blurring the divide further, demonstrating that quilting is a prime arena for the interchanging between art and craft. Sandra Sider concludes that even if quilts are not part of the academic canon, there are a growing number of professional venues that provide education about quilt art and enrich its practice (Sider 45). Quilting (along with other crafts such as knitting, crochet, and embroidery) is getting more and more attention, including the integration of art criticism into quilting culture. For example, in “Educating the Quilt Artist,” Sider describes the contents of an international convention on the education of quilters in 2007 at the IQSC: “Workshops exclusively for critiquing quilts as contemporary art have developed only recently, with positive response when frank critique is given within a nurturing, supportive atmosphere. Several organizations, such as Studio Art Quilt Associates, are responding to the general interest in including critical debate in



the education of quilt artists.” (Sider 44-45) While artists appropriate craft techniques and associations, such as those of quilting, craft practitioners appropriate art world aesthetic approaches, such as the hanging of quilts on the wall to display them as two-dimensional, complete compositions and the inclusion of critique in quilting education. Now, when hobby quilters set aside space within their homes for quilting, they refer to their workspace as a “studio” instead of a “craft room.” The boundaries between the different arenas of quilters grow increasingly complicated and blurred as they influence each other.

No quilter, whether hobby or studio, can be unaware of the fact that there are alternate ways of approaching their medium. Some studio quilters use traditional techniques and patterns, as well as “feminine” and decorative fabrics to reference the past, while some hobby quilters embrace modernist values, including the use of bold shapes and colors, or the rejection of utility. Additionally, no art critic can be justified in taking for granted a modernist or fine art perspective when viewing quilts, or for ignoring the complicated contexts in which quilts are created. Quilting and quilters contain so much cultural meaning than the flattened stereotypes that are utilized by Quilted Northern to advertise. And as I state in my central thesis, quilting is definitely not just for “grannies.” At the same time, the quilts of my own “great-grannies” can be examined seriously as to their aesthetic value, within an expanded notion of what art is and can be. Quilting builds upon feminist and craft aesthetics to allow for a reclamation of the term “art,” increasing the potentiality for the nurturing of creativity and the integration of creativity into everyday life.

### Chapter 3: Quilting's Communities of Craft

In *String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, Elissa Auther describes a situation that illustrates the tensions between women who create within two different creative frameworks: that of fine art and that of traditional women's craft. Judy Chicago is a fine artist who has focused much of her career exploring and elevating feminized crafts. She was an important figure in the legitimizing of fiber and other crafts as art, and exposed how the label “craft” had been used to dismiss women's art. (Auther 160) She spent significant time studying with craftspeople who were carrying on traditional techniques, such as china-painters and needleworkers. These techniques have been preserved by women in collaborative communities, in which teaching and passing on traditions were integral parts of being an artist. China-painters would combine demonstrations of painting with exhibitions of their work. (Auther 150-152)

Chicago succeeded in learning craft skills and utilizing the work of many of these women in her own fine artwork, including the famed *Dinner Party* project. Her experiences with many of these women, however, often left her “disheartened.” She found some craftspeople to be apprehensive of her investigations into their craft, and adverse to her plans of appropriating their techniques for her art. She interpreted their reactions to be caused by what she saw as a conservative, fearful craft subculture (Auther 150). Women's craft communities appear to Chicago and other outsiders, especially fine artists, to be stagnant (Auther 159). Chicago speculated that their resistance to her ideas and their reliance on prescribed compositions and patterns was due to an unfortunate lack of self-esteem (Auther 151). It seemed to her that their talents were squandered on domesticated, trivial work that was devoid of personal content and meaning (Auther 150).

She was left with a “complicated mix of respect and disdain” for the traditional realm of china-painting (Auther 150). She appreciated and appropriated crafts as women's art, but at the same time, she maintained her own status and values as a participant in the fine art world. Like Faith Ringgold, whom I discussed in Chapter 2, Chicago ultimately upheld the hierarchy of art over craft (Auther 160). Her attitude towards her encounters with the realm of china-painting represents the ways in which the fine art world could accept the elevation of crafts on certain levels, but would reject many of crafts' traditional values and approaches to creativity. This is the dynamic that Susan E. Bernick describes concerning the tensions between the traditional quilting culture and feminist artists who were re-embracing quilting (Bernick 144).

Perhaps, however, as Bernick suggests, the craftswomen's responses were based on a reasonable avoidance of the world in which Chicago was based and from which she was “reaching down” to appropriate their techniques. The high art world's tradition of the “isolated and private artist,” after all, was one in which Chicago herself felt oppressed as a woman. (Bernick 143) The china-painters would face that oppression as well if they were to attempt entry for themselves into the fine art world, and they would further lack Chicago's training and goals. Why would they be drawn to compete in a system that automatically disadvantages them, and in which few have chances of great success? Carol Becker explains that many women feel extra anxiety when it comes art: “Women fear that their attempts to create their own creative worlds, in which they can be as powerful as they can imagine themselves being, may very well mean that they will live a life split between their work and their daily existence as women, or it may mean that they will be alone, having become too strong, too assertive to live within the parameters set by tradition.” (Becker 219) In other words, the world in which many traditional craftswomen have lived does not allow for them to pursue the fiercely-independent identity that is necessary to

be a real “artist.” The embracing of a fine art approach would mean jeopardizing everything else that they care about.

In one respect, it is easy to see why Chicago lamented the fact that many women in traditional communities must often restrain their opinions and their self-expressions, because their identities as women mean that they must center their energies on the benefits of others, especially their families. But on the other hand, it is also clear why the china-painters and other craftswomen may wish to opt out of a system that is at odds with their values and everyday concerns, that forces upon creators an extreme form of individualism, and that classifies creators in a competitive atmosphere in which they may find success by stepping upon others. Perhaps the traditional community of china-painters allowed its members a relatively stable and supportive environment in which to practice creative techniques, to learn and grow with others, and eventually to pass their knowledge and skills on to the next generation. Success within this realm is much easier to achieve, and it is relatively accessible and equitable for those who are dedicated to it. They may have wanted to protect such a community from an outsider who was interested in technique alone and not in the values or meanings that china-painting had for the painters themselves.

In this chapter, I explore the how the figure of the “artist” is constructed, relying on myths of individuality and reified identity. I will look at how this construct is used to classify creative makers, to deny the interdependency of creative processes, and to limit the potential outcomes and meanings of creative acts. I will argue that quilting, as a craft, has the potential to avoid the myths of individuality that plague “high art.” Instead, quilting can embrace a sense of person-hood and creativity that is located in the specific context of the maker and that acknowledges webs of connection with others. Quilting lends itself to community-focused

creative production, through its employment of patterns and through a creative practice that emphasizes the care of self and others. Therefore, quilting is useful for a feminist re-evaluation of “art” that aims at the nurturing of creativity within everyday life.

### **Traditional Myths of Art and Individuality**

I will first look at common misconceptions of where and with whom creativity belongs. Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston explain that creativity is often viewed as belonging predominantly, if not solely, within the realm of art; creativity may exist in many areas of life, but "art" is seen as its ultimate expression (Gaut and Livingston 2). And art is thought to emanate from its source, the "artist." The idea of the "artist" carries many various connotations and stereotypes, but most primarily, such a figure implies a fixed unique self, and this construction limits who may qualify for such a label. Many times, I have heard people declare, somewhat defensively, “I’m no artist!” This comment, often coming from people with many obvious creative skills, is meant to place a limit on other people's expectations of the speaker's creativity, and therefore act as a white flag to creative competition and as a protection against critique. The speaker means to express that she or he is *not*, by definition, the type of person from which art can flow. The concepts of "art" and "artist," therefore, are ones that are used to determine not only the existing qualities of things and persons, but their very potentialities. Because “art” is seen as the ultimate exemplar of creativity, it is important to examine what an “artist” is supposed to be in typical narratives.

The artist is typed, in comparison to others, as an especially unparalleled individual, one who naturally and necessarily exhibits originality, transgression, and self-expression. The artist's self-expression involves shedding light on some essential aspect of his or her unique self.

Creativity is seen as emanating by necessity, naturally, possibly without effort (though perhaps with some anguish), from the artist. This process often involves revelation or discovery to tap into the source of creativity that exists deep within this individual, and it is a development that is imbued with an sense of mystery. For example, in his review of a Gee's Bend exhibition, *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman states, "The best of these designs ... are so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it's hard to know how to begin to account for them. But then, good art can never be fully accounted for, just described." (Kimmelman 1) Kimmelman and other representatives of fine art discourse emphasize that the making of art is due to the essential, inexplicable nature of the artist.

The "genius artist" in particular is the prime conveyer of creativity. The genius is a creator with characteristics and capacities that transcend context, as their work is the height of all creative acts and universally acknowledged. Estella Lauter explains that the formalism of modernist aesthetics calls for the individual artist to realize "universality," but that this "universality" is more often than not prelation for dominant groups (Lauter 99). Transcending context is not gender-neutral in an andro-centric culture, because artists will be assumed to be male (and white, and heterosexual, amongst other categorical identifications) unless otherwise noted; the assumed universality of great art is centered on men's experiences (MacColl 150).<sup>4</sup> Women and minority artists will likely feel extra pressure to conform to the prototype and to become a token that does not disrupt the establishment's expectations of what it means to be an artist. If an artist is a woman, then she is in a marked category, and her gender will be discussed in relation to her art. For example, Georgia O'Keeffe felt irritated at being referred to as a "woman artist" rather than just an "artist" (MacColl 151). Further, the only way many art critics could make sense of Georgia O'Keeffe as a female painter has been to reduce the style and

content of her work to “pretty” paintings of female genitals. Her femaleness was all that they could see when they looked at her paintings, instead of noticing her artistic innovation (Saltz 1).

A female artist's identity as a woman will also affect her experience as an artist. Francis Borzello explains that for women painters throughout history, building their identities as artists has been no simple feat. They had to juggle their ambition to be great artists with the demands of their femininity, which prescribed that they could not be too boastful (Borzello 32). Women artists have had to deal with the contradiction between their identities as women and as artists; the assumed objectivity of art has been based on men's perspectives, so that women have had to deny themselves on some level in order to fit into art narratives (MacColl 150). It is helpful to look at Carol Gilligan's observations about the differences between socialized gendered identities—the identity of the artist is tied up with masculine identity, in which separation from others is taken as the normal healthy ideal, while feminine identity's base in attachment to others is seen as a liability compared to the masculine ideal (Gilligan 9). Thus, women artists have had to perform a balancing act, trying to be independent enough to count as artists while maintaining their social obligations to be feminine—caring and not boastful.

I argue that it has been nearly impossible for women to embody the stereotype of the genius artist, in part because women have not been allowed to exhibit a personality of careless egotism that is associated with this stereotype. Femininity demands that women be other-centered, particularly focused on their families. Becker explains the challenges women face due to cultural expectations and training:

The assertion of one's judgment, one's own sense of the world, and the aggressiveness with which one must pursue one's own interpretation of reality is particularly difficult for women, most of whom have been trained to interpret and mediate experience *through* and *for* others. Women's fulfillment is supposed to result from the bearing and raising of children, the task traditionally understood as women's true creative endeavor. (Becker 216)

Although this tendency may have shifted to some degree, many women are still more focused on others, and even for those who are not, the cultural expectations for women to use their energies for the benefits of others have not disappeared. Take, for example, research-based recommendations about how women must frame their requests for pay raises in a non-aggressive manner, emphasizing how their work benefits others or having others advocate for them (Bernard 1). Women today may be accepted to be creative in ways other than motherhood, but the remnants of this framework persist in expectations for women to be more self-less and giving, and in the fact that women are still less likely to be socialized to be aggressive with their personal interpretations of the world in our androcentric culture. If they are innovative, women, such as O'Keefe, are less likely to receive credit for their ideas, and they are much less likely to be labeled “genius.”

The idea of the “artist” is similar in many respects to Michel Foucault's notion of the author and its function. Though he was concerned only with writing about “the author” in his essay, Foucault himself remarks that the author function may be discussed concerning disciplines other than writing (Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 113). The discourse of art is one that is endowed with the author function in the figure of the genius artist. Creative production, indeed, usually requires the author function in order to be accepted as art, in contrast to disciplines such as craft which do not require an author (as I will discuss below). As I have mentioned, in modernist narratives (which are not all-encompassing, but which still have great influence), art must originate with the artist, who is not just any ordinary person but a figure with certain attributes.

The author and the artist function within discourses in specific ways. Adrian Wilson explains that based on Foucault's analysis, the significance of the “author” or “artist” is not in



reference to the actual individual person who created, but to an idea, an “*interpretive construct*” (Wilson 350). First and foremost, the author or artist serves as a locus of individualization, being the idealized singular producer that is required for the discourse (Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 101). This individual is often regarded as a genius, as necessarily different from everyone else, whose every action contains expanding significances that transcend barriers of context (Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 118). Within the artist's work, there must appear to be the revelation of deep meaning from within a unique individual, which can then be read and interpreted by critics (Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 110).

Wilson adds the insight that authors, or for my purposes artists, are conventionally referred to by their surnames alone, more so to the degree that they are well-known, and especially after death. This convention, as with many practices, assumes for the most part that the author or artist is male; hence, one usually will refer to Emily Dickinson and Georgia O'Keeffe by their full names, while Picasso and other male artists are typically referred to shorthand (Wilson 358). One could speculate as to the reasons for this. It is possibly tied to the historic western tendency to associate femininity with the trivialities of cultural specificity and embodiment, in duality to the associations of masculinity with abstraction and the mind, as I noted in my discussion of hierarchies in Chapter 1. Or possibly it is no more than an indication of femininity as a marked category, as opposed to the taken-for-granted-masculinity. The feminine first name is required to indicate the artist's difference, when otherwise the artist would be assumed to be male. Borzello comments that, “even today, the stereotype of the artist is a man with a black beret, striped T-shirt and giant palette.” (Borzello 28). Either way, the shortening of reference to the last name emphasizes the author or artist as a figure containing a specific set of meanings that are drawn upon with the use of this single word. The name of the author or artist

contains the significance of their work, allowing for the endurance and permanence of the work in a fixed form beyond the producer's death (Foucault, "What Is An Author?" 105).

The enduring significance of the name points to a very important function of the author or artist: that of classification. The name of the author or artist serves as the category into which certain creative works may be positioned, defined, and differentiated (Foucault, "What Is An Author?" 107). Similarly, the artist's name determines the significance and status of what has been made. Foucault points out that one must ask: "From where does it come, who wrote it, when under what circumstances, or beginning with what design? The meaning ascribed to it and the status or value accorded it depend on the manner in which we answer these questions." (Foucault, "What Is An Author?" 109) These questions must have specific answers in order for the material in question to be in a favorable position for classification as "art." The produced item must be made by someone deemed an artist, someone who fits the image of a creative genius, someone who is innovative in the right sort of way to be appreciated at a certain time, in an appropriate setting such as New York City, with the pure intention of Art for Art's Sake. As Timothy Luke states, "Thus in the apparently innocent forms of artworks...there are rigorous prescriptions about identity, purpose, value, and action that exercise powerful effects upon those who accept their subtle scripting of subjectivity" (Luke 232). The repetitive exhibition of pieces that meet the standards, supporting these dominant ideas of what an artist is, reinforce a limit on what may be called art. And the artist, like the author, represents a certain level of value and a certain consistency or progression of style (Foucault, "What Is An Author?" 111).

The function of the artist's name could be likened to that of a brand name, which indicates a product's status and significance, regardless of how its actual material qualities compare to that of other objects. For this reason, even a perfect copy of a famous painting will be worth

relatively little, like high quality knock-off items copying name-brands. And very similar creative work will be viewed very differently according to who makes it, as I discussed in Chapter 2. Elissa Auther describes how at first, fiber and other craft-based work was accepted into the art world only when attached to well-established fine artists. For example, postminimalist artist Robert Morris relied on his status as a well-established artist whose name represented a certain type of innovation and engagement with the current discourses of the art world. He had the ability “to set the terms of the discourse” of his work because of his “authority as a critic and artist.” Therefore, his fiber creations were not vulnerable to the types of negative readings that plagued other fiber artists during the late 1960s and 1970s, who were criticized as creating work that was “nonintellectual, too ordinary, decorative, or feminine.” (Auther 57)

The gender of the creator is part of the construction of the artist which determines how his or her work will be received.<sup>5</sup> Morris was protected by his gender as well as his status against charges of being too decorative or feminine. Women fiber artists of the time made work that was often labeled “feminine,” and this label also meant, to a great extent, “non-art.” And as I discussed in Chapter 1, the deeply-rooted associations of women with the “bodily,” as well as the reinforcement of the hierarchies of mind over body and masculine over feminine, make an interpretation of women's work as “nonintellectual” all the more likely (Auther 63).

If women's artwork is deemed to be of “genius” quality, then it may be emphasized how “exceptional” it is. For example, the discourse surrounding the huge critical and popular success of the Gee's Bend quilts in 2002 treated the quilters as an anomaly. Reviewers stressed the similarity of the quilts to high-status art, while at the same time emphasizing the “primitiveness” of the quilters' lives in the rural South. The Arnetts and other fine art representatives made rhetorical leaps, trying to fit a group of “outsiders” into the mold of an isolated, unique, and

consistently-branded source of art. And so, as Linda Hunt Beckman explains, the quilters were flattened into the image of simple folk characters, “endowed . . . with the qualities of simplicity, self-abnegating humility, relentless good nature, unreflective religiosity, timeless values and habits, and a penchant for bursting into gospel songs” (Beckman 2). Instead of the impossible task of considering the quilters as typical “artists,” a construction in which they would not easily fit, the art world played up how different the women are from what is expected in “artists.” Kimmelman was apparently beside himself in wonder at the inexplicability that such impressive designs could come from such simple women, calling the quilts “miraculous” art (Kimmelman 1). His assessment stresses the lowliness of the creators as poor women while also reinforcing modernist standards of what is art, in that his wonder comes from a contrast between the “non-artistic” source of the work and its similitude to “real art,” i.e. male geniuses such as Matisse and Klimt.

In this system of classification, the lens through which a woman's artwork is interpreted often deems it either as too feminine and unintellectual, or as astonishing and miraculous. When women face such prejudiced dismissals of their art or of their identities, there is all the more reason for the construct of the “artist” to cause them creative anxiety. Add to this the general environment of intense competition that exists within the fine art world. It is often assumed that an atmosphere of competition is most productive for spurring the best of anything, that individuals will produce higher quality results when trying to exceed the results of others. This is a common mentality, which is essential to capitalism, and which thrives in athletics, but it is questionable whether it is the best approach to creativity. Of course, some creative people thrive off of stiff competition, but many others crumble in such an environment, especially when the overreaching structures disadvantage them from the beginning. Becker explains that creative

processes usually involve *some* anxiety, as the creator must allow that which does not yet exist to take form. A moderate amount of anxiety can initiate creativity in certain situations, but too much anxiety can block the creative process. (Becker 216)

Extra anxiety may stand in the way of women's creativity, as women may not be encouraged to develop a sense of independent individuality to the same degree as men. Some women, especially those living within more traditional communities, may have extra anxiety about their creative impulses, as there may exist a tension between their attempts assert their creative visions and their daily concerns as caretakers. (Becker 219) This explains the defensiveness of the china-painters which I mentioned at the start of this chapter, when Chicago, a representative of this competitive art world, came into their midst to appropriate their techniques. An atmosphere of competition causes great anxiety in many people, and this anxiety often squelches creative processes. If a creator does not meet certain standards along a scale with the “genius artist” at its summit, then s/he may feel that they should not even attempt creative output. The myths of fixed individuality will only feed the dynamics of competition by falsely separating people's interests and pitting them against each other.

Related to the atmosphere of intense competition and its limiting of “art” to those few who “make it” is another, less obvious function of the author or artist: the restriction of meaning. Morris's name protected his work from undesirable associations, and it also restricted the potential power of his work to the limits of his own individuality. The disruption of fiber from Morris's work to the material hierarchies of the art world were kept securely in control for years to come, as fiber materials still required a “real artist” to authorize their acceptance. And when feminist artists such as Chicago or Faith Ringgold shifted the content of art to include women's crafts and experiences, this broadening still rested on the maintenance of exclusivity. The

subversive content of feminist artists could do little to benefit the status of the art of most craftspeople. Only certain individual artists have been able to “elevate” these elements to art, while the majority of those using craft techniques, such as hobby quilters, will be excluded from legitimized art.

When traditional quilters' work is elevated as an exception, other limits must be imposed. For example, since the quilts of Gee's Bend were not even limited by being the product of an individual “artist,” the Arnetts have had to overemphasize their physical and creative isolation, claiming falsely that the quilters were closed off to outside influences, in order to restrict the source of “art” to the boundaries of this small community (Beckman 3). Furthermore, Kimmelman calls the quilting of Gee's Bend “idiosyncratic” and stresses its uniqueness as “art,” as opposed to other quilters who are only “artful” (Kimmelman 2). Usually, “art” is easier to contain to the isolated figure of the “artist.” Likewise, Foucault explains the way the author is used to limit the danger posed by fiction's potentially excessive possible meanings (Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 118). While the figure of the author or artist signifies a proliferation of meanings, it also contains this proliferation “safely” within an exceptional personality. Therefore, any transgression of standards, expectations, and norms is limited to an individualized location.

While the status of “artist” may allow that individual great power and freedom to expand his or her own expression, such a construction of power has a flip-side that bars that very power from expanding beyond the boundaries of the individual. On the one hand, the category of “artist” allows for, and even excuses certain irregularities of behavior, in that particular acts and images may be acceptable under the banner of art when they would not be otherwise. Performance artists have appeared nude in public, abject artists have used bodily fluids and animal carcasses in their art, and pop artists have reproduced copyrighted images. Also, an artist may be less susceptible

to some pressures of normalization, allowing him or her eccentricities of dress, mannerisms, or other personal exhibitions that, if not associated with a respected creative output, could lead to social ostracization. On the other hand, the limiting of such behaviors to the category of art keeps the unpredictability and subversive potentiality associated with creative production safely contained to a small population. The potential of such subversive progression is kept from the lives of average people, guarding against many possibilities for massive social change. The artist is necessarily an *exception* to the norm. As Gaut and Livingston point out, keeping content in check is important in the maintenance of systems of power, “for what is creative is original and hence unpredictable” (Gaut and Livingston 14).

One could argue that the accessing of such freedoms in the name of art only reinforces a system of power that absorbs the potential of creativity by keeping it sectioned off and inaccessible from the general population. Gaining allowances or status for oneself as an individual artist does little to nurture the creativity or freedom of most people, but dominant aesthetics have encouraged an interest in isolated individuality that leads people to accept these conditions. If one has ambition to be a fine artist, it is very difficult, though not impossible, to avoid feeding into this framework of isolated individuality. I am not writing in order to condemn those who do, but rather to question this framework as an ideal.

Some might insist that the notion of “creativity” necessarily relies on myths of individuality, “reflecting a misconception about our degree of independence from nature and of the possibilities of innovation by individuals” (Gaut and Livingston 11). However, I argue that creativity does not imply complete independence from others and that it does not require people to create something out of nothing. Rather, creativity is always embedded in a specific context, being built upon past productions, and existing as part of an ongoing process. And despite the

persistent narratives of the author or artist, creativity need not be tied to the idea of an essential unique self. Concerning the author (or the artist for that matter) and all of its associations, Foucault predicts that such a construction need not last in its traditional form or at all (Foucault, “What Is An Author?” 119). Such cultural transformations regarding creativity can be seen as welcome in that creativity is better encouraged without false notions of individuality. Even artists themselves, of various types, have often complained of being pigeon-holed into a narrow range of creative possibilities, evidence of the limiting effect of the author/artist function—instead of a dynamic human in the midst of a process, the creator is simplified into an idea of a fixed, unique individual capable of specific products that are associated with the already-established branding.

For these reasons, creativity would be better served to be tied to an idea of a *contingent self*. Utilizing the contingent self means realizing that one's identity is dependent on many uncertain factors, as opposed to the notion of fixed identity present in the author function. The author or artist is seen as an independent being, out of which the creative work flows. Instead, it would be more appropriate to view the process of creation as being dependent on the uncertain factors of the creator's context, being brought about by specific conditions, and being built upon past works. The creative skills are passed down and practiced, the imagination of the creator is activated to solve specific problems, and the creator responds with acts of expression and communication that make sense in her or his given context. This view of creation utilizing the contingent self is a more accurate depiction of creative processes, recognizing the interdependency that is involved.

Associating creativity with a fluid sense of self may also keep one's creative practices from reinforcing the hierarchies of the art world. Graham Longford explains that: “such an art of the *contingent self* heightens our awareness of the contingencies and differences cross-cutting all



identities, thereby helping militate against the indifference, resentment, and cruelty toward others which sometimes flow from aggressive attempts to universalize, glorify, and defend them.” (Longford 574) In this way, the utilization of the contingent self for creativity is vital for working towards the goals of feminist aesthetics in that it discourages reification of dominant aesthetic hierarchies. Instead of viewing art as that which flows from a consistently “branded” genius, an expanded feminist notion of art will include an examination of the maker's life and context, and the rejection of the traditional notion of the “artist” increases the possibilities for a creative person who does not fit the stereotype or embody the upper halves of dominant aesthetic hierarchies. Even ideas such as self-expression need not be discarded, only re-evaluated with a different idea of what is the “self.” The creator as a contingent self is dynamic, living, and interacting, as opposed to an interpretive construct or universalized idea of the artist. Instead of relying on an essential unique self, a revised notion of self-expression can instead refer to the expression of feelings, stories, and experiences embedded within a specific context. As I will discuss below, the aesthetic traditions of quilting offer models of this notion of self-expression.

### **Hand-crafting, Collective Innovation, and Creative Interdependence**

There are many ways in which quilting has potential as a medium for creativity that may utilize the idea of the contingent self. The category of craft, unlike narratives of art, does not contain the necessity to tie creativity to a false notion of a fixed, unique self. Instead of the creator being pigeon-holed into representing an interpretive construct, she or he is allowed to explore the uniqueness that comes with the personal touch, which is not based on reified individuality, but is evidence of physical manipulation with one's hands. As Octavio Paz describes, “Since it is a thing made by human hands, the craft object preserves the fingerprints—

be they real or metaphorical—of the artisan who fashioned it. These imprints are not the signature of the artist; they are not a name. Nor are they a trademark.” (Paz 21) This is a material indication of the specific maker or makers, instead of the abstraction of the creative acts into the interpretive construct of the "artist." The work of a person's hands can capture a moment of time within the life of an ever-changing individual. As Risatti argues: “rather than representing a sentimental or nostalgic anachronism, craft's embracing of the skilled hand...must be understood as a conscious affirmation of the maker...This not only anchors the fine craft object to the specific time and place of its maker, it reflects the limitedness that marks an individual maker's efforts and existence.” (Risatti 119) The linkage of craft to a specific context by its connection to its maker decreases its ability to remove itself from political and cultural realities—another important point for feminist theorists.

The material impression of craft is especially relevant (but not very respected) in today's social atmosphere, in which people tend to define their “individuality” in terms of their preferences for impersonal commodities. The “fingerprints” within crafted objects exhibit factors in the maker's context, such as specifics in regional or era-related aesthetics, the degree of skill acquired, and even the emotional state of the creator during the creative process. The crafts approach to making shows the development of creation in terms of skills and exploration of possible variations, as opposed to the mysterious, inexplicable appearance of “art.” As a craft, quilting contains possibilities for the creator in its recognition that all innovation exists within a context of interdependence, and also in its encouragement of interactive and activist communities of craftspeople. For the rest of this chapter, I will explore quilting's relation to interdependent creativity, in the forms of quilting bees, patterns, and various types of community-building.

Quilting has its own uniquely complicated relationship to the tensions between individuality and community. The communal making of quilts is taken for granted in popular thinking; when one thinks of quilts, the next thought is often of the legendary “quilting bee.” As the noted on *The American Story* educational site created by the International Quilt Study Center, quilting bees have been romanticized and mythologized, especially during the 1876 Centennial celebration and continuing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (“Creativity: Groups and Guilds: The Quilting Bee?”). While I will discuss the potential advantages of quilting bees and communal making, the truth is that quilts are and have been made under such a variety of conditions and contexts, that no all-encompassing generalization can be made about their production. However, the issue of distinguishing individuality from communal making has been one of much contestation, due partly to the negative associations of traditionally feminine work that have been used in the past to dismiss any serious consideration of quilting as a creative medium.

For example, it has been argued that the myths of “quilting bees” have harmed the status of quilting. In her significant 1973 essay, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” Patricia Mainardi writes that there has been some misunderstanding of the production of quilts, especially regarding “quilting bees” and an exaggeration of the collectivity of the quilting process (Mainardi 332). Specifically, she was speaking of the 1972 Holstein exhibition, which I discussed in Chapter 2. As she notes, Holstein displayed a general lack of interest in researching the quilts' makers, and he did not acknowledge the names of quilters, even when names were at hand. Criticizing Holstein's decontextualizing appropriation of the quilts, she observes that, “These women did not choose anonymity. Rather it has been forced on them.” (Mainardi 332) It is wrong that the work of individual quilt artists has been overlooked, or been assumed to be communal when it was not. This situation amounts to willful ignorance at best, or an act of

cultural theft at worst. Whatever his intentions were, the exhibition was well-received, and as I mentioned before, Holstein is still referenced to this day as a central figure in the elevation of quilts to fine art. The exhibition was a critical success, and many viewers at the time, especially those in the “art world,” were quite happy to view quilts in the way he presented them. Mainardi points out that the myths of the quilting bee resonate with popular images of women who lack individual creative potential and drive. In reality, however, most quilting bees have been a swapping of labor, in order to aid in the quilting of an already pieced quilt top, and completed by the group according to the plans of the maker. (Mainardi 341)

Nonetheless, though quilting bees are often misrepresented in the popular imagination, it cannot be denied that some of the work done in bees *has* been done collaboratively for community or political causes. And though many quilts have been the work of individuals, many have also been the work of at least two creators. Mainardi points out that many quilters have viewed their work as “art” (though possibly not in quite the same way as fine art institutions), and many quilters sign and date their work as a piece of art (Mainardi 332). But there have also been many collectively-made quilts that have been signed and dated by each contributor, often referred to as “signature quilts.” It is still common practice today for a hobby quilter who has pieced a quilt top to hire another person to perform the actual quilting; that is, one person selects all fabrics and design and completes the piecing of the top, and then this first person acquires the services of another person to perform the stitching that binds the layers of the quilt together. This is because the process of quilting the layers together is either incredibly laborious, requiring a great amount of skill and time if performed by hand, or it requires specialized equipment, such as free-arm quilting machines, that can make quilting relatively easy now.<sup>6</sup> There are also quilts that have been made collectively to commemorate events or draw attention to issues, such as The

National Tribute Quilt: A September 11 Memorial, completed in 2002 (Steel Quilters). The communal basis of these quilts only adds to their aesthetic and social power, which brings together many different individuals' creative skills to complete a large project with important significance to broad communities. Collective creativity has been and continues to be an important aspect of quilt-making, and it may be that this aspect of quilting diminishes its appearance as “art.”

I agree with Mainardi's criticism of the use of myths and stereotypes to dismiss the creativity of women, but my contention with her line of argument here (criticizing the image of bees for stripping women quilters of their individual creativity) is that it keeps the issue within the same confines: individuality continues to be assumed to be necessary for true creative achievement. It is true that anonymity degrades the value that people will attribute to a creative work, but few question investing value due to the appearance of strong individuality in an artist. Should this be our basis of value? What is lost in our abandoning the value of the communal or collective in handmade items?

For example, Mainardi also complains that the word “pattern” is usually used to refer to quilts instead of the word “design” (Mainardi 346). Her complaint implies that the application of “pattern” to quilts is sexist in that it dismisses them as an art form and degrades their aesthetic value. Mainardi's thinking is in line with the standards of fine art aesthetics and would also find agreement within mainstream ideas of creativity. There are sexist associations tied to the “pattern,” interrelated with the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics, which encourage a view of women's artistic traditions as being mundane, domestic, stagnant, and unintellectual. However, while Mainardi's comment points out the sexism involved with the application of the term, it also exemplifies a common misunderstanding of what is meant by the word “pattern,” which

traditionally has been and continues to be used by quilters themselves. I argue that this misunderstanding is one of the major factors in the under-appreciation of quilting (as well as other traditionally feminine crafts), and is key to the historical denial of quilts as a creative endeavor on par with a painting or a sculpture. In addition to the blatant sexism involved in rejecting women's artistic traditions, crafts such as quilting are also rejected because it is assumed that the use of “patterns” precludes any true creativity, innovation, or expression of feeling.

The word “pattern” is a very vague and general term, usually referring to a set of design and technique specifications, and though it is commonly associated with low levels of creativity, it actually does *not* indicate a certain measure of variation, innovation, or personal expression. As an illustration, similar to the playing of a musical instrument, the uniqueness of the craft comes with the material expression of the “thinking hand,” not an isolated abstract idea. An endless amount of variation is possible due to this personal touch, without the musician or craftsman needing to rely on a false notion of personality. And the creativity of the musician is not seen to be reduced to nothing just because he or she uses the “pattern,” or score, of someone else's composition; instead the impressive required skills and the *interpretation* of the music are seen to be valuable creative output. Similarly, skills and interpretation come to light when different quilters work from the same pattern.

For instance, the quilt *Never Done*, 1995 by the art quilting collective New Image Artists, displays a variety of interpretations based on one theme (New Image Artists). The quilt features eighteen blocks, each with an image of an ironing board but made with various fabrics, colors, and embellishments. The quilters started with one basic pattern or motif, of similar shape, size, and placement. In this case they each referred to a photograph of an ironing board for inspiration.

The quilters share common experiences of using ironing boards both in their domestic work and their artistic work with fabric. However, each artist has her own attitude towards the ironing board and her own style for the block. The combination of eighteen versions of the ironing board into one collaborative piece illustrates how many interpretations are possible of the same reference image and how each of these interpretations is a product of its creator's unique touch. (*Art Quilts* 69)

In quilting, a pattern basically refers to the shapes one cuts from fabric and the general arrangement of those pieces. A great amount of variation exists when it comes to the level of creative decision-making involved in the completion of a quilt pattern. It's true that lower amounts of creativity may be found in making a quilt with a purchased kit, which includes the pattern, the fabric (possibly even pre-cut into the necessary pieces), and a complete set of detailed instructions for every step of the assembly process. Of course, not all quilters will approve of kits, but they are widely available and hardly a new phenomenon, having been around since Marie Webster wrote the book, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* in 1915, and subsequently began a business of selling patterns and quilt kits (Shaw 223-224). Occasionally, I have even seen in museum exhibitions antique quilts that are noted to have been made from purchased kits. Quilt kits provide an easy option for beginners to quilting or for those who want to relax and just enjoy the construction process.

More creativity may exist in the making of a quilt using a set of instructions, by choosing the fabric oneself and possibly altering the instructions in some small ways to fit one's desires. For example, in the introduction to her quilting project book, Gail Lawther writes that differing fabrics and designs variations are possible; some are suggested by her within the book, and she encourages the readers to come up with variations of their own (Lawther 6). Barbara Randle

conveys a similar message, commenting on the great amount of creativity that goes into the making of crazy quilts; each crazy quilt is unique, reflecting the artist's choices of color and composition, and often incorporating details of significance to the artist's personal life (Randle 6).

The use of a certain pattern may also refer to little more than an overall arrangement and construction technique. The variations possible within one pattern are countless; for example, Maggie Malone collected variations on block patterns in her book, *5,500 Quilt Block Designs* (Malone). A block pattern consists of almost any abstract or representational design that can be drafted onto a grid. The most common type of block pattern is the nine patch (3 squares by 3 squares), which can be scaled to any multiple of 3 (6x6, 9x9, 12x12, etc) to make the design more complex. There are many different dimensions of blocks other than the nine patch, and there are even circular and hexagonal designs. (Malone 6-7) A vast amount of innovation is possible for each block pattern, according to the arrangement of its parts or colors. For example, figures 4 and 5 exhibit two different versions of a similar hexagon pattern, illustrating the variation possible with slight rearranging of pieces and colors. In the *Flower Garden*, c. 1970s-1980s (see figure 4) by Gladys Burns and Helena Pauls (my paternal grandmother), the hexagon “flowers” are each a different combination of fabrics and colors, and they are interspersed with columns of green “leaves.” The quilt is tied together visually by the pale yellow flower centers and the white background. In contrast, the *Flower Garden*, c. 1950's (see figure 5) by Nelida Vessot Gordon features offset columns of “flowers” only, and they fit neatly together in a honeycomb pattern. It was given to my mother, Kathy, by her maternal grandmother Nelida Gordon in the 1960s, around the same time as the *Flower Baskets* quilt (see figure 3), and it displays a similar well-balanced use of soft yellows and greens. This quilt has an even more tied-together look than Burns' quilt, with the consistency of yellow for the centers and white for the inner rings





Figure 4. *Flower Garden*. Pieced by Gladys Burns, binding by Helena Pauls, c. 1970s-1980s.



Figure 5. *Flower Garden*. Nelida Vessot Gordon, c. 1950's.

of “flower petals,” as well as its more-limited color palate for the outer rings of “petals.” These two quilts are only two possible interpretations of the “Flower Garden” type block, which is only

one of at least 5,500 possible blocks. Beyond this, not all quilts use blocks either; many quilts use other types of construction and image-making, such as appliqué, mosaics, crazy quilting, string piecing, embroidery, and designs and images made by the quilt stitching itself.

It is true that the pattern has a certain humility, but I am not referring to humility in terms of sexist stereotypes of self-less, unimaginative women quilters within a stagnant craft practice. Rather, the pattern represents a sense of perspective, as a recognition of the traditions upon which one's work is based is implied within the word itself. I argue that this humility, this honest acknowledgment of creative interdependence, is the central reason the “pattern” is viewed as a derogatory term, as dominant aesthetics rejects such notions for art. When fine art representatives have selected quilts for “elevation,” it is often those quilts recognized as “patterned” quilts that are rejected as art. For instance, the Arnetts picked quilts from Gee's Bend that resembled abstract modernist paintings, rejecting the many patterned quilts that have been created in that community (Beckman 4). Even within the realm of activities that may be termed as crafts, mediums that tend to make use of patterns are often regarded as “lower” crafts. It is assumed that without the focus on an independent, spontaneously original, individualistic artist, “real art,” and therefore the highest levels of creativity, cannot exist. However, all creative endeavors, all “artworks” by anyone's definition of the term, exist within a web of relations upon some foundation of tradition, whether continuing that tradition or diverging from it in certain ways.

Unlike the dominant idea of the “artist” and his or her “original” work, the notion of the pattern keeps in perspective the maker's identity as a contingent self, embedded within a context of interdependence, while allowing for countless opportunities to create innovative changes, designs, and alterations of established techniques. And unlike common misconceptions of

outsiders to craft that “feminine” crafts are media that are stagnant or that stifle creative innovation due to their emphasis on tradition, one may see many movements of change as quilting has been adapted in different times and places by various groups of people. In the preservation of patterns and techniques, there has existed room for innovation as contexts (materials, technology, fashion, necessities) have changed. This is why, for example, there are so many block patterns: when people adapted techniques and arrangements for their own use, slight differences were added again and again, including pattern names (many patterns have multiple names—some as many as five or ten) (Malone 6).

The potential of the humble pattern still inspires new modes for creativity. For instance, this emphasis on accessibility and collectivity for aesthetic innovation within craft is celebrated by Cat Mazza on her website, *microRevolt*.<sup>7</sup> The site offers users free access to *knitPro*, a pattern-making program following the tradition within pre-industrial craft of pattern sharing. *KnitPro* graphs any downloaded image onto any of three different sized grids for knit or needlepoint, cross stitch, and crochet. *MicroRevolt* also involves a commentary on the problems of globalization and sweatshop labor. Mazza encourages users of *knitPro* to make patterns of the logos of sweatshop offenders, and provides pictures of garments that do so, hoping to spur conversation about the issues surrounding craft and labor. The concept of the pattern demands further investigation regarding its potential for socially-just creative production.

The idea of the pattern is just one of the ways in which craft frameworks recognize creation as building upon communal knowledge. Personal expression comes from one's experiences, but it does not need to rest on fixed individuality. Innovation and expression are usually seen within craft as burgeoning organically from multiple creators, rather than drawing on myths of individual identity for the main source of innovation. Paz comments that, “By

comparison with industrial designs...the handcrafted object is anonymous but not impersonal; by comparison with the work of art, it emphasizes the collective nature of style and demonstrates to us that the prideful *I* of the artist is a *we*" (Paz 22). In other words, crafts are not stamped out mass productions, but neither are they reliant on a single "artist." Instead, they emphasize that aesthetic progressions and movements are based on interaction within communities of creators under specific conditions. Mainardi describes that within the history of American quilting, skilled quilters were well-known and admired locally, and their influence was absorbed by other quilters. Quilting trends in design, color, pattern, and quality were passed along, from place to place at specific times, as quilters were inspired by the viewing of other people's quilts (Mainardi 331-332).

Of course, this has not been a completely even process. Some quilters have had greater power to influence the craft than others, whether for reasons of identity or location (class, race, region), medium (pattern type, material used), or skill. Skill was an important factor when it came to the work done during quilting bees; Mainardi relates from her quilting research, "There are many stories of women whose stitches were uneven being sent to help in the kitchen, or of the quilt maker herself ripping out poorly done work and redoing it." (Mainardi 341). Today, the disparities in influence over quilting involve the trend of big-name quilt designers releasing books and lines of quilting products, as expected within consumer culture (as I will discuss in Chapter 5).

Still, there is more recognition of the collective nature of creative processes within quilting than in modernist aesthetic narratives, including an appreciation for a community which recognizes and supports the creativity of its participants. In this way, the potential for aesthetic change is dealt out more communally and not limited to an individualized figure. The craft-

oriented approach of hand-making, the creative support within quilting bees, and the sharing of patterns have contributed to an artistic tradition that provides a great amount of material for a feminist reevaluation of aesthetic standards with the aim of nurturing the creativity of many people.

### **Community and Quilting as Care of Self and Others**

In addition to the communal creation of patterns, community is also an important factor in the nurturing of creativity. I have discussed the importance of the contingent self regarding creativity, but community and relationship-building are also important pieces in the fostering of creativity. Community and relationships are especially important for cultivating women's creativity. Gilligan explains how when girls reach adolescence, they often stop saying what they know and stop trusting their own judgments, because their thoughts and feelings are not given validation in the public world. Women often feel that it is safe to express themselves only within the most secure relationships, due to what Gilligan calls the "privatization of women's experience." (Gilligan xxii) Therefore, the validation that women receive from creative communities may be necessary for them to feel safe enough to express their feelings through creative practices.

Gilligan also describes how women's ideals tend to differ from those of men. While masculine identity is based on separation, so that intimacy is seen as a threat, feminine identity is based on attachment, so that separation is seen as a threat (Gilligan 9). This means that although androcentric culture values individual achievement and autonomy as maturity, women's focus on relationships is difficult to change (Gilligan 17). But feminist ethics of care aims to show that the focus on relationships is not just a liability or weakness, but another way of seeing the world that

is both valid and worthwhile. Gilligan explains that “women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (Gilligan 17). The ideal of care involves “seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (Gilligan 62). An ethic of care, “which reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent” (Gilligan 74).

Feminists may look to traditionally feminized crafts to see how women's valuing of care is influential upon their aesthetic modes of expression. Examples of such care and focus on relationships abound in a study of quilters done by Kathleen W. Piercy and Cheryl Cheek, summarized in their article “Tending and Befriending: The Intertwined Relationships of Quilters.” Piercy and Cheek take their findings from interviews with Amish, Appalachian, and Latter Day Saints women. These are three cultural groups in the United States with strong quilting traditions, and Piercy and Cheek explore the personal and social benefits to these women from quilting. (Piercy 18) The researchers' main conclusion is that quilting provides generativity for middle-aged and older women—a way to care for themselves and for others at the same time, maintaining their roles as kin-keepers (Piercy 31). Quilting provides generativity in four ways: “teaching others, forming bonds with members of other generations, leaving a legacy, and contributing to the welfare of the broader community” (Piercy 26).

Quilts are most popularly thought of as heirlooms, so it is no surprise that many quilters create with the interest of leaving a legacy for their families. Lucinda Pettway Franklin, a Gee's Bend quilter, notes that within her community, each heirloom quilt was a precious part of their family knowledge: “We didn't own cameras. We didn't have TV or radio. To quilt was a memory, a warmth, a part of our heritage that we kept. We know what that meant, we didn't need pictures.”

(Farr 1) The quilters in Piercy's and Cheek's study made personalized quilts for children and grandchildren, especially for weddings (Piercy 27). This is common practice within traditionally feminine craft culture, as women's traditional roles have been most primarily concerned with the care of family members. The significance of an heirloom quilt is often not lost on its receiver, and many people appreciate the time and care put into a handmade quilt, as well as the symbolism of love and warmth to carry into the future.

I consider myself to be one of those people, as I was lucky enough to be given a quilt to mark my birth, *Baby quilt*, 1983 (see figure 6), made for me by my aunt, Peggy Hamm. Along with other hand-crafted family heirlooms, my baby quilt has given me an appreciation for handmade objects, in a way that literally touched and surrounded me from infancy. (This quilt also may have contributed to my taste for dainty flowered prints and for shades of lavender and mauve.) One Appalachian woman said, "My two children, my sons, I guess I have in-stilled in them. They love quilts better than anything. I can give them a quilt, and that is better than giving them a million dollars." (Piercy 27-28) A quilt can be a legacy, a remembrance of a relationship, or serve as a piece of oneself. It can also signify a continuation of care for one's children after one's own death. A Mormon woman comments that quilts are "[a] way of leaving yourself when you are gone. I have a quilt that my grandmother made me. She is still with me. I think my children will feel that same way. They are snuggled up in one of my quilts when I'm gone." (Piercy 28) In some families, quilting is necessary to carry on a family tradition. These quilters see the making and gifting of quilts as a way to do the same for the younger generation as was done for them. In an extreme instance, one woman found twenty-nine unfinished quilt tops upon the death of her mother, and then carried on her mother's vast quilt-making plan to finish each one as a gift for a grandchild (Piercy 28).



Figure 6. *Baby quilt*. Peggy Hamm, 1983.

Teaching quilting to others provides a more interactively social aspect to the activity. The women in Piercy's and Cheek's study undertook the teaching of quilting to family members and to others at guild meetings, workshops, and quilting bees. Within families, the teaching of



quilting has the potential to create connections of interest across generations. Specifically, as a medium with a long tradition as a feminized domestic craft, Radka Donnell comments that quilting has potential to “forge links between daughters, mothers, and mothers' mothers. Perhaps it is this sense of connection attaching to quilts that evokes such great warmth and generosity in those who see them.” (Donnell 85) Mainardi notes that historically women taught their daughters needlework arts. Women controlled the creative making of these crafts and were also their intended viewers and critics. (Mainardi 331) Quilting is still a medium dominated by women; however, there have been more male quilters in the past few decades, and certainly there have always been many men who appreciated the beauty and significance of heirloom quilts. Sons and grandsons, as well as daughters and granddaughters, have often gained an interest in quilting from their elder relatives. Younger quilters often look to older quilters for training and advice, in a craft-oriented process of education and social bonding across age groups. Quilters with particularly high levels of skill often find opportunities to teach at guild meetings, workshops, quilting bees, and conferences. One Mormon teacher recalls that in her teaching experiences, interest in learning the craft of quilting is often aroused by the examination of people's own heirloom quilts. The teaching and learning of quilting gives the participants connections to the past, while providing a lasting venue for social activity and an acquisition new creative skills. (Piercy 26)

Besides direct instruction, connections of interest are often created in the collaborative creation of quilts. Collaborating on projects aids quilters to build or strengthen bonds with children and grandchildren. The loved one receiving a quilt will often participate by helping pick patterns and colors for the quilts that are made for them. Sometimes the collaboration can be much more involved, as in this instance from Piercy's and Cheek's study: One Mormon quilter

worked extensively on a quilting project with her five-year-old grandson, who was interested in the road construction taking place near her home. She describes:

He is fascinated with machinery, and we would go up there. He came home one day and said “Grandma, if you would make me a quilt with tractors on it, I would be so happy.” And so I said, “OK.” He would help me draw them [patterns]. And we ended up making 7 construction quilts before...the 7<sup>th</sup> one was the one he liked. We had to go out and take pictures of the machinery....We spent a full two years making this quilt, the two of us. He would move things around on the floor and design where he wanted them. We made this. (Piercy 27)

A quilt made so collaboratively as this one will not just be a uni-directional labor of love from a grandmother to her grandson, but instead it will recall the time they spent working on it together and the feelings of accomplishment that they can share.

Many members of my family have had similar experiences of collaborative creation. For instance, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Quilt*, 1996 (see figure 7) was made to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of my maternal grandparents Orval and Lucile Hamm, and its making involved the participation of several of my aunts and uncles. First, Patricia Hamm Cook and Susan Hamm Smith funded the project. My mother, Kathy Hamm Pauls, began the quilt. Utilizing what was then newly available technology, she gathered photos from family members and took them to a printing shop in order to print the photos on fabric. Included are the wedding photo of Orval and Lucy, a few photos of their young family, a contemporary photo of the couple, and contemporary photos of the families of each of their five children. Also, a photo each of Orval and Lucy while they were young were used on accompanying pillows. The quilt top was pieced, using the fabric photos as center blocks in the pattern. My uncle, Glenn Hamm, and his wife, Peggy Vandevort Hamm (who made my baby quilt [Figure 6]) came to finish the quilt, tying through the top as well as the batting and backing cloth in order to bind the layers into a quilt. I remember watching them work in our dining room. A few days later, the completed quilt



Figure 7. *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Quilt*. Kathy Pauls, Glenn Hamm, and Peggy Hamm; 1996.

was presented to the recipients at the anniversary celebration, a large and lively gathering of extended family on June 7, 1996. The quilt served as a gift from grown children to their parents, pooling their energies into a project that symbolizes their appreciation for their parents' marriage as the root of what has grown into a large extended family. The quilt illustrates the growing family, while the collaborative work that went into it served to reinforce the social bond between siblings.

Beyond familial collaborations, the social aspect of quilting meetings is central—some women come to quilting events just for this reason. Attending classes, workshops, or quilt shows strengthens friendships and provides opportunities for establishing new friendships. For many women in culturally conservative locations, quilting is a socially approved activity, and quilting meetings give them a place to get away from home and meet friends. Of course, the emphasis varies according to the type of group event: quilting bees are informal groups, centered around specific quilting tasks, while quilting guilds are organizations with elected officials and programmed meetings. Also, quilting groups vary according to the differing cultural and regional attributes of the women involved. All in all, however, quilting groups are places to share and relax, and to feel supported within a community. (Piercy 30) A Mormon woman observed: “We just feel like it is a camaraderie that you just can't get anywhere else. You can quilt and relax, and discuss things in a way that you can get things that are bothering you out in the open, but it is in such a comfortable situation that it will a lot of times, solve problems, or help people know that they are not alone. Quilting is a wonderful way to feel such closeness.” (Piercy 30-31) Quilting provides many quilters with opportunities to gain social support from a community, a significant factor in the health and lives of its participants. In her article “Quilting as an Exemplar of Art Therapy,” Ellen Olshansky relates many details of her interview with Tina

Brewer, a nationally known African American quilter who has organized many groups for women quilters. She describes that quilting groups such as Brewer's provide many benefits for the quilters and their sense of well-being. Quilting groups, according to Brewer and many other quilters, nurture the building of relationships and community, increased self-esteem, the opportunity to share stories and feelings, and the exchange of validation and encouragement. (Olshansky 393-396)

Of course, quilting-centered friendships can also occur outside group settings, and many quilters have a significant quilting buddy. These friendships can also involve learning and mentoring (Piercy 31). Quilting buddies often share responsibility for completing quilts, work together on quilts, or take on different tasks for one another. At the very least, a quilting buddy is someone with whom to share one's enthusiasm. Many friendships between quilters are quite long-lasting, even spanning decades. (Piercy 29)

Groups do offer some potential, however, beyond quilting within personal friendships and family. Brewer's groups, for instance, also provide exposure to diversity and an egalitarian environment. And a traditional aspect of quilting groups is their involvement in activism, community building, and charity work. Mainardi points out the significance of this tradition within the history of women's activism—quilting bees were an important place for women's discussions, organizing, and advocacy. For example, a quilting bee was the location for Susan B. Anthony's first speech, and quilting bees reflect the stirring of the women's movement in the United States, with the Seneca Falls Conference of 1848 at the height of quilting's popularity (Mainardi 342). As socially-approved women's meetings, quilting bees provided opportunities for women to discuss social and political issues from their perspectives and to organize for action. The quilts themselves could even be tools for activism, such as the *Suffragette Flag Quilt*, c.

1912, a petition for women's suffrage signed with embroidery (Shaw 226). The names of supporters of the cause that are listed on the quilt include that of Susan B. Anthony (*Suffragett Flag Quilt*). Quilting was also a tool for activism in the famed community of Gee's Bend. The Freedom Quilting Bee during the 1960s and 1970s was an important way for the women of Gee's Bend to participate in the civil rights movement (Beckman 1). The Bee also helped the quilters earn money that improved their lives and “bettered conditions, raised morale, was fun, and heightened confidence in the civil rights comes movement” (Beckman 10). Quilting in Gee's Bend is not only an impressive artistic tradition, but it has also served as an important form of community-building and social activism.

Today, quilting activism takes many forms. Some quilting programs involve the teaching of quilting skills to participants for economic benefits, such as a program in Appalachia that exchanges quilt-making labor for financial assistance (Piercy 28). Most commonly, quilting activism involves the making of quilts or quilted items for those who need them, or the donating of quilts to raise funds for community programs and organizations. Amish quilters speak of making quilts to raise money for their schools, and Mormon quilters participate with the Humanitarian Services of the Mormon church, which distributes quilts locally and abroad (Piercy 29). The span of quilting activism is illustrated by books such as Katherine Bell's *Quilting for Peace: Make the World a Better Place One Stitch at a Time*, which offers the quilter a variety of charities to which to contribute.

Creativity focused on communities and care is important because many women, especially those in more traditional cultures, base their sense of self on relationships. As I noted above, Becker points out that women may tend to view their experiences through an interpretation centered on others, especially family or community interests (Becker 216).

Quilting, therefore, has particular potential to nurture these women's creativity. But traditionally feminine crafts such as quilting are also attractive for a more urban or younger generation of non-traditional women, as evidenced by DIY and indie craft trends. Websites such as Pinterest allow people (especially women, who seem to make up the majority of users) to post and share inspirational images, websites, and patterns. A recent term has even been concocted to name the current trend of craft when it is used for activism: craftivism. These politically-oriented craftspersons are drawn to the powerful creative potential and immediacy of traditionally feminine crafts, and as well as what they can offer to make statements for peace, for beautifying everyday life, for increasing accessibility to art, or for reaching out in a spirit of global community. As Betsy Greer, the inventor of the term, describes, "...it was a form of protest without yelling. In a heated debate, it is easy to be drowned out among the many voices; wouldn't it be harder to dismiss something tangible, like a piece of political art or handmade charitable donation?" (Greer "Craftivist History" 177) The growth of craftivism, like many other activist movements these days, is largely due to widespread web communities, such as the Craftivist Collective (Craftivist Collective #Craftivists).

The growth of intercultural exchange, through the internet, and also through the increase of exhibitions of women's textile art from around the world (such as those at the International Quilt Study Center), fosters an even broader community of craft. As a craft, quilting spans expanses of time, as current quilters are inspired by historical patterns, heirlooms, and the examples of elder quilters. Quilting also reaches across vast amounts of space, as quilts and other traditionally feminine crafts are utilized to communicate in ways that resonate with people from many parts of the world. Kirsty Robertson explains that one can trace textile craft-based activism through the decades and across continents, "from, among others, the encouragement of hand-

weaving in the Indian independence movement through the role of cotton in the slave trade and abolition movement, patchwork *arpilleras* made in Pinochet's Chile, and remembrance quilts created in postapartheid South Africa” (Robertson 186). Quilting is a craft that is practiced among people of many cultures around the world. Of course, the cultural, political, and economic contexts for quilting vary greatly, so no universal statements can be made as attention must always be paid to the specifics of context. However, as a form of communication that resonates with people's experiences of creative hand-making, quilting could foster a common understanding between people with great differences. As creators speaking through similar mediums, quilters may feel a kindred spirit with others across barriers of age, culture, and geography.

As this discussion of quilting and communities shows, creativity can be approached in a non-competitive way, one that integrates the creative process with the care of oneself, of loved ones, of a community, or of a cause. Many of the traditional purposes of quilting provide ample opportunities for the care of oneself and others, and therefore quilting has the potential to foster an emotionally engaged creativity. It is a more holistic approach to creativity than Art for Art's Sake; people's feelings become a part of their creative work, as their everyday lives are enriched with a focus on care and inclusion in a creative community. Creators who feel like they are supported within a community, with strong ties of friendship, are in an environment that is likely to foster the self-acceptance that is necessary for creativity to flourish.

Especially for women, relationship-focused crafts such as quilting are important as an acceptable avenue for their creativity. For many traditional women, such crafts mesh with their roles as wives and mothers, and their creative products serve as gifts to family members, as methods for bonding across generations, or as service to their communities. It is also an



opportunity for older women to be revered as teachers and mentors who have earned respect due to their skill and their ability to encourage others. This may provide a boost to the confidence of both the teacher and the students. In a tradition of craft, like the china-painters that I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the emphasis is much less on competition and far more on the passing-on of skills, enjoyment, and community. Therefore, crafts such as quilting offer an opportunity for many people to nurture their creative potential who would not otherwise have such a chance, especially if left to highly competitive paths of the fine art world.

In summary, it is important for feminist theorists, activists, and artists to consider rejecting the myths of dominant aesthetics, including the necessity of the reified individuality of the “artist” construct, and a competitive atmosphere, for the production of art. These myths serve as limitations on who can be an artist, on the range of explorations a creative person can make, and on the potential for proliferation of meanings, ideas, and social change. They also deny the interdependency of creative development.

Instead, I argue that feminists should look to traditionally feminized arts, such as quilting, that offer a craft-based approach to creativity. These crafts may be used to avoid the myths and hierarchies of dominant aesthetics. They provide an accessible entrance to art, with a humbler view of what an “artist” is and can do than that of dominant aesthetics. Individual identity is contextualized, as craft captures a moment in the ever-changing life of the maker and puts this moment of creativity in perspective within a broader web of connections. Whitney Otto illustrates this realization in her novel, *How to Make an American Quilt*: “Follow your parents' footsteps. This is what quilting is about: something handed down—skill, the work itself. Hold it in your hand. Fondle it. ... Laugh as you contemplate the concept of free will, individuality.” (Otto 39) Creative innovation is viewed as intertwined with connections to other creators, past

and present. The sharing and development of patterns within the practice of quilting is a prime model of a relatively honest and egalitarian approach to creation.

Quilting is also a medium that encourages the use of creativity for the care of oneself and others. Creative collaborations are important in quilting, and it is common for a quilt to be made by a group of people who share a common goal or feeling, such as love for the person who is receiving the quilt, or commitment to an activist cause. Quilting can be a form of self-care, as a form a creative practice that nurtures the individual in a holistic way, integrating their creativity with connections to friends, family, and communities, and providing a means for generativity. Quilting is also well-known as a way to care for others, involving leaving heirlooms for loved ones, teaching others to quilt, and aiding others who are in need with the quilting of blankets for warmth or with the selling of quilts to raise funds. Susan Behuniak-Long goes so far as to state that quilts are “artifacts of the social need for connection” (Behuniak-Long 167).

Relating back to my central thesis, this chapter demonstrates that quilting is done by many different communities of people, not just “grannies.” At the same time, the creative practice of many elder women is a vital piece of quilting's potential for the improvement of people's lives and communities, as well as for the passing down of quilting techniques, traditions, and wisdom. A feminist analysis of what counts as “art,” then, must reclaim the craft heritage of quilting, including the art of “grannies” and the important yet lowly “pattern,” as a way of acknowledging that one's creative work is always building upon the legacy of others. Also, looking through a framework of feminist ethics of care, it is clear that quilting can be part of a liberatory feminist project of nurturing human creativity for the enrichment of people's quality of life, community, and mutual care.

#### Chapter 4: Quilting's Embrace of Utility

The issue of utility in relation to both quilts and aesthetics is aptly illustrated by Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use." Written in 1973, the year after the Holstein exhibition, it reflects the context of this period, as feminists began reflecting on the methods that were used to "elevate" quilts. Patricia Mainardi's essay, "Quilts: The Great American Art," was also published in 1973 in response to Holstein's approach. Both Mainardi and Walker point to the way that quilts were stripped of their traditional meanings and separated from their functions within daily life.

The central conflict in Walker's story is between a mother and daughter who have completely different perspectives on meaning and value, and this cultural conflict is condensed to the question of ownership of two family quilts. The daughter, Dee, visits the home that the narrator mother shares with her second daughter Maggie. The visit marks the contrast between Dee, who has embraced every appearance of education and ambition, and the mother and Maggie, who remain in the impoverished conditions that Dee fled years ago. However, this visit also indicates Dee's shallowness and falseness of character—she comes dressed to the height of fashion with sunglasses to hide her eyes and emotions, she has changed her name, and it is clear that her intentions are to continue to reject her family while using the lowness of her origins to show off how far she has come in the world. She has come only to take—taking pictures of her mother and sister with the humble shack in background, and taking what she wants from her family's few inherited possessions to serve as decorations for her house. She designates a butter churn top that her mother still uses as an artistic centerpiece for the alcove table, desiring to freeze as "art" items that are imprinted with grooves from their daily use. (Walker 353)

Dee also presumes she will be granted two quilts pieced and hand-stitched from ancestors' clothing (she does not want the newer quilts that are machine stitched—even though her mother points out that they would last longer). She hadn't wanted the old quilts a few years ago, but now the trend among the fashionable folk back in the city is that such quilts are valuable. Having been educated in accepted discourses on art and value, she currently views the quilts as pieces of art to be hung on the wall. She calls them priceless, but she really values them because they have worldly status and monetary value. She claims to value the quilt as her heritage, but this is obviously not the case from her behavior towards her mother and sister.

Maggie, on the other hand, knows how to quilt herself, and so she values the quilts for their usefulness and for their connection to her family. The mother recognizes the quilts as objects that are not to be immortalized as art—they will eventually disintegrate—and she therefore gives them to Maggie, who values them for their practical and familial functions. She chooses to give the quilts to the daughter who would put them to everyday use. When Dee doesn't get what she wants, she immediately leaves. (Walker 346-356) Josephine Donovan concludes: “Thus, Walker implicitly rejects in this story the idea of art as a discrete masterpiece to be isolated from the real world ... Rather she proposes an art that is embedded in the everyday, that is infused with personal and local history, and whose interest lies in the so-called adventitious matters.” (Donovan 64)

Walker's story encapsulates some of the central problems that feminists have mentioned in regard to the ways in which quilts have been “elevated.” It involves an attempt at appropriating quilts in an empty, superficial manner, which rejects and ignores the intended uses and meanings of their makers. But few feminists have emphasized the issue of utility, as Walker has. What do the quilts mean to the mother and Maggie, that Dee fails to understand? Does the

elevation of quilts to “art” leave behind some piece of quilts' artfulness? Does the removal of quilts from their practical, everyday use involve a rejection of what makes quilts significant to the majority of quilters?

The issue of utility's relationship to aesthetics is particularly important for women. First of all, the predominant (though by no means the only) purpose for making quilts has been for use within the home. And most quilts (despite many exceptions) have been made by women. As Mainardi explains, it is important to view quilts within the context of quilters' intentions, values, and methods (Mainardi 332). Therefore, feminists should foster aesthetic theory that is attentive to the lives of women creators and judges women's work by their own criteria, instead of imposing upon them fine art standards. Secondly, linked with this attentiveness to women's lives and intentions for quilting, which I discussed in Chapter 3, a feminist ethics of care re-centers and values women's creative practice that is focused on the care of family, friends, community, and self. Finally, the rejection and dismissal of utility within dominant aesthetics is another key factor in the rejection and dismissal of women's art.

In this chapter, I will explore the methods and reasons for the disregard of utility within dominant aesthetics, including issues of gender, labor, and preservation. I will examine how the rejection of utility affects quilting as a creative medium and as an aesthetic product. Then, I will move on to discuss both the utility of beauty and the beauty of utility. Finally, I will address how the integration of utility and beauty is important for the enrichment of everyday life. I will argue that quilting may serve as a model for a different view of aesthetics, one that embraces utility as an important feature of the beauty and creativity in everyday life.

### **The Disregarding of Utility in Dominant Aesthetics**

The disregarding of utility may be seen to have roots in the historical separation and elevation of art over craft, but it has reached its zenith within the Art for Art's Sake set of values. As presented in my introduction, Jane Forsey explains that the Art for Art's Sake movement, which peaked with the writings of Clive Bell in 1958 yet remains influential to aesthetics, sought a division between art and other aspects of human life (Forsey 589-591). This fine art discourse has dominated aesthetics during the 20th century, especially when it comes to discussions of handmade objects.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the domination of this sort of aesthetic reasoning has left a deficit of analysis into the aesthetic dimensions of useful items that are handmade (craft, for instance, as opposed to art, and also opposed to the more prestigious design and architecture). The aesthetics of utility are vastly undertheorized, and today, few writers deal with utility in much depth. It is often briefly mentioned regarding quilts and their "rise to art," as well as in pieces concerning other crafts such as ceramics. But it is a topic that seems to have been more central to the theorists of feminist and craft aesthetics in the 1970s, after art's appropriation of several craft techniques and within the context of the popular revival of practicing crafts.

The most recent in-depth theory that I have found on the issue of function within aesthetics centers its discussion around studio crafts, especially ceramics.<sup>9</sup> The reducing of craft to studio craft, however, leads to a neglect of the gendered and classed aspects of utility within the domestic sphere. The sphere of studio craft, including art quilting, is one that aims to produce "art" in a way that is somewhat parallel to the fine art world in its goals of professional standards, exhibition, and making a living from one's art. On the other hand, the majority of craft enthusiasts are amateurs or hobbyists, meaning that they pursue crafts in their leisure time even when they are highly-skilled. The orientation towards utility is on different terms when the work

is professionalized and aimed at being sold, as is the case with studio crafts, than when it is made for personal use or for friends and family, as is the case with hobby crafts. Studio craftspersons often make “useless” art objects, or objects that only symbolically or conceptually refer to utility. When they are making items of utility, they must shape the items to fit either general needs as demanded by the market or the specific desires of one who commissions a piece. The utility of hobby crafts is similar to that of traditional domestic crafts, in that each item is made for a specific purpose within one's home or for a specific recipient, but on the terms of the creator.

A large number of crafts are based on traditions of feminine domestic crafts, which are tied to utility through their material or symbolic associations with women's care of their families. In fact, the rejection of utility and the rejection of craft as “women's work” have gone hand in hand. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics oppose art to lowly craft, mutually reinforced by the hierarchies of the conceptual over the manual, idea over matter, mind over body, product over process, sight over touch, and masculine over feminine. I noted that art became the masculinized realm of the mind and idea, while craft was relatively feminized, encompassing the creative work of the lower classes and women. The aesthetic rejection of the domestic sphere and the concerns of daily life is intensified by the effects of the Art for Art's Sake movement. At the same time, there is a significant subculture of craft enthusiasts that appreciate the application of creativity for issues of utility. The most widespread practice of craft exists within continuing traditions, such as the hobby quilters, as well as within newer waves of DIY and indie craft movements. Jill Hilbrenner points out that these craft trends involve a certain degree of re-embracing utility, as well as a re-valuing of domestic skills, feminized crafts, and “women's work.” (Hilbrenner 1)

Consequently, the time is ripe for further theorizing utility and aesthetics. Although

creative acts often have goals other than beauty, I will focus this discussion of utility and aesthetics on the intersection of utility and beauty. Beauty, while consciously rejected by large sectors of the modern art world for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is still at the root of aesthetic philosophy, and it is still a major purpose for creative making that stretches across the boundaries of art and craft.<sup>10</sup> The thriving “postmodern” trends of blending of art and craft into the 21<sup>st</sup> century have created a new context in which the modernist aesthetic assumptions are increasingly being questioned. Qualities that were previously rejected, such as feminine decorative beauty, are now being re-appropriated and re-vamped.<sup>11</sup> This context demands further depth of theory concerning the relations between beauty and utility because the traditions of feminine decorative crafts are intertwined with matters of domestic utility.

As the concern with utility is an important aspect of everyday life, the intersection of beauty with utility determines to some degree the integration of beauty into the mundane world. My feminist investigation, therefore, involves the issue of accessibility to creativity and beauty, as the realm of “high art” (which has been structured for a large part along lines of gender, race, class, and nationality) is not fully accessible to many people, whether concerning its viewing or its creation. If art is the ultimate exemplar of creativity, and art rejects utility, then creativity and utility are also disconnected within traditional aesthetics. However, the same does not hold true for creative activities within a traditional craft framework, such as traditional quilt culture.

Quilting's long-established embrace of utility is actually a major rationale given for its stigmatization within the fine art world and within a broader mainstream cultural context. Though the utility of craft is often blamed for this stigma, Risatti points out that design, which often incorporates elements of utility, shares a higher status with fine art:



What had occurred in design as a logical result of machine production became a central tenet of mainstream modern art for metaphorical and symbolic reasons... Clearly it is not function that has undermined craft, but modernist attitudes toward the skilled hand that regard it as too expensive, too slow and ultimately too old-fashioned in comparison to machine production. (Risatti, "Craft and Design" 118-119)

However, Risatti's argument on this occasion does not quite follow. As I explained in Chapters 2 and 3, even the same associations may be viewed differently when attached to different objects.

Recall Elissa Auther's detailing that emotive and bodily associations have been seen as innovative expressions from a well-established male artist like Robert Morris, while these same associations were used to brush off female fiber artists' work as decorative, feminine, and trivial (Auther 57). In this instance, design's tie to utility does not fully damage its creative status. I argue that the other associations of design with modern efficiency and the masculine realm of ideas combine to retain its status. Its connection to utility is through the conceptual, as opposed to the integration of process and matter that always accompany craft. Design is also a highly competitive field, so the benefits bestowed upon design as a creative realm are restricted to a relatively small number of people (and concentrated within empowered groups, especially middle-upper-class white men). Risatti's comment is correct with his observation that the inefficiency and expensiveness of the skilled hand in craft make its marriage to utility seem futile and old-fashioned. But why is this? Design's status is not ruined by its associations with utility, while fine art is often created by slow, expensive, "old-fashioned" methods. I argue that it is more a matter of whose hands are involved and how a maker's skills are valued aesthetically and economically. My reasoning rings true in that the hands and skills of female craftspeople are especially devalued. Estella Lauter even suggests that "formalist condemnation of the utilitarian may follow from rather than dictate the rejection of women's art" (Lauter 94).

Nonetheless, in our current context of consumerism, in which commodities are produced

cheaply with exploited labor, easily bought and discarded, the creativity involved in the making of useful items often appears passé. (I will discuss the issues of commodification and consumer culture in relation to craft in Chapter 5.) In fact, as Octavio Paz makes clear, it is a common development that when the utility of an object is reduced in significance, then the object gains aesthetic attention and status (Paz 19). This process has been part of the rise of quilts. Susan Behuniak-Long explains: “The quilt became valued again only when quilts became rarer and symbolic of an age distant enough to be regarded with nostalgia. Part of the charm...is that they are no longer necessary. They are also from a distant enough past that ownership of the item is indicative of good taste rather than of a financial inability to acquire the latest in technological devices.” (Behuniak-Long 155) So the status, and therefore aesthetic consideration, of items is closely tied to both their rarity and their separation from common utility. In this way, aesthetics are always affected by class considerations, as rare and superfluous items are less accessible to those who are not wealthy. The concern with utility has come to be associated with the interests and necessities of people who are of low social status. Fine art (especially with the rise of Art for Art's Sake) has rejected utility partly for this reason; fine art *is* fine art (and not design or craft) due largely to the fact that it has no specific tie to function. The rejection of utility, along with the myths of individual creativity, are perhaps the most entrenched elements of the fine art world that pose it in opposition and set it superior to craft practices.

In so far as fine art embraces the production of beauty, its aesthetics maintain a distinction between beauty and utility, valuing beauty as an end in itself rather than as a functional aspect. Within modernist aesthetics, the functionality of aesthetic objects is disregarded in at least three ways: by precluding, ignoring, or deactivating function. Function is disregarded by *precluding* the possibility of function, as in the case of highly-valued oil paintings,

which are valued not as decorative items but as functionless art objects, as ends in themselves. Studio art quilts also fall into this category, as they are usually made specifically to be displayed and often contain materials or constructions that preclude their function as blankets.

Function is also disregarded by *ignoring* it. The ignoring of function is an important theme in the aesthetic debate about the exhibit, “*Primitivism*” in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* that took place at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984. Thomas McEvelley criticized the curators of the exhibit for ignoring the intended functions of the the “primitive” objects displayed, accusing them of projecting their own conceptions of functionless art onto the objects instead. (McEvelley, Rubin, and Varnedoe 194) Similarly, within the Holstein exhibition, many traditional quilt values, meanings, and functions were ignored, partly due to lack of research and knowledge of the objects. The quilts for the exhibition were chosen in terms of their adherence with a vision of modern abstract art. The curators ignored the traditional quilting value of demonstrating fineness of technique when choosing which quilts should be exhibited. The “feminine” meanings and values of the quilts, including the functional reliability of a well-constructed bed cover, were ignored while favoring their similitude to the art of mostly male painters.

Finally, function may be disregarded by *deactivating* it. An instance of this would be the designation of an antique quilt to the wall and not the bed. Catherine Somerville's *Britchy Quilt*, c. 1930-1950 (see figure 8), for example, is obviously a quilt that was originally made for use but is now being treated as a fine art object. The utility of this britchy quilt (a quilt made from scraps of britches) has been deactivated; a former item of utility, it is now valued as an aesthetic item, in part due to the rare survival of utility quilts. It is now fine art, and fine art, even in quilt form, is not intended to be used. Recall Mainardi's complaints regarding Holstein's treatment of quilts—



Figure 8. *Britchy Quilt*. Catherine Somerville, c. 1930-1950. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2000.004.0116.

their functional associations were stripped from them in order to display them as “real art.” Although both the curators and the viewers of the exhibit were aware of quilts' traditional functions as bed covers, these functions were deactivated to promote a different reading of the objects.

Such disregard of functions may have several motivations. First, the movement of Art for Art's Sake was attempting to provide some protection against perceived threats to artistic expression. Jane Forsey describes how the lack of patronage by end of 19th century caused artists to resist serving political or commercial interests.<sup>12</sup> The rejection of utility was part of a revolt against the extreme rationality of industrialization, in which cold functionality reigned supreme. In reaction, artists began to strive for an idea of art as useless, as an end in itself. (Forsey 588) Even today, non-functionality in regard to art (whether beautiful or not) often begins from the desire to keep art “pure,” separate from commodities and protected from the evils of the market. McEvelley points out that such disregard of function springs from the will to preserve aspects of tradition and culture with the segregation of artwork to museums (McEvelley and Rubin 224). This privileging containment of art is an attempt to keep a sacred space, safe from the bleak realities and necessities of work and exchange.

Along these lines, the “purity” and non-functionality of art is supposed to allow the artist more freedom to focus on the meaning of the art, i.e. its conceptual or abstract qualities. It is commonly acknowledged that the pressures of consumerism can degrade the depth or quality of creative work, and therefore it is understandable that artists wanted to avoid their work being collapsed with the advertising and marketing of products. However, the reality is that the production of fine art relies for its maintenance and continuation on expensive materials, collecting, exhibiting, funding and commissioning, as well as the luxury of time for artists to create and collectors to pursue art. Therefore, the art world has a tendency to be friendly to those with the power and money to support it. This concern to keep art “pure” is also related to fine art's ambivalence about beauty or any other quality that is useful for appealing to the masses. As the rejection of beauty has not proven to free artists from concerns of economic corruption,

beauty has begun to regain aesthetic status as well as attention from aesthetic theorists<sup>13</sup>. Still, other issues concerning utility have blocked it from being seriously re-assessed within dominant aesthetics.

Most imperatively, the disregard of utility is usually done in the spirit of material preservation. The desire to preserve objects materially is a very strong and practical concern—most material goods will wear out if used repeatedly. Therefore, most people do not question that one should keep the “art quilt” on the wall, not on the bed. The tensions over preservation are often more complicated when it comes to objects that were made with intentions for use. These tensions apply to the tribal objects in the “*Primitivism*” exhibit that are protected from further use and displayed and stored with care. Likewise, much of the research concerning antique quilts is focused on their preservation as cultural and historical documents. There is a strong movement towards the preservation of quilts that are heirlooms, but the trend has also been taken up by hobby quilters and applied to the practice of making new quilts. Quilters are experienced with the qualities of their medium, and therefore they are aware that various fabrics have particular weaknesses. Current quilting practices in hobby culture recommend high quality fabrics and threads for long-lasting “future heirlooms.”

The issue of preservation always has had an impact on the practice of quilting. Historically, some fancy quilts were treated with special care, and their use was reserved for special occasions or for guests (Mainardi 332). In fact, within traditional quilting culture, the very vulnerability to damage of quilts' materials correspond to their status. Therefore, delicate silks and velvets were utilized for the special-occasion quilts, in order to display an abundance of material wealth and to show off a lack of necessity for such quilts to be used daily. In contrast, quilts made from durable fabrics such as denim and polyester have been relegated to particularly

low status because they may be used repeatedly without considerable wear. Such utility quilts have displayed an attendance to necessity, practicality, and resourcefulness, which must always be the concerns of the impoverished. In this way, even a function-centered craft such as quilting displays some aesthetic tendencies against utility, in so far as utility is tied to associations of class signification.

The tension between utility and preservation is a topic of some anxiety to quilters and quilt collectors, whether regarding an old or new quilt. As Whitney Otto notes, it is commonly acknowledged that one cannot leave a precious quilt on a bed that is exposed to sunlight, even though the natural light will bring the colors alive to one's sight. The light will damage the quilt by fading it, so one must shade the window or put the quilt away. (Otto 94) It is deemed important keep the quilt, a precious heirloom or work of art, from harm, although the process of preservation may involve a great deal of fuss and may even lessen one's enjoyment of the quilt. For instance, Otto describes the mixed feelings that may occur from storing a quilt in a protective frame:

Drawbacks of this method—quilt in Plexiglass box—include losing a sense of intimacy with the work. The desire to touch the quilt will be harbored within yourself as well as within your guests...but they will simply have to imagine the feel of the small stitches, softness of the material, unevenness of the texture (all of which gives your quilt its look of life), the extra puff of stuffing in selected areas of the top cloth, not to be confused with the layer of cotton batting that lies between the backing and the top work. Do not neglect to note that this sort of display treatment renders the quilt more formidable as a work of art. An ordinary, useful household item transformed. Shake your head at this transformation. (Otto 93)

Such an installation of a quilt protects it from damage, from accidents as well as general wear and tear, and it treats the quilt like a precious art object in its special space of containment. However, it also isolates the quilt from intimacy, from experience of the quilt through close viewing and touching. There are many other options for preservation, and the International Quilt

Study Center provides free up-to-date recommendations in pamphlets and on their website.<sup>14</sup>

This information includes links to resources as well as specific instructions for quilt care, including folding quilts properly to avoid permanent creases, storing in a breathable container lined with acid-free paper, and occasional airing or cleaning of quilts according to their fabrics.

There exists some ambivalence about becoming too wrapped up in preservation, however, and some people prefer the enjoyment that comes through the use of a quilt to its long-lasting storage in a special box. After all, as I will explore below, the beauty of an object is often inherently connected to its use. As Paz points out, “The work of art, as a material thing, is not eternal.” Part of art's beauty is its transience, revealing not a static eternity but the product of instances in time. (Paz 24) Embracing the use of a beautiful object, as well as the effects of that use over time, are ideas that have always had a home in certain arenas of craft, while fine art has thoroughly rejected such a celebration of utility. In this way, certain types of beauty that are interdependent with utility have been and are overlooked by dominant aesthetics, just as the softness and fine stitching of quilts has been lost on many of those that aimed to elevate quilts to art.

Along these lines, ignoring functions may be simply the result of a failure to understand them, which is an important factor with the presentation of the tribal objects in the “*Primitivism*” exhibition. The curators of the exhibit could not grasp the complex ritual functions for which the objects were intended, so they projected intentions of “art-making” instead. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Teri Klassen points out that if viewers do not understand an object's intended meanings or uses, they will often project their own interpretation onto it. And in this way, it may be seen that not all functions are completely rejected, but rather it is the case that certain people's interests or meanings are accorded value while others' are not. The function of quilts to signify



certain values for Jonathan Holstein or Bill Arnett takes precedence over the functions that the quilts served within the homes of their female creators.

I think that the real situation behind the disregard of utility is a *hierarchy* of functions and interests in relation to beauty. As Lauter inquires, “Is it really true that most works of art are 'useless'? Don't they serve a variety of social functions?” (Lauter 23) Aesthetic objects may serve a variety of functions, though some are valued over others. Intellectual functions are often most highly regarded. For art, such intellectual functions include innovation, form, and concepts. Social, moral or political functions also exist for aesthetic objects. For example, such objects may be used to reaffirm or challenge traditions, to inspire religious devotion, or to protest injustice. Quilts, in one form or another, have served all of the functions that I have mentioned. Especially at the height of quilting enthusiasm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, quilting was a go-to medium for women's communication. For instance, a quilt in the Smithsonian, *The Solar System Quilt*, 1876, by Ellen Harding Baker, depicts a map of the solar system as it was portrayed in astronomy books at that time. The maker used it as a visual aid for the intellectual and social functions of astronomy education, which was a respectable pursuit for 19th-century women. (“1876 Ellen Harding Baker's 'Solar System' Quilt.”) Along with the *Suffragette Flag Quilt* that I described in Chapter 3, this illustrates that quilts have served a variety of purposes, not just material ones (Shaw 226).

Material functions are those that are the most disregarded in relation to aesthetics. For example, decorative art's status as “art” is often seen to be questionable, and the aesthetic design of products from cars to teapots may be written off as mere marketing. Importantly, material functions are most obviously recognized *as* functions. I think that this collapse of the material with utility in general, combined with the low status of material interests, is principally why

functions at large are disregarded in aesthetics. For this very reason, it may be most helpful to focus on *material* functions in order to explore the relationship between beauty and utility.

Material functions are most obviously and simply nameable in everyday life. The relation between beauty and utility, therefore, may be found most easily within what Arthur Danto calls the “Third Realm of Beauty,” existing between art and nature (Danto 61). Danto explains that, “Third Realm beauty is the kind of beauty something possesses only because it was *caused* to possess it through actions whose purpose it is to *beautify*. It is the domain, in brief, of **beautification.**” (Danto's emphasis.) (Danto 68) One may discover the relation between beauty and utility within the Third Realm, as beautification is recognized as serving some purpose or another.

It is within this “Third Realm” that quilting generally would be placed, although I question where and by whom a line is drawn between the realms of “art” and “beautification.” The utility of quilts within a craft framework would put them in the “Third Realm,” because their beauty is serving an outside purpose, while the various functions of art quilts and other pieces of art would not be recognized as functions per se. The purposes of traditional quilt culture, however, such as the providing of physical warmth and comfort for one's family, are seen as functions in a way that diminishes their aesthetic value and separates them from the realm of “art.” But as Lauter asks, “Why is the function of covering a bed less honorable than the function of providing status to a wealthy investor?” (Lauter 94)

In summary, utility is disregarded in relation to aesthetics by precluding, ignoring, or deactivating the utility of aesthetic objects. A major motivation for this is the preservation of objects, but it is also related to the mutually reinforcing hierarchies of dominant aesthetics and the Art for Art's Sake movement, which serve to separate and elevate art apart from that which is

characterized as having to do with the body, matter, or femininity. The ways in which utility is recognized as such and used to discount objects as “art” is part of the rejection of most quilts as “art” and also part of the fine art discourse that controls the meanings of quilts when they are “elevated.” For the rest of this chapter, I will attempt to begin theorizing the aesthetics of utility, which have been relatively undertheorized. Attending to the beauty and utility of quilting as a traditional craft, I will proceed to argue three points: that beauty is useful, that utility can be part of the aesthetic value of an object, and that the combination of beauty and utility is an important aspect of the integration of beauty into everyday life.

### **Beauty as Useful**

Beauty may be said to serve many different functions, material and otherwise. Danto discusses beauty as one out of a myriad of aesthetic attributes. He explains that beauty has a rhetorical quality, as it promotes a certain orientation toward a given subject (Danto 121). As what Danto calls an aesthetic “inflector,” beauty is useful in its effectiveness at inspiring certain reactions of reception. Beauty, however, holds a special place for Danto. Beyond its property as a useful inflector, beauty is important for the quality of life in general. Danto concludes that beauty “is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it” (Danto 160). Beauty is among those inflectors that are easy to appreciate, as beauty gives people great pleasure and satisfaction.

In addition to its general function of enhancing life, beauty may be used to serve other, more specific functions, such as political goals. Political propaganda produced by governments and nationalist movements has often relied on beauty to attract followers. Activists have also mixed beauty, as well as other inflectors, with politics in the creation of art working towards

social change. For example, in her discussion of feminist aesthetics, Lauter states: “With increased awareness of the ways art has always served political systems, feminists have been willing to break the taboo against overtly political art. Not all the art made by feminists is overtly political, of course, but the power to effect a response through some formal means is an identifying feature of art in the emerging feminist theory as well as a sign of its quality.” (Lauter 29) Within feminist aesthetics, therefore, the relations of beauty and utility are not ignored, as feminist theorists point to the often unacknowledged political purposes behind the use of beauty, both within art and beyond it. Feminists have also been invaluable in the investigation of beauty and utility in the feminized, domestic crafts.

Of course, beauty is very useful in regard to material functions. In relation to the Third Realm, Danto points out that, “‘Beautification’ is clearly pragmatic: it is intended to cause viewers to be more attracted to something than they would be without benefit of beautifiers” (Danto 121). For example, the interior design, or the beautification, of a place of business, such as a restaurant, serves the function of making the restaurant more attractive. Environments matter because they influence our reflections and judgments about our experiences within such environments. For a restaurant, therefore, the beauty of its environment is useful to attract new customers by what can be seen through the front windows, as well as to encourage customers to return by providing an overall enjoyable experience. Many successful restaurants attend to all the senses—the taste of the food, of course, being perhaps the most important. Visual beauty is also very important, as restaurants attract people with beautiful furniture, lighting, wall colors, decorations and artworks. They also may appeal to hearing with appropriate music, as well as attending to overall comfort with the temperature setting and arrangement of tables. Of course, the extent and type of beauty differs according to the type of restaurant, to what image the

owners are trying to accomplish in order to compliment the food and please the customers who frequent their establishment. There are different aesthetics for diner, for cafe, or for up-scale dining, and customers will have different expectations for each. However, among all types, many restaurants owe much of their success to the beautification of their environment as well as to the aesthetic qualities of their food. This is just one of many examples that could be given to illustrate the fact that beauty is useful.

Quilting also embraces and optimizes the usefulness of beauty. As I mentioned previously, fancy quilts were historically made with the intention of display in a guest bedroom; it was also common to drape quilts incorporating silk, velvet, and intricate embroidery across a couch or chaise in the parlor. The importance of display has extended beyond the most fancy, however, as the majority of quilts have been made with display in mind. Mainardi points out that display was as equally important to quilt makers as the function of warming the bed. In early American bedrooms, the display of a quilt was the centerpiece of the room as there was little other furniture. Quilt makers also displayed (and still display) their quilts at churches, community halls, and state and county fairs. This is a parallel “art world” to that of fine art exhibitions in museums. (Mainardi 331) The useful beauty of quilts has served many different functions, such as the indication of social status and leisure time to make fancy labor-intensive items, the role of a conversation piece for guests, the showing off of skill, or the communication of allegiance to community or political causes.

And hobby quilters today have the usefulness of beauty precisely in mind as they quilt. Most hobby quilters make so many quilts that there are more quilts in their homes than beds. The main purpose of many of the quilts made by these quilters is not their usefulness for providing warmth. Instead, quilts are made beautiful for the enjoyment of making, for display, or for gifts

and charity—all functions of some sort. It is actually common practice now to incorporate sleeves into the construction of a quilt, in order to facilitate hanging it on decorative rods.

Quilting is an aesthetic medium that allows the maker to choose from a broad range of purposes when creating a quilt. And beauty is made to serve whatever function the quilter has in mind. Within quilting as a traditionally feminized craft, domestic functions are not looked down upon or set apart from other functions. It is true that the “elevation” of quilts is tied to their increasing distance from the necessary concerns of utilities within daily life. However, it is also true that many hobby quilters who carry on traditional quilting have questioned the rejection of utility and have championed a view of beauty and art in which utility is a central element. The beauty of a quilt is tied to the function that it is created to serve.

### **Utility as Beautiful**

The relation between beauty and utility can also be seen in reverse: function may be beautiful. Modern aesthetics may be aware, to a certain degree, of beauty's usefulness, but it does not often attend to the beauty of utility. (There may be certain exceptions, such as the beautiful utility of design in architecture or certain eras of furniture. Such awareness is often centered on the intellectual pursuit of design, however, not the skills of hand-making.) For example, in relation to the “*Primitivism*” exhibition, several questions arise: Whatever the true meanings of these objects (whether they involve some degree of “personal expression” or are items with purely utilitarian religious and communal purposes), is it necessary to strip them of all other functions in order to draw attention to their aesthetic value? At the least, wouldn't descriptions of their original intentions and purposes add to their aesthetic value? I think that understanding and appreciating the functionality of objects often increases one's recognition of their beauty.

Aesthetic appreciation of utility still remains to some extent within popular aesthetics, and is drawn upon for commercial interests. Marketing often relies on this connection of beauty and function, elevating the beauty of the design of products in relation to their usefulness. But my argument is applicable to more than just product marketing—one must note the importance of function for the enjoyment of everyday objects. For instance, I may find a boring brown teapot to be the most aesthetically pleasing teapot I've ever experienced. My reception of the teapot as beautiful is not because it looks impressive sitting on a shelf, but because it is well-balanced, ergonomic, pours smoothly, and holds just the right amount of tea for my purposes. The usefulness of the teapot is pleasing to me and adds to my experience of the teapot as an object of beauty. On the other hand, if a teapot is shaped into a beautiful form and painted in vivid colors, but it is designed such that it does not serve its function, then the beauty of this teapot is diminished. This second teapot is maybe an inconvenient size, holding more than one cup of tea but less than two. Perhaps it dribbles when I pour tea, or it has an awkward handle—one that is too dainty to support the weight of a full teapot or is not shaped for the human hand, or maybe the pot is top-heavy. Whatever the case, the second teapot's beauty is limited by its lack of functionality. When I look at it, I will only recall the negative experiences I have had trying to use it. The first teapot, however, will appear all the more beautiful to me, as I will recall the ease and enjoyment of its use, as well as appreciating the thoughtful and clever design that went into its creation, what I view to be a beautiful design. An object's fulfillment of its practical purposes, therefore, may increase its aesthetic value; utility can be part of the beauty of an object.

This experience of utility's beauty is heightened when the object is handmade, as the maker's skilled hands have bridged the gap between thoughtful design and useful object through their careful execution. As Paz explains, crafts are: "...beautiful objects, not despite their

usefulness but because of it. Their beauty is simply an inherent part of them, like the perfume and the color of flowers. It is inseparable from their function: they are beautiful things because they are useful things. Handcrafts belong to a world antedating the separation of the useful and the beautiful.” (Paz 17) In a handmade craft, therefore, the integration of beauty and utility can be seamless, united due to a tradition of aesthetic style in which the maker of the object takes into consideration design, creation, and use. Similarly, the usefulness of quilts may provide a layer of beauty that is often overlooked. A quilt's ability to warm a bed, to be soft against the skin, to add a comforting weight—these are qualities demonstrating that very usefulness, experienced every day, is beautiful in itself. This framework of embracing the utility of objects as an aspect of their beauty is part of traditional quilt culture.

Quilters, making and assessing their work from within a crafting context, have often been known to examine quilts in a different way from fine artists. They do not just stand across the room and contemplate the overall design. Instead, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, touch informs their aesthetic analysis; they are likely to take the edge of the quilt in their hands, finger the cloth for softness, and examine the stitches closely for the strength and evenness of the quilt's construction. The maker of the quilt senses its physical qualities, imagining the feelings of the intended user of the quilt, possibly a loved-one or the recipient of charity. Later, the person using the quilt will feel the material of the quilt, and they may imagine the care and process that went into the quilt through the hands of its maker. This process adds a layer of meaning to the giving of handmade quilts, such as that of “The Sleeping Bag Project,” as shown in *Instructions and Sleeping Bags*, 2011 (see figure 9). Jim and Flo Wheatley, founders of this charity, describe it on “The Sleeping Bag Project” website: “My Brother’s Keeper Quilt Group is made up of individuals and groups desiring to help the homeless by making simple sleeping bags from



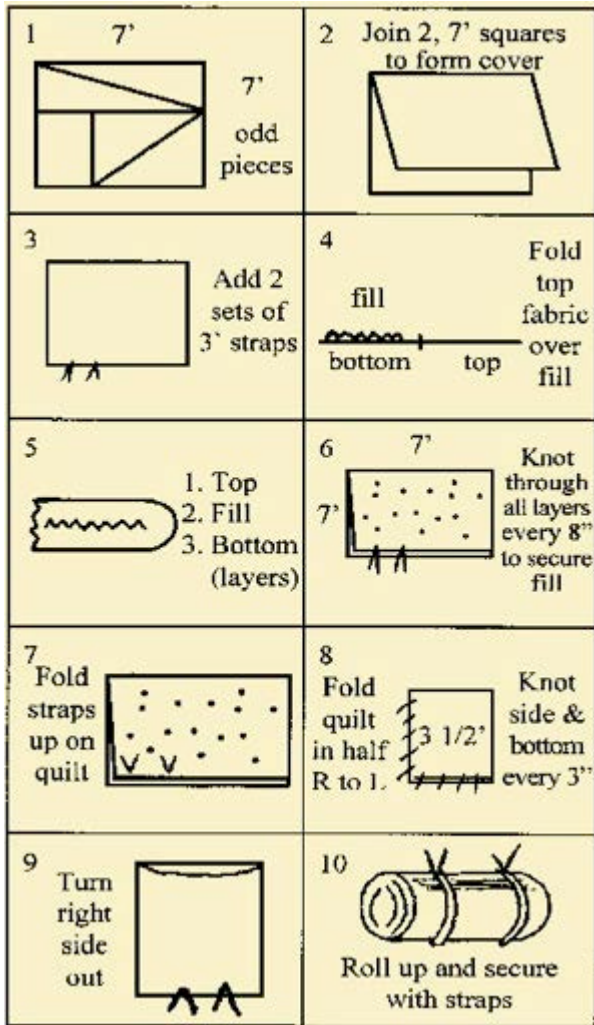


Figure 9. *Instructions and Sleeping Bags*. Jim and Flo Wheatley, *The Sleeping Bag Project*.

recycled fabrics and distributing them FREE to those who need them. Our only purpose is to help the homeless be warm until they can be helped or healed by others in our society.” For people in need of warmth on cold nights, a simple yet cushy sleeping bag could be a beautiful thing.

“The Sleeping Bag Project” provides an example of an object, the utility of which makes it appear beautiful to the receiver. The framework for “My Brother's Keeper Quilt Group,” as

well as many other quilting charities documented by Katherine Bell in *Quilting for Peace: Make the World a Better Place One Stitch at a Time*, is one that recognizes the aesthetic value of a creative process that is centered upon the physical care of others. This aesthetic framework brings to mind once again feminist ethics of care, and the re-assessment of values in a way that centers women's experiences, including the heritage of women's traditional art forms, which are focused on the care of family and community. Looking at beauty through a feminist lens, and incorporating feminist ethics of care, allows one to view the utility of quilts as an integral piece of their beauty.

### **The Importance of Utility/Beauty in Everyday Life**

Clearly, the hard distinction between aesthetic and functional qualities is a false one. The separation of beauty and utility in traditional aesthetics must be re-examined. As I have pointed out, rather than necessarily being opposed to one another, beauty and utility are often related. Beauty serves many functions, and the fulfillment of functions is often beautiful. As beauty is a part of the everyday through the creation and use of functionally beautiful items, it becomes apparent that beauty and utility are not opposed to one another, but rather they are often intertwined.

Life often demands great attention to what is useful, so the integration of beauty and utility is vital to a discussion of beauty and its implications for everyday life. Danto, as I have said, sees beauty as necessary for life, and the beauty contained within museum walls is not a sufficient solution. He asks: "Why not make the world outside the museum beautiful enough that the need for the compensatory beauty inside it disappears?...Why do we need to endure the world as it is, or mitigate it by building islands of beauty for intervals of relief, when we can mitigate it

directly?" (Danto 116) Such questions suggest that the practical improvement of people's lives is directly related to the beauty that surrounds them. Danto points out that aesthetics must include the addressing of the practical concerns that would improve people's lives, including the adding of beauty to the mundane world in order to improve the quality of life (Danto 115).

In order for dominant aesthetics to shift towards the enriching of everyday life, it is necessary for many hierarchies to be dismantled. I argue that the division between the categories of art and craft, between highly-valued objects and items of utility, causes us to lose important opportunities to integrate elements of creativity and artfulness into our everyday, physical environments. The segregation of aesthetic value to the fine art world is attended by a deprivation of appreciation for and theorizing about the beauty that already surrounds us. In proposing that "the insistence that elegance and ecstasy are to be found in daily life, in our habits of being, in the ways we regard one another and the world around us. It is sacrilege to reserve this beauty solely for art," bell hooks is of like mind (hooks 49). Everyday beauty is what engages us to integrate creativity into mundane activities, and this point gains significance as one recognizes that the aesthetic hierarchies that have rejected the mundane and the useful are shaped by issues of gender, class, race, and nationality. The concern with utility has come to be associated with the interests and necessities of people who are of low social status.

For this reason, quilts that have been labeled as art necessarily have their utility stripped from them. The title of Susan E. Bernick's essay, "A Quilt Is an Art Object when It Stands Up like a Man" sums up the fine art approach to quilts: a quilt can be art if it rejects its feminine domestic function as a bed cover and hangs upright on a wall, like a painting. This situation displays the gendered hierarchy of art (which is masculinized) over craft (which is femininized). If an antique quilt is recognized as a historically valuable artwork, it is likely to be either stored or

displayed carefully, and maybe even donated to a museum, in order to preserve it for future viewers. Similarly, if a contemporary quilt is deemed to be art, it is likely to be created and displayed with no intention of being used as a bed cover. Of course, I would not demonize the careful preservation of old quilts, nor do I think that quilts should never be made with the intention of display. I am not arguing that quilts being treated as non-utilitarian art is necessarily wrong. Instead, I wish to counter the trend that in order for quilts to be considered art, their utility (and thus, an element of their femininity) must be rejected. Within the context of the elevation of quilts, it is important not to blindly lose hold of quilting's traditional aesthetic values, and it is also important to grasp the opportunity to re-evaluate utility's aesthetic qualities.

Utility is an especially important issue for feminist aesthetics because of the way that creative practices have been traditionally gendered. Women have been (and still are, to a certain extent, particularly within more traditional cultures) typically responsible for the domestic sphere, for taking care of the household and the children. This is a situation in which the disregarding of utility is unthinkable—rather, within the caring of household and children, utility is of prime importance. For this reason, women's creativity has traditionally been channeled into practical applications for the home. Women have focused their creative capacities on making beautiful and useful items for their family, community, or for sale to provide supplemental income. The creativity involved in a craft such as quilting has been justified because quilts are useful items. In this way, utility has been an important *justification* for women's creative pursuits, especially in contexts which have not encouraged women to compete in the public world of art.

Hobby quilters who carry on the practices of traditional quilt culture often still focus their creativity on the making of quilts as useful objects. This spirit of practical creativity exists within my own family: my sister can rig up a baby swing in an afternoon, using only a pair of old jeans,

dowel rods, and old curtain cords; my mother spends much of her free time knitting afghans for graduation or wedding gifts, prayer shawls to be given to those in need of comfort through a church organization that she started, or baby hats for a charity for newborns in hospitals. The approach to creativity that focuses on care and utility is one that has been passed down through generations of my family, as illustrated by Nelida Vessot Gordon's *Utility Quilt*, c. 1930s-1940s (see figure 10). When my mother was cleaning out my grandmother's basement with my aunts, no one else wanted this quilt. It does not display an intricate design, delicately-patterned fabrics, or lovely colors as do many other quilts that Gordon made (including figures 4 and 6, which you have already seen Chapters 1 and 2). However, I contend that this winter utility quilt is beautiful in its inclusion of wool for warmth, practical incorporation of scraps, skilled beaded decoration, and sturdiness for many years of use. To fully appreciate the beauty of this quilt, one must acknowledge the resourcefulness utilized to fulfill a specific domestic function and the ability to maximize the artfulness of the needed item.

The myth that there is no significant culture or art in the domestic sphere is now difficult to defend. Feminist aesthetic theorists and art activists have made important contributions in their investigations of domestic arts and femininized crafts. Partly due to the work of feminists, there has been a cultural shift in the attitudes of many people regarding the care of domestic space. A growing subculture of people in the United States have found that there is value in having a material connection to one's most intimate environment. There has been a reclaiming of the domestic sphere by third wave feminists, and indeed, within popular culture, especially in the DIY movement.<sup>15</sup> Now with the popularity of creative DIY activities, especially domestic culinary arts, as Hilbrenner describes with the term “New Domesticity,” the rejection of useful creative pursuits has been even more worn down (Hilbrenner 1). The current DIY and crafting



Figure 10. *Utility Quilt*. Nelida Vessot Gordon, c. 1930s-1940s.

trends have allowed a certain degree of re-embracing utility and creativity in the domestic sphere, now in a postmodern, self-conscious way. Websites such as Pinterest.com abound with examples of many people's enthusiasm and strong desire to create beautiful items of utility.

These trends have not been sufficiently theorized or tied into scholarly aesthetics, especially regarding the topic of utility. However, it is time for further theorizing of the fusion between aesthetics and utility, and the project of investigating a traditionally domestic craft such as quilting is a good place to start. The theorizing of utility within the context of quilting requires looking back at the rejected poles of the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics, as they are linked with the aesthetic statuses of both quilting and utility. A feminist vision of aesthetics involves a

re-examination of the aesthetics of touch, the body, and feminized domestic labor. Skill is also connected with concerns of utility, as skill is a necessary component during the creation of objects for use, and attention to skill is part of the resurgence of the domestic arts. This is a reclaiming of art as an on-going process for the enrichment of daily life, as opposed to fixed, isolated, preserved objects.

With its relative embracing of utility and attention to process and skill, the aesthetic framework of craft tends to emphasize a certain kind of beauty as a goal of creation. Paz explains that there is a special relation between form (the way the object is made) and meaning (the purpose for which it is made) within the handcrafted object. This interrelation between form and meaning produces the result of beauty. (Paz 17) The ideal beauty of craft, therefore, contains utility as an essential element. And this integration of utility into beauty enhances the enjoyment of the handcrafted object. Paz describes how the contemplation of use and beauty is pleasurable: “The persistence and the proliferation of purely decorative motifs in craftwork reveal to us an intermediate zone between usefulness and aesthetic contemplation. In the work of handcraftsmen there is a constant shifting back and forth between usefulness and beauty. This continual interchange has a name: pleasure. Things are pleasing because they are useful *and* beautiful.” (Paz 21) This shifting back and forth between usefulness and beauty is certainly present in the practice of quilting. For example, the quilting (binding layers together) of quilts is useful to create a warm, cushy blanket, and the pattern of the quilting lines or ties is integral to the beauty of the quilt. The quilting lines are all the more beautiful if they are patterned in a way to address both visual and tactile qualities—if they are arranged into intricate designs that carry one's eyes across the surface and that produce an overall even construction, pleasing texture, and practical thickness. The utility and beauty of a bed-quilt cannot be separated from one another. Of course,

if a quilt is not visually beautiful, the function that it may serve in decorating a home will be diminished. But also, if a quilt is made of a visually pleasing but scratchy or fragile material, its usefulness, and on some level its beauty, are diminished. Therefore, there is an interdependency of usefulness and beauty, and the most pleasing quilts will incorporate a unification of both.

A craft-oriented aesthetics may also offer a different way of looking at utility's main aesthetic obstacle: material preservation. Even the eventual damage of the used object is part of its aesthetic appeal, if viewed from the radical craft perspective that Paz proposes:

The thing that is handmade has no desire to last for thousands upon thousands of year, nor is it possessed by a frantic drive to die an early death. It follows the appointed round of days, it drifts with us as the current carries us along together, it wears away little by little, it neither seeks death nor denies it: it accepts it. Between the timeless time of the museum and the speeded-up time of technology, craftsmanship is the heartbeat of human time ... The craftsman's handiwork teaches us to die and hence teaches us to live. (Paz 24)

Unlike many manufactured products, craft is not designed to be eventual trash, and unlike most visual fine art, craft does not aim at eternal existence in the protection of a museum. The acceptance of time and decomposition through use is an approach that can bring a beautiful sense of peace to one's enjoyment of material things. This is certainly an attitude with which many quilters are familiar, as “Everyday Use” illustrates. While some quilt-enthusiasts have become more wrapped up in concerns of preservation, others have wholeheartedly cherished the use of their handcrafted quilts, and perhaps even the material change that this use reflects from the passage of time and human life.

A radical craft-oriented embracing of utility challenges dominant discourses about the elevation of quilts. Walker's “Everyday Use,” for instance, champions the meanings and values that quilts have for those who make and use them, as opposed to representatives of a fine art mentality like Dee, who attempt to appropriate quilts under the guise of “saving” them, but are really more interested in collecting for their own personal wealth and status. This story has



striking parallels to the “elevation” of Gee's Bend quilts, which dominant discourse painted as being “rescued” from the ignorant and careless quilters by the art-savvy Arnetts (Dewan 1). When the Gee's Bend quilts are constantly valued for their similitude to modernist paintings, then it is easy to see how their casual use in a small, rural town is startling. But if the quilts are valued in a way that incorporates appreciation for the processes and reasons for their creation, then the discourse of “rescue” is what appears to be ignorant, and as well as rather arrogant.

Gee's Bend quilts are striking and expressive, but I contend that the “miracle” that art critics such as Michael Kimmelman see in these quilts comes from the critics’ lack of understanding of what these quilts mean in the context of the makers’ daily lives. Kimmelman and his colleagues can only describe the beauty of the quilts in terms of modern aesthetics. (Kimmelman 1) As recounted in *Choosing Craft: The Artist's Viewpoint* by Vicki Halper and Diane Douglas, Mary Lee Bendolph, one of the quilters carrying on the Gee's Bend tradition, explains that the quilts were utilitarian, made for the purpose of keeping people warm. Each quilter wanted to make the most beautiful quilts, and when they were hung outside on the clotheslines in the spring, everyone would view and compare them, picking up new patterns from others and then making alterations and innovations. (Halper 40-42) So this community has had its own aesthetic scene, which may have been influenced by modernist painters, but is better understood by attending to the details of the quilters' lives and what the quilts meant within that context. The beauty of the quilts is not inexplicable at all, but instead it is directly related to their utility and significance within a community that values them as an important part of everyday life. Much of the aesthetic value of Gee's Bend quilts comes from the makers' creative use of scraps, using what was at hand in order to make something that serves the purposes of warmth and comfort.

Relating back to my central thesis, I argue in this chapter that a feminist re-evaluation of what counts as “art,” which includes an investigation into the aesthetics of domestic craft, must take the “domestic” seriously. This means realizing that the aesthetic dismissal of utility is an integral piece of the dismissal of women's traditional crafts. Utility should be re-appraised in terms of its relation to a different sort of beauty, one that is intertwined with everyday life. Quilting's tradition as a feminized domestic craft gives it potential to illustrate how utility can be embraced as interconnected with beauty and creativity within daily life. In many ways, quilters have been transgressing the divide between beauty and utility for centuries, by creating objects that are creative, innovative, beautiful, meaningful, *and* useful. Quilting is a medium of creative making that has allowed many people with few resources to express their feelings, concerns, sense of beauty, love for one another, and sense of community, and this is why quilting has such great potential as a subversive artistic medium for the nurturing of many people's creativity.

## Chapter 5: Heirloom and Scrap Quilting Traditions

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the elevation to art of the quilts of Gee's Bend involved troubling discourses and questionable business practices, leading to a controversial lawsuit that was settled out of court in 2008 (Farr 1). In this chapter, I will show how aesthetic discourses that maintain hierarchies are related to economic exploitation, linked by stigmas against feminized labor. The case of the elevation of Gee's Bend quilts and the ensuing controversy and lawsuit illustrate how economic disparity goes hand in hand with inequality of aesthetic status and power. Bill Arnett and his family enterprises, which were responsible for the "elevation" and which represented and promoted the quilters, claim that they have done so purely out of the goodness of their hearts, because they care about sharing this important artwork with the public (Dewan 1). The Arnetts assert that they have made no profit from the quilts, but rather have spent thousands of dollars on promoting the finest of the quilts, and in addition have purchased "hundreds of quilts of little artistic value just to help the women" (Dewan 1).

However, Linda Hunt Beckman and others have pointed out the questionable business practices that drove a few of the quilters to sue the Arnetts for damages. The money from the sales of quilts to galleries and the sales of quilt designs for use on household products was filtered through the Arnetts' business without clear accounting (Beckman 7). The highest sellers have gone for more than \$20,000, while the quilters sell other quilts in the town of Gee's Bend for between \$200-7,500 depending on their size and composition (Dewan 2). Sheila Farr notes that most payments to the quilters from outside of Gee's Bend have been deposited into a foundation, with no detailed list of what payments were for or how much commission was taken by the Arnetts (Farr 1). The Arnetts' lawyer stated that royalties from "the use of quilt designs on

rugs, mugs, vases and bedding sold by Kathy Ireland World Marketing” were paid into a foundation instead of benefiting some individual quilters over others. He claimed that, “It’s difficult to keep up with that from an accounting standpoint.” (Farr 1) However, the suing quilters say they never agreed to this arrangement, and those in charge of the Arnett-organized Collective were not aware of any royalties from the use of their quilting designs or the use of the Gee’s Bend name for housewares (Beckman 8). Individual quilters were also not named as artists with the use of designs (Beckman 8). Beckman argues that the selling of designs for rugs made in India seems to go against the Arnetts’ claims that their aims are purely those of promoting the quilts as art, not profit-making (Beckman 8) Beckman, who lived in Gee’s Bend as a civil rights worker in 1968 and has gone back there to visit and interview residents, says that few of the quilters have benefited significantly from the Arnetts’ endeavors, except for pride in the fame of Gee’s Bend (Beckman 1, 9).

Some individuals and institutions within the art world have questioned the methods of the Arnetts. It was suggested by one gallery owner that the Arnetts should have taken quilts on consignment instead of buying them up cheaply before they gained value (Beckman 9). The Seattle Art Museum was concerned about gaining permissions to reproduce the image of a quilt by Annie Mae Young and making sure that she received her share of the quilt’s \$20,000 selling price (Farr 1). However, most art world representatives have been openly or tacitly supportive of the Arnetts, who are, after all, their colleagues. Those that have avoided the controversy are portrayed in the media as “staying neutral.” For example, Farr reports that the Tacoma Art Museum director Stephanie Stebich stated that she is “not involved in the commercial side of the art world”, that she does not know about the money involved or about gift items with quilt images in the museum shop (Farr 1). But is this really “staying neutral,” considering the context

in which the Arnetts have money, power, and connections while the Gee's Bend plaintiffs have none of these things? I argue that art institutions have a responsibility to investigate the processes by which they gain their art, and that in a questionable situation, they are actually taking sides by not checking with the artists themselves or their lawyers. Otherwise, "art" is split from its makers, and it becomes yet another commodity within our capitalist society (the very result that the Art for Art's Sake movement was aiming to avoid).

Going a step further, one might wonder about how the process of "elevating" quilts is exploitative in and of itself. For instance, Lucinda Pettway Franklin also sued for damages regarding three family quilts that Matt Arnett borrowed and failed to return. After the suit, the Arnetts had the quilts appraised and then turned them over, claiming that they were not as old as Franklin said and that they are only worth \$100-450 each. However, older quilts are more rare and therefore often more valuable, and some quilts were selling for tens of thousands around that time. (Farr 1) I argue that this is a demonstration of the aesthetic and economic power that the Arnetts have in determining the value of objects, a power not shared by the Franklin or the other quilters. The quilts that the Arnetts were forced to return to Franklin are determined to be relatively valueless, while the quilts that the Arnetts have "made" into fine art are by far the most revered. Sheila Dewan reports, "The most valuable quilts, the ones in the original show, are owned by the Arnetts, who say they will not sell them on the open market" (Dewan 1). And yet, the media has largely echoed the perspective of the Arnetts, portraying the quilters as simple and ignorant people who should be grateful for being "discovered" instead of attacking those who have supposedly helped them. Franklin responds, "People look at us and nobody is looking to be greedy or vindictive...but we are a proud people, we always have been. We want to survive with as much dignity as possible. Nobody want to be used. Nobody." (Farr 1) Beckman argues that

the approach of the Arnetts amounts to “sentimental capitalism, an ostentatious show of affection for people they regarded as commodities” (Beckman 2).

It is arguable that both the Gee's Bend quilts and the quilters who created them have been treated as commodities within a commercial art world, and the capitalist mindset involved in the process and bolstering of their “elevation” provides little insight into how such beauty could come from humble women in an impoverished African-American community. Glenn McNatt of the *Chicago Tribune* describes the surprise that many people voiced upon viewing the Gee's Bend quilts: “The quilts' bold, asymmetrical patterns and color harmonies are remarkable because ... they are made of materials most people regard as trash: worn-out clothes and discarded bits of fabric” (McNatt 2). Yet I assert that the striking beauty of the Gee's Bend quilts is not at odds with the reuse of what most people think is trash, but rather their beauty is dependent on a creative approach in which the quilters see the value in what is at hand. As Beckman notes, “beauty can also come out of the constraints of poverty” (Beckman 5). Due to a history of being enslaved, being exploited and nearly starved as tenant farmers, and being denied their rights as citizens, the people of Gee's Bend have developed and practiced habits to survive and make the best of what they have (Beckman 2). Quilting was a part of these habits, especially the Freedom Quilting Bee, a quilting cooperative that began during the Civil Rights Movement and lasted into the 1990s. The Bee was a form of community action, and it helped its quilters earn some extra money to improve their quality of life and build hope for the future (Beckman 7).

When a community lacks the excess of consumer culture that surrounds many people in the United States, the people within that community may not develop the attitude that everything is disposable. For impoverished peoples such as the Gee's Bend community, every scrap has a potential. This recognition by necessity of the potential of everything at hand may develop into a

certain kind of creativity and artistic approach. It is an approach that I recognize as being handed down in my own family's heritage of using every possible scrap to create new and useful items. My great-grandmother, Nelida Vessot Gordon, would cut down adult clothes into children's clothes, and use the little scraps to quilt. Another great-grandmother, Edith Wilson Hamm, was married to a tenant farmer and extremely impoverished. She took in washing and ironing to earn extra money, and she also quilted and crocheted afghans to sell. She used to dig clothes out of the dumpster, and then she would wash them and iron out all the seams to use every scrap of fabric for quilting. We still have a few small door mats and rugs that she wove from recycled plastic bread sacks and a stool that she made from large tin cans tied together and covered with upholstery fabric. This aesthetic framework that grows from creative necessity is one that most fine art representatives may not fully understand—even a Southern folk art “expert” like Bill Arnett.

No matter what were the Arnetts' actual intentions, the great disparity of power and wealth between the white art-world representatives and the impoverished black women quilters led to problematic dynamics that mirror the devaluation of feminized labor and the global exploitation of craftspeople. And the ways in which the Arnetts and other art world representatives framed their responses to the beauty of the quilts reflect a lack of understanding of the quilters' aesthetic approach and an underlying assumption that money and beauty go hand in hand. The case of Gee's Bend demonstrates that dominant aesthetics are linked to the dynamics of capitalism.

In this chapter, I will describe how quilting fits into the context of capitalism, and I will explore how the stigmas against feminized domestic craft are related to the undervaluing of feminized labor in general. The majority of craft on a global scale exists in an unjust and

exploitative system of outsourced labor, and the rise of quilting is a product of this system throughout its history in the United States. Current hobby quilting also tends to devolve into consumerism, which fuels the injustices of capitalism. I will argue, however, that there are means of resisting these harmful forces within the heritage of quilting as a domestic craft. With feminist attention to the traditional meanings of quilts for those who make or receive them, the heirloom-value of quilts may be used to resist the tendencies for all objects to become commodities. Finally, the tradition of scrap quilting inspires an alternative to dominant aesthetics, resisting consumerism and nurturing creativity in everyday life.

### **Capitalism and the Devaluing of Feminized Labor**

The practice of quilting cannot be understood without attending to its placement within the context of capitalism. Quilting has been stigmatized as women's domestic craft, but the devaluing of feminized domestic labor is also interrelated to the general forces of capitalism. Elizabeth Hobgood explains that historically, capitalism is responsible for de-skilling, devaluing, and underpaying work. This dynamic involves controlling workers by dividing them from each other and from the whole process of creation, breaking up production into assembly-line pieces and lowering the value of work when it is no longer is skilled. (Hobgood 78) In relation to the making of things, Susan Behuniak-Long points out that the growth and efficiency of production come at the cost of workers losing control over their craft (Behuniak-Long 158). Workers lose traditional craft skills, decision-making powers over the details of the products made, and involvement with the products from beginning to end. In addition to this, the desire to shorten product lifespan for increased profits causes the pace of life to accelerate (Hobgood 90).

Many of the processes of production, that involved hand-making in the past, now rely on



technology for increased efficiency. This reliance on technological advancements serves to further devalue manual labor. When it comes to quilts, “Technology not only affects the degree of connection between the quilt and quilter, but also has an impact on the value ascribed to the process and product of quilting” (Behuniak-Long 160). Quilts can now be mass-produced and marketed, but Behuniak-Long observes that the cheap manufactured quilts do not inspire the same degree of emotional significance and attention as handmade quilts (Behuniak-Long 159). Mass-produced quilts have relatively low value, but more importantly, the labor that is involved in their production is extremely devalued. As with most labor under capitalism, the factory work that goes into manufacturing quilts does not allot any control or profit to the makers (Behuniak-Long 162).

Of course, since the industrial revolution, the popularity and various trends of quilt-making have been reliant upon the industrial manufacturing of fabric. Robert Shaw describes how the production of cotton fabric exploded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the labor of enslaved people in the fields and poorly-paid girls in the mills as well as improvements in technology. The rise of an industry based on exploited labor resulted in the wide availability of inexpensive cotton and thus fed the rise of quilting as a widespread, popular craft. (Shaw 37-42) In addition to the unjust systems of production for cotton fabric, quilting has involved exploitation in the very practice of quilting, whether through the “borrowing” of patterns or through the contraction of the quilting labor. Whitney Otto observes, “You know that it was not uncommon during the Depression for a wealthy woman to hire out to a poor woman the drudgery of quilting. And that that same wealthy woman could still enter that quilt in a competition solely under her name—no thank-you or acknowledgment to anyone else.” (Otto 128) This dynamic recalls that which often occurs in the art world, when fine artists use the craft labor of others without acknowledgment

(such as my discussion of Faith Ringgold in Chapter 2). This is just a brief overview of some major injustices that have occurred within the history of quilting; one must admit that there is no “idealistically pure” quilting yesteryear that we can recall or to which we might attempt to return.

For people in the United States today, quilting, like other domestic crafts, is primarily an art or hobby. Still, there are many people who labor for long hours and low wages to produce craft items according to a set design. An examination of the context of quilting in the United States must include attention to the fact that the craftspersons around the world who labor to produce our disposable commodities, such as mass-produced quilts, are at the very bottom of the aesthetic, social, and economic hierarchies. Hobgood points out, “The blood, sweat, tears, and suffering behind what we consume are carefully hidden from us” (Hobgood 94).

Culturally feminized labor is especially devalued, and for this reason gendered stigmas are attached to quilt-making. Domestic crafts and labor are viewed as old-fashioned, overly-feminine work, while at the same time, these tasks are largely done by low-status people for low wages. The rejection of quilting can be seen on a continuum with the rejection and devaluing of other culturally feminized labor. This pattern is evidenced by such work as that which is outsourced to world-traveling maids and nannies that take up domestic chores for low wages, often under poor conditions.<sup>16</sup> In the essay, “Maid to Order,” Barbara Ehrenreich’s description of the dynamics of maid-labor points to the fact that the moral dimensions of the outsourcing and standardization of household work are tied to aesthetic dimensions as well (Ehrenreich 85-103). Considering that household tasks are being increasingly outsourced by household members and supplied as low-pay work for those at the bottom of global society, it is essential to question what creative elements might be lost. Many skills of craft and ingenuity are being lost as household work is further atomized, specialized, and standardized. As housework is further

stripped of its creative elements and of its physical relation to the household members, it is further devalued. There is an under-recognized trend of reliance on others (the "less worthy") for all aspects of life, even the most "private" affairs, especially when one has "something better to do." I agree with Ehrenreich that this reliance increases with each generation, and that it reinforces inequalities between social groups, increasing callousness and lack of consequences for those served (Ehrenreich 102). Household work is passed on to low-status people for low pay, with unhealthy working methods and expectations.

Ehrenreich proposes that we must make this real, physical labor visible (Ehrenreich 103). I argue that part of the process of making such work visible again must be resistance to standardization and recognition of the humanity of workers. The more decision-making and creativity involved, the more difficult it is to strip work of all its dignity, because these elements are related to ideas of what it means to be human, and therefore, to more social status and respect. While the crafting of quilts is not usually necessary to the maintenance of a household, I think that it can play a small part in the re-valuing of domestic and other manual labor. Quilting, as well as other crafts, can bring some awareness to the crafters of the difficulties involved in tedious work, as well as a realization of the interrelatedness of the undervaluing of feminized labor both domestically and abroad, to some extent concerning hobby quilters in the United States, and to a much greater extent concerning the exploited labor of textile and craft workers across the globe. This awareness is apparent to some extent with the current crafting and DIY trends, but there is still little rejection of the rest of consumer culture, which rests on the exploitation of countless workers around the world. Domestic work and craft should be recognized and valued for the life-sustaining and life-enriching services it provides, no matter *who* is doing it.

Artist and studio quilter Terese Agnew's work provides an ideal example of how quilting can be used to bring attention to the craft workers who are most ignored and exploited. This collage quilt portrays an image modeled after a photograph by Charles Kernaghan of a young textile worker in Bangladesh. *Portrait of a Textile Worker*, 2005 is sewn from thirty thousand clothing labels collected in a campaign from thousands of donors and then stitched together by hand over two years. This collaborative project is intended to draw attention to the largely invisible garment workers who craft our name-brand clothes for us. Agnew's quilt not only blurs the boundaries between art and craft, but it makes a strong political critique of global exploitation and of the broader context in which the value of the crafting of garments is completely obscured by the name of the designer brand. (Shaw 350-351)

Other feminized crafts are also employed explore these issues. Recall Cat Mazza and her project microRevolt, which I mentioned in Chapter 3's discussion of the sharing of patterns. Inspired by non-capitalist craft practices, her website offers the free pattern-making program, knitPro. Pictured on the site are a series of "logoknits," which feature the logos of corporations known to use sweatshop labor. Mazza encourages users of knitPro to do likewise, and she aims to spur "discussion on the relation between craft, labor, production and consumption, as well as appropriation and digital copyright."(Mazza) Both Mazza's and Agnew's use of crafts originating in "women's work" draws attention to the connection between the aesthetic dismissal of feminized crafts and the invisibility of the people who craft under the banner of "name brands." Projects such as these demonstrate how the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics mesh with an unjust economic system; in addition to the hierarchies of art over craft, product over process, and masculine over feminine, one may add that of *designer brand over craft laborer*.

The feminist task of questioning, analyzing, and deconstructing hierarchies of values that

are drawn along lines of gender, class, race, and nationality must include an analysis of how aesthetic hierarchies are used to obscure and justify the economic exploitation of people all over the world. Quilting, although largely occupying the bottom of these aesthetic hierarchies as a feminized craft, also is implicated in the injustices of the mutually reinforcing structures of capitalism and art. The rise of American quilting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based on enslaved and low-wage labor, and as we will see, quilting continues to be entangled in unjust economic and aesthetic arrangements.

### **Consumerism and Craft as a Luxury**

Within capitalist society, the lack of control and creativity in labor, as well as the extraction of profit, result in many people feeling alienated. The alienation of people from their labor is related to the rise in popularity of crafts and DIY (do-it-yourself) projects. In an interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson, Sabrina Gschwandtner observes: “That kind of alienation is one of the things that draw people to craft as a hobby right now. People don't see the result of their labor in their jobs. You do a part of the administration or a part of the physical assembly, but then your work goes out into the world and doesn't have your stamp on it. So these craft projects at home are something people can do from start to finish.” (Bryan-Wilson 82) Crafts allow people to have complete control over what they make, to create for their own reasons and to express themselves, and to assess completed projects by their own standards. However, the availability of, control of, and time for crafts that many people in affluent countries enjoy should be seen as luxuries. The activity of crafting is a leisure activity, and it is pursued from a desire to create instead of by necessity. Behuniak-Long comments that: “...such a joyous reunion of women and craft was made possible not only by changes in gender roles, but also by changes in

technology. Freed from the needle, women could embrace quilting as their history, their voice, and their art. Quilts, no longer a necessity, no longer used to enforce standards of femininity, could only now become a banner of feminism.” (Behuniak-Long 156) Quilting, like other needlecrafts, has always been a creative process, but in the past it was also a necessity: poorer women quilted to warm the beds of their family or to earn extra income, and wealthier women made fancy quilts as emblems of their status and femininity. As Kirsty Robertson points out, the rise of the manufacturing of clothes and other textile goods, using cheap factory labor, caused such items to become easy and inexpensive to purchase. Indirectly, sewing, which used to be a common skill, became unnecessary for most people in North America and Europe. (Robertson 198) In the United States, needlecrafts are no longer required women's activities, but many people purposefully chose to pursue needlecrafts, as one of the countless options of leisure activities available. (Exceptions to this exist in traditional communities, such as the Amish, in which women quilt as part of their contribution to the labor of both home and community.)

Instead of making things that we need for ourselves, we earn money to buy standardized items. As Hobgood points out, “Without alternative values, good capitalist people cope with their insecurity by escaping into consumerism and the 'shop till you drop' ethos” (Hobgood 90). Even the impulse to make things for oneself or others can get diverted into a growing market of commodities, such as new materials, gadgets, and patterns galore.

Hobby crafters can be especially prone to getting caught up in the consumerism of quilting, and there are numerous jokes in hobby quilting culture about hiding enormous and growing fabric stashes from family members. Marybeth Stalp discusses the quilting culture trend of secretively hoarding fabric. Stalp came across an extreme instance in her interviews with quilters: apparently, there is a legend of a woman who went to such lengths to hide the amount of

fabric she was buying, that she unloaded her freezer, lined the bottom with fabric, and then replaced the frozen food so that her husband would not find the fabric (Stalp 116). While most quilters do not go to such lengths, a common document for “serious leisure quilters” is “The Quiltmaker's Will,” a somewhat humorous, though also somewhat serious will to have one's fabric stash safely passed on to other quilters upon one's death, avoiding the danger that it will be thrown away by non-quilting family members (Stalp 115).

The obsessive buying and hoarding of fabric is closely related to Hilary Gifford's description of a flourishing market for artist-designed fabrics. She observes that there is a growing tendency for established professional quilt artists to design fabrics to be marketed to non-professional quilters (Gifford 26). The artist-designed fabrics are mass-produced for quilters who cannot afford to buy original pieces of artist-painted fabrics. This mass production is big business, as a growing number of fabric companies are marketing to quilters (Gifford 26). Gifford's article is interesting in that it presents yet another area in which quilting blurs the boundaries between high art and craft. In this case, artists are involved in producing materials used by crafters, which appears to be a reverse of the often-discussed issues of crafts-people producing materials or labor for artists' pieces.

Gifford's argument is that the designing of fabrics for mass-production is a good way for artists to make a living from their art (a difficult task) and to support their studio practice. There are important issues, however, that she does not explore; there are ethical concerns with the mass-production of these fabrics in other countries, such as Japan and Korea, and doubtlessly the huge gaps in income between the different people involved in fabric production (Gifford 27). There are also great differences in status between an artist who designs fabric, a crafts-person who buys this fabric, and a laborer who works to manufacture it to begin with. The artist will

always be credited as the designer of the fabric, but crafts-people's work often goes uncredited in artists' work, with the bottom end of this aesthetic (and economic) scale manifested by the lack of recognition for the people who labor in the fabric weaving and printing industries. These dynamics further reinforce a hierarchy of design over manual labor. Gifford views the production of these mass-produced fabrics as “a bridge between art quilters and quilters who represent the larger mass market” (Gifford 26). However, I argue that this trend (in which hobby quilters become even more dependent on the fine art world for their creative projects, while the fine artists profit from the mass market of crafters and receive the high status benefits of being designers) demonstrates how the commodification of fabrics reinforces the dominant hierarchies of aesthetics. And in turn, the emphasis on design over craft only further serves capitalist objectives—it is more profitable to hire a big-name designer and order cheaply-made, imported products than it is to invest in careful crafting by people who have some creative power over their work, but little status with which to drive sales.

This dynamic is also illustrated by the trend of celebrities becoming designers and releasing lines containing a vast array of products to be sold under their names—obviously the well-known name and its associations are more important for profits than a focus on the skill of designing. Sometimes the branding does not even involve the designer: Martha Stewart's name is used as a signifier of quality in order to sell products, while the actual designing is done by the plethora of professionals she hires to maintain the image of her many business interests. Likewise, Kathy Ireland's marketing company, kathy ireland Worldwide (kiWW), sells many products, neither of her design nor of her making, under her famous name. (The Arnetts entered a licensing agreement with kiWW to produce a line of housewares that employ images of Gee's Bend quilts or Gee's Bend-inspired designs, though the controversy surrounding the lawsuit



seems to have dampened the endeavor as nothing recent may be found online (Farr 1).)

The mass-producing of artist-designed fabrics is an integral part of the process of rendering older fabrics obsolete and therefore undesirable. Gifford notes that a variety of quilters are targeted with the marketing of artist-designed fabrics, from other quilt artists designing original quilts, to traditional quilters who want updated colors and styles to incorporate into patterns (Gifford 27). Quilter, teacher, extensive book writer Nancy J. Martin describes her own fabric consumption: “As you can imagine, 30 years of quilting has resulted in a rather large fabric collection, so every once in a while it is necessary to evaluate what is in my stash. I have decided to rid myself of any fabrics more than 10 years old by donating them to local quilting groups that make quilts for charities. This practice frees up space for the purchase of new fabrics.” (Martin 8) Martin is not necessarily trying to reduce her fabric stash; rather, she is trading out old fabrics for new ones. The market relies on the fact that both hobby and art quilters desire new, different, and updated styles. The production of new fabrics also helps create this desire in the first place, as the “planned obsolescence” of fabrics means that a quilt made with fabric from ten years ago will look dated and out of style (Stalp 113). In this way, creativity devolves into consumerism, as quilters rely on fabric trends to shape their expression. As Hobgood states, “people adopt corporate-designed scripts for personal emotional expression” (Hobgood 90). Getting lost in constantly buying more commodities can distract from the creative process, and more importantly, it feeds a system of consumerism that continually makes those commodities obsolete as a result of trends in “fashion,” filling our landfills with loads of fabric. This, in turn, creates an overabundance of fabric, which is undervalued and which often relies on exploitative textile labor from across the globe.

Feminist analysis of the harm justified by dominant aesthetic hierarchies reveals that

feminized crafts such as quilting are implicated in the patterns of exploitation and profit. Through a huge market of crafting materials, tools, instructions, and even cruises, women's crafts have been commandeered to serve the interests of capitalism, by which the injustices of sweatshop labor are justified with the making of profits. Instead of such crafts being centered on care and community, they appear to have devolved into symbols of leisure, at the expense of craftspeople all over the world. The irony is that our existing crafting habits and dependency on sweatshop labor are related to the very aesthetic and economic hierarchies which stigmatize feminized labor. In other words, these consumerist tendencies, which rely on the structure of designer brand over craft laborer, support the same line of thinking which structures art over craft for creative activities within our own context. Therefore, consumerist craft is self-defeating for the project of re-valuing of craft as art. However, quilting also contains means of resisting these harmful patterns.

### **Heirloom-value and Resisting Commodification**

In response to the hollow and dehumanized capitalist notions of value, Nora Ruth Roberts proposes the idea of quilt-value or heirloom-value. She admits that, “it seems unrealistic to suggest, as did William Morris and such socialist leaders as James P. Cannon, that a return to the arts and crafts movement in the future utopia will somehow obviate alienated labor” (Roberts 132). The re-appropriation of traditional craft practices is not sufficient to transform the dynamics of capitalism. However, Roberts argues:

The human value embodied in heirlooms and quilts is of a more personal, if you will, more human quality. In that way, this human value posits the possibility of a more humane, more rational way of calculating what to produce and what to spend our laboring hours doing. In suggesting the possibility of an “aura” of human potential, heirlooms suggest in their very existence the superseding of capitalism and the market economy. (Roberts 131)

Instead of being resigned that production and labor must be driven predominantly by considerations of profit, Roberts is proposing that heirlooms can serve to remind us of the possibilities to structure work around other considerations, such as the enrichment of human lives.

Heirlooms offer personal connections to objects, and they offer a suggestion of hope for personal connection to one's work as well. When profit is the only goal, many irrational, inhumane standards may be justified if they are profitable to those in power. Patrick Maynard observes how work tends to draw upon only a few of a person's capacities, and in a narrow manner (Maynard 53). However, if work were to include elements of creativity, such as the blending of labor and creativity displayed in domestic craft, it would give people a chance to draw on many aspects of themselves in a more holistic way. As domestic crafts, heirlooms suggest an approach to objects and their production that is focused on the quality of life of the producers and the life-enriching aspects of the objects produced.

Viewed through feminist ethics of care, heirloom value is one of the most important aspects of quilting, especially to the quilters themselves. Recall my discussion of heirlooms as part of Chapter 3's explorations of the traditional purposes and meanings for quilters. Many people quilt to express their care for their families, and they often see quilts as a way to provide an extension of care that lasts after they are gone (Piercy 27-28). Quilts may have heirloom-value when involved in the care of one's community as well. For instance, "The Sleeping Bag Project" (see figure 9), which I used as an illustration in Chapter 4's exploration of the beauty of utility, demonstrates how an object may be used to express care for someone that the maker does not know personally. The instructions for a sleeping bag found on Jim and Flo Wheatley's Sleepingbag Project website are entitled, "How to Make an Ugly Quilt." The text indicates that

this is because it is a utility quilt that can be made by those with a low level of skill. The instructions also explain that it is vital that the quilt not have any market value, so that the homeless person who receives it will benefit from it.<sup>17</sup> The term “Ugly Quilt,” then, refers to the system that ties aesthetic value to economic value, as well as the Wheatley's efforts to prevent their sleeping bags from becoming commodities. I do not know if the term was intended to be an ironic designation; I propose, however, that the sleeping bags are beautiful in their utility. The employment of cheerful colors and warm fabrics for the care of those in need gives a value to the “Ugly Quilts” that cannot be understood in purely economic terms.

As heirlooms, quilts contain the “utterly personal secrets,' ... that stand in defiance of the reduction of all human activity to the commodity form” (Roberts 132). There are qualities of communication and connection that may be carried by an heirloom quilt from one generation to another: the desire to pass on beauty and comfort; the pieces of fabric that transfer from use in one life on into another life; the inspiration of a creative legacy; and the physical connection of touch through the object, from the hands of its maker to the warmed body of its user. For reasons such as these, quilts and other heirlooms cannot be reduced to their market-price value; instead, they are valued for their sentimental, utterly personal, human qualities. Roberts ponders, “Did my grandmother ... pass down to me a bit of her soul, her being, her essence, which she meant me to continue as a sacred trust and pass down in turn to the next generation ... ? ... The obligation involved is not to return a like gift but to cherish and continue the gift itself and its oral 'aura'” (Roberts 128).

The material and emotional gift of a hand-made heirloom, such as a hand-made quilt, resists placement in the capitalist framework. Further, it inspires the receiver to ponder the non-commercial value attached to the creativity of its making and its love-inspired labor. The

preciousness of the object lies in its ability to recall connections and memories between people, across space and time. In this way, heirloom-value is subversive in its “posing the possibility of a future noncapitalist world of relations based on use-value and human value rather than profit” (Roberts 132).

Values such as these are vital for feminist ethical concerns, as they provide alternatives to the consumerist culture that distracts us from the exploitation of labor, that reinforces gender stereotypes through advertising, and that replaces creative impulses with the desire for new commodities. Quilts as heirlooms, additionally, may be a means to care for loved ones and communities, and in the case of “The Sleeping Bag Project,” quilts may be a small way to redress economic injustice by showing care to those who have fallen through the cracks of a money-driven society. As I will explore for the remainder of the chapter, the traditional values of quilting as a domestic craft also furnish inspiration for a different approach to creative processes.

### **Scrap-quilt Aesthetic and Resisting Consumerism**

Certain historical aspects of quilting are worth recalling, especially considering the continuing concerns of living in a capitalist society. What if quilters could reach back into quilting's history as a craft, to purposefully appropriate a tradition of recycling textiles? There is potential to draw on certain elements of traditional quilting in order to create projects more sustainably, by the creative restructuring of scraps into new and useful objects. Drawing from its history as a domestic craft, often made by necessity, quilting offers possibilities to incorporate resourcefulness and sustainability into creative processes. Historically, especially during the Great Depression and other times of hardship, people with few resources have created quilts from whatever scraps of old fabric and clothes they had at hand.<sup>18</sup> For example *Crazy Quilt*, c.

1930-1945 (see figure 11), displays the incorporation of old knitted garments into a warm, functional blanket. The maker did not try to disguise the source of the textiles, but rather embraced a recycled look as part of her or his aesthetic approach. Large and irregular pieces of fabric, often retaining the shapes of the garments from which they were taken, were sewn together to create a useful and colorful quilt.

Pieced quilts in general exemplify the potential for resourcefulness. Concerning American quilting practice, Patricia Mainardi points out, “Quilts were made in three ways: pieced, applique, or by the use of quilting stitches alone on a solid color background. The majority of them were 'pieced' for economic reasons; small pieces of fabric were joined edge to edge to make up a top of a single layer of fabric.” (Mainardi 333) Piecing allowed quilters to use inexpensive small pieces of fabric, scraps of fabric from other projects, and re-purposed fabrics from old textiles and clothing. The piecing of quilt tops (and sometimes the quilt backings as well) is a continuing practice, and it makes up the majority of hobby quilting today, though it is not pursued for economic reasons or for necessity, as it once was. Now piecing is focused on the appearance of quilts within the aesthetic tradition, or in other words, reproducing the look of piecing without any connection to the resourcefulness that originally spurred the practice.

In our current context, there is the danger that any creative undertakings will be redirected into the fostering of a growing market for commodities, including the vast numbers of fabric and hobby chain stores. Hobgood points out, “One must search hard for a piece of life that is not up for sale as more areas get pulled into the profit-making system” (Hobgood 90). In response to this fact, Radka Donnell admits, “I literally came to hold on to quilts as a refuge from our fast-paced and wasteful material culture” (Donnell 127). In a capitalist society, the activities that are deemed worthy of precious time and energy are those that either make or spend money.



Figure 11. *Crazy Quilt*. Maker unknown, c. 1930-1945. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003.003.0140. (From what once was the Holstein collection.)

The process of spending time on something that avoids this dynamic is necessary for the very envisioning of a society that is not structured around profit-making. Clearly, many hobby quilters see quilting as an escape from the pressures of a capitalist world, because for them quilting is a

hobby and not work. However, this aspect of quilting could be taken a step further. I argue that, instead of undervaluing textile labor, while filling our landfills with outmoded fabrics, quilters can endeavor to resist the trap of consumerism by following the vast array of examples from the history of quilting, to recycle old fabrics into inspiring new quilts.

Of course, there are numerous hobby quilting sources that endorse scrap quilting. For example, Gail Lawther gives instructions for projects that incorporate small pieces of fabric. In this way, the quilter can use up pieces from an existing stash or collection of scraps, avoiding the throwing away of many bits leftover from past projects. (Lawther 6) Likewise, Barbara Randle promotes using the bits and pieces of fabric that are already in one's stash:

Like most people who sew, I have saved fabrics forever. My sewing room is full of fabric leftovers from window treatments, slipcovers, upholstery, and throw pillows, not to mention scraps given to me by my friend, designer Rick Stenbridge. I never knew why I was saving all this fabric, but could never bring myself to throw it away. Mostly I just looked at it. Why is it that we sewers just want to have a big stash? Well, at least I knew I had enough fabric to start crazy quilting. The only thing I needed was to learn how to crazy quilt! (Randle 8)

As Randle observes, crazy quilting is an especially good technique for scrap quilting, as it involves utilizing small and irregularly-shaped scraps of many different types of fabric. For whichever piecing or appliqué techniques that one would like to employ, there are instruction and pattern sources that encourage the use of scraps. There does appear to be an increase of interest in scrap quilting, judging by the increase of pattern books for scrap quilts.

While these books refer to the heritage of the necessity of using scraps during tough times and suggest that one may value fabric pieces left over from previous projects, they rarely propose using scraps or recycled fabrics as an alternative to buying new fabrics. They often mention reducing waste, but they do not carry that thought further to the realization that the root of such waste lies in the over-consumption of new fabrics. The current trend towards scrap quilting



rarely extends to retracting economic or aesthetic energy from the overproduction and undervaluing of manufactured textiles.

Additionally, many scrap quilting books and patterns are just as concerned with creating a “scrappy-looking” quilt as they are with avoiding waste. In *A Treasury of Scrap Quilts*, one would expect there to be a definite emphasis on the resourceful use of scraps. Nevertheless, Martin, its author, clarifies:

The term “scrap quilt” suggests that one use leftover pieces, or scraps, of fabric. However, I have never made a quilt using fabrics just from my scraps. There is always the desire to go purchase more fabrics that will enhance those scraps. So, whether you're working from you scrap bag or purchasing all new fabrics to make a scrappy-looking quilt, remember my motto: “Why use 2 fabrics when you can use 20?” (Martin 7)

The focus of the current practice of “scrap quilting,” therefore, is mimicking the appearance of vintage scrap quilts by using many different fabrics, not by necessity but by choice. And since the fabrics are intentionally chosen instead of being whatever is left over, newly-purchased fabrics will play an important role in achieving the look that the quilter desires. Concerns of ease and efficiency dominate those of resourcefulness, and therefore, Martin suggests that any piece which is smaller than 4” x 4” be thrown away (Martin 8). And, as in hobby quilting culture in general, color coordination and precision are top priorities. As Martin explains, historically,

Scrap quilts ... were not “best quilts,” because they were necessarily for warmth; they were referred to as 'utility quilts' or scrap quilts. These scrap quilts featured myriad fabrics from leftover clothing, linens, and bedding, and they were not necessarily color coordinated. My scrap quilts are very carefully planned for color and placement, thus they aren't random scrap quilts in the historical sense of the term. (Martin 8)

In the current appropriation of certain quilting techniques and patterns, therefore, some parts of the tradition are dropped due to our current context of plentiful, affordable fabrics and the lack of necessity for a warm blanket.

Furthermore, though scrap quilting is still practiced, it is not the dominant mode of

quilting, nor has it been for most quilters for quite some time. Despite the fact that she has been quilting for many years, Helen Kelly reflects on how she “rediscovered” quilting with scraps fairly recently:

It was a strange experience, my using old fabric for the first time in this way. Ordinarily, when I make a quilt, I go out and buy the fabric especially for it. I could make a hundred quilts with all of the fabric that I have stashed away, but somehow, I find it intriguing to go out and search through the bolts of material in the fabric store for exactly the right color and print. Maybe I will set myself a challenge—to make a quilt out of what I already have here, just like so many of the quilters in the past. I could recycle the bits and pieces piled in my workroom, my scraps. I could hunt through the ancient clothing that I have hung in the back of my closet, saved in case the fashions come back in style, and I could wear them again. Why not use the beloved material in those dresses? (Kelly 36-37)

Kelly's habit of constantly buying more and more new fabric appears to be typical. She was almost surprised by the idea of using old fabric in a time when this is no longer a necessity. It seems to never have occurred to her before this instance. And while she considers undertaking the challenge of scrap quilting, it is clear that this is not a dominant mode of quilting for her or for most other hobby quilters.

It is not that I think buying new fabric is necessarily wrong, but there are several reasons to foster the practice of recycling old fabrics. Most directly, scrap quilting can be a way to recall memories that are tied to the fabrics being used. In the novel *How to Make an American Quilt*, Otto describes the thoughtful process of one of her characters quilting with recycled fabric:

What you should understand when undertaking the construction of a quilt is that it is comprised of spare time as well as excess material. Something left over from a homemade dress or a man's shirt or curtains for the kitchen window. It utilizes that which would normally be thrown out, “waste,” and eliminates the extra, the scraps. And out of that which is left comes a new, useful object. Take material from clothing that belongs to some family member or friend or lover (if you find yourself to be that sort of a girl). Bind them together carefully. Wonder at the disparity of your life. (Otto 9)

Quilting with scraps of fabric can be a way to recall various memories that are associated with them. Different events and periods of one's life may be joined together in the making of a scrap

quilt. Even if we do not have specific memories tied to the fabrics, they can tie us materially to people's lives in the past. We can touch, value, and re-purpose what once were bits and pieces of someone's physical world. In this way, scrap quilts have an increased heirloom-value, especially if the fabrics are special in some way to the quilter—perhaps because they are the remaining scraps of an aunt's childhood dress, or carefully-saved unfinished quilt blocks found at a flea market, or a bunch of her dad's old neck ties.

The use of neck ties in particular has been a popular practice, mainly due to the fact that the fabric from ties is often silk or silk-like synthetics which are shiny, unusually-patterned, and retain their bright colors. Tie fabric has been attractive to scrap quilters, and even more so if there are sentimental associations attached to them because of the loved one who wore the ties. My great-grandmother, Nelida Vessot Gordon, made such a quilt, *Tie Quilt*, c. 1940s (see figure 12), as well as figures 3, 5, and 10, all of which incorporate the use of scraps to some degree. For the tie quilt, she saw the beauty in garments that were no longer going to be worn, possibly because they were worn out, stained, or simply out of fashion. Now I can appreciate her quilt not only for its beauty, but also for its resourcefulness and for the material connection it provides to the physical life of her and her family. As Kelly says, “There is a certain mystique about quilts made with old fabrics. They talk to us of people and places and times past. They speak to us. They remind us.” (Kelly 37)

Moreover, scrap quilting is valuable for broader, more abstract reasons. In a society (as ours is today) in which almost everything is a disposable commodity, I find it enticing to meditate on a process in which small bits of excess or scrap fabric are saved, re-used, transformed from potential trash into items of great utility and beauty. In the scrap quilting of the past, snippets of fabric were compiled to warm future generations. Scrap quilting contains a



Figure 12. *Tie Quilt*. Nelida Vessot Gordon, c. 1940s.

sense of hope, in the making of something that could easily be discarded into something beautiful. It can be a break from commercial culture, and an alternative set of values to the escapism of consumerism that Hobgood critiques (Hobgood 90). It is a way to divert energy away from unfair labor systems, withdrawing the consent that we give as consumers. Scrap quilting can also be a chance to “make the best” of what is at hand. This is an attitude that is most often associated with eras such as the Depression, when people *had* to make do in order to survive. Or, more recently in quilting history, many quilters faced a less crucial challenge of making due—Martin recalls that when she made her first quilt in 1976, the quilting resurgence had just begun, and finding options to buy 100% cotton fabric was difficult. So, she went to her husband's closet with scissors, and shortened many of his shirts to short sleeves in order to obtain scraps for her quilt. (Martin 7)

But could not that by-gone aesthetic sensibility be appropriated for our current purposes? There can be greater value in re-using old scraps than just resourcefulness—it can actually encourage creativity. Instead of going shopping for a set of “perfect” coordinating fabrics, one is forced to problem-solve. The scraps that have been saved are the pieces of inspiration. One might have to make due with a limited palate or a vastly varied one. The quilter will assess the shapes and sizes of the pieces, some possibly unusual color combinations, some types of fabric other than 100% cotton. Chances are, no one will have the exact scraps as anyone else, and everyone will also have his or her own process for handling their scraps. In this way, the limiting of choice increases the possibilities for creating a unique quilt.

Scrap quilting also encourages an aesthetic sensibility in which whatever is at hand is desirable. In our consumer culture, we are constantly fed advertising that keeps us from being satisfied. We are told that if we just had something more (maybe just a few more gadgets or

fabrics, in the case of the quilter) we could feel fulfilled.<sup>19</sup> The practice of using scraps can help one develop more satisfaction with what one already has. Instead of seeing the vast array of new fabrics as the most tempting and beautiful desired objects to be obtained, the quilter can begin to value and to see the beauty and possibilities in things she or he already owns. She might notice, for example, how the stripes on an old shirt remind her of railroad tracks, and some leftover yellows and greens speak of country fields near her hometown. From these thoughts, a picture may form in her mind of a quilt-to-be. This picture is inspired by what is at hand, as opposed to the open-ended experience of shopping for fabric. The great variety of fabrics in the store, combined with some quality of “sameness” that newly-made products seem to have when lined up in rows and aisles, may actually squelch inspiration. Instead, the scraps at home give the quilter a place to begin formulating ideas. The quilter's unique creative process when using scraps is bound with an alternative aesthetic.

This alternative aesthetic is apparent when viewing a quilt such as *Scrap Quilt*, (see figure 13). Though its piecing is imprecise and the corners do not match up perfectly, it displays enthusiasm for the variety of patterned fabrics that make up the “stars” as well as the bright scraps of solid fabric that make up the irregular octagons in between. Nothing is known about the origin or maker(s) of this quilt, which was acquired by my parents when my father was working as a doctor in Pakistan, as an alternative to the draft in the early 1970s. This quilt was picked out of a missionary donation barrel and given to my parents when they had a baby; they brought it back with them to the United States in 1975. Its lack of precision or its unlimited color palate may provide reasons why was donated in the first place, but I appreciate the way the quilter saw the beauty in whatever fabrics were at hand, working spontaneously with small irregular scraps of any color for a kaleidoscope effect. Its inspiration comes from finding joy in limited resources,



Figure 13. *Scrap Quilt*. Makers unknown., c. 1960s.

and so it exemplifies a true scrap quilting aesthetic, as opposed to the superficial “scrap quilting look” that is common in the current hobby quilting world, which is really focused on a certain conformity to standards of precision and design which feed the commercial markets for tools that make precision easier and for exciting new cotton fabrics.

Bell hooks describes this contrast, which existed in the differing aesthetics of her grandmother and her mother:

Sarah Oldham, my mother's mother, was the “style radical.” Her aesthetic sensibility was grounded in a more traditional appreciation for the natural world, for color and harmony. As a quiltmaker she was constantly creating new worlds, discovering new patterns, different shapes. To her it was the uniqueness of the individual body, look, and soul that mattered. From her I learned the appropriateness of being myself. The example of personal freedom and creative courage set by my grandmother was constantly challenged by the bourgeois aspirations of my mother, whereby she insisted on conformity, on imitating acceptable appearances and styles. To my mother, 'nice things' were not the earth, the sky, the eggs in the henhouse, a fishing worm uncovered in dark, moist dirt, the sight of a tomato growing on a vine; “nice things” were the objects seen in advertisements, on the screen, and in catalogues. (hooks 119)

The grandmother hooks remembers practiced an aesthetic attitude that valued the distinctive qualities of what was close at hand, utilizing a lens bent towards seeing the beauty in nature and in the individual people surrounding her. This aesthetic perspective encourages creative practice that is integrated into everyday life, such as the quilting and gardening that Sarah Oldham enjoyed. She was satisfied with the beauty and creative opportunities already available to her. In contrast, hooks' mother was more concerned with the aesthetic standards fed to her by consumer culture, which spurred her to desire things which must be bought to satisfy her need for beauty. She was seduced by the promise of attaining status through the purchasing of the “right” products. The problem with this aesthetic approach is that satisfaction can never be maintained, as consumerism demands constant obsolescence of products under the guise of fashion and novelty. Also, the buying of mass-produced objects restricts the creative engaging of beauty to matters of tasteful arrangement. As hooks describes, her grandmother’s aesthetic approach provides a glimpse of the potential to be satisfied with humble, non-consumer-driven beauty and to weave this appreciation together with creative practice.

Ultimately, hooks has been inspired by the aesthetic principles that she learned from her grandparents: “The black elders in our community, like Sarah my grandmother and Gus my grandfather, believed it was better to seek beauty in a world that was not subject to monetary



exchange. For Sarah, beauty was there in the growing of flowers in her elaborate garden, or in the making of her quilts.” (hooks 120) Notice that these aesthetic principles are intertwined with practical matters, and that the valuing of what is at hand is interrelated to seeing the beauty of utility, which I discussed in Chapter 4. In fact, hooks refers to how her aesthetic values are similar to those of Alice Walker, the author of “Everday Use,” explaining the importance and potential of nurturing beauty, which has been a tradition for poor black women through activities such as gardening. Both Walker and hooks describe how this tradition involves a respect for the potential that at hand and the determination to take advantage of it. In conclusion, hooks reminds us that, “This legacy has been handed down through generations in traditional Southern black folk culture. These were notions of beauty and wealth grounded in a worldview that was in opposition to excessive materialism.” (hooks 120) This perspective on beauty is one that hooks values for its potential for social change. Such an everyday aesthetics, the merits of which I have been describing, is exemplified in the tradition of scrap quilting, in which the quilter demonstrates “respect for possibilities—and the will to grasp them!” (hooks 120) It's about a different way of looking at the material world, one that values what is available, what is “free,” and one that also values the potential of anyone to shape that material world into something beautiful. For many reasons, recycling fabrics can enhance the experience of quilting and foster creativity.

In her description of the traditional aesthetic of poor black women, hooks brings insight to the beauty of the Gee's Bend; instead of being a surprise out of nowhere or “miraculously” like “real art,” the Gee's Bend quilts may be seen to be inspired by a joy in everyday life that cannot be contained by dominant aesthetic frameworks. Their beauty comes from a creative attitude that has many parallels to the aesthetics of poor white women, like my great-

grandmothers, as well as other folk art traditions of impoverished peoples who have developed problem-solving skills and practiced habits to survive and make the best of what they have. For instance, the habits of necessity learned by Edith Wilson Hamm (my great-grandmother who dug in other people's trash to retrieve old clothes from which to make scrap quilts) led to an aesthetic approach in which her love for bright colors could not be squelched. She was supposed to make a color-coordinated quilt for my mother using only four fabrics, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, but instead decided to add in a hodgepodge of striking prints and a rainbow of colors (see figure 2). I can imagine that the Gee's Bend quilters, though perhaps more talented than Hamm at creating a balanced design, may owe their striking use of color to an aesthetic approach that developed by the marriage of necessity and joy in the mundane. Their aesthetic was further refined as they compared quilts within the community, drew inspiration from each other, and strove to make the most beautiful quilts possible.

By attending to the contexts in which celebrated quilters, such as those in Gee's Bend, develop their craft, feminist scholars not only learn to appreciate the quilters' own values and meanings for their art, but they also draw inspiration for a new aesthetics which avoids reinforcing the harms done by capitalism, consumer culture, and the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics. In this chapter, I used a feminist lens to describe, analyze, and critique the ways in which quilting has contributed and continues to contribute to the exploitative patterns of exploitative labor. Relating back to my central thesis, quilting definitely appears to be an "art," but unfortunately from my analysis in this chapter, quilting has been and is still often an "art" in some troubling respects: it is an activity of leisure for those who can afford it, it uses materials and tools that are available for low prices due to sweatshop labor, and the valuing of the quilters' creativity is based on the status of relative privilege that most quilters in the United States enjoy

compared to people whose craft skills and labor are exploited. As much as hobby quilters are not deemed to be artists relative to “fine art,” textile workers around the globe are ignored and exploited, hidden beneath the brand names for which they labor. Thus, we can see how dominant aesthetics and capitalist interests support each other, especially when it comes to feminized labor, in systems that structure art over craft, masculine over feminine, and designer brand over craft laborer. When quilting devolves into consumerism, it feeds the stigmas against “women's work” and becomes self-defeating for the project of re-valuing of craft as art.

However, feminism calls for more than critique—it must also be a process of discovering what furthers social justice and enhances the quality of life. Feminism allows one to see that within its heritage as a domestic craft, quilting also contains means of resisting the harmful patterns of capitalist exploitation and empty consumerism, as well as seeds for alternative aesthetics. The heirloom-value of quilts shows how they may be used to communicate care to family and community, recalling connections between people across space and time, while resisting commodification. The heritage of scrap quilting offers an approach to the practice of quilting that does not rely on hobby consumerism, but instead involves being resourceful, learning to see the beauty in what is at hand, and developing resilient creative skills. Relating back to my central thesis, the embracing of quilting as a feminized domestic craft opens up the consideration of what counts as “art” to an international scale, but not just the privileged people of the world who have opportunities to become fine artists, but also the poor, many of whom do craft to earn a living. The traditions of heirloom-value and scrap quilting offer inspiration for a liberatory feminist project of nurturing the creativity of all people.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

With this thesis, I began with an investigation into the question, “what is art?” I have found that in order to answer this question, one must ask, “who qualifies as an artist?” Is it possible that my great-grandmothers, who quilted a collection of heirlooms that now grace the beds of my family, may be labeled “artists?” I have discovered that ever since the “elevation” of quilts to art in 1971, “grannies” such as my great-grandmothers, Nelida Vessot Gordon and Edith Wilson Hamm, have the potential to be called “artists.” At the same time, there are still strong forces towards the rejection of femininity and women's arts (such as the cross-stitching that I scorned as a teenager, and quilts made by hobby quilters). Because it is positioned in both the realms of fine art and feminized domestic craft, quilting provides a view of the battle between differing aesthetic perspectives.

As a feminist, I think that it is important to question aesthetic assumptions and hierarchies (especially those to which I have adhered at times), and to understand and analyze how the forces shaping the definition of “art” are drawn along lines of gender, class, race, and nationality. Through a feminist lens, I have looked at what is rejected, and also on what terms something is accepted as fine art. Quilts have been “elevated” to art, and yet this does not include the estimated twenty-seven million hobby quilters within the United States alone (Shaw 333-334). While many antique quilts, and also contemporary studio art quilts, may be considered art, there are still stigmas against current domestic quilting as old-fashioned, uncreative, and overly feminine. The hobby quilters who continue quilting as a domestic craft are derided by those outside their subcultures, and this serves to bolster the divide between fine art and craft.

The elitism of the fine art world is maintained by the lingering tenets of modernism,

which dominately determine what is labeled “art,” as opposed to the separate sphere of craft. These tenets include formalism (visual elements of line, shape and color), originality, and artistic autonomy (also known as Art for Art's Sake, which proposes the separation of art from other aspects of life). The exclusivity of art is also supported by the mutually reinforcing hierarchies of dominant aesthetics, which valorize art over craft, conceptual over manual, mind over body, idea over matter, product over process, sight over touch, and masculine over feminine. These hierarchies in turn reinforce one another, and they lead to the rejection of quilting's traditional values—such as touch, care, utility, and skill, and its current practitioners—mostly female hobbyists.

Besides the tenets of modernism and the hierarchies of aesthetics, the boundaries of art are defined around acceptable producers. The art world absorbs the experimental work of established or well-positioned individuals, including the “borrowing” of the lower halves of the aesthetic hierarchies, while any aesthetic movement that undermines the elitism of the art world is rejected. Therefore, art produced by women and other marginalized people within that world will only be valued in relation to how it compares to the art of the white, male “geniuses” who have been considered worthy of inclusion within the art-historical canon. Craft is acceptable if appropriated on certain terms by individuals who count as “artists,” but craft is a liability if taken up in a way that preserves traditional craft values.

In addition to describing and developing a critique of the problems of dominant aesthetics, a feminist project must also include imagining how things should be and promoting that which furthers social justice and enriches people's lives, including the nurturing of creativity. It is important to re-examine that which has been rejected due to gendered stigmas, in order to preserve previously overlooked positive elements. Feminist ethics of care exemplify this process,

re-examining an approach that has been rejected in the past due to the fact that it has been voiced largely by women. Ethics of care advance the benefits of solving problems with an eye on strengthening relationships and avoiding harm. Likewise, there are values and practices within traditional quilting culture that are potentially liberatory, if one attends to quilting's strengths that stem from its history as a feminized domestic craft.

My central argument in this thesis is that a feminist analysis of quilting attends to the complexities of its status as a creative medium. This involves analyzing the stigmas that preclude much quilting from the category of "art," including associations with femininity and "grannies." Additionally, I argue that in order to fully appreciate quilting, a feminist approach must contain a reevaluation of what "art" means. Quilting actually bridges craft and fine art, but feminism shifts the focus to a broader meaning of art and esteems quilting as an art on its own terms, including its heritage as a feminized domestic craft. Drawing upon this heritage, quilting has the potential to facilitate an aesthetic approach that nurtures human creativity.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the process of the elevation of quilts to fine art, detailing how the discourse about these quilts has been carefully managed to maintain the power of fine art establishments and representatives. I explained that, although many quilts are dismissed as art, some quilts are actually employed to reinforce the hierarchies of modernist aesthetics. The elevation of many quilts (from the Holstein exhibition in 1971 to Bill Arnett's exhibition of Gee's Bend quilts in 2002) has involved praising the craft objects in terms of their resemblance to modernist paintings by established male artists. The traditional values and meanings of the quilts to their makers were not deemed to have aesthetic significance. Therefore, the majority of quilts continue to be rejected as "feminine craft," while the quilts that count as "art" are used to reinforce formalism, the art-historical canon, and Art for Art's Sake.

Therefore, studio quilters and artists who appropriate quilting have to navigate complex power dynamics. Many of these artists are activists, such as Faith Ringgold, who utilize the transgressive potential of quilting to create boundary-breaking images. However, it is difficult for artists and studio quilters to avoid reinforcing the hierarchies of dominant aesthetics; their success depends on their ability to achieve the status of “artist” as opposed to “craftsperson” and to prove their work is “art” instead of “craft,” which means feeding into an aesthetic framework that excludes the majority of creative makers.

These circumstances mean that quilting's status is very complicated, determined by its situation within two distinct, yet overlapping aesthetic worlds: fine art quilt culture and hobby quilt culture. These two worlds increasingly influence one another, as quilters from both camps borrow values and practices from the other quilting culture. I argued in this chapter that quilting's complex position, shaped by multiple sets of hierarchies, has the potential to disrupt and weaken existing hierarchies of dominant aesthetics as quilters borrow across boundaries. If one draws upon the accessibility and traditional values of quilting, this process may also be used to further social change and to nurture many people's creativity. Quilting's traditional valuing of skill, touch, and fine details, as well as its purposes of domestic utility, comfort for human bodies, and care of loved ones and community, may be used to challenge the dismissal of these aspects within dominant aesthetic hierarchies. Therefore, quilting destabilizes these hierarchies by inspiring a reevaluation of the feminine, the bodily, the material, craft, process, skill, and touch in terms of creative expression and aesthetic value. As a craft that draws upon both sight and touch, quilting advances an aesthetic that is connected to our daily, physical lives. It is definitely a creative medium for more than just “grannies,” and it encompasses organizations and attitudes that are aimed towards accessibility instead of exclusion. Building upon feminist and craft

theories that propose an expansion of what may be called “art,” one may use quilting and its traditions as a feminized craft to integrate creativity into daily life.

In Chapter 3, I explained the characteristics of the “artist” construct, including extreme individuality and a fixed identity. The interpretive construct of the “artist,” similar to Foucault's author function, serves to classify creative makers, to represent a “brand” of consistency, and to limit the potential meanings of art. Within the competitive atmosphere of the fine art world, the “genius” artist also functions to ignore the interdependency of creative developments. These myths of dominant aesthetics operate to maintain the exclusivity and power of existing art world establishments by restricting the identity of who counts as an artist, the spectrum of explorations in art, and the potential for generating new ideas and significant changes.

I argued in this chapter that as a craft, quilting offers means to prevent these drawbacks with a sense of contingent individuality, rooted in the dynamic life and context of the creative maker. This opens up opportunities for creative people who do not fit the typical characteristics of the “genius” or embody the upper halves of dominant aesthetic hierarchies, especially women. The creative traditions of quilting include an acknowledgment that creativity blossoms within a web of connections to other creators, past and present. The sharing and altering of patterns within quilting practice exemplifies a comparatively honest and egalitarian approach to creativity. The possibilities for aesthetic development are spread throughout communities of makers. Quilting groups tend to encourage atmospheres of support and recognition, rather than fierce competition, which is especially important for women or others who may have extra anxieties about asserting their creative perspectives.

Quilting also encourages the use of creativity for the care of oneself, loved ones, communities, or social causes. Quilting bees, guilds, or family groups provide important



opportunities for friendships, mentoring, teaching skills, bonding across generations, and generativity. An emotionally engaged creativity is fostered, as the people and emotions that are central to quilters' lives inspire their projects. Therefore, quilting is useful for a feminist re-evaluation of "art" that aims at the nurturing of creativity within everyday life. This is especially true for women within traditional communities and for elder women, whose creativity should be recognized as worthwhile of aesthetic recognition. Looking at quilting with attention to feminist and craft aesthetics, it is clear that the heritage and continued practice of passing down skills, techniques, and patterns within non-competitive groups provides opportunities for mutual caring, for recognition of the creative legacy upon which quilters build, and for expansion of what and who count as art and artists.

In Chapter 4, I explained the ways in which utility is dismissed within dominant aesthetics, including precluding, ignoring, and deactivating the utility of aesthetic objects. Material utility is most often recognized as "utility" and rejected by this rational, while other functions and purposes may not affect the aesthetic status of an object. Thus, a major motive for the dismissal of utility is the preservation of objects, as the physical use of many objects may hasten their disintegration. This is definitely true of quilts, and there are many recommendations for the preservation of antique and heirloom quilts. More extensively, however, this disregard for utility is related to the mutually reinforcing hierarchies of aesthetics and Art for Art's Sake, separating and elevating art above the bodily, matter, and femininity. The ways in which dominant aesthetics is used to reject the mundane, the useful, and the domestic are shaped by matters of social status by gender, class, race, and nationality.

Utility is an important issue for feminism because traditionally (and continuing in conservative communities), women's roles give them responsibility for domestic work. For such

women, issues of utility are of prime importance and may not be disregarded. Therefore, there is a history of women channeling their creativity into domestic craft. Utility is one of the traditional purposes of quilting, and today hobby quilters continue to make quilts for everyday use.

Utility also continues to be one of the main excuses for dismissing most quilts as art, and utility is an aspect of quilting that is removed from quilts when they are “elevated” to art.

However, beauty and utility are related to one another. Beauty serves many functions, such as being persuasive or attractive, decorating environments, and enriching human life. At the same time, utility may be beautiful—the fulfillment of an object’s practical purpose may be at the root of its aesthetic value. This is especially true for a handmade craft object, because the utility of the object is integral to its design, and the maker may imagine the fulfillment of the object’s purpose while s/he is creating it, placing her or his hands where the hands of the user will rest in the future. The warmth, sturdiness, and softness of a quilt, for instance, are aspects of its utility that stimulate the aesthetic enjoyment of the quilt. The beauty of utility is especially apparent through a lens of feminist ethics of care, as the utility of a quilt or other handmade craft provides beauty in its potential to comfort or warm others.

The combination of beauty and utility is important for integrating beauty into everyday life. Instead of segregating aesthetic value to the fine art world and setting it apart from items of utility, an aesthetic appreciation of utility engages us to integrate creativity into mundane activities and to appreciate the beauty that already exists in our physical environments. A feminist vision of aesthetics is helpful towards these aims, especially when re-embracing the creative potential of touch, the body, femininity, skill, and domestic work. Through a feminist and craft-oriented approach, “art” may be thought of as an on-going practice, enriching everyday life, and possibly even embracing decomposition as part of the beauty of useful art objects and as

a reflection of the passage of human life.

Quilting is a model for this alternative aesthetic approach, embracing utility as an aspect of the beauty and creativity in daily life. The interdependency of usefulness and beauty are especially apparent in quilts, as the most pleasing quilts will incorporate both—think of the lines of quilting stitches that create beautiful patterns and that also are placed carefully so as to bind the layers into a strong, smooth, equalized structure. Looking at quilts in this way challenges the fine art appropriation of quilts on terms of formalism and challenges people to take domestic arts seriously. Without the excuse of rejecting utility, dominant aesthetic discourses would have more difficulty in renouncing the aesthetic value of the majority of quilts and quilters. The heritage of quilting, on the other hand, is a realm of creativity that allows many people to express themselves while attending to practical purposes.

In Chapter 5, I described how quilting is positioned within the context of capitalism. Quilting, as a feminized domestic craft, is located on the bottom of aesthetic hierarchies. However, it may also be implicated in the depredations of capitalism, as well as in the aesthetic justifications for the patterns of abuse that flow from capitalist systems. First of all, the rise of quilting in 19th-century United States was based upon the use of enslaved and exploited labor in the production of affordable cotton. Currently, hobby quilting tends to devolve into consumerism, through an enormous market of fabrics, quilt-making tools, instruction books, accessories, and additional quilting leisure activities. This fuels the injustices of a global capitalist system, where the majority of craftwork depends upon exploited, outsourced labor. Quilting as a symbol of leisure supports a system in which the logic of profit is used to justify extremely low wages and dangerous working conditions, especially given the common quilting obsession of buying excessive amounts of newly manufactured fabrics, while older fabrics pass into obsolescence.

But the aesthetic and economic scale that devalues the labor of craftspeople and factory workers worldwide in comparison to designers and brand names is the same scale that devalues feminized domestic craft in comparison to fine art. Thus, when quilting devolves into consumerism, the project of esteeming the feminized craft of quilting as art is undermined. Dominant aesthetics and capitalist interests support one another, especially when it comes to feminized labor; in addition to the hierarchies of art over craft, product over process, and masculine over feminine, one may add that of designer brand over craft laborer.

I argued that the heritage of quilting as a domestic craft also contains seeds for resisting the harmful patterns of capitalist exploitation. Through a feminist lens, one may revalue quilting traditions such as the gifting of quilts as heirlooms. Heirloom-value resists commodification and inspires us to appreciate objects that are handmade instead of purchased. Heirlooms may also recall love, care, and connections between people across space and time, which are human-centered as opposed to monetary values. Likewise, the tradition of scrap quilting provides an alternative aesthetic and creative approach resistant to consumerism. Scrap quilting is a method for nurturing creativity in everyday life, and it is a way to foster habits of seeing the beauty that surrounds us in order to make the best of what is at hand. These are habits that many great quilters and other creators, especially those in impoverished communities, have developed, such as the reknowned quilters of Gee's Bend. Scrap quilting requires one to become resourceful, and to develop resilient and adaptable creative and problem-solving skills. It also allows one to practice a form of art that is open and accessible to those with few resources.

The feminist project of reclaiming feminized crafts, like quilting, as serious aesthetic and creative practices must also include reconsidering the "art" of people all over the world who craft to earn a living. Attending to the positive practices within the heritage of domestic quilting, such

as giving quilts as heirlooms and quilting with scraps of fabric, one finds inspiration for an aesthetic approach that nurtures the creativity of all people.

In conclusion, I want to make clear that the tendencies within aesthetic discourse that I criticize in this thesis are habits into which I also may slip—at times I place art over craft, view hobby quilters as trivial, tend to label only male artists as “geniuses,” become obsessed with preservation, and become caught up by the temptations of consumer culture. The forces of dominant aesthetics affect us all, and it is important to recognize their consequences and work towards an improved vision of aesthetics.

In “Time Capsule,” Lucy R. Lippard, remarks that “Most images may not be ‘worth 1000 words’ but sometimes they can operate parallel to rhetorical texts and dense information barrages, providing jolts to embedded opinions” (Lippard 410). Along these lines, I think that there are great possibilities for activist artists and feminists theorizing aesthetics to work alongside one another, engaging in dialogue and reinforcing each other’s aims. This must be a collective process with open exchange of ideas across different disciplines, for, as Lippard argues, it is very rare for an individual artist to be as effective in challenging aesthetic standards as a group of artists can be. For a fresh approach to aesthetics to gain momentum, the integration of theory and creative practice is necessary; new ideas and new material forms must combine for a complete re-envisioning of what creativity includes and what forms of it are valuable.

There are also several topics within this thesis that I think deserve further research. The aesthetic value of touch, as well as the rich communication that is possible between the maker and user of a hand-crafted object, merit additional attention. Today, I can view quilts as an art and reflect on the broader significance of quilting as a creative method within aesthetic discourses. However, seeing quilts as flattened images of art objects is not sufficient. I look back

to the way that I viewed quilts as a child, and I think that this sort of viewing resonates with a craft perspective and has value. It involves looking close-up with concentrated attention to every detail within a small area, including the ways in which the appearance and the physical feel of the different fabrics varied to create a rich landscape of color, pattern, and texture.

I find inspiration in the humble yet versatile pattern, which is undervalued except within circles of dedicated quilt scholarship. The pattern as an emblem for communal creativity could have broader influence on conceptions of creativity in general. There may be a way to expand upon the combination of ethics of care and aesthetics, perhaps an aesthetics of care that displays the connections between beauty and the interrelatedness of us all, between creativity and care. An expansion of the aesthetics of utility would be beneficial for this; quilting's traditional ties to utility lend it a certain kind of creative potential. I propose that a creative act is enriched when it is for a purpose outside oneself (such as a gift, an item for charity, a quilt for remembrance, a political statement). Creativity and problem-solving with other people in mind might be important elements in an aesthetics of care. There are growing subcultures of DIY communities, crafters, and activists whose practices of reclaiming feminized domestic craft may provide material for further research.

Finally, I think that it is important to promote a vision of craft as art that is tied to awareness of global capitalism. Quilting is a creative method that may aid in this project, as there are various forms of quilting around the world. It can serve as a form of communication and common understanding across barriers due to the commonality of creative medium. Feminism must nurture art-forms that create ties between us and help us recognize the commonality of our creative impulses; I echo the conviction of bell hooks: "Rather than surrendering our passion for the beautiful, for luxury, we need to envision ways those passions can be fulfilled that do not

reinforce the structures of domination we seek to change. Hopefully, feminist thinkers will begin to engage in more discussion and theorizing about the place of beauty in revolutionary struggle.” (hooks 123) Along these lines, the alternative aesthetic of scrap quilting is a unique method in which feminist aesthetics can meld with crafting practice to form a new creative vision. Donnell describes: “The dismantling and rearranging of something old—as we cut up old pieces of cloth and worn-out clothes—and the creation of something new *takes courage* and is *aimed at liberation*. Taking a piece of cloth and using it for something other than defining social status and gender is not an aesthetic talent. It is a step to social deliverance.” (Donnell 20) My hope is that this thesis will inspire further developments within feminist and craft aesthetics that have broad impact in shifting discourse about creativity towards means for revolutionary struggle, liberation, and social deliverance.

## Figures

1. Maker unknown. *Tumbling Blocks*. Possibly Pennsylvania, c. 1880-1900. Cotton and calico, hand-pieced, 82 x 76 inches. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003.003.0202. . . . . 50
2. Hamm, Edith Wilson (1900-1985). *Stars*. Jetmore, KS, c. 1970s. Double knit polyester, cotton sheet backing, Machine pieced and machine quilted with running hearts, 75 x 98 inches. Collection of Kathryn and Daniel Pauls. Photo by Daniel Pauls. . . . . 70
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5. Gordon, Nelida Vessot (1892-1975). *Flower Garden*. Location unknown, c. 1950s. Cotton, Machine pieced and hand quilted, 73 x 78 ½ inches. Collection of Kathryn and Daniel Pauls. Photo by Daniel Pauls. . . . . 104



6. Hamm, Peggy (b. 1958). *Baby quilt*. KS, 1983. Cotton, cotton lace, Pieced and Appliqued, 53 x 41 inches. Collection of Melanie Pauls. Photo by Daniel Pauls. . . . . 111
7. Pauls, Kathy Hamm (b. 1947), Glenn Hamm (b. 1954), and Peggy Hamm (b. 1958). *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Quilt*. Parsons, KS, 1996. Cotton, crochet cotton, Scanned family photos. Machine pieced by Kathy Pauls; Tied by Glenn Hamm, Peggy Hamm, and Kathy Pauls; Signed by each photographed family member; 96 x 111 ½ inches. Collection of Kathryn and Daniel Pauls. Photo by Daniel Pauls. . . . . 114
8. Somerville, Catherine. *Britchy Quilt*. Aliceville, Alabama, c. 1930-1950. Denim, Machine Pieced, 72 x 69 inches. International Quilt Study Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2000.004.0116. . . . . 131
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13. Makers unknown. *Scrap Quilt*. Location unknown, c. 1960s. Cotton, Pieced, 54 x 54 inches. Collection of Kathryn and Daniel Pauls. Photo by Daniel Pauls. . . . . 182

### Notes

1. See for instance, Margaret R. Miles' fascinating study of the symbolism of the sexual female body in Christian imagery.
2. See [www.quiltstudy.org](http://www.quiltstudy.org).
3. See [www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org).
4. This androcentricity of fine art is related to the continuing gender inequality in representation for artists. See Carolina A. Miranda's discussion of artist Micol Hebron's project to document the gender ratios of artists featured in art galleries (both LA and New York City). According to Hebron and the other artists who have contributed figures to her project, the ratios average out to about 70 male artists for every 30 female artists.
5. There are many other examples of art being rejected or lessened in value, only due to the fact that the artist was a woman. Certain artworks were lauded when the artist was thought to be a man, but when the artist was discovered to be a woman, "flaws" began to be noticed. See Estella Lauter 93-97.
6. See Nancy J. Martin.
7. See <http://www.microrevolt.org>.
8. A major exception to Art for Art's Sake discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the Bauhaus movement, which presented a challenge to modernism with its appreciation of function (Lauter 92). With roots in the Arts and Crafts movement, the Bauhaus began with a political manifesto aimed at breaking down the classed divisions between art, design, and craft. However, the Bauhaus became increasingly depoliticized due to the political climate of mid-century Germany—its lasting influence is on styles and approaches within industrial design, especially design pedagogy and furniture design. See Joan Ockman's "Object Lessons from the Bauhaus."

9. See Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*.

10. See Arthur C. Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*.

11. Elissa Auther discusses the substantial amount of fine art incorporating fiber, for instance (Auther 163, 175). Many of the artists build upon the work of feminist artists during the 1970s, such as the “femme” of Miriam Schapiro (Lauter 99). Also, artists from various countries around the world work with fiber to draw attention to the artistic traditions within their respective nations. The tenets of modernism weaken further with the growing internationalization of fine art. (Auther 172)

12. Also developing during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Arts and Crafts movement and its leader, William Morris developed aesthetic theory in the opposite direction—by aiming to reinsert humanity into the production of items of utility. Morris idealized skilled craftsmanship against the alienated labor in factories. In practice, however, the Arts and Crafts movement, like fine art, centered on the making of luxury items for wealthy clientele. Morris's writings continue to influence and inspire many craftspeople, however.

13. See, for example, Danto.

14. See Patricia Crews and Shirley Niemeyer, “To Protect & Preserve: Caring for Family Quilts in the Home” or “About: Textile Care.”

15. Many 3<sup>rd</sup>-wave feminists seek to revalue spheres of femininity that have previously been rejected (even by feminists of the past), including domestic work. See Justine Sharrock's discussion of the complications of reclaiming domestic work in “Queens of the Iron Age,” in which she notes the abundance of feminist craft websites, and even ads for household products in magazines for young feminists.

16. See the anthology, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in a New Economy*. Ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2002.

17. See [www.uglyquilts.org](http://www.uglyquilts.org).

18. See examples of such quilts on the International Quilt Study Center Website by searching the collections under the exhibition: "Recycling and Resourcefulness: Quilts of the 1930s."

19. For a helpful description of aesthetics and consumerism, see John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

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