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Erich Consemüller, Marcel Breuer and his "harem" (from left to right- Marta Erps-Breuer, Katt Both and Ruth Hollos-Consemüller), ca. 1927

## Hirst, Don't It? Revealing the Invisible Labor of Female Fiber Artists in Twentieth Century Art

Women fiber artists have engaged in the core concepts of Modern Art, including color theory, geometry, and abstract composition, in ways that have not always been acknowledged within contemporary art movements. However, any history of Modern Art cannot be complete if it refuses to include the work and ideas of women and fibers. Through this paper, as well as through our accompanying quilt project, we document the parallel history of fiber art and artists in Contemporary Art - beginning with the often overlooked artists of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshops - and reinsert their ideas and practices into one of the most talked about

works of Post-Modern Art on the market today.

As artists interested in the ways labor and value are apportioned between craft and art, we found ourselves fascinated by Damien Hirst's "Spot Paintings." Seemingly representing the inevitable end point of modern art's trajectory through abstract expressionism, and the art market's bloated capitalist peak, these paintings seemed both connected to the abstract textile work of Bauhaus movement, but also its complete opposite. By recreating a single spot painting as a hand dyed, hand sewn "yo-yo" quilt, we tease out the connections between this bloodless, abstract work, and the lovingly crafted textiles of early modernist artists.

Founded in Weimar Germany in 1919, the Staatliches Bauhaus sought to break down the divisions

between fine art and craft in both art and design, and in the process had an enormous impact on the development of aesthetics and techniques of Modern Art and architecture. One of the first art schools to accept both female and male students on (theoretically) equal footing, female students

to the Bauhaus flocked in record numbers. They quickly found themselves unwelcome in many school's workshops, the however, and by 1922, only the Weaving Workshop was open to women. While most of the students who entered the workshop did not have textile backgrounds, weaving proved to be a fertile ground for exploring the artistic concepts being taught by master artists like Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Josef Albers. Art historian Sigrid Wortmann Weltge argues in Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus, the women of the Bauhaus struggled to have their work recognized to

the degree of their male contemporaries. A decade earlier Kandinsky had written in Concerning the Spiritual in Art:

The more abstract is form, the more clear and direct is its appeal....The more an artist uses these abstracted forms, the deeper and more confidently will he advance into the kingdom of the abstract." The weavers, in producing textiles of pure abstracted form, were heeding his advice. That neither weaving nor women could easily 'advance into the kingdom of the abstract' was yet another lesson to learn.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Bauhaus was conceived of as a temple to the elevation of craft, female textile artists working there often found their work dismissed as "trivial." The intentional diminishing of women's contribution to modern art has a variety of explanations. In addition to the generally accepted

attitudes about the inferiority of the female sex, abstract artists were still struggling to convince a skeptical art world that Modern Art was a valid art form. In order to prove the legitimacy of early Expressionism, Abstract proponents delegitimized and set aside any connections to folk art, decorative arts, and craft practices. As a result, the avant-garde textiles of the Bauhaus textile workshops were rarely seen or presented as fine art.

Another factor in the historical erasure of Bauhaus textiles from the historical narrative of Modern Art was the difficulty the individual

artists had in displaying and receiving credit for their own work. In 1924 a group of weavers protested that their exhibit pieces were marked simply as "Bauhaus" rather than displayed under their own names.3 All of the work produced in the workshops was owned by Bauhaus, and artists often had to request permission or even buy back their own pieces in order to participate in outside shows or exhibitions. As a result these and other impediments, of the hundreds of women who passed through the weaving workshops, only a handful (and most notably Anni Albers) are recognized today as the groundbreaking artists that they were. When Abstract Expressionism was ultimately embraced by the art world at large, textile art was excluded from the public



Double-weave tapestry. Ruth Hollos-Consemüller, 1926. Viscose.

<sup>1</sup> Wortmann Weltge, Sigrid. Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus. San Francisco: Chronicle, 1993. Page 49

Wortmann Weltge, 1993 Page 42

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

understanding of the artistic movement.

The global rise of Abstract Expressionists successfully shifted the dominant art gaze to the United States: New York and San Francisco in particular. Beginning in the late 1920's, Modernist work had been available to view in the US, first in the Museum of Modern Art and, subsequently, Albert Gallatin's Museum of Living Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, all of which focused specifically on "non-objective painting." In addition to this cultural emergence, the country experienced an influx of European Modernists in the wake of World War II. This exceptionally dark period in history played muse to artists who



Untitled (Red and Grey), 1950. Ad Reinhardt. Oil on canvas, 80" x 60".

wished to find new and increasingly powerful ways to express their fascination with "man's dark side" and their anxious awareness of humanity's "irrationality and vulnerability." Their solution was through nonobjective, highly dynamic and often physically huge compositions. Barnett Newman's

large-scale, highly geometric, color-field paintings, "create[d] a kind of elemental impact," which allowed the artists to free themselves "from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, and myth that have been the devices of Western European painting."

As Abstract Expressionism took the center stage in the contemporary art world, textiles continued to evolve outside of the artistic mainstream. The parallel tracks traveled by textiles and fine art can be understood through the history of quilts and their much debated entry into the mainstream fine art world. It is widely considered that this entry occurred through Jonathan Holstein's exhibit, "Abstract Design in American Quilts", held at the Whitney Museum in 1971. However, in order to fit into the public understanding of contemporary art, the quilts had to be stripped of their identities (makers, social histories, functions) and were presented solely through their formal relationship to Abstract Expressionist paintings.

The quilts for the exhibition were collected by Holstein and partner Gail Van Der Hoof from thrift stores, auction houses and individual families across the Eastern United States, many of whom parted with their quilts for a mere few hundred dollars. The names of the makers, even when available, were discarded in favor of labeling each quilt only by the state of origin and approximate date. This show was not about artists: it was about applying Modernist aesthetics to a pre-existing tradition; aesthetics that were prioritized over the sometimes express wishes of the makers, who balked at the idea of technically imperfect work being shown in public. Holstein admitted freely that.

Many quilts we chose were in terrible condition, frayed, stained, had material missing, were repaired (before we bought them) with materials later than the quilts

<sup>4</sup> Paul, Stella. "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History." Abstract Expressionism. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Paul, Stella. "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History." Abstract Expressionism. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.

on which they were used, etc. This was unimportant to us, as we were looking only for particular visual qualities in quilts as they were at the moment and nothing else.<sup>6</sup>



Bars. Pennsylvania. ca.1890. Cotton. 79 x 76.

The quilts were then hung like paintings (flat against a white gallery wall), lit like paintings, and discussed like paintings, some reviews going so far as to "[treat] quilts as if they were naturally occurring objects, made without benefit of human skill, intelligence, or aesthetic sensibility." The show created an environment wherein quilts were assimilated into dominant art culture as opposed to standing on their own historical merits: they had to 'pass' as art and by doing so, they were allowed to become it. While technically expanding the definition of Abstract Expressionism to include textile works, the exhibit nonetheless continued

- 6 Buszek, Maria Elena. "How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form." Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011. N. pag. Print. Page 104
- 7 Bernick, Susan, "A Quilt Is an Art Object When It Stands Up Like a Man." in Torsney, Cheryl B., and Judy Elsley. Ed. Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern. Columbia: U of Missouri, 1994. Page 149

the erasure of female textile artists as equal participants in contemporary art movements.

This co-opting of feminine traditions while excluding female artists can be seen even earlier in the Abstract Expressionist movement than aforementioned exhibition. Robert Rauschenberg's Bed (1955) may be the first contemporary work of fine art to contain quilted material: a log-cabin style quilt stapled and painted onto a bed-shaped frame. Instead of being an intentional social or even formal reference, however, Rauschenberg claims to have simply "run out of canvas." Indeed, the quilt itself had previously belonged to a fellowresident of the Black Mountain School of Craft, a woman who, upon first viewing Rauschenberg's finished piece, reacted by saying, "I didn't actually give Bob the quilt, it just sort of appeared in the work one day."9 The quilt in question was both literally stolen from a woman, but it, and by inference quilts at large, were figuratively stolen as well. The piece suggests that quilts can only be art objects with male permission and via their destruction or, as was later to be demonstrated by the Holstein exhibit, removal from their functional/feminine past.

Feminist theorist Susan E. Bernick argues that during this particular transition of quilts from 'mere craft' into 'high art', three distinct sects of quilt culture emerged - Fine Art Quilts, Traditional Quilts, and Feminist Quilts - each with its own defining features and cultures. Fine Art Quilts have been touched on above. This group is delineated by curators and critics who defined art in terms of originality of design and through aesthetic relationships to previously established works.

The second of these groups is Traditional Quilters: craftspeople, predominantly women, with a fairly unified design history that included the recreation and minimal tweaking of patterns passed down and shared through oral tradition

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



Mrs. Oliver Byrne's Quilt. Elaine Lustig Cohen/ Sharon McKain/ Rosalia Mehringer. 1981, cotton, 70 x 85.

and printed publications.<sup>10</sup> Their priorities were not defined in terms of social standing but instead in terms of technical prowess. (It was members of this community who showed concern over the technical quality of the works exhibited by Holstein.) They made quilts to celebrate life events: new babies, marriages, etc. Their interest was (and is) in sentimental rather than fiscal value.

Finally, Feminist Quilters sought to create a bridge between the history, labor and social realities of Traditional Quilters and the societal and financial

remuneration that came with acceptance in the Fine Art World. However, much like other political actions made by feminist groups of the era, their attempts to work within existing patriarchal systems often resulted in variedly botched projects. One such example is the ill-fated Artist and the Quilt show, curated by Charlotte Robinson, who approached well-known feminist artists and asked them to each design a quilt. The artists were then paired up with traditional quilters who translated the designs into finished objects. Although the project started in 1975, unforeseen problems kept the works from being exhibited until 1981. Many of these complications stemmed from the fact that the curator and artists lacked any previous knowledge of quilt-making and were unprepared for the sheer amount of time and money necessary

<sup>10</sup> It is not so much that Traditional Quilt Culture was established during this period (any more than their quilts suddenly became art), instead that their distinct cultural parameters become clear when compared to other groups interacting with quilts.

to complete quilts at this scale. The project was predominantly funded by grants and, while the quilters were the only individuals financially compensated, they received a pittance compared to the amount of time they spent working.

Ironically, this added to, rather than diminished, their exploitation. It is true that the artists could better afford to do the work without pay, but it made the quilts, waiting for a buyer, the product of the artists; the quilters, like materials, were purchased to realize the artists' intentions.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the quilters ended up abandoning the project, citing feelings of being treated as secondclass members of the exhibition.

When analyzed through the vantage of history, we can see that both Art Quilt and Feminist Quilt cultures presented problematic and arrogant claims. Art Quilters alleged they made quilts into art while Feminist Quilters insisted that quilts were art all along, with the patronizing implication that Traditional Quilters were unable to recognize art without their help. In order for quilts to retain their historical/symbolic power while simultaneously permeating the perimeters of the fine art realm, all of these factors - the aesthetic design sensibilities of quilts, the individual histories of real womenmakers, and the patriarchal structures by which those histories are defined - must be recognized.

While quilt and textile art were held at the margins of the mainstream art world for much of the last half century, Damien Hirst has unabashedly occupied a spot near its pinnacle since his emergence as one of the Young British Artists in the 1990's. A brash, unapologetic 'bad-boy' artist, Hirst's works borrow amply from a broad range of artists who came before him. Ranging from large-scale sculptural installations of dead and dissected animals, to geometric prints with natural and pharmaceutical motifs, to sculptural pieces embellished with millions of dollars' worth



Damien Hirst. Photo: Andrew Testa/The New York Times/Redux.

of gold and jewels, Hirst's body of work has been an unqualified economic, if not critical success.

One of his most prominent collections of work is his "Spot Paintings." Stark geometric designs made up of anywhere from four to tens of thousands of multi-colored dots, there are rumored to be more than 1,400 spot paintings in existence. At once an extension of and a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, Hirst adopts the tradition of geometric formalism while discarding the color theory and emotional expression of his predecessors. The color choices in the spot paintings are entirely random, with no two colors repeated and, with the exception of 20-odd paintings created by Hirst himself, the entire process is completed by his assistants.

"Painting spots was very dull," says Rachel Swainston, who worked with Hirst back in the '90s before becoming an upholsterer. "There's not a lot you can say about them. The canvases would arrive; they'd be stretched and pinned. Damien would specify spot size and we would mark them up and draw them. Then we'd have a massive delivery of household paints, which we'd mix into smaller pots of whatever colors we needed. We'd have hundreds of colors: no two were ever the same. A six-foot square canvas

<sup>12</sup> Kunzru, Hari. "Damien Hirst and the Great Art Market Heist." The Guardian. N.p., 16 Mar. 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Bernick, 1994 Page 142



His/Ours. Nora Renick Rinehart and Rachel Wallis for Craft/Work. 70" x 70". Cotton. Photo by Joe Tighe.

with spots four inches apart would take about a week. Every painting was sold."<sup>13</sup>

While the critical reaction to The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011 was often brutal, the commercial reception has been record breaking. Hirst's Spot Paintings have sold in recent years for anywhere from \$50,000 to \$1.7 million, making him the richest living artist in the UK.

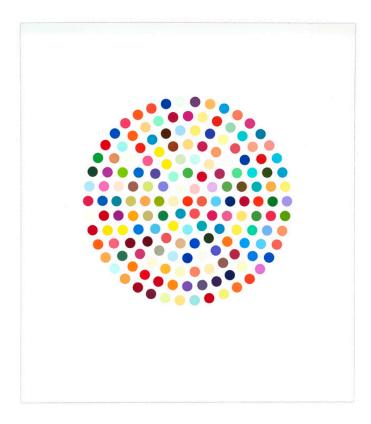
Although it has become a popular pastime in the art world to shit on Damien Hirst's work in general, and the Spot Paintings in particular, we chose to recreate *Cephalothin*, a 2007 etching in the series. We did this, not because we think it is an artistic failure, but because of the ways in which it succeeds. Hirst's Spot Paintings are accessible and engaging because they distill visual art down to its core elements: an interaction between color and geometry on a flat plane. Although the pieces are undeniably post-modern, through them we can see the trajectory of 20th century art: from the

work of Early Modernists, to Abstract Expressionism and through to Pop and Conceptual Art. Our aim in recreating a Spot Painting as a quilt is to reinsert female (and feminist) artistic labors which have been selectively removed from the popular understanding of art history.

We begin and end this project with the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop for a number of reasons: We see a direct line from the abstract, geometric exploration of color and form by the early Bauhaus weavers to the postmodern geometry of Hirst's quilt-like Spot compositions, but that artistic progression is rarely acknowledged or documented in the traditional art history canon. Additionally, we share the Bauhaus' belief in the importance of craft and technique in the artistic process. By hand dyeing and hand sewing our "Spot Quilt," we make visible the care and labor that is excised from Hirst's process. Whereas Hirst never touches or even engages in the physical act of making the vast majority his Spot Paintings, we have touched every element of our piece in every stage of our process. Our intention is that this essay and our quilt help reaffirm the place of women and textile art, as well as the traditions of craft and folk art, in the foremost artistic movements of the 20th century.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley, Caroline. "What It's Like to Paint Spots for Damien Hirst." Flavorwire. N.p., 2 Apr. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2015.

## **Our Process**



With over 1,400 spot paintings in existence, we had to choose carefully which one to emulate. It couldn't be too big or we'd never finish it and it couldn't be too small or it wouldn't make the impact we were aiming for. Plus, we wanted one that already looked like a quilt. Eventually, we settled on Cephalothin (2007) which was originally a lithograph print.



We dyed and dyed and dyed.... over 200 individual colors in total using MX Chemical dyes for cellulosic fiber.

When our finished collection of colors was compared

to the original print, we discovered a number of inconsistencies which meant we had to re-dye a bunch of the colors.



Yo-yos are a traditional american quilting technique that was popular during the Great Depression. Each yo-yo is created by stitching and gathering a circle of fabric and then ironing it flat. All of this stitching is done by hand.



The front and back of our quilt are both made of solid white cotton fabrics and the batting - the fluffy middle layer that give quilts their exquisite weight and texture - is organic cotton. These three layers get temporarily stitched together by hand with large "basting" stitches that are designed to be removed after the final stitches are in place. The house rule is

Nobody Bastes Alone, which makes the process a lot less time-consuming and harrowing. Once the quilt was basted, we placed each of the yo-yos, constantly referring to the original print, and held them in place with safety pins.



We then blind stitched the yo-yos to the surface of the quilt in such a way that the stitches were invisible from the front but, because they traveled all the way through to the back, were able to hold all of the layers together. After much debate, we decided to put additional quilting stitches in the "background" of the composition. We chose white thread so that the stitches would be invisible and the final quilt would most closely resemble the original lithograph. We bound it with white for the same reason.





The quilt is called "His/Ours" because we're intentionally asking questions about ownership. The design unequivocally came from Damien Hirst, but we feel that he, and art history at large, neglects to reference and give credit to generations of women textile artists working with similar compositions. The quilt is unequivocally ours because we came up with the concept and have literally touched every single inch of the surface. So who's is it really?





Photo by Joe Tighe.



Photo by Joe Tighe.



Photo by Joe Tighe.



Photo by Joe Tighe.



Photo by Joe Tighe.



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