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The significance and emergence of ‘craft’ in contemporary fine art exhibitions and practice, exemplified within the Venice Biennale 2024.

I never even knew that art could be anything other than spectacular pre-Raphaelite paintings, or imposing renaissance sculptures; the skill, technique and overall grandiose filled me with awe, and quickly became my expectation and standard. Of course, what I didn't realise was that this slither of the art world that I was exposed to, was simply that - a limited preview into the canon. It was when I had entered university and begun knitting and sewing within the context of visual art that I discovered this history of denial and exclusion for artists like me.

Craft has a complex history which has left it often overlooked within the art world, but today we may again be at a point of revival. Mirroring the 1970s, Glenn Adamson (2007, p.166) highlights a certain trendiness of craft within the contemporary art sphere: ‘craft seems positively fashionable in the present moment, as artists, architects and designers evince a fascination with process and materials’. It is important to define what craft is, to delineate what we will be referring to throughout this essay. I will discuss the changing value of the medium, which has gone through many historical variations, so I think it is important to classify craft here as its material manifestations. Tate defines craft as ‘a form of making which generally produces an object that has a function’ (Tate, no date), but I believe this discounts a lot of contemporary work, focussing on the physical results. Instead, I prefer Glenn Adamson’s (no date) definition of modern craft - ‘the application of skilled making to the world around us.’ - which instead focuses more on the means of production and less so on the functionality of product.

Contemporary exhibitions are showing more craft works than ever before: there are more retrospectives for the icons of textiles, including Anni Albers (1899-1994), Sheila Hicks (1934) and Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017); crochet techniques have appeared within recent Turner Prize winners throughout Veronica Ryan's yellow room, and Jasleen Kaur's doily atop a car; and of course, the 2024 Venice Biennale explicitly outlined textile works as a focus of the exhibition. There is a rising discourse surrounding the medium and its inclusion within contemporary practice. This essay will focus on this dialogue, looking at the 2022 and 2024 Venice Biennales as touchstones for contemporary art practice, and the significant shift here as to what types of art we are valuing in today's modern context. I will look at the political and social links to practicing within craft, discussing the roots of this art form and how this has influenced the re-evaluation and recontextualisation that we are seeing today.

The 2024 Venice Biennale

The 2024 biennale, curated by Adriano Pedrosa (1965), was titled 'Foreigners Everywhere – Stranieri Ovunque'. Now retired President of *La Biennale di Venezia*, Robert Cicutto (2024, p.48), outlines his choice of Pedrosa for curator of the 60th annual Biennale in an introduction:

I chose Adriano Pedrosa so that he could bring his point of view on contemporary arts, rereading different cultures as if through a cinematic reverse shot.

What does this mean exactly, both for the biennale and the outward influence it will have on the contemporary art world? Pedrosa is a Brazilian native and is artistic director of Sao Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), responsible for numerous exhibitions highlighting histories of minorities in an ongoing series (*La Biennale di Venezia*, no date). So, practicing away from the Euro-American standards of visual art offers a fresher perspective and an inclusion of artworks removed from the accepted hegemony of the art world. Numerous recent discourses on biennials and their outward reach have outlined these ideas, and the capability to enrich the contemporary art field via the inclusion of cultural contributions from more marginalised regions, countries, and people (Weiss, 2011).

These themes are central to the 2024 Venice Biennale, encapsulated within two key motifs: textiles, and familial relationships of artists. There is also a focus on inputs from the Global South, defined as a group of countries (mostly in the southern hemisphere) who may ‘feel their views have not been heard fully or their interests not adequately reflected in the multilateral system’ (Brooke-Holland, 2024). So, in art, we are referring to a largely excluded series of contributions removed from the Euro-American standard. Within this essay, we will be focussing on this inclusion of craft, and what it means in relation to both the history and current plane of contemporary art.



Fig. 1: Julien Creuzet's colourful sculptures

Pedrosa engages with the historical relationship between craft and otherness (Pedrosa, 2024), and highlights it front and centre into arguably one of the biggest events within contemporary art sphere; it is an act of unwavering support, uplifting those who choose to work within this medium. Biennials can act as powerful centres for change- they represent and coordinate ‘trends’ within the art sphere, opening global conversations removed from the hegemonic ideals of euro-centricity (Checa-Gismero,

2022). This relationship, between craft and marginalisation, between textiles and indigenous, mostly post-colonial, communities are inherently linked by this otherness. The contemporary field is moving towards a more inclusive canon where we are spotlighting those who have been historically removed, so it makes sense that within contemporary art today we are finding a more involved role for craft work. Highlighted by Julia Bryan-Wilson (2013), craft is inherently contemporary because the art world is now so full of it, exemplified not only in the biennale, but also currently at the Tate Modern with Mike Kelley's (1954-2012) current solo exhibition *Ghost and Spirit* as well as Monster Chetwynd's (1973) *A Tax Haven Run by Women 2010-11* in the ongoing Performance and Participation exhibition. Hence, being a touchstone for the contemporary art scene, we can see parallels and correlations echoing between other institutions and the biennale.

Here, in Bryan-Wilson's *Eleven Propositions in Response to the Question: "What Is Contemporary about Craft?"* (2013, p.8), we can relate the ideas highlighted in proposition three to the ideological constructs of the 2024 biennial: 'Craft draws its very strength from its anachronistic quality and its ties to traditions, both its adherence to conventional artisanal labour and also its more messy reinventions.'. This is referential to the history of craft and emphasises its relevance to and embeddedness within the modes of production of textile work today – the two are inherently linked. It is important here to clarify that making work under the umbrella of 'craft' means making work utilising methodologies passed down from generation to generation (Bryan-Wilson, 2013); it means producing work with the same needles that our mother's mothers used, and how this meaning embedded within the material informs and evokes experience. This dissemination of knowledge so vital and informative to the medium devises the methods and culture of production that is essential to contemporary craft, the 2024 Venice Biennial, and Pedrosa's vision.

What motivates craft practices?

Relevant to this discourse revolving the craft revival and its significance within contemporary art is its link to the political. Craft is a 'language of material, provenance and making' (Lloyd-Jones, 2011), meaning its various modes of creating offers artists a way to engage with political activism, notably within environmental, Marxist, and feminist discourses. Feminist artists have engaged with this complex history of demotion and used craft methods as political fuel; coinciding with second wave feminism, artists reclaimed the methodology of craft under the umbrella of the fibre arts movement. This movement of the 60s and 70s worked to elevate works of fibre to fine art, fighting its preconceived standing within the hierarchy and assessing the limitations of the aesthetics of the art world (Auther, 2008).

The division between art and craft is a Western invention; art historians and theorists, in conjunction with societal constructions, created a hierarchical divide between art forms. These ideas which have formed the expectations and pillars within art history can be traced to German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant explores the place of judgement, understanding and reason, and examines discourses around aesthetical and teleological judgement. Kant outlines this idea of 'the genius' when talking about fine arts - if genius is to create something to which no rule can be applied, then in art, genius is the originality within production (Reiter, 2018). In his clarification of art here, this idea of originality cuts out craft and labour because the making is focussed on product and use, as opposed to the so-called aesthetic idea of fine art. We see similar aggravations in Clement Greenberg's classifications of the avant-garde and kitsch, coinciding with the industrial revolution and the rise of modernism in art and literature. 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) discusses the emergence of the avant-garde as a rejection of capitalism and patronage, whilst increased industrial efforts produced another, lowlier endeavour within art - 'a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: [...] popular, commercial art and literature' (Greenberg, 1939, p.3). This 'low' art appeared as a pre-digested version of high society's art and culture, which was mass produced for Euro-American audiences,

enabling a 'universal literacy' (Greenberg, 1939, p.4). Placing craft into this context, we look at the fundamental histories of the medium, and its detachment from traditional art means; in relation to the manufactural efforts of the industrial revolution, handicrafts faded away in favour of the capitalist means of mass production. So, if the avant-garde is a removal from capitalism, it is hence a rejection of craft mediums.

This clarification of craft within the art sphere is important to understanding the ideologies that are informing, especially feminist, craft practitioners today. When looking at the canon, we must understand that there are pre-existing ideals which act to form it; the canon is shaped by 'an ideological practice' adopted and reproduced by art historians and academics, which work unconsciously to confound the societal beliefs of the time (Parker and Pollock, 1981). Here, we are looking at the reproduction of femininity – in particular the notions of inferiority and domesticity – and its influence on determining the hierarchical standing of art produced by women. Prejudices against women fuel these categorisations of art and have hence worked to separate and demote women's work, simply defining it as 'homogenous expressions of femininity' (Parker and Pollock, 1981, p.18). Historically, there is institutional sexism rooted deeply within the hierarchy of arts, removing female art forms from the canon and repressing the cultural contributions put forth by textile artists.

The divide is, hence, an inherently gendered issue; embroidery made at home by female amateurs is viewed with significantly less respect than the male Renaissance painters of the same time. Women and the art they produced became alike, and the standing of these works – seen with both textile arts and flower paintings – was significantly lowered (Parker and Pollock, 1981). Highlighted by Rozsika Parker (1984, p.5), the public and private spheres, as well as the motivations for producing work become relevant to the upholding of this ideological divide, confounding this preconception that 'art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal'. There is no doubting the fact now that the contributions made by female embroiderers and needleworkers formed a rich, extensive cultural base, but as capitalism grew and embroidery became an industrial effort, its place within art was lost.

It is easy to use the romanticisation and domestication of craft methods to demote its significance in contemporary art. The nature of making with one's hands evokes a certain image – a folksy and hobbyist kitsch that regresses its importance (Bryan-Wilson, 2013). It is hard to detach the visuals of craft as an amateurish, decorative pastime belonging to women in the home; Glenn Adamson highlights the associations between craft, 'amateurism' and femininity, which have worked to purport this image of inferiority and removal from the 'avant-garde' (Adamson, 2007). However, the visual nature of the handmade is a strength, and offers a political agency to feminist artists who repurpose these preconceptions.



Fig. 2: The Dinner Party

Using craft as a language for feminist and anti-colonial activism politicises the practice and offers a powerful irony which uses the visual language to its benefit. An example highlighted by Rozsika Parker (1984, p.209), is Judy Chicago's (1939) *The Dinner Party* which utilises craft techniques committed by women as a political language to further discussions on women's rights in the 1970s. Chicago's piece is a commemoration of iconic historical female figures, 39 of which take their place at the table with embroidered settings, using techniques of their own time. Ferren Gipson

(2022, p.116-117) outlines the potency of this piece, and others created under the umbrella of 'women's work'. She talks of a unique ability of craft mediums, which have the innate ability to communicate women's experiences and perspectives due to the complex interconnected histories of gender and craft.

What is happening today?

Looking today at the past two Venice Biennales, we have seen a turnaround from these seemingly archaic ideologies that have influenced institutions for so long. For example, in 2022, curator Cecilia Alemani (1977) included record highs for non-male inclusion with just 21 of 213 artists identifying as male (Reilly, 2022). The gravity of this is highlighted by Maura Reilly (2022), where such a high majority of female participants in shows of this grandeur are often only in museum exhibitions solely devoted to female-identifying practitioners under an overtly feminist veil. *The Milk of Dreams* is instead an exhibition infused with this feminist literacy that enables her a so-called curatorial activism, forfeiting the historical male standard of exclusion and eurocentrism (Reilly, 2018). We see similar ideals trace throughout both the 2022 and 2024 biennales, especially that of an inclusion for those who have previously been on the outskirts of the exhibition space. In 2024, Pedrosa's devotion to works and inputs from the Global South within the *Nucleo Storico* offers us an insight into Modernist discourses removed from the Euro-American standard (Pedrosa, 2024), whilst in 2022, Alemani offers an insight into alternative historical narratives removed from the assumed male 'systems of direct inheritance and conflict' (Alemani, no date).



Fig. 3: Portraits Nucleo Storico

It is also interesting to take the nature of Greenberg's classifications of low and high art and apply them to contemporary craft works, exemplifying this shift. Highlighting the valuable emergence of nonobjective art, Greenberg (1939, p.2) talks of a drift from content and a focus instead on 'imitating [...] the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves'. Here, artists' inspirations are a derivative from the mediums they work in, working from the technical possibilities of medium as opposed to literal content. Utilising the capabilities of medium as a motivator for creating is evident in the works of Sheila Hicks, whose experimental and structural installations have been an investigation into the methodology of weaving and its possibilities, especially within the realm of off-loom possibilities regarding large scale installations and productions (Fowler, 2018). So, it was indeed a cultural consensus that worked to demote craft, maligning its associations to labour. We see a similar rejection of Greenberg's assertions and the biases fostered within modernism in the work of Beatriz Milhazes (1960) for the Applied Arts Pavillion at the 2024 Venice Biennale. Her painting works here are collaborative with the V&A, inspired by their traditional textile collections. Milhazes' series of work focuses on the possibilities and capabilities of colour, borrowing the visual motifs and structures seen in the V&A's weavings and textiles as a means of studying colour. Her practice

delineates, not from the technique and process focussed nature of Modernism, but via the reintroduction of historical references. She doesn't reject history, instead reestablishing craft and textiles, appropriating the patterns and colours found within and blurring the lines between 'high' and 'low' art. For example, *The Golden Egg* utilises the exact colour proportions from a kimono and sash from the V&A collection, reimagining the vibrant colours into swirling organic shapes and patterns, which like her other works blur between the abstract and the figurative (Pedrosa, 2024).



Fig. 4: *The Golden Egg*

Moving away from these historic euro-centric classifications of art aligns with the rising popularity of craft mediums, as post-colonial sentiments from the South and a reframing of the canon in this way encourages a questioning of western aesthetics (Checa-Gismero, 2022). We can look at the writing of Glenn Adamson (2017) for reference of this, as he discusses the methodological use of craft's embeddedness within the turning of Euro-American standards. Its contemporaneity coincides with this

reinvention of craft as a protest of its own history and contexts. As we work to reverse the white hegemony and sense of ‘otherness’ associated with craft, we remove the barriers of invisibility for craft works and discourses from the Global South and post-colonial nations. This questioning of Kant’s hierarchical assertions has become essential to the reversal of a cultural colonisation that has worked to make craft contributions invisible. In ‘The Black Craftsman Situation: a critical conversation about race and craft’ (Clark et al, 2021), the women on the panel discuss this invisibility at length, noting the lack of considerations of race and ethnicity within the rising prominence of discourses surrounding craft in contemporary art. Sonya Clark (2021, p.254) outlines the connection between African representation within craft collections and how we define what craft is. She highlights the fact that the skills woven into African histories, especially from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade are often overlooked as art, and institutions have further excluded these skills in their definitions of craft. So, by instead altering these classifications, we are revealing overlooked histories.

The 2024 Venice Biennale’s Golden Lion award winner *Takapau* by Mahaato Collective is an exemplary consequence of this. The New Zealand native collective utilised the ancestral whariki takapau weavings as inspiration, which are finely woven mats that add prestige to ceremonial events within Māori culture. What results from this, in the arsenale, is a large-scale weave extending from the floor to ceiling - a piece of grandeur which looms over the walkway. It is entirely referential – an ode to the legacies of Māori weaves and textiles which are so prominent within the culture. Speaking about the work (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 2023, 5:45), Bridget Reweti and Terri Te Tau discuss the patterns that appear in the construction of the piece. Via a mock-up production where the women were initially creating the large scale whariki, nihoniho and kaokao patterns that had come up in research began to accidentally formulate within the production. Allowing past legacies and ancestry to influence practice is a strength and acts as a vital mode of visual language; ‘you can be inspired by the work of our ancestors and follow a continuum of art-making that is of value, and really [it] is a way to talk about who you are’ (Mataaho Collective, 2022).

To conclude, craft's significance in contemporary art today derives from its up-and-coming prominence within large scale, mainstream exhibitions. The medium has moved on from the female, domestic associations to instead exhibit a politically charged visual language utilised by feminist and marxist practitioners to their strengths. This exposure to craft in mainstream exhibitions is echoing throughout galleries on more local levels – for example the Walker Art gallery's *Stitching Souls: Threads of Silence* – the long-term impact of which is something interesting to revisit and study. To be able to see so much textile work is valuable, especially as a female fibre artist, as it removes a kind of futility to the practice which I feel is something that has been internalised by so many. This saturation of brilliant, technical works provides a legitimacy to non-typical practices and allows us to step away from the institutionalised hierarchy that we have been taught for so long.

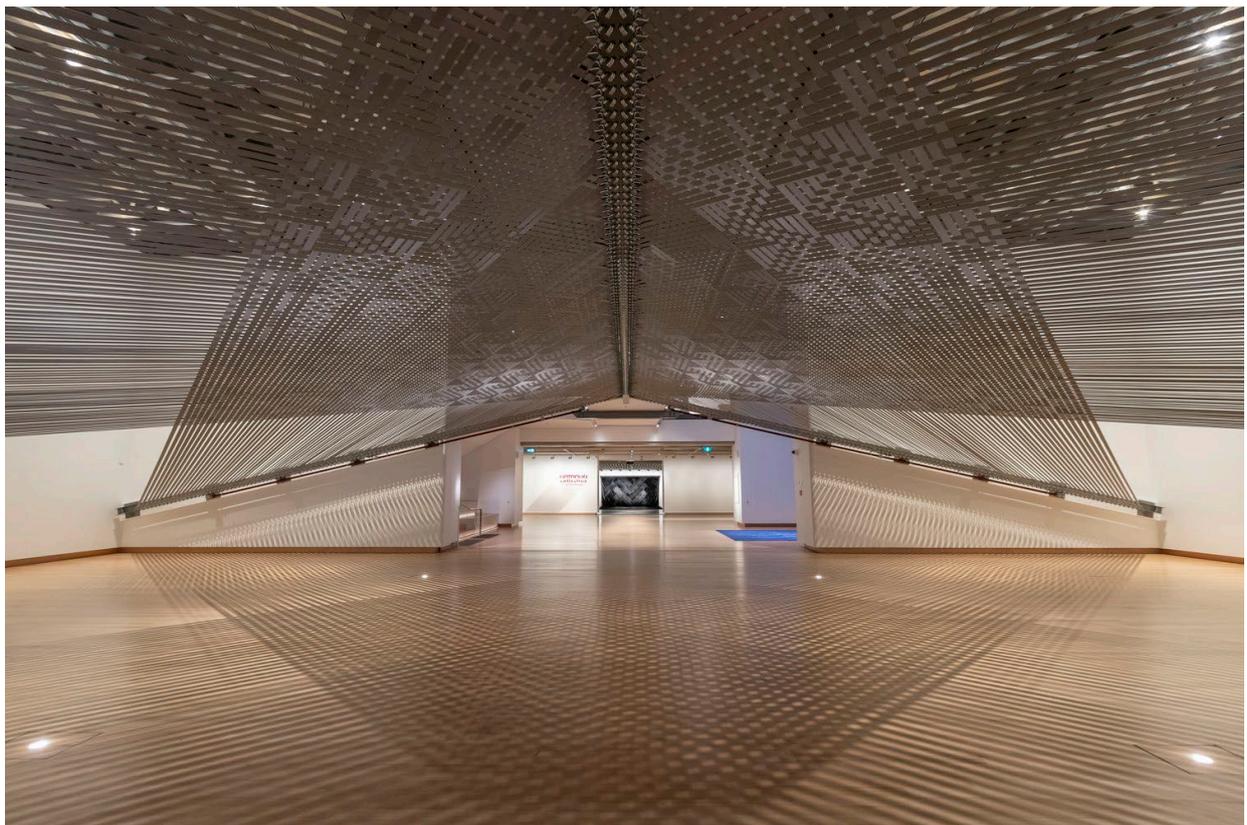


Fig. 5: Takapau

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Fig. 1:

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<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/reviews/venice-biennale-arte-2024-review/>
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Fig. 2:

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Fig. 3:

La Biennale di Venezia (2024) *Portraits Nucleo Storico*. Available at:
<https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2024/portraits> (Accessed: 10 January 2025).

Fig. 4:

Milhazes, B. (2024) *The Golden Egg*. Available at:
<https://www.instagram.com/beatrizmilhazes/p/DBR0-22Pyes/> (Accessed: 10 January 2025).

Fig. 5:

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