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With Needle and Threat:

Resignifying Abject Femininity through Feminist Craftivist Performance

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how two feminist craftivist performance art pieces, Casey Jenkins' *Casting Off My Womb* and *Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's* by the Feminist Needlework Party, reclaim abject femininity in profound ways. Through recalling subversive performance art practices of the 60's and 70's, retracing the threads on the gendered history of craft and needlework and deconstructing harmful dominant cultural representations, narratives and discourses, this thesis explores how the two case studies, by paying homage to their feminist foremothers, expand the web of feminist resistance, reweave representation and reclaim abject femininity from its patriarchal exile. Through a situational analysis the performances are moved from the plane of the aesthetic experience to a relational field, highlighting their craftivist potentiality in shifting dominant narratives, generating public dialogue on important feminist issues and fostering interconnectivity, community and connection. The performances are analyzed according to a dramaturgical methodology that employs the situational triad of context, composition and spectatorship as an analytical compass.

Introduction

Artistic practices that reflect on societal discourses and debates, redefine politics of representation and employ activist means have been around for numerous decades, spanning from the cultural manifestations of postmodernism within its critical discourse to the participatory arts and relational aesthetics of the 90's (Bishop 2012, Bourriaud 1998). What is referred to as art in our contemporary sphere goes way beyond the aesthetic and into the social, the political, the experiential and the affective. With that in mind, this thesis aims at analyzing two pieces of performance art that combine elements of performance, craft and activism in order to outline how they converse with societal discourses and what sorts of possibilities they create when it comes to feminist politics of representation, resistance and subjecthood.

The central objects of analysis of this thesis are two pieces that combine performance and craft, both mediums prevalent in feminist practices, each carrying their own history of subversion. Although both feminist performance art and *craftivism* —meaning any form of activism that incorporates the use of crafts, usually needlework— have received their respective academic and artistic attention, I would like to investigate what could come out of this interdisciplinary union; on one side there is craft in its transition from a tool of female domestication and passivity to a powerful generative means of feminist self-realization and empowerment and on the other side there is feminist performance art in its tradition of nurturing of the abject and the transgressive. I find that the two create a dialogue rich with potentiality in rewriting dominant narratives of representation and engendering new subjectivities when it comes to gender.

Partly drawing from feminist psychoanalytic theory (Kokoli 2016, Kristeva 1982) by abject femininity this thesis refers to feminine traits that have been systemically demonized by patriarchy, traits that are seen as undesirable, ugly and in need to be obscured and eliminated

from the public sphere so that the dominant oppressive systems can keep operating without ideological disruptions. Abject femininity encompasses any aspect of femininity that does not align with or conform to phallogentric culture but allows femininity to exist outside of the tight constraints of the male gaze, possessing a transgressive power to escape that gaze. In the scope of this thesis, abject femininity is presented as a positive, albeit threatening force, with the potential to engender new subjectivities for women; by cathartically reclaiming these marginalized and neglected aspects of femininity from patriarchal ideology, their power of feminist dissent resurfaces from the depths of their abjection. Through unearthing forgotten and misrepresented histories of women in relation to needlework, this thesis explores how the two chosen performance pieces work as agents of excavating and reshaping abject feminine archetypes, narratives and representations. While providing new frames of reference, shame is replaced with empowerment and that which threatens becomes a reclaimed weapon of self-realization. Through a revision of harmful discourses on and representations of female subjectivity and identity, these feminist craft performances act as generators of sociopolitical change, moving from the personal towards the political.

In a manner that could be paralleled to a process of psychoanalytic sublimation¹, that is turning the socially unacceptable and the repressed into modes of expression that can exist within normative society, both performances use needle and thread to mend and transform aspects of femininity that have been demonized, that cause fear, having been centuries-old systemic threats to patriarchy, associated with the “dark continent” of femininity². The traits in question here manifest in female sexuality and witchcraft, both prevalent and central themes in the performances that will be analyzed. But instead of presenting these aspects of

¹ For more on art as a form of sublimation see Gemes, Ken. “Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation.” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 38, 2009, pp. 38–59. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717974>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2023.

² For a feminist reexamination of how femininity and the female body have been presented as threatening, abject and monstrous in culture see Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*, Taylor & Francis, 1995.

femininity in a way that assimilates them within a patriarchal canon by polishing their sharp edges and making them malleable, soft and subdued, the feminine abject is staged as powerful, transformative and positive, as something to be cherished instead of tamed, to be sharpened instead of polished.

My case studies are two feminist performance art pieces that employ craft in their epicenter while articulating different aspects of abject femininity. The first performance is by contemporary Australian artist Casey Jenkins and is called *Casting Off My Womb*. As an homage to all the feminist performance artists before her, she follows the thread of using her body as an essential part of the performance. For twenty-eight days she sat at a gallery space knitting with yarn inserted into her vagina. Her menstrual blood functioned as dye to the knitted piece since the 28-day duration includes a menstrual cycle. The use of abject materials like bodily fluids, piss, excrements, blood etc. which all produce a more-than-uncanny effect, finds home under the category of abject art, defined by Tate as follows: “Abject art is used to describe artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions” (Tate). Apart from expanding the webs of body and feminist performance art of the 60’s and 70’s, Jenkins’ piece also incorporates abject art practices with the feminine abject being materialized in the presence of her period blood.

The second case study is a performative lecture by the Feministische Handwerk Partij, translating in English to Feminist Needlework Party,³ an Amsterdam-based political feminist artist movement that, as their manifesto states, is dedicated to “studying, repairing, speaking, patching up, unlearning and mending” (Manifesto). They have produced many manifestations in public spaces and have also contributed to public programs all related to feminist politics and needlework. The performance that will be analyzed in this thesis is called *Wool-spinning*

³ Throughout this thesis I will be also using the abbreviation FHP when referring to the group.

Witches and Creabea's and was presented at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam as part of the public program for Stedelijk's *Meet the Makers* edition on Sheila Hicks. In this performance, the two leading artists of the collective, Margreet Sweerts and Emmeline de Mooij pay tribute to our witch wool-spinster ancestresses. The performance included a reading of de Mooij's essay read by herself where she connects the dots on witchcraft, mythology and needlework, repairing and reclaiming a part of women's history while Sweerts accompanies the reading with sound, embodying something like the Ancient Greek theatrical chorus. And of course, needlework also takes place; the audience was sitting in a circle where they could work on their needlework projects, or pick up pieces of textiles that were placed in a circle and repair them. In this performance, abject femininity is embodied in the figure of the witch.

Both of these performances artfully excavate abject feminine histories and stereotypes in an attempt to deconstruct and stitch them back up as an act of repair. Aside from dipping into the personal and the transformative, these pieces also function as independent craftivist statements that are in constant conversation with their audience, and society at large. Relationality is crucial in analyzing them since, apart from their political nature, socio-historical context and empowering possibilities, they work towards creating community, interconnections and visibility. They also approach craft as a process and highlight the significance of crafting in itself. Performance art is also approached not as a passive presentation but as an active intertextual dynamic agent that directly implements the spectator, whether physically, mentally or affectively, as a process that defies patriarchal norms and ideology. In their effort to engage, provoke, include and affect the audience lies a craftivist potentiality in shifting gazes and narratives, in reclaiming the feminine abject.

The central research question for this thesis is: How do contemporary feminist craftivist performances comment on and resignify femininity? In order to answer this, I am employing

a dramaturgical methodology that comes from situational analysis and readings that dissect the gendered history of needlework, the potentiality of performance to create new subjectivities, the politics of art and craft and the role of craftivism in this contemporary cultural scene. In my analysis I am also employing concepts from feminist psychoanalysis such as the abject and *écriture féminine* as well as references to feminine archetypes from mythology and witchcraft.

Before delving into the actual analysis of the case studies, it is important to provide enough theoretical context that establishes some of the core notions and concepts that are relevant for my analysis. In the theoretical framework of this thesis, I refer to theory on feminist performance art, craftivism and the gendered history of needlework, providing the necessary context for situating and understanding the case studies from a multidimensional perspective. Some other important concepts will be appearing later on along with the analysis itself. In the methodology section, I explain how a situational dramaturgical approach can help in better exploring these works not as mere performance art pieces but as situations bound to their time and space, to their sociopolitical and cultural context and to their relation to the audience. This layered complexity allows for an open and multifaceted reading that takes into account all the three elements of the situational model of analysis that I will be using; paralleled to the three sides of a triangle, these elements are composition, context and spectatorship. Finally, my research culminates in a close reading of the two performance pieces where some additional concepts along with documentary analysis will be presented.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

In order to sufficiently analyze the two chosen performances in a nuanced and multifaceted way, as well as to provide an adequate sociopolitical, (art)historical and philosophical context, the theoretical framework for the scope of this thesis is informed by multidisciplinary reading. The texts that have accompanied my research refer to feminist perspectives on art and craft, craftivism, performance and relational aesthetics as well as borrowing concepts from feminist psychoanalysis, mythology and witchcraft. In what follows I aim to delineate these core theories and readings in order to provide the necessary theoretical context for situating the analysis that will follow, while also employing them as a productive means in answering the central questions of this thesis. There are also a couple of concepts related to abject femininity that, albeit being part of the theoretical underpinning of this thesis, will be elaborated on in detail in conjunction with the case study analysis on Chapter 3, with each case study reflecting two conceptions of abject femininity.

1.1 Performing Dissent: Feminist Performance Art as Activist Revision

This section focuses on the background of feminist performance art as a subversive form, on its use of the female body and on its activist potentiality to shift subjectivities. Since both of my objects of analysis are performances I perceive this performativity to be as equal of critical attention as the craft aspects thereof (which are developed and analyzed in the second part of this chapter).

One cannot talk about feminist performance without referring to the impact of the radical and often transgressive feminist performance art of the 60's and 70's, which, despite its association with second-wave feminism, still carries relevance today, as much for art and performance studies as for subversive feminist politics. During that time, this fresh medium which brought the female body to the conceptual and formal spotlight, actively undermined

and redefined what constitutes art within a patriarchal Western canon. As Erin Striff argues in her article *Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art*, performance art “reflected the political unrest and culture, in which freedom of the body implied sexual resistance to cultural constraints. ... [It] was all about the breaking of tradition and the creation of new modes of expression” (1). Performance art operates in-between the physical/corporeal and the mental/conceptual, with these two dimensions always being in conversation with one another. In feminist performance art the body is often used as a vessel to express, oppose or transgress certain conceptual and societal notions. It is important to highlight the use of the body as a subversive artistic medium, especially since in Western patriarchal discourse established as early as the Medieval times through religion, the body has been reduced as of less importance compared to the mind, perceived as dirty and impure, a notion often reflected in the established art canon as well. In her article *Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse*, Susan Stanford Friedman contextualizes this mind-body dichotomy in a way that reflects gender biases through critically dissecting the creativity and childbirth metaphor. She argues that this familiar mind and body dualism is embedded in Western patriarchal ideology where men are identified with the mind and creation, while women are reduced to their bodies and identified with pro-creation. According to that ideology:

Creation is the act of the mind that brings something new into existence. Procreation is the act of the body that reproduces the species. A man conceives an idea in his brain, while a woman conceives a baby in her womb, a difference highlighted by the post-industrial designation of the public sphere as man's domain and the private sphere as woman's place. (Friedman 52)

By using the female body as an artistic vessel that spans the whole spectrum of aesthetic perceptions, from the erotic to the grotesque, feminist performance artists have been

attempting to strip it off of these essentialist gender biases. The body, in its othered state, becomes a transgressive vessel that refuses patriarchal inscriptions and instead attempts to critically redefine problematic discourses and restricting binaries that only reaffirm patriarchal narratives and structures.

In her article, *Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism* Jeanie Forte explores how feminist performance art, along with criticizing aspects of art like commodification and commercialism, allies with postmodernism, adding on a gender-critical dimension to its critique. Commenting on its inherently political nature, Forte argues that women's performances stem from "the relationship of women to the dominant system of representation, situating them within a feminist critique. Their disruption of the dominant system constitutes a subversive and radical strategy of intervention vis a vis patriarchal culture" (217). Performance art was used as a deconstructive strategy, embodying the discourse of the "objectified other" (218).

This deconstruction hinges on the awareness that 'Woman,' as object, as a culturally constructed category, is actually the basis of the Western system of representation. Woman constitutes the position of object, a position of other in relation to a socially-dominant male subject; it is that 'otherness' which makes representation possible" (218).

Feminist performance art, therefore, exposes patriarchal ideology in its phallogentric modes of representation and signification through deconstructing them and creating alternative modes of subject-object relations. In this way it disavows oppressive patriarchal systems of thought and representation and offers new means for the construction of subjectivity through, its use of the body as a subversive medium: "The female body as subject clashes in dissonance with its patriarchal text, challenging the very fabric of representation by refusing

that text and posing new, multiple texts grounded in real women's experience and sexuality” (Forte 220).

Within these radical expressions that negate the status-quo, the activist potentialities of feminist performance art emerge. The well-known saying “The personal is political” comes to play here to highlight how, while staging what are often deeply personal and subjective experiences, feminist performance art is at the same time voicing collective struggles while providing a liberating frame of reference and identification. In this attempt at consciousness-raising and enabling women to form their own subjectivities and identities, feminist performance art moves from theory to practice and “provides a visible basis for the construction of a feminist frame of reference, articulating alternatives for power and resistance” (Forte 235). These alternatives are polyphonic and inclusive since there is no one-fits-all notion of femininity, empowerment or gender expression. In performance art “the differences and the commonalities among women are made visible and celebrated” (Forte 232).

In its attempt at shifting gazes and rewriting narratives, feminist performance art takes on a serious activist agenda. In their article *Considering Feminist Activist Art*, Mary Jo Aagerstoun and Elissa Auther pinpoint three traits as key to defining a feminist practice as activist, since not all feminist cultural practices are necessarily activist, which can create a murky territory. The three important traits they propose a piece needs to have in order to be considered feminist activist art are being *critical*, *positive* and *progressive*:

By critical we mean work that seeks to expose underlying ideologies or existing structures that have a negative effect on women and their lives; by positive we mean work that takes a stand, expressing its maker's faith in achieving results or positing alternatives; by progressive we mean a belief in the feminist tenets of equality and

inclusiveness, a better world free of sexism, racism, homophobia, economic inequality, and violence (Agerstoun and Auther 7).

Through being critical, positive and progressive, feminist activist art invites us to reevaluate how we perceive our own identity, how we contextually see ourselves in society and how we are affected by patriarchally-imposed limitations in order to take a step further in breaking these limitations and systems down. This implicit, and yet foundational, kind of activism is just as necessary as more pronounced activist manifestations such as protesting, petitioning, documenting and donating. The aforementioned criteria will be explored in the analysis of the chosen performances in order to examine their positioning within the spectrum of feminist activist art. The tendency of feminist performance art to question and reject dominant modes of representation proposed by patriarchy and phallogentric culture through creating new subject positions for women renders it an activist tool that disrupts ideology, authority and order while encouraging the creation of more open and fluid discourses and representations.

1.2 From Stitching the Personal towards Stitching the Political: Feminism and Craftivism

This section focuses on the crafting aspect of feminist craft performances, and specifically in the interrelations amongst needlework, feminism and what we call craftivism. In order to explore this relationship between craftivism and feminist discourse I shall focus on three parameters, namely the gendered history of needlework with references to the art-craft binary, an exploration of craftivism as a contemporary and polemic manifestation of feminist needlework practices and the relational tendencies of craftivism.

Rozsika Parker has been one of the leading scholars in craft studies and as a feminist art historian has outlined in numerous works of hers the gendered history of needlework. In our collective cultural consciousness we still tend to associate needlework, whether knitting, embroidery or weaving, with the domestic, passive, submissive, conservative even, all

adjectives that stand as radical opposites to our perception of feminist empowerment. This association is far from benign and is rooted in centuries of ideological endeavors to not only restrict women to the private sphere and keep them subjugated, or turn them into a “good wife”, but to also belittle and erase needlework and the so-called domestic arts from the Western art historical cannon. In her seminal book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* Parker traces the history of needlework centuries back and outlines how embroidery was essentially used to define a certain feminine ideal, proving that this constructed notion of femininity imposed by patriarchy is essentially artificial:

The construction of femininity refers to the psychoanalytic and social account of sexual differentiation. Femininity is a lived identity for women either embraced or resisted. The feminine ideal is an historically changing concept of what women should be, while the feminine stereotype is a collection of attributes which is imputed to women and against which their every concern is measured (Parker 4).

Parker observes how needlework practiced by women has never been accepted as art but defined as craft, underlining a connection between the hierarchy of the arts and gender: “The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft” (5). This exclusion of craft from the dominant art canon is exactly where its subversive possibilities begin. Being an outsider in the art world, craft opens up potentialities for undermining and questioning hierarchies while at the same time rejecting the art market’s monetization of creative work. Besides, craft does not need to be recognized as art to find its power. Such an identification would not only reaffirm this supposed hierarchy but strip craft off of its unique history and risk its assimilation into normative art establishment practices.

Apart from being gendered itself, the art-craft binary is comparable to other binary counterparts such as masculine-feminine, creation-procreation (as analyzed in 1.1),

private-public, id-superego with one of the parts always superimposing over the other. In *Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts* Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock once again outline how in the art-craft hierarchy, craft is ascribed traits like decorative and applied that strip from it any trace of intellectuality but instead see it as manual and repetitive. (50). Art is often perceived as a form of a higher creation produced by what Linda Nochlin calls in her essay *Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?* the myth of the Great Artist, “—subject of a hundred monographs, unique, godlike—bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence” (153). Juxtaposed to this quasi-spiritual presentation of artistic creation, stands craft, baptized as decorative and utilitarian, reduced to something more humble and everyday with less substance, grandeur or conceptual essence. Craft is also connected to the feminine and the private sphere, thus, unrecognized by a male patriarchal canon as any form of legitimate art. Needlework is often also attached to its materiality and thingness instead of being perceived as an immaterial and conceptual process. As expressed by Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush in their essay titled *Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender*, “craft is not just a material practice separate from semiotic ones ... Craft fastens the concrete and the abstract into a material symbol” (246). This processual quality is highly ignored since it is mostly ascribed to works of “high” art. This sexual division that forms the established hierarchies in the Western art history canon has been enabled and reinforced through the power of ideology. For Parker and Pollock “Ideology, is not a conscious process, its effects are manifest but it works unconsciously, reproducing the values and systems of belief of the dominant group it serves” (80), making it impossible to consider the art and craft binary in purely aesthetic terms, since in it we see mirrored gender struggles that have existed for centuries.

Parker also points out that whether something is accepted as art or not often correlates to where it was made and who made it (5). Apart from her critical points, she also comments on

a more nuanced and empowering aspect of needlework —namely embroidery— that is often overshadowed by the constant negative connection it bears to a means of restricting and controlling women:

Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness. The presence and practice of embroidery promotes particular states of mind and self experience. Because of its history and associations embroidery evokes and inculcates femininity in the embroiderer. But it can also lead women to an awareness of the extraordinary constraints of femininity, providing at times a means of negotiating them, and at other times provoking the desire to escape the constraints. Observing the covert ways embroidery has provided a source of support and satisfaction for women leads us out of the impasse created by outright condemnation or uncritical celebration of the art. (11)

Adding to Parker, Elizabeth Emery highlights the radical manifestations of needlework, the abject status of which allowed it to challenge the exclusionary hierarchies that erased women from (art) history:

Needlework was revolutionary for feminist art as it was thoroughly separate from the arts establishment, the commercial art marketplace, the concept of male ‘genius’ and the canon of Western art. Among feminist textile artists, needlework was considered a form of countercultural production that was free from the associations of the commercial, male-dominated art world. (113)

We observe, therefore, a shift in the discourse around craft, which has been moving from a means of preserving female passivity and subjugation to an alluring, subversive and innovative feminist practice. Its outsider status also makes it brim with potentialities for resistance and protest.

When it comes to crafting as an activist tool, this practice has been going on since long before the 21st century. Needlework, for instance, was strategically used in the feminist campaigning of the Suffragettes as a means of evoking femininity as female strength, not weakness (Parker 197). But what exactly is craftivism nowadays? The word itself already evokes a general definition: craftivism is a form of activism that employs various craft practices. It was coined by Betsy Greer and other craftivists in a collectively composed manifesto that consists of various affirmations: “Craftivism is about raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch ... Craftivism is about creating wider conversations about uncomfortable issues ... Craftivists are makers, hackers, menders, menders and modifiers of material things” (Craftivism Manifesto), just to name a few. Craftivism finds expression in numerous DIY online and offline communities and has become quite “pop”, leading to some artists hesitating to call themselves craftivists due to the overuse of the term. There lies a gray area between craftivist cultural practices and DIY Pinterest projects. As Ele Carpenter argues in her essay *Activist Tendencies in Craft*, “the complex and multiple approaches to craftivism are as diverse as approaches to art and activism” (2). Craftivism is also a common protest practice, see for example yarn bombing. Since my objects of analysis relate to performance, the type of craftivism present in this thesis is, again, more nuanced and less polemic compared to other craftivist examples, although both of the makers of the pieces I will be analyzing identify with the term “craftivist”. In the context of this thesis, craftivism is explored as being part of interdisciplinary art practices; needlework is staged within performance art, creating a dialogue between the two artistic traditions, two traditions that have been consistently expressing the feminine outside of patriarchal molds.

Bearing in mind the historical context of the gendered nature of needlework and how this led to it becoming a uniquely subversive means of feminist expression will be productive in analyzing the chosen performances not merely as autonomous artworks but as instances

situated within the history of feminist practices of dissent that are interwoven within an ongoing lineage of crafting resistances. Craftivism is a contemporary manifestation of practicing needlework in a socially situated way, giving visibility both to the craft itself as well as to the maker(s) and the social, political and personal messages they imprint on or through their practice.

What craftivist practices also have in common is that “the social, performative and critical discourse around the work is central to its production and dissemination. Here craft is not simply a luddite desire for the localized handmade, but a social process of collective empowerment, action, expression and negotiation” (Carpenter 1). Glenn Adamson in his book *Thinking Through Craft* also suggests that crafting should be also perceived as a way of thinking instead of just a way of doing (1). As far as craft and activism are concerned, Bratich and Brush also point out where the radical political potentiality of crafting is most visible in:

If knitting offers subversive possibilities, it is hardly restricted to explicit radicalized forms. Instead, it is the very logic, the very mechanism, of crafting that promises a powerful political tool. The community-building, spacemaking, and ethical relations that constitute fabriculture allow us to rethink the politics of the popular via mundane media. (248).

They also refer to this quote by Greer:

“Craftivism is about more than ‘craft’ and ‘activism’—it’s about making your own creativity a force to be reckoned with. The moment you start thinking about your creative production as more than just a hobby or ‘women’s work,’ and instead as something that has cultural, historical and social value, craft becomes something stronger than a fad or trend” (Greer qtd. in Bratich and Brush 248).

Analyzing craft as part of a performance emphasizes these qualities that pay attention to process, rendering it something more than just a means to creating a material end. In other

words, the act of crafting itself is worthy of analysis and doing any needlework can potentially be read as a performance.

Relationality is another key element that should be highlighted as both present in political crafting in general, as well as in the chosen performance art pieces in particular. When craftivism is concerned, another way that it manifests politically is its relation to community, which allows for its relational character to emerge. There are numerous on-and-offline craftivist groups and collectives and most of the time craftivism, like most other types of activism, is practiced in groups. It essentially carries the inherent togetherness seen in centuries-old needlework practices to a new, more public and more polemic sphere. It encourages conversations, connectivity and exchange of knowledge, making it a relational art practice as well. When it comes to the chosen case studies as craftivist art projects, relationality is also present, not only attached to the craft dimension but also related to the ability of a performance art piece to be itself relational. Both case studies being feminist performance art pieces with an activist grip are not only situated in a specific sociocultural context but also generate dialogue with society at large, whether through direct audience participation or in more implicit ways that still engage with societal discourse.

For this thesis, both feminist craft performances are therefore situated within the discourse of relational aesthetics. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” (5). A relational art project bears characteristics such as intersubjectivity, togetherness, exchanges and the formation of encounters (Bourriaud 5-6), traits that also happen to be present in craftivist circles. Both of the case studies focus on bridging aesthetics and theory with praxis in an attempt to not only retrace erased histories and resignify femininity but also build intimacy and community, something that has been always cultivated and nurtured within

needlework circles. I argue that contemporary craftivist performance art creates a fertile soil for these types of encounters and exchanges that Bourriaud refers to. When actively situated within societal discourses, contemporary feminist performance art can fuel dynamic relationships and discussion, as well as foster feelings of community and empowerment. Both of the performances I am focusing on bear strong markers of relationality; directly speaking to and interacting with society, they dig up forgotten and misrepresented histories and aspects of abject femininity in an attempt to heal and positively redefine them in order to change present narratives and representations in a dynamic and intersubjective way. Additionally, in the FHP's case, needlework is brought to the participatory forefront with the presence of the audience being an integral part of the work. Bourriaud also proposes that relational art creates situations of interaction and communication that are not ruled by the structuring rhythms of everyday life which are inherently connected to the demands of capitalism, technology and transactional relations (6). Similar to Bourriaud's disregarding of the normative communication zones, needlework also offers a "critique of the regime of technology and the culture of speed. Crafting creates slow space, a speed at odds with the imperative toward hyperproduction. Crafting also ruptures the seamlessness of the technological present" (Bratich and Brush 235-6). The creation of social bonds through art which is at the core of relational aesthetics is necessary for any productive form of activism since activism can start at an individual level but is intensely dependent on solidarity and collective effort. The relational character of the performances is also highlighted in more detail in relation to my methodology which comes from dramaturgical analysis.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 A Situational Approach to Feminist Craft Performance

Since my approach in analyzing the two chosen performances is far from limited to the aesthetic sphere but encompasses socio-historical and cultural context, spectatorship, participation and activist commentary, I find situational analysis to be a fitting method through which the potentialities of these works to engender new subjectivities on femininity and reclaim the gaze can be explored. In a situational approach, as articulated by Nanna Verhoeff, Sigrid Merx and Rick Dolphijn, the object of research is not viewed as a “thing” or “work” but as a spectatorial situation that is culturally and historically specific (1). In situational analysis, the focus lies on how a performance can create “particular subject positions for audiences, spectators, or participants and related experiences, meanings and reflections on, or possible contributions to public discourse and debate.” (1). The emphasis on new subject positions is very relevant for my case studies since, through their relational interconnectedness, they shed light on how, as feminist performance art pieces, they constitute craftivism and actively influence perceptions on gender, craft and abject femininity, contributing, thus, to public perceptions in a critical way. They are not mere works to look at and maybe briefly ponder on but possess the power to deconstruct dated stereotypes and generate new meanings and subjectivities in the audience.

In order for these renewed subject positions to emerge a dynamic process is required to be at play. A useful analytical tool for unpacking this dynamic process without neglecting any thread that contributes to a well-rounded situational analysis is the dramaturgical triad of *composition*, *spectator* and *context*, a dramaturgical method of analysis proposed by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx. In their article *Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach* they showcase a method for analyzing performance that takes equally into account

these three interrelated components. Dramaturgy is defined as “the meaningful coherence of all theatrical means employed, of their organization and structure in time and space, and how their interplay generates meaning and experience” (Nibbelink and Merx 7) with its three relational planes being as follows; composition principles, which refer to all the theatrical and structural elements of a work, be it props, costumes, light, sound as well as space and time, spectatorial address, which refers to how the audience is implemented in the performance, and the performance’s relation to wider sociocultural and artistic contexts (6). This model emphasizes the interconnectedness and equal importance of each element while remaining flexible and fluid in how it is meant to be used. The notion of situatedness always remains central since both the performance itself as well as the spectators exist within certain societal, historical, political and personal spheres which affect any interaction between them.

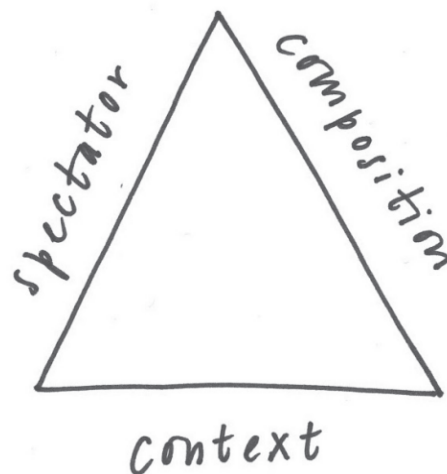


Fig. 1. A visualization of the situational triad model of dramaturgical analysis in Nibbelink, Liesbeth Groot and Sigrid Merx. “Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach”. *FORUM+*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2021, pp. 4 - 16.

For this thesis trajectory, I am framing the central sub-questions related to the two case studies around these three elements in order to address and resolve the central research question which is how these feminist craft performances can resignify perceptions on

femininity. I also identify with the notion of addressing them not merely as artworks but in a way that highlights their contextual underpinnings and their relation to history; performance art history, the gendered history of craft practices as well as any feminine history that has been obscured and misrepresented by dominant culture, like, for example, the history of witchcraft. Thus, context is crucial to my analysis, but so are the unique theatrical means that are employed to materialize certain concepts as well as the involvement of the audience, especially in the case of *Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's*, where spectators are at the same time participants. Through audience address I shall also address the craftivist potential of these performances to influence public perception and generate dialogue.

Below I am listing the sub-questions:

On composition: How does the composition of the performances stage craft as a subversive feminist practice?

On spectatorship: How are audiences urged to critically rework preconceived notions of femininity through being physically, mentally or affectively involved in the performances?

On context: How do these pieces connect abject femininity to archetypes, histories and myths in order to rewrite them in a cathartic and empowering way?

2.2 Data Collection

In this section I shall refer to the reasoning behind the selection of my two case studies as well as how I sourced my data for each one.

I chose to focus on case studies that combine craft with performance and can be classified as feminist and craftivist. Both pieces employ concepts, symbols and imagery related to abject femininity in order to transgressively resignify it and turn it from something negative into something nourishing and productive. Moreover, they are both part of and a continuation of a certain historical lineage that connects women with needlework and daringly expand this link

in radical and contemporary ways, bringing alternative narratives in regards to femininity and craft into play.

When it comes to *Casting Off My Womb* by Casey Jenkins, her abject knitting technique referred to as “vaginal knitting” is particularly intriguing in not only the way it pays homage to the often graphic feminist performance art of the 70’s but also in opening discussions on prominent feminist issues such as bodily autonomy, menstruation and representation of female genitalia in media. I also found the controversy the performance piece caused online an interesting aspect of audience address. The 28-day duration of the piece is relevant from a compositional perspective due to its physical and symbolic allusion, which is the female menstrual cycle. I am basing my analysis on the documentation material I accessed on the artist’s website and a YouTube video from Australian TV network SBS, where the piece is featured in one of their series called *The Feed*. This video provides some more visual documentation as well as commentary from Jenkins herself.

As for *Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea’s* by the Feminist Needlework Party, apart from them fulfilling all the aforementioned criteria, I was also happy to include a work by a collective that is active in the Netherlands which makes it part of my community. As a researcher, I am pleased to highlight cultural projects that are happening in my vicinity and enrich communal and local cultural life, so part of my reasoning was subjective. I was also lucky enough to be able to meet and talk to them in person which made this project feel really impactful. Apart from them being close to me in proximity, I also wanted to present a work from an art collective instead of only independent artists to highlight the element of togetherness intrinsic in needlework. This element of community is something the FHP fosters through their projects that are relational at large, meaning that they implement public space, encourage participation and aim to promote an appreciation for care, maintenance and repair through performative actions that combine needlework and studying, as stated in their

manifesto. The particular performance that I chose to focus on artfully employs the witch archetype, providing rich intertextual commentary on the history of needlework and feminist discourses on witchcraft. The fact the audience is also participating in the performance is another aspect worthy of analysis and interpretation. For this performance, I collected data from their website, namely text and documentation images and also conducted an in-person interview. Since online documentation was limited and I had not attended the performance, I had to rely on their telling for some specifics of what the performance entailed. The format of the interview was unstructured and often took on a personal and conversational character. Since I was invited to the artists' studio and talked with them in person, while using parts of the interview for my analysis, I refer to them by their first names as I am quoting them.

Chapter 3: Analysis

This chapter dissects each case study through an analysis that covers the three planes of the situational triad model of composition, context and spectatorship. These aspects of dramaturgy will be analyzed separately each as a subsection of each case study analysis while also maintaining a conversation with one another since their boundaries are often blurry. As Nibbelink and Merx put it, “These planes continuously inflect and interfere with each other” (7), making it hard to create clear-cut distinctions and isolations.

3.1 Knitting the Abject Maternal: Casey Jenkins’ *Casting Off My Womb* as Sexual-Textile Politics.

Setting the Stage

In 2013, a video of an artist knitting with wool placed in her vagina went viral with over 13 million views on YouTube causing conflicting reactions, something not that surprising for any unconventional and experimental art project that reaches mainstream attention. The artist in question is Casey Jenkins, a Melbourne-based installation and durational or community engagement performance artist whose work, as stated in her website “explores social and institutional power dynamics, and notions of intimacy, temporality and identity, with a particular focus on feminism and gender” (Bio). The “vaginal knitting” as it was often referred to in the media was part of her durational performance piece titled *Casting Off My Womb*, which is also the work of hers I chose to highlight for the scope of this thesis because of its craftivist and confrontational character. For twenty-eight days, marking one menstrual cycle, she could be found at the Darwin Visual Arts Association knitting with yarn lodged in and drawn out of her vagina. The final knitted piece is 15 meters long, draped across metal coat hangers and off white in color with parts dyed red by her menstrual blood.



Fig. 2. Jenkins, Casey. "Casting Off My Womb." 2013.

<https://casey-jenkins.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Casting-Off-My-Womb4-web.jpg>

Through this performance Jenkins links two conflicting notions of femininity, "the vulva associated with women's sexuality and reproduction, and knitting associated with elderly asexual women" (Casting Off My Womb), both aspects of femininity that carry stereotypes and patriarchal marks. By conflating the two, she presents femininity as layered, as something that resists patriarchal definition, that rejects and challenges any positioning under these restricting parameters. In what follows I shall explore what statements this feminist craftivist performance piece makes when it comes to resignifying femininity and reclaiming representation for aspects of femininity that are obscured in the shadow of their patriarchally-imposed abjection, namely menstrual blood and the female genitalia, by going through elements of its context, composition and spectatorship.

Tracing the Threads: Theoretical and Cultural Context

There are three types of context encountered in *Casting Off My Womb*; firstly, there is its feminist art-historical context that allows us to read it intertextually as part of a (counter)tradition of feminist subversive art practices. Secondly, there is its cultural and societal context which allows us to elaborate on what kinds of debates it makes a statement on and what kinds of allusions and references it draws from within our collective cultural consciousness. Finally, there is its philosophical and conceptual context that allows us to theorize on the more abstract concepts and ideas it evokes. This section focuses on all the three aspects of context in an organic order that does not read them as separate since they often inform and draw from each other.

In my theoretical framework I extensively examined how feminist performance art breeds conditions fertile for acts of defiance by deconstructing the objectified other and challenging the dominant discourses of representation imposed by patriarchy. Being a work of feminist performance/body art, *Casting Off My Womb* is positioned within and continues this lineage of radical and subversive feminist art pieces that were particularly popular in the 60's and 70's, hoping to generate new frames of reference and redefine female subjectivities. One important link to feminist performance art history is its reminiscence of Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* from 1975 in which Schneemann stood up naked on a table, drawing a narrow scroll of paper from her vagina, reading aloud from it. The contents of the text, as documented on the Tate website were excerpts from one of her previous works where she positions what is labeled as traditionally feminine properties like intuitive and bodily processes against the traditionally perceived-as-male notions of order and rationality (Tate). We see here again a reflection of the creativity vs procreativity, mind vs body binary embedded in the creativity as childbirth metaphor as analyzed by Friedman. In this context, both Schneemann and Jenkins use their body to give birth to an artwork, subverting what the

metaphor proposes in its patriarchal expression. But if we read the metaphor under a feminist lens, “In contrast to the phallic analogy that implicitly excludes women from creativity, the childbirth metaphor validates women's artistic effort by unifying their mental and physical labor into (pro)creativity” (Friedman 49). Adding on to that analogy, in her article *Casey Jenkins and Knitting Monologues* Amy Bryzgel writes:

During the act of creation, Jenkins is both artist and object, creator and created, occupying both subject positions simultaneously. [...] the womb produces not life, but art, and woman is an active agent in its creation; the production of the artwork is not simply the result of a biological process (Bryzgel).

Other cultural critics have also noticed this link between the two performances. Emma Rees in her article *Casting off shame through vagina knitting* notes that both artists self-objectify, meaning that they reclaim the presentation of their own bodies which under patriarchy are constantly exploited, voyeuristically displayed and sexualized (Rees). In their shameless nudity and autonomy, they threaten and disturb traditional hierarchical structures and patriarchal order. To go back to Forte, “Women's performance art has particular disruptive potential because it poses an actual woman as a speaking subject, throwing that position into process, into doubt, opposing the traditional conception of the single, unified (male) subject.” (220). With *Casting Off My Womb*, therefore, Jenkins, being both subject and object, dynamically expands feminist threads that reposition the female body in public space in dynamic and explicitly subversive ways. Similarly to Schneemann, Jenkins uses her body to make a statement for the positioning of women within patriarchal society by transgressing any notions that ascribe shame and maintain control over the female body.

This speaking that Forte refers to when she talks about the speaking subject, here, happens through the body. Rees writes: “Schneemann was acknowledging the power of the female body both to shock and to produce meaning. In its fluffy white wool, Jenkins’s own “scroll”

is far softer than Schneemann's hard-edged, concertinaed paper." (Rees). Funnily enough, craftivism is often called "soft" activism, as a counter form of protest that is seen as less violent and loud. Moving from the art-historical to the conceptual context, this notion of reclaiming and rewriting the body, or, writing *through* the body, relates to *écriture féminine* which is used as a category by many feminist psychoanalyst critics as a "poetics of the female body" (Friedman 50). The concept of writing through the body, or, as Hélène Cixous puts it, writing in white ink (881), is a feminist post-structuralist idea laid out in her seminal essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, where the classical myth of the Medusa is reexamined in order to signify the feminist power of female dissent, which, victimized and subjugated by patriarchy and phallogentric culture returns the gaze, a gaze that petrifies. In this essay she coins the concept of *écriture féminine*. It is a form of expression that comes before language that she sees as essentially feminine, circular, and nonlinear and eventually, liberating, cathartic and empowering: "I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs" (Cixous 876). Jenkins' vaginal knitting can be read as a practice of *écriture féminine*; knitting through the female body, knitting in white thread, which creates a form of sexual-textile politics. The interrelation between *écriture féminine* and feminist performance art has also been highlighted by Forte who acknowledges that in the vein of *écriture féminine*, feminist performance artists, through (re)writing the body, manage to reclaim it from its patriarchal textualization, recognizing the importance of asserting female sexuality (225).

Jenkins' work is actively situated within cultural tropes and popular perceptions and is explicitly commenting on and attempting to shift harmful ideas and public narratives regarding two aspects of the female body that patriarchy loves to scorn and demonize; the female genitals and menstruation. This explicitly weaves the performance into the web of

public sociopolitical and cultural feminist debates, displaying how it is not merely a symbolic, isolated and subjective piece but a craftivist attempt at shifting societal perspectives. Through her craftivist agenda, Jenkins attempts to shift public perceptions through creating new, positive associations in the place of outdated and harmful ones about the vulva and menstruation while also making an overarching statement about female reproductive rights. In her article *Willful knitting? Contemporary Australian craftivism and feminist histories*, Kyra Clarke states:

While the work of artists such as Schneemann and Jenkins has been dismissed as narcissistic, through their intimate, almost communal performances of the body and disturbance of order, they draw attention to significant social issues relating to reproductive rights, sexuality and the representation of women's bodies (302).

Female reproduction and specifically the female genitals under patriarchal discourse fall under two sides of a similarly harmful and deceptive essentialist guise; they are either hyper-mystified and obscured as something invisible, unknown or impossible to understand or ultimately demonized as dangerous, dirty, inappropriate and threatening. Jenkins seems to be highly aware of the demonization of the vulva. On the viral video posted on Australian network SBS's YouTube channel she says, "If you take a good hard look at a vulva, you realize it's just a bit of a body. There is nothing that is shocking or scary, nothing is going to run out and eat you up" (SBS The Feed). The phrasing on the last part of this quote is particularly intriguing to me since it brings to mind the myth of *vagina dentata*, meaning vagina with teeth. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Jenkins was not merely joking but alluding to a popular cultural trope. In many cultures, both western and eastern, as well as in many different eras, there have been numerous accounts of myths and stories where vaginas are presented as having teeth, often attacking men, a manifestation of the psychoanalytic fear

of emasculation⁴. Vagina dentata is just another instance of patriarchy being threatened by female sexuality, materialized in what is far from benign tales stored in our collective cultural consciousness. By allowing her naked body to sit undisturbed and knit, Jenkins is trying to mend and shift these impressions by linking the vulva with something as innocent as knitting. In her own words:

I think the expectation when you are showing the vulva is that people are going to feel feelings of fear and repulsion. By linking the vulva with something people do find warm and fuzzy and benign and even boring and by just knitting for a long period of time, I hope that people question the fears and negative associations they have with the vulva (SBS The Feed).

This inherent fear and repulsion she refers to proves how misogyny is so ever present and deeply ingrained in certain thought patterns that we are almost unfazed by certain misogynistic reactions because of how habitual and prevalent they are. Why do we almost expect it that the sight of a vulva or vagina when not presented under the male pornographic gaze will cause intense reactions?

Jenkins uses her body as an artistic medium that is being constantly rewritten in an attempt to elude the projections of the male gaze, to which it inspires simultaneous desire and disgust. This reinstitution in this performance happens, as explored above, through the employment of central core imagery which refers to explicit presence of the vagina and the vulva in art (Emery 119). “The dominance of the masculine phallus was challenged by the feminist positioning of central core as a source of feminine power [...] [the use of which] enabled a visual means for centering women’s experience, by giving particular focus to reproduction, menstruation, motherhood and sexuality” (119). Despite it being an activist tool primarily of the 70’s, I argue that it can be just as relevant today since unfortunately we are far from

⁴ For a more detailed exploration of this concept as well as some examples of vagina dentata myths see my article: Metaxa, I. “This Pussy Has Claws: Vagina Dentata Myths of Empowerment and Horror.” *Mediamatic*. www.mediamatic.net/en/page/382207/this-pussy-has-claws. Accessed 1 Feb. 2023.

overcoming perceiving female nakedness and menstruation as taboo subjects, as proven by the barrage of negative reactions Jenkins' performance received online. Despite progress in feminist liberation, representation and awareness, there is still a great amount of shame attached to menstruation and the naked female body is yet, in many cases, bound to a voyeuristic and phallogocentric interpretation. It is important to note that central core imagery as well as *écriture féminine* come with the caveats of essentialism and biological determinism due to their emphasis on the female body and its functions and this is something recognized by many feminist critics who propose using these concepts with criticality and care.

Moving on from one othered aspect of the female body to another, the presence of menstrual blood in the performance is a strong compositional and visual element while also carrying cultural and conceptual weight. The first association is, of course, menstruation. Clarke notes:

Despite being an ordinary part of the lives of many women, menstruation is often stigmatized and viewed as taboo, embarrassing, kept discreet, as a symbol of the leaky nature of the female body. Here, menstruation is not only experienced but its stain remains on display: the knitting changes shape and colour depending on the density of the menstrual flow. In this way, not only Jenkins, but the object she creates, may be seen as abject, with disgust (303).

The unapologetic staining of Jenkins' menstrual blood on the piece was perhaps even more shocking and disturbing to those that reacted negatively to the piece than the vaginal knitting itself. Period blood, similar to the vagina, carries its own baggage of invisibility. It is the abject, the hidden, the unspeakable, which as it becomes outward its patriarchally-imposed abjection is simply revolting. The notion of abjection as expressed in feminist psychoanalysis by Julia Kristeva is particularly relevant in reading the effect of menstrual blood for this performance. In her book *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* Alexandra M. Kokoli lays out a number of concepts from feminist psychoanalysis that relate to what she

calls the feminist uncanny which “alludes to, displaces and revises the concept of the uncanny in transformative and profoundly masterful ways” (39). What makes the uncanny, well, an uncanny concept, is what is called the return of the repressed, that which phallogentric culture sees as grotesque and dangerous and that which threatens its dominance: “The return of the feminine bears the mark of its imposed exile, from which it broke free; its scars are what is uncanny and its return against the odds is terrible. The feminist uncanny is thus perpetually suspended between revision and revenge” (Kokoli 39). This quote allows us to get a glimpse of why the feminist uncanny bears great potential in being used as a way to purify the “despised” feminine and use this power it holds over patriarchy as a strength instead of a reassertion of its perceived grotesqueness. I propose that through central core imagery and the staging of the abject period blood, Jenkins manages to do exactly that; to turn, in a sublimating fashion, her “unclean” period blood into a natural dye for her knitted piece. Menstrual blood, here, is not a stain that should be wiped off but a bold statement of transformation and reclaiming space for visibility. By experimenting with a practice associated with abject art, Jenkins is revising and transforming the “dirty” matter, and along with this material transformation she is also transforming ideas and narratives held about menstruation. Therefore, apart from an abstract psychoanalytic concept, the abject makes a dramaturgical statement within its material existence and renders this performance an example of abject art, expanding a tradition of transgressing notions of social propriety and questioning dominant narratives of representation when it comes to the female body and its bodily functions. Jenkins’ period blood certainly threatened and disturbed. But is it the matter itself that is so repulsive?

To go back to Kristeva, the abject lies “directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.” (1). The abject is different

from the uncanny, since, unlike the uncanny, it does not evoke something forgotten and repressed and yet familiar but comes way before the symbolic order, before the conscious and the unconscious (Kokoli 51). She also connects it to the maternal; “Rather than feminine, the abject is maternal, which makes it a more appropriate term of comparison, contrast and resistance to patriarchy” (Kokoli 52).

Jenkin’s abject is explicitly also maternal since it directly ties in with female menstruation and reproduction. For Kristeva, menstrual blood specifically is particularly high in the scale of abject substances since it represents “the danger issuing from within” (71) and according to Kokoli “it both complicates the relationship between the sexes and confronts them with (a procreatively defined, binary) sexual difference” (52).

Using abjection as a critical lens exemplifies patriarchal culture’s projections on the maternal; desired and simultaneously repellent but always in need to be controlled and punished (Kokoli 55). The aversion to Jenkins’ period blood, therefore, reflects patriarchy’s paradoxical projections on female procreativity in general, on the one hand exaggeratingly celebrating motherhood and maternity as sacred and pure and on the other hand restricting female reproductive rights, demonizing menstruation and passing moral judgements on any choice a woman makes for her body and reproductive system. In conclusion, I perceive the abject —as a sub-category of the feminist uncanny— to be a productive and positive concept in the context of my analysis and of Jenkins’ performance. By stripping it from internalized guilt and recognizing its transgressive potentiality it can help in shifting the gaze from male to female, in deconstructing essentialist biases and resignifying femininity and womanhood in a subversive way.

Composing the Knitted Abject: Interiors and Exteriors

Moving on from the piece’s art-historical, philosophical and cultural context, this section focuses on more tangible aspects of the performance that relate to its composition.

The dramaturgical aspects I shall analyze are knitting as a staged act, as well as aspects of time and space. The presence of menstrual blood is also recognized as a compositional element that, despite its materiality on stage, has been analyzed more in relation to its conceptual and social underpinnings in the previous section. Employed as a dramaturgical device, it alludes to societal notions and associations about menstruation and gives visibility to this very natural bodily process that is still obscured from public perception and held as taboo.

A central part of the performance's composition is the act of knitting. Knitting, as implied by the "domestic arts" title it can be listed under, normally occurs within the confines of the home. Any presence of knitting in spaces that are not domestic elicits feelings of surprise, confusion, perplexity. Bratich and Brush connect this sense of uncanniness to Freud's uncanny. They write:

What causes such discomfort about knitting in public? ... Knitting in public is out of place. Freud institutionalized a concept denoting the jarring and disorienting effect of being spatially out of phase: *unheimlich*. The queasiness of the *unheimlich* occurs also when interiors become exteriorized (especially the home, as it also means unhomely). Knitting in public turns the interiority of the domestic outward, exposing that which exists within enclosures, through invisibility and through unpaid labor: the production of home life. (237)

Their phrasing of interiors becoming exteriorized—apart from relating to the aforementioned abject—is particularly relevant for Jenkins' knitting since the wool that she is using comes literally from within her, ascribing a double uncanniness to the act of knitting. Knitting in this unexpected setting also creates a defamiliarizing spectatorial situation, catching the audience off guard and subtly encouraging them to make new connections.

Knitting, as well as the knitting material which, in this case, is wool, also bear associations like boring, benign, grandmotherly, all of which bring nothing of sexuality or threat to mind. And yet, Jenkins implements this duality of sexuality and asexuality, softness and edge into her work, subverting societal expectations. Commenting on this aspect of her performance on a radio interview with ABC Australia, she explains that “I consciously use things with those associations to try and draw people into then viewing things that they associate differently. And also to question why you dismiss an activity just because you associate it with women” (ABC). On the CBS video she describes the sensation of vaginal knitting as “slightly uncomfortable sometimes, arousing sometimes” (CBS The Feed) and goes on to explain that knitting with skeins of wool inside her was also a restricting experience that confined her movement, since she was not free to just get up and move around. This state of restriction can allude to how needlework had confined women to the domestic for centuries, paralleling this physical sense of confinement to society’s attempts at restricting women from entering and freely navigating the public sphere. This time however, this confinement, apart from being physically challenging, also challenges. Knitting embodies a meditative act that refuses to ascribe to the fast-paced rhythms of hyperproduction under late-stage capitalism. It is generally a time-consuming activity —twenty-eight days in this specific instance —that rejects the imperatives of maintaining a fast pace in life, the same imperatives that relational art rejects, as analyzed by Bourriaud (1998). Jenkins’ staging of knitting honors what Bratich and Brush call slow space. According to them, needlework “ruptures the seamlessness of the technological present—watching someone knit reveals alternatives to mass production, introducing jarring anachronisms” (236).

Through the act of knitting both body and mind are being nurtured and acknowledged by slowing down. In her video interview, Jenkins also claims that the piece is partly about her assessing being intimate with her own body. The presence of the body and its centrality for

Jenkins reinforces its vital significance both for feminist performance art and for materiality and creation. As Bryzgel argues:

While Jenkins continues the tradition of feminist body art exposing the female body and revealing its interior biology, she takes this exploration to the next level by merging body and material, interior and exterior. As she knits, the manufactured yarn becomes a natural material, and the body is both the producer and part of the final product. (Bryzgel)

When it comes to the performance's spatiotemporal dimensions, I would also like to highlight the piece's duration. The twenty-eight day duration not only encourages slow space but also coincides with a full menstrual cycle. Jenkins herself states that "The performance wouldn't be the performance if I were to cut off my menstrual cycle from it" (SBS Australia), meaning that the duration was not an arbitrary decision but integral to the composition of this piece. The menstrual cycle is a vital part of the performance not only conceptually but also materially since it enables another compositional element of dramaturgy to emerge; the menstrual blood. In the middle of the long white knitted piece lie red spots, dyed from Jenkins' menstrual flow. As established earlier on, the use of period blood in the piece can place the work under the category of abject art.

To conclude, with this twenty-eight day performance, Jenkins not only challenges perceptions of time and productivity but also transforms knitting from its ideation as a passive domestic pastime to a subversive public craftivist act. She creates and reclaims a space in the public eye where women can resist the male gaze through encouraging a reconsideration of the role and representation of the female body within society. Her abject knitting averts patriarchy but inspires feminist solidarity and promotes the creation of counter-representations of female subjectivities.

Returning the Spectatorial Gaze

The last aspect of the performance that will be discussed is the spectatorial situation it creates and its audience address. Although the performance is not participatory, we can observe its relationality through its critique of the culture of speed, its engagement with public discourse and its attempt to generate a dialogue about female sexuality. With her abject and craftivist staging of knitting, Jenkins creates an affective and visceral spectatorial experience where the female knitting body is out-of-place, with place here referring to its usual placement under a patriarchal lens. By refusing these inscriptions, Jenkins enters a territory that allows for difficult conversations to start, conversations that can hopefully change oppressive and normative standards and perspectives. In this way, following Aagerstoun and Auther's markers of feminist activist art, *Casting Off My Womb* is indeed critical in questioning establishment notions and patriarchal representations, positive in celebrating aspects of femininity that are often demonized and progressive in breaking taboos. Clarke also points out how the artist is concerned with social commentary and critique: "Menstruation is a visible expression of the absence of pregnancy and this performance may be seen as a refusal of a socio/cultural desire for linear, heteronormative reproduction, creating something else: an artwork and social comment" (303). Issues of reproductive freedom, oppressive gender roles and outdated expectations for women are, thus, indirectly touched upon. Going back to composition, the presence of the metal coat hangers are a bold visual allusion to abortion rights and all the unsafe, DIY abortions that so many women have had to perform due to the criminalization of the procedure.

When it comes to how the performance was received, reactions were mixed. Since the existence of documentational material is limited and I have not conducted any interviews with either the artist or the audience, I will refrain from speculatively commenting on its reception at the gallery space. What is known for certain from her interviews is that people at

the gallery space were mostly supportive, calling her brave and encouraging her (SBS The Feed). What is worthy of critical attention is this juxtaposition between a 28-day performance experienced at a gallery space versus a less than three minute viral video that was accompanied by intensely negative comments. People in online spaces did not hesitate to proclaim their disgust and shame Jenkins and call her attention seeking, among other personal attacks. In a piece she published at The Guardian in response to all the negative reactions, Jenkins states:

In the gallery setting, viewers responded with more circumspection and respect than they have in subsequent internet forums. I have hopes that after the noise of the visceral reaction dies down on the web, people might take time to consider why they responded the way they did. That they will stop trying to dictate what I do with my body and spend some time contemplating why they feel such a strong need to do so.
(Jenkins)

Clarke interestingly observes that the video was not trying to be edgy or controversial to the slightest, instead it was presented in a gentle manner, with soothing music in the background, a soft pastel color palette, closeups of Jenkins' face and a calm voice-over with her commentary on her piece. She contrasts that with the documentary material on the artist's website where one can see more raw, clear close-ups of Jenkin's bloody fingers and needles (Clarke 302). In a sense, the video documentation of the performance bears its own dramaturgy which is different to that of the actual performance and the analysis of which could be productive in understanding its spectatorial impact. In her radio interview, Jenkins also acknowledges this double aspect by referring to her piece as having two stages; pre-internet and post-internet (ABC). Consequently, its spectatorial effect shifts depending on whether the audience was present in the gallery space or witnessed the performance as mediated through the video. This duality within the performance's presentation —the actual

performance and its documentational material on Jenkins' website versus the SBS YouTube video— can be also understood following Philip Auslander's *documentary* and *theatrical* categorizations of performance documentation. In his article *The Performativity of Performance Documentation*, Auslander classifies performance documentation as either documentary, defined as “the traditional way in which the relationship between performance art and its documentation is conceived” (1) or theatrical, meaning “cases in which performances were staged solely to be photographed and filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences” (2). Though a more unspoiled spectatorial result would be rendered through audiences interacting with the performance itself at the gallery space or at least with primary instead of secondary documentational material (e.g documentation images), the SBS video, whether intentionally or not, has, to an extent, reduced the performance to a state of theatrical documentation that strips it from its performativity, artistic intent and material complexity, taking away from how it was supposed to be experienced.⁵ This opens up a discussion on our relationship with digital media consumption in general, which cannot be elaborated on within the scope of this thesis. But the impact of videography and the camera lens as a powerful tool of mediation and meaning-making in the context of performance studies is an intricate thread to be further explored.

⁵ For another perspective on the relationship between performance art and documentation see Phelan, Peggy. “The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction” *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993.



Fig. 3. Jenkins, Casey. "Casting Off My Womb." 2013.

<https://casey-jenkins.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Casting-Off-My-Womb2-web.jpg>

Despite its non-provocative intent, the video, as well as the performance at large, did provoke. The torrent of negative reactions only proves that progress still needs to be made when we talk about issues of menstruation, sexuality and the female body. Certainly in the 70's one can expect persistent moralistic and conservative reactions to any feminist body/object art project and it is saddening to see these reactions persisting in the present. Pragmatically, it is also expected that the gallery-goer segment of the audience would be more open to the performance, either due to their own interest in such art projects, their familiarity with contemporary art, etc. The fact that Jenkins received so many personal attacks and proclamations of disgust in her process of reclaiming a femininity that deviates from its normative patriarchally-imposed state only goes to show how necessary such radical artistic interventions are.

In closing, *Casting Off My Womb* challenges harmful narratives of shame and disgust when it comes to the female body and its bodily processes, reaffirms the power and threat the feminine abject poses to patriarchy and order and celebrates non-conformist expressions of femininity in their feminist resignifications. The craftivist staging of Casey Jenkins is both personal and political. *Casting Off My Womb* is a personal statement and a chance for the artist to reconnect with her body but at the same time that body is recognized as a political medium that is constantly re-written. By following in the footsteps of other feminist performance artists before her, Jenkins nurtures the feminine and maternal abject by creating a space where its existence is possible and its presence a gentle, soft woolen threat to the structures that want it erased. Her knitted stitches, entwined with bodily fluids, are hard to undo.

3.2 Crafting with Cunning Care: The Return of the Wool-spinstress Wicked Witch in *Wool-Spinning Witches and Creabea's*

From Research to Repair: Theory and Praxis within the FHP

Moving on to the second case study of this thesis, I would like to introduce the Feminist Needlework Party before diving into the analysis of their performance. The Feminist Needlework Party is a political feminist artist movement that, through merging theory and practice, needlework and studying, focuses on repair by engendering alternative ways of working, making and speaking. The collective is an initiative of artist Emmeline de Mooij and director Margreet Sweerts and started from their interest in reading about and researching textiles and feminism. At the beginning it was research-focused and as it progressed, discussions based on reading were combined with practicing needlework and specifically repairing. In this way, body and mind are both involved, which is one of the core values of the movement. As stated in their manifesto:

During our gatherings we allow needlework and studying to become completely intertwined. By doing so we strive to un-learn the deep-rooted tendency to elicit a hierarchic separation between body and mind (where the mind is prioritized over matter). (Manifesto)

They soon started to invite other artists and friends who would contribute by proposing different texts and they would meet in small groups to discuss them while mending. As Emmeline put it during our conversation (to which I will be referring throughout my analysis) this act of repairing textiles is a symbolic act of repairing gaps in history (de Mooij). With their meetings, the FHP works on developing practices that refuse to prioritize the mind over the body, practices that develop another kind of speaking with one another, the content of which is affected, Margreet proposes, when we are more embodied; “Conversation changes when you work with your hands at the same time. You are slowing down. You come out of

your mind and into your hands more, keeping yourself more grounded and embodied in the situation” (Sweerts).

Upon reaching out to Emmeline and Margreet they invited me to Emmeline’s studio where we got to talk about their practice and in particular about the *Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea’s* performance. A lot of my analytical output for this performance is informed by my conversation with them and all the insights they shared with me, which I am very grateful for.

Mending Historical Gaps: An Excavation of Context

As with the previous case study, I shall start my situational analysis by looking into the performance’s context in a way that covers its sociopolitical, historical, philosophical and cultural underpinnings. Being a lecture performance, the element of intertextuality, sources, research and studying is integral to its reception and analysis, making any dramaturgical approach that prioritizes its more tangible elements of composition and audience address incomplete. I shall start with the context since the performance itself was inspired by theory and reading and close my analysis with an exploration of the compositional means employed and the relational impact of its participatory character.

On the History of Needlework: Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea’s is a performative lecture inspired from and serving as an extension of Emmeline de Mooij’s essay of the same title, in which she unearths the deeply obscured and unsung history of women in relation to needlework and witchcraft as well as the creabeas. In her text, she provides a lot of theoretical and historical context for the performance and sets the tone, textually introducing the core archetypes that are also dramaturgically summoned during the performance: the wool-spinning witch and the goddess of domestic handicrafts, the creabea. Creabea, an amalgam of crea (short for creative) and bea referring to woman, is a Dutch word with no English equivalent that refers to “someone, especially a woman, who is creative; particularly with respect to (amateur) handcraft” (Wiktionary). Reflecting art establishment attitudes

towards art and the so-called decorative arts, the work of the creabeas is often undermined and mocked, another symptom of these denotations: “Not only is work made by Creabea’s diminished as ‘hobby art’; these creatives belong to a category of makers completely ignored in both art history and the mainstream art press, so much so that they are barely represented, even within the label of outsider art” (de Mooij 46). The identity of the creabea is called forth for re-examination, presented here not as an insignificant marker of femininity but as something that signifies skill, talent, creativity and capability. The essay, therefore, already sets the tone for reclaiming and repairing notions of femininity that have been undermined and tarnished by patriarchal discourse and authority.

But the big abject star of the performance is the wool-spinning witch, that feral and cunning embodiment of female craftiness who in her ability, skill and resourcefulness has posed an incessant threat to patriarchy and capitalism, two ideologies that operate in similar oppressive mechanisms and need each other to be sustained. The shaggy old hag, wrinkled with bad teeth and wild hair, stripped of any conventionally attractive feminine attributes, the witch has not only been a symbol of the demonization of female sexuality and uncontrollability but also embodies one of the biggest scapegoats of misogyny expressed throughout modernity. The witch is a central figure in the performance, summoned on stage by the two artists in their own embodiment thereof, but also through ritual, both aspects that will be analyzed as part of the performance’s composition. In exploring the staging of the witch, some theoretical context is necessary in order to understand the depth of her symbolic return on stage.

What makes the witch so despised? Apart from a symbolic connection between witches and the oppressed, the reasoning behind their exile is also very tangible. In her radically critical book *Caliban and the Witch*, feminist scholar and activist Silvia Federici reexamines the witch hunts that intensified during the 15th and 16th century in Europe by relating them contextually to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Drawing from Marxism and

feminism, she argues that the persecution of witches in the form of witch hunts was as necessary for the development of capitalism as other forms of enforcing hegemonic power and control, like colonization, slavery and the expropriation of the peasantry from their land (Federici 12). In this lens, the witch embodies the Other who poses a threat to authority and order and needs to be subjugated and controlled to ensure that the system in power will remain intact and functional. In the spirit of divide and conquer, the witch hunts were used as a way to draw a schism between men and women, “teaching men to fear the power of women, and destroyed a universe of practices, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline” (Federici 165), thus, inflicting harm to communities and society at large. De Mooij also mentions that aspect of witches that is often obscured from their patriarchally constructed archetypal image of evil-doer;

The women labeled as witches played important roles in villages as healers, midwives and sorceresses. Mostly older women, they were traditionally the ones who embodied the knowledge and memory of their community. The witch hunt destroyed a world of feminine customs, collective relationships and knowledge systems” (48).

Women who were accused of witchcraft were, therefore, most probably not witches in the devil-worshipping supernatural sense that demonologists and the church proposed. Instead, they were skillful members of their community as well as working class women who had control over their reproductivity, As Federici argues:

witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women’s resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal. Witch hunting was also instrumental to the construction of new patriarchal order where women’s bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources.[...] the witch hunters were less interested in

the punishment of any specific transgression than in the elimination of generalized forms of female behavior which [...] had to be made abominable in the eyes of the population (170).

Federici's analysis paints a picture of why witches are connected to hegemonic threat. Approaching this sense of threat from a psychoanalytic and symbolic perspective, Kokoli opens her book with a reference to the archetypal essence of the witch who, similar to the Medusa, is reimagined as an agent of revolution and a personification of feminist resistance.

Marginalized, oppressed and victimized but also representing the repressed underbelly of a rationalist and sexist – 'phallogocentric' – order of things, witches emerged as a sorely needed bridge between social oppression and symbolic repression. Oppressed and marginalized groups have long had an affinity for the cultural unconscious and an interest in mining it; conversely, the culturally repressed is often perceived as threatening and socially subversive. (1).

The witch, therefore, is an embodiment of the ultimate Other, both socially, politically, symbolically and psychoanalytically, making her a strong device for activist storytelling. By summoning this powerful, multilayered archetype on stage, both through embodiment and through reading, the FHP deconstructs all the harmful associations and stereotypes surrounding her by going deep into this misrepresented history. This collective unlearning is a process necessary in repairing damaged threads and healing ancestral traumas of femicide. Apart from threat, the witch also signifies a celebration of female craft, skill and capability. These positive attributes of witchcraft are highlighted on stage through the practice of needlework. Needlework is not only used as a means of repair, repairing textiles while also repairing history, but also reestablishes its position in society as an empowering feminist practice that brings communities together, strengthens connections and promotes the transfer of knowledge and skill.

Turning from history to myth and folklore, the archetype of the witch appears in many tales and stories where it is mostly villainized. Despite witches being, among other things, prolific healers, the witch is usually portrayed as an agent of harm, chaos and havoc. A familiar manifestation of the witch is the wool-spinning witch, who is also staged in the FHP performance. To understand this portrayal of witches as wool-spinstresses and their general relationship to needlework, it is important to unravel the tremendous connection between needlework and witchcraft. In her book *Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion, 700-1100*, feminist historian Max Dashu outlines customs and traditions of paganism and witchcraft in Europe. She devotes a whole chapter to outline the significance of threads and textiles in spiritual and healing practices. Dashu writes about the handful of representations where goddesses are depicted as spinners and weavers (33) and gives examples of how spinning and weaving were used as divinatory tools, in blessing and healing rituals and during invocation of goddesses (35-40). Witchcraft is a craft in itself, a category of craft whose practices draw from other crafts like needlework. She writes; “In spinning and weaving and knotting, weirding women partook of the Fates’ power to shape and transform reality. They were literally witches, bending and twining and binding the fibers of Being. Spinning was one of the craft of wicces” (47). The tall staffs that witches are visually often imagined with called distaffs also happen to be tools used in wool-spinning, establishing one more connection between needlework and witchcraft. They were usually carried by female spiritual leaders called *völur*: “The title of *völva* (plural *völur*) comes from *völr*, “wand, staff”. The *völva* is a “staff-woman”, named for the female chamanic wand” (99).

Dashu also explains that these practices, like most pagan customs, were demonized and criminalized by the church and brings up how these harmful stereotypes about witches are also deeply-rooted in language. Male referrants like sorcerer or magician carry connotations of wisdom and knowledge contrary to the female term witch. Language, therefore, “[uses]

sex-marked words to designate harm-doers” while certain word choices “carry a certain historical charge, loaded with the misogynistic sexual politics and racialized stereotypes of the witch hunts” (46). This negative representation of witchcraft also manifests in narratives where women employ craft practices for deceptive and treacherous means, embedding a cunningness in craft. There are countless myths and stories that present women practicing needlework as a transgressive means, positioning them in the planes of cleverness and skill but also trickery and threat to authority and power.⁶ Bratich and Brush also describe how these cunning-craft connections find expression in language:

To be called “crafty” is synonymous with being cunning, clever, even deceitful. One does not have to go too far back in time to note that cunningcraft referred to a whole series of knowledges and skills associated with women (aka folk knowledges or witchcraft). Ornamentation and artifice, associated with the arts of feminine seduction, only increased the association of “craftiness” with legerdemain (251).

Adding on to the linguistic perspective, there is another common thread between craft and witchcraft. The German word *kraft* means power but not power as dominance but power as ability. Both crafters and witches possess immense ability in mending, healing and manifesting creative force into material existence. Bratich and Brush also mention this linguistic parallel: “We can think of English versions like tradecraft, statecraft, spycraft, and witchcraft: the set of skills and practices that have systematic effects in the world.” (253).

In closing, all these historical and cultural references, apart from shedding light on how deeply-rooted in misogyny seemingly innocent stories, representations and even words are, also establish layered links crucial in understanding the weight of staging the witch in the FHP performance. The return of the wool-spinning witch invites us to deconstruct these harmful associations that have plagued all aspects of femininity and womanhood that threaten

⁶ Greek mythology is brimming with such tales. See, for example, Penelope’s weaving in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the myth of Arachne, the story of Theseus and Ariadne, the three Fates and the list goes on.

patriarchal and capitalist order. Through collective study and repair in their performative lecture, the FHP highlights these positive, generative and productive aspects of the witch who is not only an embodiment of the marginalized, demonized and victimized populations but also inspires collective action and healing by reclaiming her *kraft*.

Composing Ritual

Moving on from context to composition I shall highlight certain theatrical elements of the performance and investigate how some of the core ideas mentioned above are performatively enacted. The performance took place as part of the public program of Stedelijk Museum's *Meet the Makers* event on Sheila Hicks, an American textile and fiber artist. The location bears significance since the Stedelijk is one of the most renowned modern and contemporary art museums in Europe, if not the world. This leaves room for thought on the relationship of craft and craftivism to the institutional space within contemporary art. In my conversation with Emmeline and Margreet, a lot of questions came up about the compositional and theatrical aspects of the performance since, not being there, I needed their words for documentational input. While talking about the setting, Margreet gave a very practical production detail that to my interpretative outlook bears symbolic significance; she said that location-wise they were positioned in an isolated room that was not physically connected with the other parts of the evening. To me, that immediately brought to mind the image of witches gathering for their ceremonies and rituals in secluded areas, away from the busy centers, usually at the perimeter. And since the whole performance is about witches, this hidden room was rather fitting in light of the historical context.

The composition of the performance largely consists of elements of ritual. One of these elements is the positioning of the audience; everyone was sitting in a circle. Apart from being non-hierarchical, the circle was chosen because, as Margreet explains "the circle is a strong form; to be with people and to celebrate or digest things together" (Sweerts). Margreet has

been researching ritual since the FHP wants to introduce more ceremonial and ritualistic elements in their meetings and performances. At the center of the circle Emmeline and Margreet had placed pieces of fabric and textile, pieces that carried techniques of their needlework-practicing mothers and grandmothers, connecting personal to collective histories of women and needlework.



Fig. 4. Nauw, Maarten. “On the History of Needlework: Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's”, *Feministische Handwerk Partij*, 2022.

<https://feministischehandwerkpartij.org/site/assets/files/1256/1.1800x1100.jpg>.

Before the lecture began, like high priestesses initiating a ceremony, they went around and passed a piece to everyone so that they have something to look at and feel, creating a common thread that tied them together. The participants could also mend that piece during the lecture or work on their own needlework project. This passing around is another ritualistic practice, similar to how a priest or priestess may pass around communion or a sacred item.

Following that, Emmeline started reading her essay that was placed inside the red book seen in the documentary picture below, which is, in fact, an old needlework technique book. With that placing of her text inside another text, intertextuality is performed in a literal-material as well as metaphorical-symbolic way.



Fig. 5. Nauw, Maarten. “On the History of Needlework: Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's”, *Feministische Handwerk Partij*, 2022.

https://feministischehandwerkpartij.org/site/assets/files/1257/2022_meetthemasterssheilahicks_stedelijkmuseumamsterdam_maartennauw_129.1800x1100.jpg.

Margreet accompanied Emmeline's reading with sound and movement, embodying a sort of oracle, as she called it. Non-verbal sound is another element found in rituals and creates a balancing counterpart to the verbal element of the reading, questioning the hierarchy of logos. Her abstract sounds were often subversive and disruptive, interrupting Emmeline's reading with yawning, snoring etc, embodying, in a way, the abject side of witches and the

unconscious. But ultimately as she explains “I was trying to express the unheard voices that are behind the stories Emmeline was talking about” (Sweerts). There was also a third woman who was spinning; three women on stage in total, resembling the mythological three Fates controlling the threads of life and death.

In her embodiment of the witch, Emmeline can be seen with long strands of hair, drawing attention both to the role of hair as a symbol of feral and uncontrollable femininity and sexuality but also as something that connects us to our crafty wool-spinning witch ancestresses. As she writes in her essay;

Let us draw hope and inspiration from these leftover tufts of hair and textile fibres from a distant past. That they give us insight into a subversive tradition in which the everyday cycles of life are not denied or violently transcended, and with which we can expand the knowledge of our wild-haired foremothers, the disobedient witches, the ancient spinning-woman-goddesses and völrur. (de Mooij 54)

Hair also occupies its own strong presence in myths and rituals. In our conversation, Emmeline also mentioned being inspired from all the pagan goddesses described in Dashu’s book, all depicted with wild hair; “It was a trait that pointed you out as a witch” (de Mooij).

Apart from the hair, the archetypal image of the witch is evoked through costume as well. “We have experimented with costumes and have these bathrobes customized with natural dye as a basic uniform” (Sweerts). She also said that apart from wearing them to recall the archetype of the witch, there is also an element of reversal and subversion; “The bath robes came from the idea that when you wear one it can make you feel relaxed in your body because you associate it with relaxation” (Sweerts). I found it interesting that their chosen garment is this very domestic item, bath robes are exclusively worn at home. By wearing them in public spaces, an uncanny effect is evoked, similar to how practicing needlework in public can be unusual and defamiliarizing. A subversive act that makes us question and

reevaluate the positioning of needlework in public discourse. Emmeline additionally points out: “When we hand them to people it helps with unwinding” (de Mooij).

Through their carefully crafted staging, the FHP summons the wool-spinning witch, the weaver, the healer, the völv, the transgressive wild-haired woman and all the abject femininities, shedding light into their erased histories while paying homage to their skill, their mark in history and their power to inspire dissent. This abject femininity ascribed to the witch when—aside from potentially reasserting dangerous anachronistic misogynist stereotypes — resignified under a feminist lens finds its countercultural and transformative power.

A Participatory Seance

In this final part, I shall focus on the craftivist, relational and participatory aspects of the performance through its spectatorial address. With this performance, as with their general radical activist attitude and interventions, the FHP practices repair, whether literally by repairing textiles or metaphorically by repairing narratives, mending the gaps of history with needle and thread. To quote Margreet, “ We want to dive into this history that is untold and is very important for the daily lives of women to bring another kind of validation to it” (Sweerts). The repairing, retracing and retelling that takes place during *Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's* can be read as a craftivist action that makes a larger impact beyond the performative context. When asked whether they identify with the term craftivist, both Emmeline and Margreet agreed that they do but they are often dissatisfied with the craftivist examples they see, meaning that the term is sometimes loosely used and refers to projects that are less artistically informed. Referring to the term craftivism, Margreet says “It sometimes loses some power to communicate these activist messages. It gives a sweet, safe image of craft. Not controversial, dangerous or confusing” (Sweerts). The craftivism of the FHP crosses the boundaries of safe representation and acceptability by employing the archetype of the despised witch, resignified and recognised as an agent of repair. By exploring the witch in

that context, they create new and empowering cultural frames of reference for women as well as for women in needlework. Their craftivism is also explicitly political and anti-capitalist, being critical of how the rise of industrial capitalism and production exploited women's skills and knowledge of needlework for its own gain. As Emmeline argues in her essay, women were also excluded from the workforce and got isolated in the domestic sphere, turning from active and skillful community members to unpaid reproductive laborers (de Mooij 52). Through practicing needlework collectively, in a participatory and inviting circle, the FHP claims space for needlework in the public eye, stripping it off of its anachronistic connotations. Instead, needlework is proposed as a subversive communal activity and feminist means of organization and (inter)action; "May we take our needlework outside again, out of the isolation of the household, and see our streets, squares and fields everywhere flooded with cheerful wild-haired Creabea's in every shape and colour, armoured with distaffs and spindles!" (de Mooij 54).

The performance emphasizes community and togetherness through the form of the circle and its refusal to employ a separation between stage and audience. This is not a random compositional decision but stems from Margreet's own experience in the field of performance;

I have experimented with form a lot. Being educated in theater, I was fed up with this separation of the audience, the people in the stage having fun and me sitting quiet in the dark. I didn't like that. You have the one who leads the ceremony or the ritual, the one that brings some input but then the rest can be more involved in carrying the whole thing, the spirit of the meeting (Sweerts).

This circle evokes the aspects of needlework circles that Bratich and Brush call *fabriculture*: "the broader practices (meaning-making, communicative, community-building) intertwined with this (im)material labor" (234). They bring the knitting or sewing circle as an example;

Often noted for being women-only spaces where the production of physical objects and communication take place, these “hidden” zones provided a different kind of subject formation. These spaces would function to allow women to swap stories, skills, knowledge, and strategies and generally speak about the more oppressive aspects of the social home. (240)

Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's is a performance that creates a similar dynamic situation, nurturing connectivity, social engagement and inclusion, rendering it highly relational. When Bourriaud refers to “these machines carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling” (6), I cannot help but think of how getting re-introduced to working with our hands in an embodied way by coming together and doing needlework serves as an alternative to highly individualized and mechanical modes of production. It not only brings communities together but does so while being politically engaged. With their performance, the FHP fosters this creation of relational encounters by being open and inviting to all, by sharing knowledge and rejecting hierarchies while also maintaining artistic essence. By inviting the audience to bring along and work on their own projects a spectatorial situation is created where the participants are not only receivers but also makers and contributors. The act of doing needlework together sustains relationships, promotes learning from one another and shows what crafting can be beyond a means of making something; crafting is a process with conceptual and social dimensions. By creating this participatory setting, the FHP hoped “To make one group feel, for a moment, that we are one circle of feminist warriors doing needlework” (Sweets).



Fig. 6. Nauw, Maarten. “On the History of Needlework: Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea’s”, *Feministische Handwerk Partij*, 2022.

https://feministischehandwerkpartij.org/site/assets/files/1252/2022_meetthemasterssheilahicks_stedelijkmuseumamsterdam_maartennauw_138.1800x1100.jpg.

3.3 Common Threads

In closing, both feminist craft performances make strong statements when it comes to femininity and craft, staging alternatives that encourage the creation of resignified femininities in a way that rejects patriarchal ideology and its oppressive doctrines. They highlight, embrace and reclaim abject aspects of femininity that, being a threat towards and rejected by patriarchy, possess the ability to constitute subversive and empowering female subjectivities. In a craftivist spirit, they use needlework in imaginative and inspiring ways, weaving new practices within the web of feminist resistance.

An intriguing afterthought regarding both performances is a consideration of the fact that feminist craft has found its way into the institutional space of the gallery and the museum, as seen in both case studies.. Is this to be perceived critically as what Maria Elena Buszek calls in her essay *"Labor is My Medium": Some Perspective(s) on Contemporary Craft*, the colonization of craft by the art world (68), or is it a positive manifestation that gives craft its well-deserved attention and recognition? For something to be craftivist should it necessarily be explicitly separate from and, perhaps, even against institutions or should it take proactive advantage of the visibility and resources institutions provide in order to make its voice louder?

Through an excavation of compelling female archetypes like the witch and a reassertion of representations of the female body outside the confines of the male gaze, the two performances operate outside patriarchal restraints, proposing new ways of identification for women. In their attempt to mend centuries-old hegemonic damage with needle and thread, they actively contribute to public discourse and spin the narrative on issues of gender, sexuality, creativity and capitalist modes of production.

Conclusion

A feminist reexamination of (art) history, cultural tropes and practices traditionally associated with women is crucial in redefining femininity in a way that reclaims it from the confines of phallogentric definition as well as restricting capitalist and patriarchal order. Representation is important for any marginalized and othered group and taking control of that representation is a vital step in rewriting one's subjectivity and repositioning oneself within society. Through feminist performance art as well as craftivism, feminist artists and makers take advantage of the rich history of dissent associated with feminist performance art and stitch their own piece within craftivist resistance.

Through a situational analysis that approaches performance not as an independent, self-contained vessel of aesthetic experience but as a situated practice that is informed by and responsive to sociopolitical debates, by analyzing elements of context, composition and participation respectively I showcased how my two case studies reclaim the gaze through resignifying femininity;

In her durational performance *Casting Off My Womb*, Casey Jenkins composes a dramaturgy that centers the abject menstrual blood as a bold statement. Her staging of knitting transforms the activity from benign to uncanny and the intimacy she builds with her own body betrays voyeuristic expectations. As an homage to body art, abject art and central core imagery, all practices associated with radical feminist art projects of the 60's and 70's, Jenkins positions herself as part of feminist art history and in a craftivist spirit draws our attention to some yet unresolved feminist struggles; reproductive rights, autonomy over one's body and visibility of menstruation. Apart from challenging normative representation and patriarchal ideology, through being both personal and political, Jenkins may inspire audiences to reconsider the shame surrounding the female body and its natural processes.

Conversely, with their performative lecture *On the History of Needlework: Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's*, the Feminist Needlework Party bridges theory and practice, study and action, body and mind. By building strong intertextuality and connections to historical and cultural contexts, they summon the witch from her patriarchally imposed exile as a way to remind us of her transformative capacity and skill. Through theatrical and ritual elements as well as through reclaiming needlework practices in spaces other than the private and the domestic, they invite us in a process of retracing and repairing damaged representations and historical omissions. Strongly relational, the FHP invites participants to join in this excavation and urges them to get not only mentally but also physically involved by practicing needlework as part of the performance. In this way, the archetypal needlework circle reemerges, not as a space of confinement but as a reclaimed space of community, solidarity, connection and exchange.

Analyzing performance art without having witnessed the performances first-hand certainly creates some obvious limitations since I had to rely on secondary and documentational sources for my research output. I do believe, however, that in many cases it is possible, but not ideal, to research and write about contemporary performance art even without having been a spectator. Getting in touch with the makers in question is a great way to bring a first-hand feel into one's analysis and I was fortunate enough to be able to do that for my second case study analysis. This limitation opens up possibilities for future research on how we theorize and write about performance from a distance, which can often lead into caveats of overinterpretation.

When it comes to expanding this current research I do believe highlighting queer perspectives and practices within feminist craftivism is necessary, and an omission that was due to practical limitations of space on my part. In a truly inclusive and relational feminist craftivist space, queer subjectivity, bearing its own patriarchal marks of abjection, also needs to be

explored⁷. A critical investigation on the relationship between art and culture institutions and craftivism can be also fruitful in examining how craftivism's identity as a largely anti-establishment and soft protest practice can be positively or negatively affected by institutional inclusion. Finally, since this thesis explored interdisciplinary practices in craftivism by analyzing craft within performance practices, I think it would be insightful to look into how other artistic media create interdisciplinary connections by incorporating craft and needlework practices.

⁷ For an introduction to queer craftivism see Fountain, Daniel. "Survival of the Knittest: Craft and Queer Feminist Worldmaking." *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, 2021.
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Appendix

Below I provide excerpts from the interview I conducted with the FHP. I have transcribed parts of the conversation with the initial I standing for myself, M standing for Margreet Sweerts and E standing for Emmeline de Mooij. An audio file of the recorded interview can be provided upon request.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about how the FHP began?

M: We started very simply with the two of us wanting to read stuff about textile production and feminism and repairing clothes and we wanted to read things together and talk about it while we were repairing and doing something with our hands.

E: It's also a symbolic act to repair gaps in history. All these stories about women untold.

M: At the beginning it was a research period.

[...]

E: Sometimes we notice that in our performances or meetings towards the end we are discussing and we forget about the hands and the needlework. We are so used to prioritizing the mind over the body.

M: Therefore it's also interesting to try to develop another kind of speaking with each other. Maybe it influences the content of our speech when we try to be embodied.

I: I think also this slowing down makes you think of your responses instead of rushing to respond immediately. You are not so overstimulated.

M: Conversation changes when you work with your hands in the meantime. You are slowing down. You come out of your mind and into your hands more. You are slowing down and therefore you keep yourself more grounded and embodied in the situation. You feel more connected with your body, you become aware of it constantly.

[...]

M: We thought it is interesting to do the same kind of reading and repairing with other artists. So we started to invite other artist friends, at first one at a time and then a bigger group. So slowly we grew. We also ask people to bring in a text/stimulus. We were very enthusiastic. We got inspired by the literature to have this more radical activist attitude about it. Therefore we came to the name as an activist movement

I: It has a political sound to it.

M: We want to dive into this history that is untold and is very important for the daily lives of women to bring another kind of validation to it.

[...]

I: Do you identify with the term craftivist?

E: We do, but we also feel that the examples that we often see are less artistic than we would like.

M: It loses some power to communicate these activist messages. It gives a sweet, safe image of craft. Not controversial, dangerous or confusing.

I: When it comes to the *Wool-spinning Witches and Creabea's* performance, how did the idea for it come about?

M: We had this essay by Emmeline that could be brought as a lecture. We thought about how to do that and we wanted to make it performative. It was a performative lecture. The participation part included: we had put stuff in the middle, exercising techniques of my mother and of her grandmother. So we brought in a personal history of our ancestresses practicing textiles. We had that in the middle of the circle and at the beginning of the lecture we gave everyone something to feel and to look at

I: Like a common thread.

M: Some people also brought their own handwork and everyone was sitting in a circle.

I: I like the circle cause it reminds of a ritual

M: And you also become the landscape for each other as you are listening and working and digesting the performance.

[...]

M: We were the two of us and a lady spinning with the distaff. And we were in costumes

I: What was that red book you were holding in that picture?

E: The red book is an old needlecraft book with techniques in it so I put my lecture inside.

I: Like practicing intertextuality. And I also see you wearing a wig?

E: I was wearing the wig cause I also talked about wild haired foremothers in the text and that's also inspired by the *Witches and Pagans* book where the author describes all these pagan goddesses in Europe that often had wild hair, it was one trait that pointed you out as a witch. There were these customs and rituals involving hair.

M: Hair is also connected to sexuality, power, uncontrollability

I: How about the costumes?

M: We have experimented with costumes and we have these bathrobes as a basic uniform, we have customized them with natural dye. We played around with all these images.

I: What does the dressing up add to the performance? Is it recalling these archetypes, creating the archetypal image of the witch?

E: Yes but we also want to reverse them. The bath robes came from the idea that when you wear one it can make you feel relaxed in your body because you associate it with relaxation.

I: Also a domestic item of clothing, something you usually wear at home

M: But then wearing it in public spaces.

E: When we hand them to people it helps with unwinding.

M: To make one group feel for a moment that you are one circle of feminist warriors with the needlework.

[...]

M: We wanted to make this circle because the circle is a strong form, to be with people and to celebrate or digest things together.

I: Also non-hierarchical.

M: I have experimented with form a lot. Being educated in the theater I was fed up with this separation of the audience, the people in the stage having fun and me sitting quiet in the dark. I didn't like that. You have the one who leads the ceremony or the ritual, the one that brings some input but then the others can be more involved in carrying the whole thing, the spirit of the meeting. You are part of it in an energetic way. The circle is a strong form. We have the 3 women, how 3 is also common in myths and stories, goddesses. Emmeline was doing the lecture and I was doing the oracle, doing the sounds that came up, doing abstract sounds and Diana was spinning. I was also doing repair needlework and trying to express the unheard voices that are behind the stories Emmeline was talking about.

E: Also acting a bit disobedient, interrupting sometimes, snoring, falling asleep.

M: It started with Emmeline and me going into the circle to give everybody a piece of textile and then the lecture began. We are looking to implement more ritual and ceremonial elements. I am still researching how to do that. You cannot invent ritual. When is something a ritual and when is it intensified reality and when does real life begin again? One way is by passing something to people, also sitting in a circle

I: Also triggering the other senses

M: It also has to do with slowing down, literally, embodying another kind of time

I: Any comments about the location?

M: It was a struggle a bit because we were in an isolated room and there were a lot of things happening so people were not directed to our space, it was not very clear. We were not physically connected with the other parts of the evening.

I: You can also see it as a symbolic thing, the rituals taking place in the edges of society