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Language Lace: thinking and speaking through material making

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade interdisciplinary engagement with lace has opened up an emerging space for designers to explore new materials and technologies that question conventional forms of textile making and meaning. The focus of this article is to present contemporary approaches to lacemaking as a creative exploratory response to a local environment. The article will present a textile installation created for the Museum Central de Textile in Łódź, Poland in 2013. Here historical embroidered laces known as punto en aire (translation: 'stitches in the air') will be re-imagined as a modern-day place marker. Philosophies of striated and smooth space (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) will explore metaphor through the relationship between language and material structures as a means to move beyond the surface reading of a textile. This article seeks to find original research methodologies for place making in textiles and in doing so present an expanded view of the field.

KEYWORDS

contemporary
lace
place making
metaphor
permeable
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textile

INTRODUCTION

Composed of an intriguing mix of technical complexities, the unique qualities of lace continue to serve as a rich design source for a variety of contemporary practices. This can be seen through international contemporary lace exhibitions over recent years whereby designers from a range of disciplines have been invited to explore material innovation as a means to open up new definitions of lace.¹

This article will present contemporary approaches to lacemaking as a creative exploratory response to a local environment. The aim is to demonstrate a critical examination into identity and place through the making of a textile. Traditionally lace could be read as a place marker and came to represent the family and region where it was made through the materials and patterns employed to make it.²

This article will reference historical embroidered laces known as *punto en aire* (translation: ‘stitches in the air’) to demonstrate how making knowledges move between generations. How can new notions of ‘stitches in the air’ be re-imagined as a modern-day place marker? The aim is to create original work that reflects back a recognition of place. It is in the experience of recognition itself that enables us to view our environment in a new light.³

The research is framed by theory based in New Materialism, a developing trend of thinking that gives agency to the primacy of materials and their properties. It raises new questions about our embodiment as humans in the world around us and the ways we produce and consume our environment. It is concerned with authenticity in the relationships we have with materials and processes. These relationships can have a co-evolutionary role in the making of textiles as an embodied act.⁴

The article will present a textile installation, *Drawn Threads*, created for the Fourteenth International Triennial of Tapestry, Museum Central de Textile in Łódź, Poland in 2013. The Museum houses an international collection of contemporary textiles and is recognized as a world leader in its contribution to the field. Participation in the Triennial is by invitation only. In 2013 I had the privilege of being invited along with two other artists to represent Australia. In this project, traditional approaches to materials and techniques normally associated with lace have been suspended and challenged as a means to situate textiles in a more open and inclusive definition of art practice.⁵

TEXTILE THINKING

In articulating the thinking processes involved in the making of *Drawn Threads* this article seeks to demonstrate how the structural qualities of lace go beyond the mechanics of making to illuminate abstract thought and move beyond the surface reading of a textile. Relationships between surface, line and space will draw from philosophies of striated and smooth space.⁶

Here ‘textile thinking’ is presented as an exploratory, creative and critical activity.⁷ It is not based on knowledge that already exists but rather is activated when the mind is provoked by an encounter with the unknown and unfamiliar such as my participation in the Tapestry Triennial in Poland, a country whose history and culture is unfamiliar to me. Through the intersection of two cultures, Australian and Polish, new concepts unfolded in ways I couldn’t have anticipated, and brought to my consciousness significant, important events that my own family had been part of.



Figures 1 & 2: Cecilia Heffer, *Drawn Threads*, lace installation for the Fourteenth International Triennial of Tapestry, Museum Central de Textile in Łódź, Poland, 2013.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE – THE DISCIPLINE OF TEXTILE SCHOLARSHIP

The significance of this article is that it contributes to writing and thinking through making in the discipline of textile scholarship. This field is currently experiencing a paradigm shift in *how* we write and *what* we write about textiles.⁸ Over the last twenty five years these shifts have moved from a gendered and mainly art-based perspective to a change of thinking about textiles as a valid material making practice that embodies a complex semiotic sign system. Boundaries are being blurred in the ways we engage with collecting, documenting and showing textiles. This can be evidenced in publications such as the Handbook of Textile Culture where several contributors ranging from theorists and academics to artists and curators present various forms of textile design thinking as dimensionally expansive languages for abstract thought.⁹

CONTEXT – THE VALUE OF PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN TEXTILE PRACTICE

The relationship between textiles and place can be evidenced in many ways, from the local materials they are made from to the symbols they are encoded with.¹⁰ In Australian history textiles carried by migrants connected them to homelands and to their new host land. Lace

handkerchiefs made by a loved one evoked embodied connection to the maker and home. In this way textiles serve as powerful metaphor for migration, memory, family, identity, social fabric, cultural traditions and the transfer of skills between generations.¹¹

Connection to place can be seen in contemporary Australian textile practice. As guest curator for the Second Tamworth Textile Triennial (Australia's key national contemporary textile exhibition), *Group Exchange 2013-2015*, I was able to observe first-hand the way that artists demonstrated a real need to articulate an engagement with their local environment and in turn how this theme resonated with audiences. Place was demonstrated through a sensitivity to materials collected from each of the artists' surroundings such as local grasses, emu feathers, eucalyptus and natural dyes to convey a variety of themes and environmental concerns. Great value was given to place as shown by audience response to the curator overview, artists' talks, symposiums and question time.

In the broader creative arts field the influence and connection to place is unique to Australian artists, writers and audiences due to the country's extraordinary expansive geography. How space impacts on a culture is articulated in Tim Winton's novel *Island Home*:

I'm increasingly mindful of the degree to which geography, distance and weather have moulded my sensory palate, my imagination and expectations. The island continent has not been mere background. Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit as geological as family.¹²

The significance of cultivating a sensitive empathy and ethical practice to place is reiterated by Winton when he talks about a new younger generation of Australians who are more evolved in their literacy and politics around the notion of country and share a greater sensitivity to the original Aboriginal custodians of the land. He warns of an Australia where place is overshadowed by Australia the nation or Australia the enterprise and that the material facts of life are being overlooked.



Figure 3: Cecilia Heffer, “Lace Postcard” series exhibited in *Sensorial Loop*, First Tamworth Textiles Triennial, 2011.

Figure 4: Cecilia Heffer, private commission for writer Rebecca Huntley in memory of her Italian grandmother whose husband was interned in Queensland during World War II, meaning that she was left to run the sugarcane farm in the day. Throughout this time she made lace at night.

LACE DEFINITIONS AND METAPHOR

A critical examination into identity and place through the making of a textile is underpinned by my own personal experience. As a young child in the 1970s, due to political upheaval my family migrated from Chile to Sydney. At first the experience of cultural assimilation was akin to living in a space between two countries and cultures. Gradually as I adjusted to my environment with its unique sounds and landscape, the memory of one home was replaced by the making of a new home.

Over time I have come to realize that the repetitive processes in my lacemaking explore absence and presence as a means to understand and to construct identity of place. Here lace net-works are an apt metaphor for negotiating the permeable boundaries and thresholds we encounter as we move through the spaces in which we live and work.¹³ In my own lacemaking, patterns of spaces are constructed as a means to identify and understand form. As individuals, we identify ourselves by the spaces we inhabit between objects. In order to understand our own story, we notice the differences; the spaces between ourselves and others.

The conceptual exploration of space, the absences in lace can be evidenced in lace definitions in other practices. Leading Japanese textile innovator Reiko Sudo (Nuno Textiles) describes lace as a fabric of gaps whereby the spaces in between carry essential meaning:

Spaces – intervals or *ma* in Japanese – exist between things, between movements, between sounds, between patterns, between threads, between words, between people, whether in the form of physical emptiness or time or attitude. At first glance, there seems to be nothing to see in such spaces, but I gaze transfixed. When I look at things, I find I also look at the spaces between things – almost as much as the things themselves.¹⁴

In my own work, the spaces between two cultures, Australian and Polish, has been explored through a lace definition developed by lace historian Rosemary Shepherd O.A.M. Shepherd created a lace classification system for the Lace Study Centre at the Powerhouse Museum in 2003 and defined lace as ‘an open work surface whereby the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid motif.’¹⁵ In the making of *Drawn Threads* the surface becomes a site to process my response to place. I consider the space around the motifs and engage with a set of relationships between the stitched line, the soluble impermanent surface the motifs are stitched on and the shifting relationships between lines and surfaces and their transformations into patterned lace structures.¹⁶

THE SITES - CENTRAL MUSEUM OF TEXTILES: ŁÓDŹ, POLAND

At the start of this project, it was important for me to understand the story of Łódź and to learn of its rich history of textile manufacturing, material prosperity, architecture and classical music. Along with this history there is a harder story of the devastation that war brings and the story of the spirit of its people. Today in a revitalization process postindustrial areas have become new spaces for cultural centers.¹⁷

THE SITES - AUSTRALIA: WAMBERAL BEACH

The site selected for the project is known as Wamberal Beach located on the central coast of New South Wales. Wamberal is its Aboriginal name meaning ‘where the seas meet’. Locked by a lake and divided by rocky outcrops it has long stretches of shallow water. It has great meaning for me as I have been coming to the area for the last twenty years and feel attuned to the variations in its landscape weathered over time.

Initial research engaged a six-month period of observation, recording, collecting, videoing, and photographing the ethereal quality of light and space in the landscape. A walking routine became integral to my research process. Walking along Wamberal enabled me to physically think through ideas. The repetitive nature of my walks could be likened to a meditative practice. It parallels the way I physically ‘draw’ with the sewing machine to make my lace.

Stitching lines and pathways back and forward with the machine eventually creates lace netting, a new surface. The line in this instance is a stitching or walking of threads, it is a moving gesture that transforms into a surface to become a site of inquiry. The mechanical repetition is similar to the process of cloth making, such as weaving and knitting.

Through my walking, I became a physical bobbin in a landscape, creating lace tracks (threads) backwards and forwards on its ephemeral shore. Walking, observing, collecting, drawing, stitching and writing proceed along lines of inquiry of one another. In this case walking connects time and place through experience, relationships and life histories.

COLLECTING/ LACE CORAL METAPHOR



Figures 5 & 6: Cecilia Heffer, lace coral as artefact and as a digitally printed motif.

While walking the beach I was drawn to clusters of coral washed onto the shore created over time by one of our greatest artists - the sea.¹⁸ The coral was exquisitely lace-like in form: delicate, white and cream in colour. Fascinated with these fragile laces I started to collect and group them. To me they resonated with the history of lace making in the 1500's when women from fishing villages around the Devonshire coast made lace as a living. The women found the wooden bobbins needed to make lace too expensive, as an alternative they fashioned fish bones into pins for lace making. The lace became famous, known as Bone Lace and gained popularity with nobility and the courts.¹⁹ I was struck by how human ingenuity could adapt fish bones to tool as pins and started to draw parallels with the lace like corals I was collecting on the shore. The complexity of the coral reflected the complexity of lace making. In this sense, the coral spoke of a lineage of lace history and served as a visual metaphor for memory, identity and social fabric.²⁰ The coral became the key motif in *Drawn Threads*.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRACES/CONVERSATION - A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this project conversation, un-expectantly and profoundly informed my studio enquiry. Alongside the researching and making of *Drawn Threads* I spent a lot of time that summer with my mother who lived in the area. I would visit with stories of the beach, photos to distract and ideas about the lace work. The notion that the work was to be exhibited in Poland was of great interest to her and it seemed to trigger memories of her life and experiences in World War II. At the age of seventeen as a young girl from Dublin she joined the Women's Royal English Naval Service and was trained in Morse code (a pattern of dots, a form of lace making?). Once the war was finished she eventually was stationed in Dresden, Germany. Over this very precious time the stories of her experience in the war gathered form and became a bridge to my understanding of the history that Poland had suffered. History and autobiographical narrative started to weave the context for *Drawn Threads* moving between permeable boundaries, crossing cultures and time zones past and present. These stories infused the lace with a unique understanding of place and exchange. The making of the lace developed a deeper symbolic role in honouring lives past lived and a connection to Poland. Inadvertently my mother became a co- collaborator in helping to weave story and meaning into the lace. Her story can be seen as autobiographical traces existing beside the main body of the work, revealing connections to place where I had least expected to find them.²¹

PIXELS AS A DIGITAL STITCH

Historically handmade laces can be divided into three key techniques; Bobbin Laces, Drawn Work and Embroidered Laces. Traditionally lace motifs were created through meticulous hand embroidered stitching to float suspended in lace netting as *stitches in the air*. In this project, a digital pixel becomes a form of contemporary stitching. Scans of lace coral created printed motifs through Direct Digital Printing. DDP technology prints over thirty thousand pixels of colour (additive traces) onto the surface of a cloth allowing for precise photographic detail. In this sense, a digital pixel is likened to a stitch.²² When scanning the coral, I discovered that the extraordinary complexity of its delicate structure magnified to reveal a series of small segments that joined to form a whole. I observed that this joining mechanism in the coral could be likened to a 'bridging' technique in traditional lace making. Lace schools were made up of teams of women who specialized in bridging, the joining of motifs to create the final lace. This unique process intensified the similarities I've observed between coral structure and lace making. The bridging technique can be seen as a connection between

Poland and Australia. It demonstrates the transference of making knowledges between generations and cultures to serve as metaphor for, memory, identity and social fabric.



Figure 7: Cecilia Heffer, digitally printed lace coral motif on silk organza.

Figure 8: Embroidered lace sample showing bridging technique from the Pag Lace Museum, Croatia.

SURFACE AS A SPACE OF ENCOUNTER

The surface I stitch onto is soluble; it is impermanent; momentarily it becomes a space for fragments, a space of the incomplete, a site of uncertainty from which to start again.

‘It is where the mind extends beyond fragile boundaries, beyond frayed and indeterminate edges, expanding in the fluidity of the smooth. The surface is a liminal space, both inside and out, a space of encounter’.²³

In this pinning and placing process material fragments come to signify material traces encoded with memory (traces in the form of a coral print). Through a further intensive machine stitching process the soluble backing (the original impermanent site) is dissolved in water and emerges transformed into a new material form. The final transference of place occurs when the lace is suspended in the gallery, a new site where it embodies story and place in the form of a gently living moving presence.

THE FINAL SITE - MUSEUM CENTRAL DE TEXTILE

Visiting *Drawn Threads* in the Museum Central de Textile in Łódź provided a unique opportunity to view the installation in a curated museum environment. In this space, the transference between cultures unexpectedly was enabled through a glowing Polish twilight. The subtle shifting movement of the lace ‘breathing’ in the space generated a delicate patterned environment. In this moment, the museum space became a momentary European

site for Wamberal Beach. Shadows added a dimension to the work, a third gentle space for the viewer to inhabit, to walk across, to experience.

When the piece was finished, I drove it up to my mothers and hung it in her living room window so that the winter light could shine through the lace. We both sat back looking at the piece; it had become an entity of its own. I started explaining how the Museum approached artists to donate their work to their textile collection. Should I donate the piece (all those hours of stitching)? My mother kept looking straight at the lace. Her response made my decision very clear: ‘they were bombed and devastated by the war, they lost everything.’

Drawn Threads was donated to the Museum Central de Textile in Łódź. In making the work I have been able to reflect on the nature of impermanence and the notion of place making. Through the donation process I have come to acknowledge the importance of exchange and shared experience.

The lace now serves as a manifest for memory, a genre for storytelling. Embodied histories and places transcend time - therein lies the infinite nature of human experience translated through narrative, the ties that bond. It exists as an homage to my mother’s experience in the war, to our time at Wamberal Beach and to the rich histories embodied in the city of Łódź. It sits amongst other international textile art works and now will enjoy basking in a translucent European light. Receiving the Museum’s thank you letter completed the cultural exchange. They thanked me for my generosity and also made the point that my gift meant a lot to them in that it demonstrated how much value I had for the work they did, the Triennial and Museum Central Textile collection.

CONCLUSION

In this article, a unique lace making process became a vehicle to explore a contemporary response to a selected environment, Wamberal beach, situated on the NSW coast of Australia. *Drawn Threads* was created for the Fourteenth International Triennial of Tapestry, Museum Central de Textile in Łódź, Poland in 2013. In revealing the unique textile thinking processes behind the making of the work, new perceptions and approaches to place were evoked through the making of a textile.

Historical embroidered laces known as ‘stitches in the air’ were re-imagined as a modern-day place marker through digital technologies. The open structural qualities of lace that allow air and light to move through considered lace as a permeable boundary. The surface became a site for cultural exchange, moving between people, places, generations and

histories in time and space. It demonstrates how textiles serve as rich metaphor for memory, identity and social fabric.

The article presented a narrative that was composed of diary entries, reflections on practice, conversations, studio notes and autobiographical writing. The significance of exploring an artistic language that can communicate the complexity and intelligence behind nascent forms of ‘textile thinking’ is critical for the recognition of textiles in a broader design field. Demonstrating how textiles can serve to illuminate abstract thought in the field of history and theory can add value to the cultural agency of the craft and move it beyond the perception of being purely a decorative design source.²⁴

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