

Uncrafting Worth: a lexicon

for Post Body Reflections

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There has rarely been a time in the world where one's importance has not had an impact on one's placement in the world. How one is regarded by another person or system has always, and continues to, dictate social status, political influence, financial placement, and geographical situation. I believe that this system of steadfast prescriptions needs interrogation, and that their concreteness needs loosening. Welcome to my lexicon; the textual description of the world of my artistic research. The following 3264 words that shape my research, includes six concepts, which I call figures. Throughout, I will act as your guide, ensuring your understanding of these figures, as well as my desire to interrogate each. My urgency looks at *crafty labour* through the lens of *opaque bodies* and *genderfication* in order to investigate *unreclaiming worth*.

Let me start with a question: Why would you pay attention to this text? Why would you pay attention to the words neatly displayed on your screen describing a world of artistic research that has seemingly nothing to do with you? Maybe I have piqued your interest in my introduction, maybe you think there is something to gain by understanding the figures that exist here, or maybe you feel curious about my inquiry. Regardless of your reason, there is something in it for you. There is worth here. Something worthy in this world; the words, the bodies, the labour, the actions, the objects... Unfortunately for these components, however, they do not all hold equal worth; and here lies the complexity of worth, and thus genderfication, crafty labour, unreclaiming and opaque bodies. This collision of concepts spurs the question as to whether the usually transparent body (in this context, the female body) can attain worth without its attachment to some sort of output into the world. In my practice and

research, worth is something or someone that is regarded as good, important, or interesting by a system or body that has the authority to define it as being so, therefore also defining how it is treated. To have worth is to be considered important, making one a desire or necessity to another person or society. But how is worth assigned? How do we decide the worthiness of bodies, objects, and labour? The answer to this question is three-fold, as the assignation of worth is dependent on: **how** worth is measured, **who** measures worth, and the **authority** that comes with that measurement of worth. While there are multiple ways of measuring worth; by currency, emotion, labour, size, functionality, aesthetic, or time, these measurements will almost always be converted into the measurement of authority. When I speak of authority, I refer to one's ability to direct or influence the environment around them (another's behaviour or the events of something) with or without the consent of others. Considering this, something or someone's worth equates their authority, however, it can also only be appointed by someone who already has authority.

The world into which I make my inquiry and situate myself, focuses specifically on the worth of female bodies in relation to male bodies (a strategic essentialism that will be explained later), domestic craft objects in relation to art objects, and the labour of these female bodies making craft objects. Psychotherapist, art historian, writer and feminist Rozsika Parker, states that "there is an important connection between the hierarchy of the arts and the sexual categories male/female" (Parker, 1984: 5), reminding us of the common historical and socio-political perspective that a woman's worth is inherently considered less than that of a man's due to gender difference. In addition, this innate worth of men allots them the power to

assign worth in a way that maintains male dominance and female subservience. Thus, the way in which a woman can attain worthiness is already constructed, and only by successfully complying with what is expected of her may she attain that worth. The irony of a woman's worth is that it is not autonomous, as the worth of her body, the craft objects she makes, and the labour of making are deeply entangled. This entanglement raises questions like whether a woman's body obtains worth because of the craft object she makes, or whether the craft object acquires worth because of the hands that make it, as well as what worth, if any, could be assigned to the labour of making these craft objects? It is this entanglement that spurs the aforementioned question as to whether the female body can attain worth without its attachment to a worldly output, particularly in its contribution to benefiting and maintaining the hierarchy of men and art. My inquiry wishes to understand and interrogate this, and by doing so, unravel the power relations and structures that continue to be held in place.

The next figure that shapes my research is effectual. It is a methodological concept that queers these systems of worth and authority, and seeks to unbutton, unknot, undo, unravel, and untie. It seeks to un; to not. To not take back, to not claim, to not reclaim. To unreclaim. Unreclaiming asserts that these bodies, labour, and objects do not belong to anyone. They just are. They do not own and are not owned. They are whole and self-standing, in need of no assistance by singular definition, or prostheses. So detached that even their association to the concept of unreclaiming dissipates at the moment of encounter. This detachment, however, is not automatic, it is an intentional effort that initiates a complete

evacuation from any definitions subjected onto a body, labour, or object. The methodology of unreclaiming offers an alternative to 'claiming' and 'reclaiming' because it does not state or assert ownership or dominance. Using the word 'unreclaiming' instead of 'reclaiming' specifically, offers a rational and unflustered resistance, and thus a denial to the system of 'who-owns-what', and 'how one is defined'. Unreclaiming is not, however, about passivity, ignorance, or indifference, but rather about embracing a definition of the self that is not influenced by any societal, political, or external other. Rather than reacting to the external, unreclaiming is autocatalytic; the catalyst arising from the self. The 'un' in unreclaiming, announces a negation to the 're' in reclaiming - that is to do again or go back. By placing 'un' (meaning 'not') at the beginning of the word, the taking and taking back again of claiming and reclaiming is dismantled before it can even begin. Unreclaiming speculates a world in which bodies, objects and labour can be identified and collaborated with. The intention of unreclaiming is to reach a point of intersectionality. American lawyer, civil rights activist and philosopher, Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes 'intersectionality' as a "lens through which you can see where power comes, collides, interlocks and intersects" (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectionality describes how the multiple identities of a person come together to define them as individual, thus creating different modes of discrimination and privilege. To unreclaim is to reject the definitions imposed by others, have the authority to choose one's own descriptors, and combine those to create a uniquely defined identity. The result of unreclaiming is one which does not imply you and me as separate, but rather you and me as different yet still connected. I am proposing that unreclaiming creates a new system which refuses any division into

irreconcilable categories. Through this methodology, the concept of worth detaches from its current definition and floats in space, making the renegotiation of worth possible.

Following these varying expressions of authority and assignments of worth, as well as how to instigate their dismantle, are the bodies onto which these ideas imposed. In other words, how the same body performing the same labour is attributed a different worth. To make this more concrete, I am going to look at gender as a divide - specifically the female/male binary (this is, however, only one example of a division produced by this system)¹. Genderfication refers to how gender defines the space one is expected to take up, and the tasks and behaviours one is expected to perform. To keep my inquiry specific, I look at genderfication's ontology, and, more specifically, how the qualities and characteristics regarded as 'female' transpired. In *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), Rozsika Parker insists clearly defining femininity and uses writer, activist, and feminist Simone de Beauvoir to do so:

In *The Second Sex*, 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote: 'It is evident that woman's "character"- her convictions, her values, her wisdom, her morality, her tastes, her behaviour - are to be explained by her situation.' In other words, femininity, the behaviour expected and encouraged in women, though obviously related to the biological sex of the individual, is shaped by society. (2)

It is thus one's gender that inspires one's societal role. The problem, however, is not *what* the characteristics of femininity are, but rather, *how* femininity came into being, as well as the expectation and encouragement

¹ I am using the gendered roles of female and male only as placeholders to look at how power separates and segregates.

to perform these characteristics. It is an expectation based on the biological fact as uncontrollable as one's gender, creating the limited choice between two ways of existing, and thereby unjustly generating the basis upon which the rest of one's life is regarded. 'Gender', as understood by feminist scholar Judith Butler, is a "historical situation rather than a natural fact" (Butler, 1988: 271), thus limiting the possibilities that bodies hold to transform into completely unique identities and forcing them to abide by this social construction.

Through its ontology, I seek to understand how genderfication gave rise to crafty labour as a distinctly female attribute, subjecting woman to the private, domestic space, creating "utilitarian objects for the household to serve [their] husband and family" (Packer, 2012: 3). When Judith Butler quotes de Beauvoir that "one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman," Butler elaborates that gender "is a stylised repetition of acts [and] stylisation of the body" (Butler, 1988: 270). It is the unending and expected repetition of these acts assigned to those identifying as female, including virtuosity, domesticity, craft work and the private space, that fuels my inquiry. Although great leaps and bounds have been made in gender equality by feminists, the expectation of women to be feminine has not been eradicated or replaced; it has been compounded. American professor Arlie Hochschild explains that the expectation of the contemporary female includes adopting the role of the working woman, while still maintaining the same domestic characteristics of femininity. In *The Second Shift* (1989), Hochschild describes households in which both parents perform a work shift during the day, and then a second shift of childcare and housework at home. While both parents experience this

shift, women still tend to take on most of this responsibility (an ingrained expectation). It is clear then, that the ontology of genderfication is a direct consequence of the subjection of the female gender. By using genderfication as a lens to look at crafty labour, it is my hope that gender as an enforcer of prescribed behaviours and measures of worth may be disassembled.

Sitting alongside genderfication is the figure of opaque bodies. Here, I am advocating for the shift of bodies identifying as female from their current state of transparency to a complete opacity. To be transparent is to ensure that something or someone else may be seen, a perfect metaphor for the female performing crafty labour. It may be that her body is transparent so that her labour may be seen, her body and labour are transparent so that her craft object may be seen, or that her body, labour, and craft object are transparent so that a male benefiting from their output may be seen. It is important to note that this woman, her labour, and her object are not always transparent in that they cannot be seen, or in that they are absent, but rather that their extreme presence has been taught to be ignored. Their degrees of opacity and transparency depend on what is expected of and extracted from them. This can be further elaborated by the visible/invisible binary. Peggy Phelan believes that "visibility is a trap" because it "summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession" (6). In *A Woman's Place?* (1984), however, Linda McDowell and Doreen Massey point towards the freedom in visibility when criticising the invisible, domestic space: "the worker remains confined to the privatised space of the home, and individualised, isolated from other workers" (McDowell et

al., 1984: 203). These examples illustrate that there are transparent bodies, and bodies that are not fully opaque (which is an exploited and objectified visibility). In both cases, the degree of opacity is disregarded, and the same menial worth assigned. In their opposing approaches, however, Phelan, and McDowell and Massey point to the same larger issue: the denial to be able to choose. Women simply don't have the choice to be a completely opaque body; they are either kept in the private space to perform women's work or put on display as an object to be looked at. What I am advocating for is opaque bodies; bodies that have authority over their own worth and definitions, and agency in their actions. The discourse of opaque bodies also includes that of the opaque craft objects and labour, and their attachment to the bodies that make them. From a teleological perspective, the urge for opaquing bodies questions who and what is currently seen and not seen and unpacks how the renegotiation of worth may affect and be affected by this opacity shift.

Crafty labour is the fifth figure to my lexicon. Sometimes an indexical sign of the crafter or labourer, crafty labour is born out of femininity, because it "ensured that women remain at home and refrain from book learning...domesticity was a defence against promiscuity...[and] to become synonymous with chastity" (Parker, 1984: 75). Sliding on the scale of opacity and transparency, crafty labour may be found in the dark, invisible space, or appear detached from its maker, in the visible space. Crafty labour combines the concepts of women's work, labour, and domestic craft. Parker explains that "traditionally, women have called embroidery 'work'...Moreover, the term was engendered by an ideology of femininity as service and selflessness and the insistence that women work

for others, not for themselves" (Parker, 1984: 6). In other words, the intention of women's work is to serve a husband and family with a labour or physical effort that remains invisible. Produced by this women's work is craft, which is named so rather than 'art' because craft objects are defined by their utilitarian functionality, while art serves us aesthetic beauty. "The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them. Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, was made in the domestic sphere, usually by women, for 'love': Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere, for money" (Parker, 1984: 5). Domestic craft encompasses both the output of craft objects (including knitting, weaving, embroidery, crocheting), as well as the labour of making which typically occurs in the private, domestic space of a woman's home. The long-standing, hierarchy between art and craft extends itself into a hierarchy between female and male, as "part of the problem is that 'art' has a positive evaluative connotation that 'craft' lacks. Some critics, with good reason, claim that this difference in evaluative meaning reflects our culture's elitist values: what white European men make is dignified by the label 'art', while what everyone else makes counts only as craft" (Markowitz, 1994: 55). In coming together, the figures that make up my lexicon formulate a critique of a system in which someone with authority assigns worth onto bodies that have been limited in their authority due to their gender and thus left transparent. I have formulated crafty labour as a way of articulating and interrogating the problems in this system, and as a way by which we may begin to discover a new implementation practice.

I have entitled this concept 'crafty labour' because of the mischievous possibilities with which this concept can affect systems of worth and authority. Crafty labour is in kitchens and backrooms, movements and intentions, skin and blood, pillows and wall hangings, time and effort, process and labour; it shapeshifts from one to the other. The rationale of its naming implies resistance and activism, because to be crafty is to be:

1. clever at achieving one's aims by indirect or deceitful methods, or
2. involves the making of decorative objects and other things by hand.

To perform crafty labour is to submit to the assigned gender role so vehemently that it produces a result drenched in satire, thus undermining the intention of femininity. Moreover, crafty labour, in its activism (or craftivism) does not seek to become art but rather redefine its worth, as "moving embroidery several rungs up the ladder of art forms could be interpreted as simply affirming the hierarchical categorisations, rather than deconstructing them" (Parker, 1984: 5). A redefinition that I hope to echo in the distinction between female and male. It is, thus, from the site of crafty labour which I begin my interrogation.

The ability for this research to reach its full potential rests on the form of the final figure: relationality. Relationality describes how an audience places themselves in relation to me as the artist. It is the connectedness between parties, and in the case of my research, includes the web of multiple and varying relations between an audience, me, the concepts, materials, labour, and so on. The work being done in my research requires an amount of hospitality, labour, and performance to guide the audience in, not only in the case of this lexicon, but also in my

process of artistic research, my final thesis and final performance. Crafty labour manifests the relationality between the audience and the artist by articulating the issues at hand, redefining what these ideas might look like, and (thus) interrogating the system I am critiquing. By implementing crafty labour, I am recognising that worth is temporal, contingent, and based on relationality, thus intention and orientation. The intention and orientation of both the audience and I, initiates a renegotiated understanding of worth. In the production of relationality, I am critiquing the triangle of authorship, authenticity, and authority. By inviting the audience into my work, authorship (my claim over the presented work), authenticity (the claim to the factuality or “truthiness” of the work), and the authority regarding the work falls into question (Shah, 2017). The authority of worth is removed with relationality because the audience and artist are able to place themselves in a way that creates a space where it is impossible to impose one’s own ideas of worth onto another body. This generates a space without authority, authorship, and where authenticity is no longer thought of as rare, privileged, or original.

In conclusion, it is my hope that by looking at the site of crafty labour through the lens of genderfication, and the shifting of transparent bodies to opaque bodies, that the unreclamation of worth may begin. As part of my artistic practice, I intend to use crafty labour as an instrument with which to query and reveal its own worth and the worth of bodies that should necessarily become opaque, as well as crack open a constant negotiation of the definition of worth, and every edge it touches.

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