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Yarns: Community, Creativity, and Craft in the Textile Arts
Oral History Project Proposal

Interviews conducted for *Yarns: Community, Creativity, and Craft in the Textile Arts* explore the interrelationship between feminism and craftwork. For my purposes, I use the word craftwork to describe creative efforts that contribute to the home economy, with an emphasis on jobs traditionally performed by women. While craftwork often deals with textiles, it also includes areas such as decorative or tole painting and paper craft. This series of interviews focuses particularly on the shifts that have occurred with craftwork over the proceeding forty years and the external events that caused these changes. Considerations include: the different experiences of women who learned craftwork either prior to or after the rise of second wave feminism; the role of class status—particularly how the increased availability of inexpensive readymade items changed craftwork for working class women from a financial necessity to a form of creative expression; and the position of craftwork within third wave feminism with its increased elevation to both an art form and a political statement. These interviews will be part of an ongoing venture titled the Women’s Work Project (WWP).

Background

My interest in this topic stems from my own involvement with craftwork. My family has a tradition of doing craftwork, so as a child I learned craft skills from both my mother and my grandmother. As an adult this translated into my participation in craft groups and working professionally as a seamstress. I created the first incarnation of this project in the spring of 2003,

as part of the senior project for my Bachelor's degree in Woman's Studies at Portland State University. Inspired by the story of Harriet Powers, I began the Quilt History Project (QHP) to record narratives of women who quilted. Powers, an ex-slave from rural Georgia, created two quilts in the late nineteenth century that now reside in major museum collections: one in the Smithsonian's collection and the other at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Three written descriptions dictated by Powers accompany these quilts. Though heavily mediated through the biases of those recording Powers's words, the survival of this oral testimony provides important insight into Powers as an artist.

With the QHP I collected narratives through three different written surveys—one for the individual quilter, one for members of quilting organizations, and one for people that want to talk about someone else they knew who quilted. While I encouraged respondents to take liberties with their answers and to pose questions of their own, I used four questions as the basis for each of the surveys. For the individual quilter, these included: 1. How long have you been quilting? 2. What are your preferred methods/materials/designs to use in quilting? 3. What motivates you to quilt? 4. Do you feel quilting has a space in modern society and if so, what? I collected approximately a dozen of these surveys, all from individuals I knew previously. The responses ranged from short one or two sentence answers to long, detailed explanations. Viewing these surveys critically, many of the respondents seemed unsure about how to answer the questions, that in my efforts to allow the participants freedom in how to respond I did not provide enough explanation or instruction.

In late 2006, I expanded the project and changed the name to Women's Work Project. I did this for three reasons: to look at other craft forms, to create room for the project to grow, and to include tools for recording people's experiences beyond the written surveys. At this time, I

issued new surveys aimed at persons doing all manner of craftwork along with the following statement of purpose:

Women's Work Project (WWP) seeks to explore and better understand the often-complicated relationship between women and work. WWP wants to reconsider what the term "women's work" represents and places an emphasis on craftwork as a form of creativity traditionally allowed to women. These creative expressions by our mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and friends have generally been overlooked, their stories untold. As we rediscover craftwork, we also must uncover its past and recognize those that have come before us. For this reason, it is important to collect the stories of those engaged in craftwork, to display their work, and to appreciate the varied roles of craftwork in their lives.

Based on my earlier experiences issuing surveys, I expected some respondents to feel nervous in their answers or to try to shape their responses to what they thought I wanted. When I distributed this new set of surveys, I also included a copy of one that I had filled out, both as an icebreaker and to demonstrate the multiple possible interpretations of the questions I posed. The responses I received back surprised me. As with the Quilt History Project surveys, the answers to my questions ranged in length and content, at the same time, these responses had a richness lacking in the previous set. Respondents recounted family stories in unexpected ways, provided answers that were both humorous and serious, described their work and their process in amazing detail, and in many ways caused me to rethink some of my expectations. I felt these surveys succeeded in creating a space in which individuals who rarely talk about their creative process to do so. I also found the use of surveys increasingly restrictive, as I was unable to ask further questions or to pursue a participant's answers beyond what they chose to write down.

In the fall of 2008, I conducted my first oral history interview for this project. I spoke with Sandra Zodnik, manager of the costume shop at Portland State University and a longtime friend and colleague. Originally I planned to interview another woman, Pam Jett-Goodrich, at the same time as Zodnik. Knowing both women before the interview and expecting them to start

their own dialogue based on my promptings, I created a short list of subjects to discuss rather than an extensive number of questions to ask. These topics centered on the gendered nature of the work, an understanding of costumers as a modern incarnation of the dressmaker, the pay disparity they experienced in the field, and the politics that come out of that. This approach proved faulty on a number of levels. When Jett-Goodrich canceled, I found myself with too little material for a singular narrator. The narrowness of my scope garnered limited reaction from Zodnik and left me grasping for questions to continue the conversation. As a co-worker, I assumed an insider stance in a way that shortened Zodnik's explanations of what the work actually entailed and caused me to say in effort to get a response, "pretend like I don't know this."

Interestingly, I did not know what Zodnik would say. In an interview designed to discuss the intricacies of working in a field traditionally considered to be one of women's work, Zodnik distanced herself from that label early on, making it clear instead that she considered herself an artist. In a discussion of the value placed on different types of work, Zodnik provided the following responses:

Sandra Zodnik: but the whole realm of sewing, I think still has that, I think it's still considered something that's not of a value. It's not certainly valued equally as having prowess with a hammer and saw

Chelsea Vaughn: and you, so do you think that is a remnant of it being considered women's work, to do sewing over sawing?

SZ: I imagine so...I mean, where else would it come from? I guess, and I also, actually, I, I'm not sure how much this comes from my sense of living within the culture, I'm sure it probably one hundred percent does, or just my own, a, from my own, kind of, well, because I'm an artist I'm kind of inherently marginalized from main stream society, so I'm not sure how much, what impact that has, I do feel that I, I think I've decided that I tend to undervalue my own work, because, I mean relative to what other artists do, I think because it's something that I've always done, and I didn't have to, I didn't go out and pay twenty thousand dollars to learn these things. I just sort of have this ability, from years, and because to me it's no big deal, I feel like, therefore, it's not worth very much, in the spectrum of how much things are worth.

Zodnik took my question about the nature of “women’s work” and answered with how she regards herself as an artist. Further, in her self-identification as an artist, she minimized the value of her work based upon how she learned it. Being taught craft skills by her mother as a child held less financial value in Zodnik’s estimation than artists who learned their craft through costly institutions. Zodnik located this sense of comparative worth in what she understands as the societal value placed upon different modes of learning. What, in hindsight, I had designed as a rather shallow interview illuminated for me the complexities of how an individual craftsperson understands their work.

Methodology

When I interviewed Zodnik for the WWP, I geared my questions toward what I saw as the gendered nature of the work she did. She instead focused on her creative process. This affected the direction of future interviews for the WWP greatly. While I had approached the subject of craftwork as an issue of gendered labor, Zodnik's responses made clear the complexity and subjectivity of an individual engaged in craftwork. Going forward, I broadened my research to include issues such as economy, creativity, and process, as well as the effect of outside events, such as changes in the social climate, on the interviewee.

I structured the current set of interviews around twenty questions with the understanding that I intended to ask follow up questions as they arise. This allowed a standardized point of comparison as well as room to account for the individual nature of responses and to pursue certain lines of questioning further. In forming the twenty base questions, I attempted to cover a broad range of activities and areas, including: how the interviewee learned particular craft forms,

how she uses these skills, what she feels about doing craftwork, the effect of finances on craftwork, and any social connections formed through craft.

Conclusion

Using the twenty-question format, I have completed three interviews, each approximately an hour in length. While I cannot draw definitive conclusions from three interviews, certain commonalities have arisen. Each of the three interviewees learned craftwork at a young age and has continued to incorporate it into their lives as an activity they enjoy. Learning craft skills as children, respondents tended to describe craftwork somewhat dismissively as “something [they] just do.” At the same time, each respondent expressed an understanding of craftwork as something that a majority of persons within their communities do not do. Each of my interviewees, in turn, expressed pride in their unique abilities—that knowing how to make things set them apart somehow from other people who do not. This conflicting sense of value only came out only upon further questioning. As one respondent made clear when she said, “I don’t ever think about craft [work] in the way that you’re asking,” craftwork plays a multi-layered and often unexamined role in the lives of my interviewees. Conducting oral history interviews creates a space to explore craftwork further.