

**FEMINIST SUBJECTIVITIES IN FIBER ART AND CRAFT: SHADOWS OF AFFECT,
JOHN CORSO-ESQUIVEL (2021)**

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In his acknowledgements, which precede this book, the author John Corso-Esquivel opens by stressing the urgency of correcting historical and political narratives in support of ‘generative projects of community building’ in a post-truth era (x). This self-proclaimed ‘emerging author’ (x) challenges our notions of subjectivity and the exclusionist hierarchies of artistic Modernism to reorientate the subject-object binary through a relativist, and even postmodern, progression. This progression acknowledges the emerging discourse of the affective sensations of fibre art, and its primacy of materiality and making which engage with emotion, desire and wonder. Corso-Esquivel describes the vitality of the combined physical and emotional body, expressing the dissolution of boundaries between the body and what is beyond itself through a merging of insides and outsides as cooperative and responsive forms and feelings. He tells us about the pre-conscious intuitive and speculative being, of looping temporalities and the encouragement of a permeable relationship with people, environments and things. He says fibre art and craft (or British textile art) draws from, but is not confined by symbolic identities, which can be untidy, continually transforming and transformational as a kind of ‘becoming’, a place where new subjectivities are formed.

I was captivated by this writing (I can say this since the book is premised on feelings and reaction) and since, in my own making, I recognize the immersive and deeply sensorial transcendency of material and the material act beyond its haptic qualities. I have spoken previously about wonderment and enchantment, so in Corso-Esquivel, I found equivalencies, having referred previously to

the awesome and awe-inspiring aliveness of Janet Echleman's expansive pulsating networks and describing them through Ingold's concept of 'open worlds' (Ingold quoted in Kettle 2012: 19). Equally formative are Judith Scott's bound forms which morph objects into invisible and alternative entities which are mysteriously and simultaneously repressed and liberating. Corso-Esquivel presents a rigorous discourse using philosophical and psychoanalytical theories to address the marginalization of applied arts across cultures and its proactive place in feminism, identity formation and sensation. I learnt a lot and I mostly understood what I was reading. I will attempt to represent it.

This is a book about affect which Corso-Esquivel distinctively defines as movement and passage through emotional states. He leaves behind the 'Lacanian paradigm expansive sense of affect' and 'cognitive experiences of emotion' (4), to ground his discourse in the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, who 'posit that a work of art presents a block of sensations, that is to say a compound of percepts and affects' (5). To get your head around this he suggests:

If we were to imagine a body lying on the grass next to a tree, the sun's shadow passes along this body (affectively), and at a given time we could see the shadow's image (percept) at a given angle. It is the passage that enables a momentary shadow to be discerned and not vice versa.

(5–6)

The shadow is important, since he says 'contemporary fiber art and craft create shadows that shield bodies – however momentarily – from the blinding light of the Symbolic' (8). He contends that through material means, sensation is encountered with no need for language and explanation. The creation of the shadow is examined through eight American women fibre artists (some very familiar and some new) whose practice embraces affective subjectivities, not as dark places but as alternative realities of experience and knowledge. In doing so he reveals how shadows establish a relationship between the viewer's body and the work of art. Sheila Pepe and Ruth Asawa use shadow to explore otherness, difference and alterity as positive states. Asawa dissolves boundaries of sensation saying, '[w]hat I was excited by was I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time' (13). Pepe's dolls and shadows create dialogues between the originating body and itself, and in her later non-figurative work, Corso-Esquivel draws from the Deleuzean loop, and from his becoming, to explore repetition in making as an emphatic and progressive invocation of physical being and evolving difference. He states, 'Deleuzean philosophy allows us to realize craft as a distilled reemergence. The formally repetitive nature of craft is precisely what enables us to focus on its difference' (65).

He defines craft as 'a material act of intuition' (72). In Chapter 3, Judith Scott's and Claire Falkenstein's works embody an artistic knowing contingent on instinct. Corso-Esquivel uses Henri Bergson's philosophy of intuition, to discuss the continuous and interlocking flow of time with the past and future. By this means the historical past is swept up and actualized intuitively, apprehended

in the layering of fibres, it is then reversible, invisible and both material and immaterial. This means that craft can transcend formal hierarchies related to historical narratives and to represent hidden dimensions which contain counter narratives of affective intuition.

Chapters 4 and 5 use Deleuze and Guattari's writing on stratification, a geological process of layering, where the deposition of sediment and the structuring of sediment into rock (109) solidifies, and yet can reconfigure through temporal and physical change. Stratification affirms both compound structures made up of difference and also their eruption and shifting. Artists Sonia Gomes and Shinique Smith explore individuality, variation, metamorphosis and mutation, both making changeable fabric components which present ethnicity gender and identity as simultaneously specific, rooted and shifting. They individually 'bundle fabric into sculptural mass [...] [w]ith readable signs which hint at symbolic meanings but do not support a political didacticism' (109).

Stratification of society and social roles can be reformulated and reconstituted in new kinds of fluid configurations and flexible spaces. Under the heading 'matrixial shadows' (checking this terminology out I find it relates to feminist film theory and *The Matrixial Gaze* by Ettinger), Corso-Esquivel describes Gego's environmental installations as diagrammatically dynamic and Janet Echelmann's 'concept of a void [...] belies an entirely rich, connected, open experience' (143). Corso-Esquivel uses Ettinger's 'picture of a pre-symbolic affective universe' (148), which is 'compassionate', suggesting that relationships and connections seek each other out or are informed by each other. This matrixial existence is emergent and unstable, opening the possibilities of connecting sensations and generating communal experiences.

This book, whilst about feminist subjectivities is really about the overlapping and shared sensations of porous experiences that 'bypass sexist pitfalls' (11). Fibre art and craft indicate these pathways, which are entry points for the multidimensional body and its fellows to explore: 'Feminist fiber art affects bodies directly through affect, the subjects of these artworks experience pleasure, collectivity and connection through movement and passage – in a word through the sensation of becoming' (11).

It feels good to be able to have pleasure and wonderment in making and in viewing fibre art and craft, and Corso-Esquivel's contribution to affect discourse is welcome. He opens a space for the variety of diverse experiences and identities to be fully participating, alongside the feminist voice, in artistic practice and debate. A timely contemporary contribution which elicits some of the things we know are bound into our textile making.

References

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