An archaeology of tapestry: contexts, signs and histories of contemporary practice

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Diana Wood Conroy
11 January 1995
AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF TAPESTRY:

CONTEXTS, SIGNS AND HISTORIES OF CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

The relevance of archaeological theory to contemporary craft, both through the discipline of academic investigation, and through an autobiographical voice in art practice, is the subject of this study. The sense of place, both classical and Aboriginal, is explored through letters and diaries from Greece in 1967 and from Bathurst Island in the Northern Territory in 1974.

In bringing archaeological theory to bear on contemporary tapestry and textiles the principal finding is the pertinence of a faceted materiality, visuality and textuality, in exploring the cultural meaning of a work. The profound differences between the two areas of tapestry and textiles are brought out by an analysis not only of the objects themselves, but also of the documents - the craft journals of the 1970s and 80s - that position them within the spaces of contemporary art/craft. This study provides a critical structure that locates tapestry and textiles between the inarticulate tactile characteristics of 'semiotic' fibre, and the coherent visuality of the 'symbolic' Fine Arts.

Archaeology excavates the un-imagined and brings it into consciousness. The fragmentary objects of the past examined here are the classical collections of the Nicholson Museum in the University of Sydney and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. This study demonstrates that the relationship of the past to the present is a matter to be continually reassessed, both through academic research and art practice. The two exhibitions documented, Archaeologies and Unwritten Country open up connections between archaeology and Aboriginality, tapestry and drawing that interrogate fixed hierarchies of past and present.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The reflections of maturity evolve from alignments set up in childhood. I acknowledge with deep affection the unfailing encouragement, emotional and material support given to me by my parents, Marion and David Wood. Their histories subtly permeate this work.

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The Academic Women's Committee of the University of Wollongong has offered substantial help in the completion of this thesis by awarding me a six months Development Grant, with the back-up of a women's support group from the entire University community. I am grateful to Dr Peg Macleod for her commitment to this area and her interested support of my project.

Not least, I would like to thank Julia St George for her meticulous and patient research assistance. Michael Young offered invaluable help in formatting image and text, as did Leonie Molloy. Gregor Cullen's acute eye in placing image and text transformed the design of the thesis. Nicholas Conroy has taught me about computers, and organised my files. Without such help, completing this study within the bounds of a full time academic work load would have been hardly possible.

My two sons, Nicholas and Rowan, have tolerantly accommodated the process of postgraduate activity as part of their own life, and have been a source of great strength. I dedicate this study to them, with much love, and hope that they feel it was worthwhile, in the long run, to have this work in place.
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INTRODUCTION

Overview of thesis

This study set out to examine the relevance of archaeological theory to contemporary craft practice in two intermingling threads. The thread that links the four parts of this writing is an autobiographical stance, that connects seemingly disparate areas such as archaeology, Aboriginality and tapestry/textiles. Because of the nature of creative work, both tapestry and writing are located at the intersection of the personal and the cultural/historical. The use of a personal voice and diary extracts accentuates the central place of process and of the personal in the artwork itself.

The second thread investigates, through substantial academic research, and an archaeological positioning, the underlying tenets of tapestry and textiles from their establishment in Australia as craft/art practices in the early 1970s until the present. The voice of research and scholarship is impersonal, but in including the autobiographical documentation normally outside the domain of scholarly research, this study gives an insight into the broad ramifications of contemporary art practice, both from a theoretical and subjective viewpoint.

The context of archaeology

Archaeology is introduced through my early employment in the Nicholson Museum in the University of Sydney, where the original nineteenth century collection was set in a very different kind of order through the imperative of a scientific and materialist paradigm for the vigorous archaeology that emerged after World War II. The background of empirical archaeology in the 1960s is charted through my experience of reorganising the Mediterranean material of the Nicholson Museum. The emphasis on scientific data collection is contrasted with the fictional and literary reconstructions of the Victorian era of this museum.12

Recent archaeological theory parallels the developments of visual art theory in the wider artworld. The deep influence of structuralism, in its understanding of language as the founding model for many systems within a given society, is combined with the influence of semiotics, where a comprehensive textuality is applied to the very discipline of archaeology itself. No longer is the 'objectivity' of
the archaeological investigator beyond question, but the cultural assumptions of the archaeologist in relation, for example, to issues of gender and class become part of the excavation under consideration. Feminist critiques of post-structuralism are touched on in relation to the masculinity of the scientific materialist archaeology that prevailed during my own time in the field of archaeology.

The advantages that recent developments in theory bring to archaeological, and artistic disciplines are evident through a much greater awareness of theory laden positions, and a consciousness of a shifting and flexible understanding of the past. Archaeology, like art, now refers to many disciplines, to literary and philosophical theory as well as a ‘scientific’ positioning of the object. Archaeology itself has been re-constituted as a ‘text’ by post-processual archaeologists contesting the limitations of the materialist empiricist position. Yet this emphasis on text may be countered by the stress laid on drawing, mapping and photography during the laborious process of documenting a site and its contents. The organisation of material evidence from the past both from excavations and museums takes place through an intensive and highly structured visuality. Drawn grids provide a framework for comprehending both horizontal layers, and the objects they contain. My archaeological drawings accompany the writing to highlight the complexity of visual criteria which form their own systems of visual reference, existing apart from verbal textual analyses. Tactility, the texture of objects, their ‘feel’ and weight is another criterion employed for identification and comparison of wide series of artefacts.

Contemporary archaeologists have applied a theory of analysis of objects and their contexts to modern garbage dumps, to graffiti in the University of Hawaii, and in a notable study, to the comparison of beer cans between Scotland and Scandinavia. The most successful of these studies were able to deduce social and cultural indications from an analysis of the image content and stylistic forms of the material evidence. Two case studies of my own accentuated the value of an archaeological perspective in positioning contemporary work. Taking one tapestry, from the body of work of tapestry weaver Kay Lawrence, the wider meaning and context was drawn out from a detailed consideration of both the materiality of the piece, and the texts to which it referred. An exhibition of a carefully curated but diverse group of objects from craftspeople and artists, Clashing Fragments, was reviewed by imagining such works as artefacts from the same level of a site on an archaeological sorting table. Inferences about our current situation were drawn from signs implicit in the form and content of the pieces.
Artists themselves have reflected on archaeology not only as a way of bringing home the loss of the past but also on the way it has been presented to us by archaeology and anthropology. The self reflexitivity of artists mentioned here, Susan Hiller, Stephen Cox and Joseph Beuys, questions not only the fragmentary objects of the past themselves, but the relationship of the past to the present as a matter to be continually reassessed.

Fieldwork: the sites

At this point the examination of archaeological theory and its relevance to present craft practice shifts to a consideration of the broader impact of the site, and to the understanding of a sense of place which is fundamental to my body of work. Here the ‘data’ is provided by my own letters written from sites in Greece in the late 1960s. These letters were rediscovered during the course of this research, and revealed to me (the young ‘I’ in the letters seemed so distant) that my present involvement with sites in the Illawarra had an early beginning in other ancient sites. The archaeological perceiving eye can hardly be separated from the emotional and aesthetic considerations of the places themselves. I remember these travels through Greece, on my own for the first time as a young adult, as a time of almost visionary intensity. In approaching these Greek sites there was a turbulent coming together of a great amount of scholarly research into the sites from the sparse fragments contained in the Nicholson Museum, and the actual impact of the light, space, depth of vista and detail of colour and fragment in the places themselves. Speaking the Greek language, talking to people in remote villages, allowed me to enter a world simultaneously of the past (an imagined past I reconstructed from my years of study) and the present.

The relationship of people to place in Australia is also guided by my emerging apprehension, through letters and diaries, of an Aboriginal understanding of country during a year spent on Bathurst Island in the Northern Territory. An archaeological analysis of a site reveals only the material remains - of the meal, of the tools that cut the meal and the fire that cooked it. It cannot reveal the other complexities of culture, the stories of ancestors and mythical beings that enhance and illuminate everyday life, the laughter, the dancing, the mourning, the intricate ritual of relationships and belief. Among the Tiwi I discerned a very different perception of humans to country from that provided by my classical training, a perception that may well have been ‘invisible’ to the white settlers of Australia, many of whom arrived here with a comparable ‘classical’ education.
**Tapestry and textiles**

These autobiographical insights into perceptions of place were formed by an archaeological and anthropological grasp of the wider contexts and systems of relationship that underpin human society. Turning from the personal, away from a first person narrative, these contexts are explored in relation to tapestry and textiles, the area of my practice. Having set in place a background of archaeological theory, and a personal position, the historical beginnings of tapestry and textiles as part of the dawning crafts movement in Australia are brought into focus in the extensive third part of this document. What is of great importance for current practice in these areas is a recognition of the very different originating impetus of these two areas.

As in contemporary archaeological investigations into common objects (such as beer cans) a consideration of the texts surrounding the actual objects, can bring light on the meaning held by them. Such texts are provided by early issues of *Craft Australia*, and the *Australian Handweavers and Spinners Journal*, as well as catalogues of exhibitions. The emergence of an expressive and textural textile art in the 1970s is accompanied by numerous artists’ and critics’ statements about their understanding of the work within the momentum of this textile revolution. The written articles which have been examined, and the form of the work itself make certain conclusions very clear. Material - jute, sisal, wool - was perceived by these artists as a content in itself that could express the overwhelming tactility of form that brought to mind an intensely corporeal realm. Slits in woven fabric, crevices, bulges, cascades of falling thread, stressed an intuitive alignment to instinct and experiment rather than intellect and tradition. I have positioned this intuitive emphasis within a paradigm set out by Julia Kristeva, following Jacques Lacan. The prelinguistic world of the subject is a world of the senses, a world before words, a world of touch, smell, sensation. This is the area that Julia Kristeva has referred to as the ‘semiotic’, an area, she posits, that periodically overflows into avant-garde art practice. The great influence of artists from America and central Europe, such as Sheila Hicks, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Ritzi and Peter Jacobi changed the domestic orientation of textiles, by emphasising a vast scale and expressive materiality unconnected to traditional textile arts.

At the same time feminism in Australia gave rise to an exploration of this hitherto disregarded feminine area of domestic textiles, in such exhibitions as *The D'Oyley Show* and Vivienne Binns’ *Mothers Memories, Other’s Memories*. Fibre artists,
like many craftspeople of the 1970s, did not always position themselves within the
domain of the feminist rediscovery of the hidden histories of textiles documented
by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, but preferred to see the new fibrous
materiality as gender neutral, despite its constant references to the sensual maternal
body.

Fibre artists of the time perceived that theirs was a language of materiality rooted in
touch, in an acute awareness of texture and the qualities of an inarticulate softness,
hairiness, or malleability. This art reflected a tactile, haptic unconsciousness that
drew on the first experiences of the developing senses. Its revolutionary character
transgressed the bounds of the tasteful to evoke a corporeal world very distinct
from the ‘symbolic’ ambience of tapestry, which endeavoured to keep the
‘unconscious’ resonances of its textile origins at bay. Instead of the irrational world
of touch, the sense of sight is privileged to allow tapestry to be allied to the Fine
Art of painting and hung in great buildings as emblems of status, rather than
acknowledging any allegiance to the maternal, prelinguistic realm of the ‘semiotic’.

Compared to the rise of textiles in Australia, the establishment of tapestry is allied
to government patronage and workshops, and to interpreting the work of ‘great’
artists, usually male painters. Although tapestry existed in Australia before the
establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in 1976, it was a loosely defined
 technique that was allied to the textile movement. For textile artists an
understanding of the structure of the weave was integral to form and content, and
so, rather than working from a drawn cartoon, individual tapestry weavers within
the burgeoning textile movement applied an ‘intuitive’ approach to materials.

By contrast, the weavers of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop were rigorously
trained in traditional European techniques which were passionately retained in the
face of all the technical excesses of the fibre artists. The flat surfaced technique
with its ritualised methods of joining, of mixing colours, of subtle woven
interpretations of the painted and drawn image was seen by its protagonists as
allied to ‘Fine Art’. For all these reasons, I have taken tapestry as emblematic of a
‘symbolic’ order to follow again Julia Kristeva’s model of the formation of the
subject. The ‘symbolic’ order is imbued with the acquisition of language and the
order of institutions, and associated with the realm of the father, rather than the
‘unspeakable’ sphere of the maternal body. Tapestry upheld patriarchal traditions,
and insisted on the traditional ‘language’ of technique. The artists and patrons
associated with tapestry workshops enhanced the status of governing bodies, and the power of individuals within the state. Tapestries have decorated the rooms of state with myths and histories which gave resonance and depth to the status quo of Europe. Unlike the transgressive, revolutionary character of fibre art, tapestry was intrinsically conservative in its insistence on traditional modes. Its appearance at this moment in the crafts movement in Australia offered a balance to the momentum of contemporary art practice as it veered away from the object to ideas of conceptual art and a minimal materiality. Like fibre art of the 1970s, tapestry was in no way identified with the growing feminist movement despite the fact that most weavers were women. Government patrons, critics, and the image makers who provided the designs for interpretation in the Victorian Tapestry Workshop were predominantly male.

Contemporary artists negotiating the often contradictory fields of tapestry, textiles and feminism are Narelle Jubelin28 and Tass Mavrogordato29, among others. The issues of translation, reproduction and appropriation are central in coming to terms with rapid media images. Critical reception of tapestry has been distorted by modernist ideas that emphasise spontaneity, ‘originality’ and individuality, all concepts that are not implicit within tapestry practice.

Because of deeply held views about the place of both tapestry and textiles, exhibition and curatorship has been held within specific tapestry and textile contexts. The most renowned of these is the Lausanne Biennial in Switzerland, set up to be a forum for tapestry in 1962, but now dedicated to textile art which in fact excludes traditional tapestry practice. The Tamworth Textile Biennial in New South Wales has also been a substantial and influential exhibition arena. Once again, there is a recent tendency for traditional craft disciplines in the Tamworth Biennial to be replaced by conceptual ideas of ‘bricolage’ and rudimentary techniques from the artworld. This tendency has been countered by artist initiatives from textile and tapestry practitioners to organise exhibitions of conceptually serious and technically highly developed work. Such an initiative has been the Goulburn Regional Gallery’s exhibition Discerning Textiles30 touring New South Wales in 1993 and 1994. Tapestry practitioners have also come together to curate Texts from the edge: tapestry and identity in Australia at the Jam Factory in Adelaide in 1994.

I have been closely involved as practitioner, writer and curator in these two exhibitions. The historical divisions between textiles and tapestry, usefully described through the metaphor of ‘semiotic’ and ‘symbolic’, can be used in
addressing the much more diffuse and conceptually sophisticated forms of current practice. Individual tapestry weavers are becoming acutely aware of the 'semiotic' overtones of the medium, and its gendered history, while textile practitioners have become conscious of 'symbolic' arenas of history and ideas that can extend the significance of the crafted textile. The examination of the areas of textiles and tapestry presented in this study is a significant tool in comprehending the shape of contemporary practice. The development of a critical language in interrogating these fundamental craft disciplines is relevant in giving insight into the broader implications of the Australian artworld.

**Documentation of exhibitions: ‘Archaeologies’ and ‘Unwritten country’**

The fourth section of this writing brings together the diverse strands of this thesis in considering the tapestries, drawings and paintings in the two exhibitions *Archaeologies* and *Unwritten Country*. This body of work provides the focus for bringing together archaeology, Aboriginality and tapestry, and its significance is located in the cross referencing between these disciplines.

Rather than a sequential description, I have structured this section as if my own work were part of an archaeological analysis, with context, provenance, images, medium, form, and collections as headings. The background to this body of work I have located within my maternal ancestors who were such consummate embroiderers and knitters. In considering a feminine sense of space, and a particular alignment to nature I have included writings from Dorothy Wordsworth, as a parallel to my own sense of self in my long years in rural Australia observing the bush. Continuing this preoccupation with place are the sites of the Illawarra coast, long abandoned by their original inhabitants and disregarded by contemporary coast dwellers. Bellambi and Murramarang have been described in the archaeological literature, and their scattered fragments by the sea also evoked for me the living beach camps I had known in Bathurst Island. Converting archaeological drawing to large scale works could convey the particularity of these sites in grids that also called to mind the large cartoons I had used for tapestry weaving.

The fragments of the site seemed to have analogies with the long tradition of still life, ‘natura morta’. Norman Bryson’s examination of the significance of classical still life painting in Pompeii, particularly his investigation of ‘rhopography’, the
painting of the disregarded and unvalued object, added to the meaning of the fragments I depicted. Contemplating the logic of the grid superimposed on the site brought me back to the origins of logic in the classical world. Classical collections such as that of the Nicholson Museum in Sydney and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra had been brought to Australia from the Mediterranean and now form part of our history and identity. Juxtaposing the classical with ancient Aboriginal sites, and thinking about the journeys of migration of both my family and tapestry itself, resulted in the body of work *Unwritten Country*. The time-consuming, slowly made tapestry fragments are placed within the time ridden sites of both Australia and the Mediterranean. The medium of tapestry brings its own associations, its ‘symbolic’ aura to the disregarded sites imaged through drawing. This body of work is important because of its reflection of lesser known Australian histories of women, of Aboriginal people, and of museum collections within a cross-disciplinary field.

The significance of the written thesis lies in the clarification of contemporary craft and art practice through the discipline of archaeology. It also entails an understanding of recent developments in archaeological theory which comprise familiar elements in the wider visual art field, particularly semiotics, psychoanalysis and feminism. A central finding of this study has been the complexity of the areas of tapestry and textiles within current art practice and their association with what I have described as ‘semiotic’ and ‘symbolic’ arenas. Craft writing in Australia can benefit from a theoretical focus that is sympathetic to the very artefactual character of craft through a critical discourse derived from archaeology. Given the absence of critical writing in the crafts until recently this theoretical detailing of textiles and tapestry can fill a significant gap in the field. By elucidating these ‘marginal’ areas and their relationship to each other, the wider art domain can also be illumined.


18 Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, ‘Social Values, Social Constraints and


PART I

THE CONTEXT OF ARCHAEOLOGY

CHAPTER 1: ARCHAEOLOGY AND SELF

CHAPTER 2: ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PRESENT

CHAPTER 3: ARCHAEOLOGY AND TAPESTRY
CHAPTER I

ARCHAEOLOGY AND SELF

When I first came into the Doctor of Creative Arts program in 1990 I felt that I must re-investigate the tenets of archaeology in relation to my own art practice, and more widely. I began to re-read archaeological theory, while simultaneously investigating readings in contemporary art, such as the French semiotic, post-structuralist and feminist writers. As artist-in-residence at the School of Creative Arts in 1989 I considered the intriguing relationship of archaeology to postmodernism. I gave a lecture on the topic and also made layered drawings which contained elements collaged from archaeological drawings made in museums and on sites in Europe many years before. These connections between the archaeological discipline of placing objects in a context, and ways of contextualising contemporary art or craft objects, seemed a fertile area for study, both as a maker and as a writer.

In January 1990 I attended a Humanities Research Council Conference in Canberra that accompanied the exhibition Civilization from the British Museum at the Australian National Gallery. The terms in which ancient art were discussed, by the very scholars who had taught me a generation earlier, seemed (with a few exceptions) to have remained substantially in the frameworks that had seemed so limiting to me as a student, but which now had the charm of a historic epoch. I was impressed and amazed that the reconstruction of the elusive fragments of the Monument of Halicarnassos, like some rare marsupial, was still under discussion, with a slightly different emphasis. In some ways it was wonderful that this precise scholarly world remained so untouched by the momentum of changing societies, and I experienced again the poignant fascination of the ancient Mediterranean past, so familiar and yet strange because unvisited by me for so many years. Listening to all these scholars, I perceived the ancient cities as a safe refuge from the ravages of the present, and although fragmentary and mysterious the pain of the past can become distilled through being so distanced, and is somehow completed and controlled by the archaeological systems imposed on it.

Greek Archaic votive offerings and fragments, Nicholson Museum
Despite the attraction to the mute and fragmentary objects and the poetry of ancient sites, I felt that my decision to be an artist, rather than describe minutely the traces and residues of past cultures, had been a risky but infinitely worthwhile choice of direction. I began to realise that I needed to reconcile that long training in archaeology with my present practice as an artist. I needed to draw on the intricacy of archaeological image and forms of representation through an imaginative juxtaposition with the present. I used to think while working in museums numbering and drawing objects - what might these objects say if given permission to speak? As an artist, I could give permission, could bring another imaginative context to counteract the fixed and silent contexts of the past. As a writer, I could simulate archaeological and anthropological approaches to put contemporary practice in a fresh light.

These perceptions were heightened at a conference in Orange soon after Civilization, called Alchemy and Artefact. In a workshop we were asked to evaluate several single and unrelated paintings from the gallery collection. It suddenly became clear to me, that because of my training in archaeological/anthropological systems of observation and categorisation, that evaluating the paintings in personal, aesthetic terms had little relevance - no longer do we have 'absolute' values of aesthetics and technique. I could not make sense of these works without reference to a whole category of other works, to placing them in context, to constructing the circumstances in which they were produced - the gender of the artist, the social situation, and the 'myths' of the time. Aesthetics becomes just another factor to be considered when looking at the overall meaning of the work. Meaning is constructed by a host of other elements, rather than just the intention of the artist, who really does reflect his/her unconscious assumptions and set of social circumstances.
The very possibility of taking up a study which encompasses artworks based on a 'fictional' meditation of archaeological methods of relating to the past is due to the opening up of concepts across disciplines, an acceptance, even an encouragement of cross-disciplinarity. The idea of the 'inter-textuality' of the subject allows, too, the crossing of former boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction', which permits 'archaeology' and 'art' to merge in previously unimagined ways.

The complexity of this thesis derives from the use of the term 'archaeology' to refer to both a theoretical structure in writing about contemporary arts/craft practice, and also the subject of my own imaginative tapestry/drawing practice. The forms and systems of archaeology - the technical drawings, sections, grids - have become displaced into tapestry and drawing.

The ideas underlying the process of archaeology have become implicated in my writing about contemporary arts practice. Archaeology functions as a theoretical
approach in my discussion of tapestry and textiles in Australia, but also as a metaphor, the self as site, in my arts practice. Diaries give evidence for this other reflection:

Notebook 4, 2 February 1991
I am indelibly imprinted with the ancient objects in museums that I have drawn and catalogued so slowly. The way Italian metaphysical painters digest their overwhelming past must be relevant to me. I would like an art that is subtly contradictory, disturbing, an art that reflects the layers of the personality, the dark light, the grotesque. The dreamworld I suffer from, the objects I live amongst, this relationship with the children which goes beyond the personal is like that moving fractal image from the huge computer seen in Canberra. One’s own spiral, so large and intense and difficult to oneself is just a tiny blimp on the huge spiral of society, which is yet formed entirely by those tiny blimps whose individual spirals reflect and construct the total form. It may follow that the courage to be intensely personal is in a sense the courage to reveal society. I hide whole areas of the personal, and only reveal ‘beauty’, yet my own innate images are not beautiful but alarming. The archaeologist cannot control what is revealed - the glimpse of a classical wholeness that has seduced centuries of European imagination may be the desired outcome of an excavation, but the actual revelation of the different strata of a site may unearth the destruction of a city, famine, unburied bodies and desolation. To attempt to ‘dig oneself up’ uncovers the terror of what might be found, unconventional hatreds, loves and lusts - one only discloses the desired, ordered personality.

Nicholson Museum, 1947, (University of Sydney Archives), showing plaster cast of Laocoon, and a portrait of Sir Charles Nicholson, together with genuine Egyptian sculpture and the Roman copy of Praxiteles’ Hermes
There are two voices threading through this thesis: one gives the informative and theoretical background to archaeology and contemporary arts practice, and the other is the personal voice. This personal voice mediates between intellect and practice, between conscious knowledge and the unconscious shiftings of art practice, rather like what Shari Benstock calls

an inner seam, a space between 'inside' and 'outside'.

In this chapter I will first outline the intentions of archaeology as I understood it on excavations and in museums from 1962-1973.

The more recent developments in approaching material culture, known as the 'post-processual' archaeology parallel developments in 'postmodern' art theory. Similarly, as the 'post' in postmodernism indicates a continuing connection with modernism, contemporary archaeology, no matter how influenced by ideas of language and the pervasiveness of text, still retains an allegiance to the 'process' of scientific excavation and analysis. Investigations into contemporary culture using a post-processual approach will be the subject of the next chapter.
Background to mid twentieth century archaeology

Archaeology grew out of the systematic and descriptive studies of antiquities in Europe in the late eighteenth century, with a bias towards art objects that could be aligned to classical or Biblical sources. After the publication of the works of Charles Darwin around 1860, excavations began to be orientated to discover not only precious objects but also the social evolution of humanity, in prehistoric and peripheral societies as well as the Greek and Roman world.

At the University of Sydney the Nicholson Museum in the Department of Archaeology houses a collection of antiquities from Egypt, Turkey, Greece and Italy which was donated in 1860 by Sir Charles Nicholson, the first Vice-Chancellor of the University. In 1962 the Nicholson Museum, housed in the old Gothic quadrangle, was just as it had been since the collection was assembled.

Notebook, July 1991
When I was a student of archaeology, I was given a task - almost as girls are given in fairy stories. This was to sort, catalogue and put in context a motley and unprovenanced collection of Mediterranean antiquities donated to Sydney University by a benefactor of the 1860s. I spent long hours in the Nicholson Museum, Department of Archaeology, poring through old cardboard boxes with yellowing labels written in a flowing Victorian script. After searching through volumes of excavation reports, what great satisfaction it was to find the exact analogy to identify and position the fragments in a particular time and place. Some boxes had been forgotten in storage: sculptured marble fragments of a 3rd century Roman sarcophagus were found in a crate stored for half a century in an old pub in Chippendale.

The Nicholson Museum had dark stone walls, Gothic arched windows, heavy wooden cases and a great crowd of peculiar objects. An avenue of white plaster deities - Aphrodite, Hermes, Laocoon - led up to The Dying Gaul under the window, and below them were innumerable gravestones inscribed in Greek and Latin.
Many of the inscriptions referred to individuals who died very young. Parts of mummies were carefully labelled in bell jars. The aesthetic was that of a Victorian drawing room, jumbled, detailed, full of memorabilia with overtones of an obsession with death. The feeling was one of fascination with the transience of once monumental glories, reminiscent of Shelley’s *Ozymandias* which I had liked so much as a child, in Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shatter’d visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
Tell that the sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamp’d on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mock’d them and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works ye Mighty and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

This assortment of objects expresses the curiosity of the nineteenth century collector in all aspects of the evolution of European art, and the display in the old Nicholson Museum was a jumble of model reconstructions and ‘real’ antiquities. The style of the display was like a Victorian drawing room, a true showcase for antique curiosities. In Australia such a collection from the classical past could
authenticate the claims to civilization of the new University in a new country with fresh memories of a convict population.

This collection was entirely edited and one could say, re-invented by the very different prerogatives of the ‘new’ archaeology emerging in the 1950s. A great momentum and excitement was given to post-war archaeology in Britain by Mortimer Wheeler, Stuart Piggott, the Australian Vere Gordon Childe and many others, and these redefined the parameter of archaeological theory and practice, bringing rigour and order to the excavation and description of sites and the analysis and description of the objects found in them. As a student of archaeology I was employed in the middle 1960s in recataloguing and putting on display another interpretation of the same past as that of the original Nicholson Museum. My task was to make sense of the past through the organisation of this often arbitrary collection of artefacts accumulated in the 1850s and 60s. Sir Charles Nicholson, in his desire to establish a teaching collection had had a very different concept of the past from that of the scientific, factual attitudes of the 1960s.

The antiquarian past of the great Victorian patriarchs had to be reassessed by the confident present, as a past full of supposition and literary reconstructions.

Notebook, July 1991

The Museum is a very silent place to work, brilliantly and artificially lit, locked against the outside world. I sit at a table with a tray of objects: fragments of pots, bits of figurines or stone. They have come from nineteenth century excavations
with insufficient documentation, and I turn the pages of heavy old excavation reports in French, German, Italian, to find the exact analogy, a clue to the context that will give these pieces meaning to this time. I hold the objects day after day, looking for minute characteristics - they feel so here and now. I could identify a pottery fragment from its very fabric and texture - the soapy feel of Etruscan bucchero, the charcoal roughness of a cinerary urn, the sharp clean red of Roman ware. The poetry of those fragmentary objects remains with me still - a votive lead figurine, a terracotta head, a potsherd painted with a dancing leg, a small glass tear bottle.

The 'new' past of the 1960s was grounded in a minute examination of the actual material evidence from carefully excavated sites, using every scientific device to avoid overt subjectivity in the interpretation of evidence. The Victorian past was dealt with, dismantled. Fakes and reconstructions were banished. The plaster casts seemed to belong to an irrelevant artistic past to a contemporary artworld that was enchanted by Abstract Expressionism, where John Olsen was making non-representational yellow paintings on ceilings. The plaster casts were dispersed to high schools all over Sydney, where they were slowly vandalised and disappeared. The gravestones were relegated to the storeroom, together with the mummified sections of bodies. The Gothic interior was covered over, lined with modernist white, airconditioned, and fluorescent light was installed to replace the dimness and clutter of the previous collection. Sequences of pottery fragments that had no part in the Victorian display were brought from the storeroom as part of the great line of chronological evidence stretching back to Neolithic Europe and the Middle East.
Recent theory in archaeology, such as that put forward by Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, would suggest that the new scientific Nicholson Museum reflected not the past, but a particular 'scientific' view of the past by a present which was no more truly 'objective' than the fictional reconstructions and restorations of the Victorian past which it replaced. The Museum itself can be regarded as an artefact which changes with the different needs of its history. The objects in the collection have acquired another history, apart from the original one in their own time and place. They have been transported to Australia to authenticate the classical past as a model for the new country, and by being there at such an early period, become themselves embroiled in that history.

Archaeology, it was said at this time, could be defined as the study and historical interpretation of all the material remains of past cultures, in order to reconstruct the different stages of material civilizations since earliest times. Works of art are categorised as artefacts and are considered as historical documents, not in pure aesthetic terms, but in terms of their context within the site. The subjectivity of present day observers applying twentieth century 'norms' of judgment has been a constant preoccupation of archaeologists across the philosophical spectrum.

The recognition of the difficulty of 'objectivity' in those digging up the past, still so much under discussion in 1994, was evident to Flinders Petrie, the British archaeologist, as early as 1904:

The results of the excavation are directly dependant on the personality of the excavator - a man (sic) finds what he looks for, or at least, does not find anything that he does not look for.
The likelihood of bias in interpretation from the present to the past was a constant undercurrent in the 1960s - though bias was usually considered in terms of stylistic judgment, not in fundamental terms of gender or race. The danger in considering past art by the standards of the twentieth century was apparent to Vincent Megaw writing in 1970:

Twentieth century aesthetics applied to ancient art forms may all too easily involve us in the concept of 'art for art's sake'... which can only mean art divorced from its social and historical context, which may give us individual satisfaction, but this satisfaction must necessarily be totally different from the mystical and probably magical circumstances under which (the ancient art forms) may have been produced.7

The relationship of archaeology to science is always emphasised at this time, yet the individual perception of the archaeologist is also recognized as being fundamental in interpretation. Mortimer Wheeler in 1954 stresses the multi-disciplinary character of archaeology across the natural sciences (as yet, cross-disciplinary contact with literary theory, or sociology, would have been unimaginable):
Archaeology is increasingly dependent on a multitude of sciences, and is itself increasingly adopting the methodology of a natural science, drawing upon physics, chemistry, geology, botany ... It is also perhaps an art, integrating scientifically observed and dissected phenomena relating to man (sic).... The ultimate appeal across the ages is from mind to sentient mind. The life of the past and the present are diverse but indivisible.... Too often we dig up mere things, unrepentantly forgetful that our proper aim is to dig up people.8

The actual systematic methods of excavation have developed with the systematic development of archaeology. In the nineteenth century Heinrich Schliemann had set out to prove the historic truth of Homer, and had only tentatively discovered the principles of stratigraphic excavation as he uncovered the layers of his sites. Having a particular period in mind, he was not always tolerant of the less interesting levels of the ancient mounds of Troy and Mycenae.10

In reaction to this sort of enthusiasm, Mortimer Wheeler in the 1950s described the core principle of excavation as the understanding of the vertical and horizontal stratification of the site with a sensitive and diagrammatic representation of each minute variation in soil texture and contents as the various levels of the site are unearthed. Each level or period may be horizontally excavated over a greater area,
depending on the discrimination of the archaeologist, but vertical stratifications give an essential key to the chronological sequence and history of events.\textsuperscript{11}

To describe the process of excavation: in many cases the site is first photographed from the air, to determine more clearly the outline of the main buildings, fortifications, etc. A grid is placed over that part of the site to be excavated, and each section of the grid excavated with detailed levels recorded. Each object as it is found is labelled with its level and is described by its material, form, technique and chronology, if known. As the material from the site is closely studied, comparative sequences of stone, pottery and metal from other related sites are brought in for analysis. Precise and objective drawings to scale are made of significant objects, showing the section, plan, and actual appearance. Photography is an essential tool for documentation at all stages.

The most difficult site to grid that I worked on was an underwater excavation of a Roman shipwreck at Torre del Sgarratto in South Italy near Taranto. Gridding the sea presents quite new challenges - in this case we used the arbitrary grid of

![Stone by stone plan of buildings at Zagora, showing site grid, 7th - 8th century B.C. University of Sydney excavation 1967]
uncarved marble sarcophagi as they lay on the sand as permanent points of reference and alignment.

Chronology is a complex subject, and intricate methods of estimating time frames place sites in a mesh of sequences and discontinuities. A linear view of human development is hardly possible as different societies develop in different ways, and highly literate, technologically complex societies—such as Rome—may exist beside cultures still at a prehistoric level technologically—such as Celts and Scythians. In any archaeological site many chronological layers may be seen at once. In a long inhabited site, such as Lefkandi in Euboea in Greece, a deep eight metre section through the mound showed the layers of successive towns from Iron Age Greece (800 B.C.) through Archaic, Classical, Roman, Byzantine and Medieval dwellings. At any one point there may be an overlapping of cultures and influences.

In the 1970s the mathematical and statistical paradigm was forefront in the analysis of sites and their contents, and the growing capacity of computers was seen as a way of categorising and comparing a vast array of objects across sites. ‘Spatial analysis’, derived from geography, and ‘ethnobotany’, the analysis of ancient plant
remains within sites also made their appearance at this time. Growing sophistication in scientific means of dating, a more precise radio carbon dating, and lately, techniques for the dating of organic fragments through the analysis of their genetic content, have extended knowledge about the great time span of human habitation, particularly in Australia. This scientific emphasis has been increasingly debated, for, as in other areas of art, literature and history, humanist 'enlightenment' positions have been seen to be based so often on subjective and unconscious inferences about the superiority of the male viewpoint over the female, of upper class over lower class, of white European over Asian, African and all indigenous peoples.

At the conference *Alchemy and Artefact* in Orange in 1990 I talked to Amareswar Galla, an archaeologist of impressive scholarship from the Australian National University. His background as a Buddhist from South India, and his knowledge of the Sanskrit histories of India, as well as his training with Jean Paul Sartre in Paris, gave him a clear understanding that Europe was not the primary source of knowledge, that there could be a completely different reading to Australian archaeology if one deducted the unconscious bias of western European thought. I became aware that the British school of archaeology I had trained in could be making unknowingly Eurocentric and possibly phallocentric readings of material which were in no sense absolute. The same data from an excavation examined by an archaeologist with a brown skin, trained in India in Sanskrit, in a matriarchy, may take on a completely different meaning.
Structuralist and Post-Structuralist influences

Stuart Piggott wrote in 1965 that the work of the archaeologist was

to devise some hypothesis that will account for the observed phenomena - in scientific language, he will construct a model, a mental creation expressing the relationships and arrangements which will best account for all the observations he has made.

This position may be compared to that of Claude Levi-Strauss, writing at the same time about the structures of relationships within an anthropological context. And yet despite Piggott’s talk of ‘models and relationships’, the ‘new’ archaeology which he supported resisted the inferences regarding culture that are drawn from structural and post-structural analyses of language.

Contemporary archaeology in the 1990s is as divided as the field of art theory, with splits between the extremes of an entirely positivist, empirical stance derived from the so-called ‘New’ archaeology, and a ‘Post-processual’ position which sees the past as a text, to be deciphered in an endlessly referential system of associations. In their extensive analysis, and critique, of past and present archaeological theory Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley describe science as the key word for understanding the ‘New’ Archaeology:

Why did the majority of archaeologists want to don the antiseptic white coat? This would seem to involve the acceptance of the myth of the supremacy of science as the ultimate mode of human understanding, the scientist as an heroic figure dispelling myths with an incisive rationality.
They deny that the aims of this empirical archaeology are valid, as the search for scientific objectivity must be a futile one. They show through a long discussion that there can be no ‘objective’ link between patterning perceived in material culture and processes which produced that patterning. One of the main aims of archaeologists is to produce texts, to publish the ‘factual’ findings based on surveys, excavations, and analysis of finds. Objects are made understandable by being transferred into words, and so these texts should be looked at through the same processes as found in literary criticism. Archaeological texts, they point out, select from the past what is memorable or important to the values of the present.

So often (the confrontation with the past) is not based on difference. Resurrecting the forgotten requires us to suspend our values, treat them not as universals but as contingent, historical, open to change. The authority of archaeology, the knowledge it produces is not to be found in the past but in the direction of its transformative practice. The truth is not to be found in history; history is to found in the truth.16

This ‘Post-processual’ (postmodern) archaeology of Shanks and Tilley, which emphasises the textual production of archaeologists as a basis to reviewing theoretical, if hidden assumptions, is influenced by the extensive writings of French theorists of culture and language. Where does this emphasis on language as the principal means of interpreting a culture come from?

Following on from the earlier work of French and Swiss linguists, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, in the late 1950s and 1960s took language as the most fundamental structure of human reality which could be used as a way of observing the structures of entire fields of social behaviour, such as art, religion, kinship, exchange, which in fact may themselves be better understood as languages. A culture comes to terms with nature by means of encoding through language. In other words, language, as humanity’s distinguishing feature is

at once the prototype of the cultural phenomenon whereby all forms of social life are established and perpetuated.17

The study of language, semiotics or semiology, is made up of the study of signs which words indicate to express ideas. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure first used the terms ‘signified’ and ‘signifier’ to express the idea of how a concept or ‘signified’ - e.g. ‘book’- is related to the actual sound-image of ‘book’ - the ‘signifier’, to form a linguistic unit, or ‘sign’. Such linguistic signs make up a
language. Within each language words may have close associations to other words not spoken, seen as it were to be related ‘vertically’ or even poetically to these words. Also, because language inevitably forms a sequence, there is a ‘horizontal’ relationship between words which enable them to be precisely understood. Our own particular language, according to the American linguist Edward Sapir writing in 1949, predisposes us to see and hear and otherwise experience the world in very different ways:

> the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language patterns of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.18

This movement, known as ‘structuralism’, in the mid twentieth century involved a different perception of the world from the nineteenth century one, where nature is understood as a multitude of independently existing objects which can be listed and classified. In the structuralist discipline, the perceiver’s method of perceiving can be shown to affect what is perceived. Total ‘objectivity’, so desired by ‘scientific’ archaeologists in the mid twentieth century, is not possible. Because the observer is bound to create something of what she/he observes, the relationship we make between things becomes as important as the things themselves. It is the relationship between the various structures of language (phonemes), between seemingly independently existing concrete objects, which actually determine their nature. Thus, the full meaning of an object or experience cannot be understood unless it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part. Anthropologists’ (and archaeologists’) concerns must therefore lie with the unconscious foundations which underlie the ‘language’ of the whole culture, the relationships between the structures of myths and kinship on which all social life rests. Terence Hawkes discusses structuralism’s discoveries as relevant to wider cultural theory in western societies:

> Structuralism reveals to us, particularly in its account of the nature of myth, the confirming, supportive, problem solving nature of all art. It thus strengthens the notion that art acts as a mediating, moulding force in society rather than as an agency which merely reflects or records.19

What is useful for archaeologists involved in the understanding of objects and their contexts, is that it is the relationship between those objects that must somehow be unravelled. The emphasis in recent contextual archaeology is therefore on seeing objects both as indicating ‘residues of human behaviour’20, and also as active
agents in constituting human relationships. This emphasis on objects as emblems of relationship within societies was absent from the classical archaeology I studied, despite the existence of a rich literature.

A current combination of anthropological understanding of culture as 'a system of shared meanings' and of an archaeological analysis of data is seen, for example in Paul Tacon's analysis of the morphology of stone tools across an ancient Aboriginal community where living societies could provide some evidence on a possible meaning of the different materials used. Much of this is related to ideas about power: the power of the Ancestral Beings who created the landscape; the power and properties of stone as a substance, especially quartz and quartzite; the power of initiated males who made, used and controlled access to stone tools. Quartzite was believed to be the petrified bones of ancestors, so tools of this substance, even though more brittle than other stones, would be especially powerful and effective pieces. Functionalist analysis could not have identified why there was a sudden change in material to quartzite but evidence from comparable living communities indicated that sudden changes in tool form and manufacture referred definitely to social, symbolic and aesthetic changes in the needs of the toolmakers.

For a graduate of Classical Archaeology at the University of Sydney in 1967, the recent structuralist discoveries of the relationships between objects, myths, and human communities, were considered inappropriate to the methodology which I was taught with such thoroughness. The stone tool analysis cited above would not have been possible. Any connection to Anthropology and the study of 'primitive' peoples was inconceivable in the classical arena. I remember the frustration I felt in not being able to impute the slightest meaning to an object, not being able to draw on the considerable body of classical literature to understand the broad psychological and symbolic context in which the vases I classified and identified might have existed. I was constantly reminded that the proper study of archaeology was just the 'material evidence' of the past, with only concrete and specific references from ancient texts permitted, and actual physical contexts with the site through section and grid attested. Any attempt to glimpse the web of meaning that must once have surrounded these artefacts in their own time (as we know from the extensive studies done in anthropological fieldwork) was considered inappropriate. Yet despite my frustrations with what I felt to be the limitations of archaeology I realise that my experience of understanding art objects through a minute attention not only to actual style and manufacture, but also to the
whole context of known sites, and the assemblage of comparable objects found in them profoundly affected my subsequent approach to contemporary art.

When I came to study the issues of postmodernism it was instantly clear that the archaeology I knew so well offered many points of comparison - the emphasis on wide social context, on the role of the viewer/archaeologist in assigning meaning, the alignment to grids, layers and fragments. It seemed to me, that even with the strenuous critiques of 'positivist attitudes' the actual postmodern studies of sites and artefacts (some of which are discussed below) do still rest on a firm foundation of:

empirical data collection, rigorous data description, and the analysis of all potentially significant associations between artefacts, ecofacts, and structures and their stratigraphical, cultural, and ecological contexts.²⁶

In comparison to the empiricist archaeology of the 1960s the emphasis on relationships and language structures which form cultural meaning in all its ramifications allows 'post-processual' archaeology to offer layered insights to contemporary material culture, as I shall examine in the next chapter. I observe that this is the third major re-alignment in archaeology that I have known - as a child I knew the Victorian clutter of the early Nicholson Museum, as a student I helped transform this mass of representations to a modernist order based on scientific principles, and now the consideration of archaeology as text reopens the literary allegiances of the nineteenth century. In this chapter I have reviewed the grounding of archaeology. In my work as an artist I see a smoky reflection of the empirical archaeologist who documents and records the site, who is constantly intrigued by what is actually there, by the odd juxtapositions of appearances and contexts. From the dual perspective of an artist/archaeologist I have applied such ideas of 'empirical data collection' to the unconscious, documenting and taking note of night terrors, of repetitive dreams and persistent images. The possibility of finding a join, a link amongst the multiple fragments of the self is as alluring as the tantalisingly incomplete images on the scattered potsherds of the archaeological store room table.

Can a new emphasis on the 'fictional' in archaeology redress the lack I felt in my student days? This lack of poetic extension led me to abandon the cataloguing of ancient objects in order to invent my own. The next aspect to be considered in this study is archaeology in its most recent guise, in relation to contemporary culture.
13 Texts of this time used ‘man’ and ‘he’ to speak for humanity. Current practice finds this gendering unsound, but I will quote the texts of this time without further comment on this usage. The unconscious assumptions of male dominance were implicit in the archaeology of this period.
19 Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, p. 56.

23 Alexander Cambitoglou, J. J. Coulton, Judy Birmingham and J. R. Green, *Zagora 1*, figure 1V.

24 The present professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Sydney, Professor Richard Green, assures me that such literary evidence is fully attended to in the 1990s.

25 For example, the extensive study of the meanings of cloth in Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (eds), *Cloth and Human Experience*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1989.

CHAPTER 2

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PRESENT

We are very knowing. We know all sorts of things, too, about how there isn’t a
unitary ego - how we are made up of conflicting, interacting, systems of things ....
Roland had learnt to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing place for a number of
systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his ‘self’ as an illusion,
to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message network of
various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language forms and hormones...
A.S. Byatt, Possession

This description of a young man of the 1980s in A.S. Byatt’s novel underlines the
change in educational assumptions over a generation. When I was a student the
‘systems of things’ were apparently highly organised and clearly defined as
separate disciplines, the result of an increasingly rational approach to the material
evidence of the past. Since that time, investigations into the nature of language, and
the pervasive acceptance of semiotics, the deconstructive criticism of feminist
thinkers, literary and psychoanalytic theorists who point up the unconscious
constructs that determine action, have subtly changed the way we think.

This chapter investigates the way language studies have altered the study of the
material past. For an artist, and a woman, the times are favourable for allowing a
creatively imagined past, for permitting previously inapposite conjunctions of time
and place. Archaeological methods applied to the past and derived from both
scientific process and from linguistic paradigms can also be usefully applied to
contemporary textile practice as I shall demonstrate. The language model
investigated through post-processual theory is one that opens up the discipline of
archaeology to pluralities of ‘readings’. At the same time, the universal application
of textuality is countered with a re-investigation of the visuality of archaeology and
the influence of this visuality on contemporary artists.

Ivory head of a lion, Etruscan, 6th
cent. B.C. Museum of Archaeology,
Florence.
The archaeological drawings that accompany this text were made by me in the Gabinetto di Restauro, Museo Archeologico, Florence in 1967-1968 and in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum, London, in 1969-1970. These drawings were reprinted from very old photocopies made in 1968 and 1969 on to archival rice paper. I showed them as a collection of documents of a particular archaeological framework, supposed to be without any ‘subjective’ inferences, in a regulated drawing convention. But all ‘systems of representation’ indicate relationships to objects, as do these meticulously observed drawings. They were exhibited in ‘Archaeologies’ at the Wollongong City Gallery, June/July 1992.

We look with our minds, we draw what we know.

**Material culture studies and language**

The linguistic model of recent archaeological theory allows me to propose a subjective reading, even an artistic reading of sites and objects, that can be as ‘true’ as any other more ‘objective’ reading. So Ian Hodder, under the tenets of post-structuralism, as a post-processualist archaeologist can write:

> The meaning of an object does not lie within that object but within its reading, that is in the link that is made between that object and other objects, words and concepts. As a result the meaning of an object is never static and its reading is never finished. It is always open to new interpretation.2

*Mother goddess ceramic figurine, Anatolian Bronze Age, 15th century B.C. Museum of Archaeology, Florence.*
Contemporary archaeological theory absorbs structuralist concepts of language discussed above and also incorporates the study of semiotics, so influential in the 1970s. The semiotic writings of Roland Barthes are particularly relevant in light of archaeology as he demonstrated how material objects (cars, bread, wine, meat) could be read as ‘texts’ and myths.³ Christopher Tilley as editor of *Reading Material Culture* outlines in his preface what he sees as the four principal features of the new material culture studies, which are all linked by an obsession with language. Because these perceptions also hold true for much art theory of the present I will quote him in full:

The field of material culture studies is one concerned with the relationship between artefacts and social relations irrespective of time and place.... Material culture studies inevitably require a series of refusals. Minimally four of these can be distinguished. First, there is no disciplinary allegiance. Any distinction between matters ‘sociological’, ‘anthropological’, ‘philosophical’, ‘archaeological’ or ‘literary’ is arbitrary and unhelpful. The second is any attempt to separate out philosophical and theoretical questions from the practical business of research. Theory is practice, and all practice is theoretical. Both theory and practice are philosophical in nature. The third is to subscribe to a subject-object dualism, that the investigator can be neatly separated out from that being investigated. The fourth is the reification of categories of analysis into separate spheres such as politics, economics, ideology or more specifically, art, literature, which then desperately have to be linked back together in some way.⁴

A preoccupation with language as the main element in re-constructing archaeology in line with these ‘refusals’ is developed by Bjornar Olsen in the same volume, where she investigates Barthes’ ideas in relation to material culture. Material culture is interpreted as a text to be read: in this discussion ‘object’ = ‘text’ and ‘maker’ = ‘author’. The understanding of the object is displaced from the ‘original’
intention of the maker, or the intention of the culture of which that maker is a part, to the meaning given by the 'reader', the user, the viewer. She argues that in the logocentric tradition (of 'new' archaeology) the meaning is regarded as existing before and outside the object/text. This logocentric tradition tries to establish what the author/maker meant, and not at all what the user/reader understands. For example, Olsen suggests that archaeological monuments such as megaliths should not be regarded as filled with a pre-given meaning, but we should look at them as 'empty sites' open endlessly to different significations. She goes on:

This openness creates a paradigmatic relationship to society, which allows megaliths to establish ties to any historical moment and culture. ... Even if we imagine the megalith builders as rational Cartesian subjects who wanted to translate a certain preconceived meaning into a megalith design, the monument soon became separated from the context of meaning controlled by these 'authors'. It became 'decontextualised' (or liberated) from the historical moment of creation, and committed to new readers and the future. Due to its veritable duration this material text opens itself to infinite readings as it continuously confronts new readers in altered historical situations. Its origin became lost in its own creation. Only the material signifier remains constant, the signifieds are repeatedly created and lost through the historical act of re-reading.5

Rather than try to recover the 'original' object, writes Olsen, we should endeavour to translate the object through our former readings, through relating objects to the huge body of past and present texts/objects. All these texts are gathered together in the person of the reader, who is herself an 'intertextual construct' of many other texts that form her - written, material, memories, emotions. We address 'objective' texts when attempting to understand the ancient artefact, but also translate this material into the 'subjective' history of our own bodies and personal situations. This crossing over of sign systems into one another destroys the idea of the self-referentiality of the object as somehow entire and filled with its own meaning. Olsen reiterates Julia Kristeva's concept of this 'inter-textuality' to describe this diversity of possible meanings.
This discussion has very intriguing connotations for the producer of ‘material artefacts’, that is, the craftsperson/artist. Rather than always assuming that the process of signification comes from meaning to objects, from having an idea of content and then expressing it as a product, Olsen postulates that the makers of the megaliths might have decided how to express, and then found out what it meant. (Many artists would entirely sympathize with this position.) A plurality of readings through succeeding generations of viewers of megaliths can never be fixed into the ‘true’ knowledge, the particular understanding of each viewer is conditioned by historical time and social conditioning.

This brings the discussion to one of the main criticisms of this process of endless textuality. The danger of relativity, where every viewpoint has equal validity, has been addressed by the feminist critique of post-processual archaeology, just as it has by feminists in other fields of cultural studies.6

Feminist archaeology is defined by its political motivation, to recognize and work to change the patriarchal nature of society, archaeology and our perceptions of the past. Roberta Gilchrist summarises the concerns of feminists towards the whole field of archaeology, and the necessity to confront conventional and stereotypical
representations of women’s roles by demonstrating women in the past to have led ‘varied, prominent and above all, valued lives.’ Fundamental to archaeology is the recognition of the principle of gender, defined as the social construction of masculinity and femininity, as instrumental in the ordering of material culture. Gender is central to the interpretation of past societies, as it is to the present, and cannot be considered as an optional issue.

Feminism and post-processual archaeology

Erica Engelstad outlined in 1991 the varying feminist positions in western anthropology and archaeology, and also in the scientific field of primatology. Feminist critiques, parallel to post-processual archaeology, reveal the bias in western scientific ‘objective’ method, through its neglect of any perspective other than an implicitly masculine one. Feminist critiques of science have demonstrated androcentric distortions since the time of Francis Bacon. Yet subjectivity and the necessity of being self-reflexive in theory and practice are an acknowledged part of both post-structuralism and feminism.

Her criticism is that the awareness of the subjectivity of archaeologists as part of a mesh of inter-textuality, does not extend to an awareness of themselves as gendered individuals caught in power structures that may appear ‘neutral’ but are in fact masculine.
In fact, what marks many post-processualist texts, in particular Shanks and Tilley, is lack of understanding of gender as historically, socially and symbolically constituted, ... a lack of attention to gender as a structuring principle.\(^9\)

Shanks and Tilley advocate the writing of many contradictory, politicized archaeologies, resulting from a plurality of ‘readings’ of material culture ‘texts’. All these archaeologies would seem to have equal rights to present cases and equal rights to be believed. But if interpretation of facts can be stories and fiction, if there is no way of separating true and false interpretations of data, then only power will be the agent that determines which archaeology, and which story is heard. Concern with a broadly defined concept of power as being of critical importance in social relations is found in Shanks and Tilley, based on the writing of Michel Foucault, yet this concept of power does not include gender. The misuse of power by those holding it is widespread, as the writings of Edward Said have shown in relation to the policies of the West towards the East, or the misuse of Aboriginal remains in Australian archaeology, mentioned below. ‘Multiple perspectives’ in refuting androcentrism, or Eurocentrism must be carefully placed in the context of social justice. The expanding possibilities, the exciting breaking of boundaries in the ‘archaeology of texts’, opened up for women by the diverse ideas of postmodern theory must be placed within a framework of an acute self awareness and social responsibility in relation to power. Bjornar Olsen wrestles with the relativist dilemma in discussing the post-structuralist reading which rejects

the existence of any external position of certainty, any universal understanding which is beyond society and history or by reference to the authority of any preconceived centre or origin existing before and outside the text. When I argue for a certain reading of the past I have to realize my own position as historically and culturally situated, that my struggle for an alternative view of the past is related to political and social values in a present academic sphere of western capitalist society and has no automatic relevance outside it.\(^{10}\)

The unconsciously logocentric position of past and some present Australian archaeology has been illuminated by the current dispute between Aboriginal

Etruscan fibulae, 6th-7th century B.C. Museum of Archaeology, Florence.
communities and archaeologists who have considered it a ‘right’ to disinter ancient human remains for scientific investigation, without consideration of deeply held Aboriginal beliefs about the status of such bodies, even though they are often fossilized by extreme antiquity. The intrinsic differences in the understanding of time, history, and the relation of the individual to land are some of the implications of this passionate conflict.\textsuperscript{11}

In this overview of the issues in contemporary archaeology I have tried to show how the momentum of current theories has changed the seemingly simple investigation of an object in a museum to an action which is indeed ‘a theoretical crossing-place for a number of systems’, as in A. S. Byatt’s description. The meaning of an object never rests in a particular time and place, is never static, but is continually open to re-interpretation by the changing viewer, as I have shown in the recounting of the changing curatorship of the Nicholson Museum.

Yet, despite the new alignment of archaeology as text, the praxis of archaeology must also consider the visuality of objects and sites as an important element of interpretation. In the next section both textual and visual archaeological approaches will be utilised to examine present material culture.
The archaeology of the present

Have the principles of archaeology been used to investigate contemporary artefacts? William Rathje in 1971 described systematic relationship between material culture and behaviour through investigations of the contents of contemporary garbage dumps, or even behaviour at isolated road ends. (The 'material remains' were too neatly predictable in this case, being beer cans and 'sex-related items'.)\(^1\) The analysis of the record of the contents of modern household garbage turned out to be of great interest to experts in consumer behaviour and to government policy makers. In comparison to ancient garbage dumps, the flow of goods through our communities from context to context has become so swift that the original site or context of an object becomes rapidly obscured. Yet these studies were limited by being purely statistical and empirical, without bringing in added textual material - advertisements, local law, history and socio-economic patterns of settlement which makes the study of contemporary artefacts so complex.

Another fascinating study published in 1982 investigated a group of graffiti in the University of Hawaii\(^2\) through three sets of attributes: the materials and techniques used in the production of the message, the form of the message, and the content of the message. In this study, graffiti are regarded as essentially archaeological in nature, as they are behavioural residues fixed in time and space, and are well fitted

Gold fibula, with ducks and filigree, Etruscan 7th century B.C.
Museum of Archaeology, Florence.
to a structural and textual analysis. 'Not permitted' racial tensions were revealed through this study, which were normally hidden or joked about. This study goes beyond the statistical account of the data in coming to terms with the actual content of the racism of the graffiti - here textual analysis and knowledge of the cultural complexity of the society has greatly added to the careful particularity of the visual documentation.

Yet another ten years on from this, in 1992, in an exhaustive study looking at the design of contemporary beer cans in England and Sweden, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley substantiated their new reading of material culture discussed above. They aim to:

realize the potential of the study of modern material culture as a critical intervention in contemporary society, an intervention with transformative intent...

How can the designs on cans and bottles be explained? Our approach to this problem involves an investigation of the social meanings attributed to alcohol consumption and in particular those connected with beer drinking; we contend that the designs are embedded in the social and symbolic structures of everyday life.¹⁴

Lid of Etruscan funerary urn, 7th-8th century B.C. Museum of Archaeology Florence.
In this study, the authors see their work as having a ‘transformative’ effect by bringing out what is normally obscured to our social consciousness. They see their work as not only of detached critical interest, but as an instrument affecting the forces behind change in society. As well as a statistical analysis of every design feature - amount of text, content of images, number of colours, style - all these aspects were also analysed structurally for the relationship between them, and to known work and leisure patterns, consumerism and advertisements, to the brewing industry, as well as the history of early industrial capitalism and alcohol production. The study found that not only were the patterns of beer drinking very different in each country, but that:

As part of everyday culture beer cans form systems of communication, expression and representation, creating a symbolic order of meaning... The symbolism on the cans (lions, eagles, coats of arms, sailing ships) creates an imaginary set of relationships to the present... by invoking a mythical past. The obviousness of the designs is an obviousness effected through the power of ideology. ... The more alcohol is considered dangerous, the greater the number of codes employed to mediate the contradiction...15

Here the study of material data is immensely enhanced by not being limited to the mere description of the ‘evidence’, the limitation I found so restrictive in my early experience. The meaning of the objects within their context has also been broached by crossings and connections with history, literature, or sociology. The authors’ self-reflexivity is evident in their consciousness that this very investigation may affect the subject of their study, that the archaeologist/viewer’s relationship to the data is also part of the momentum of culture, not separate from it.
Much current discussion examines the realisation that objects exist in a physical sense in the present, but also have an underlying textual and representational existence. For example in the recent anthology *Reading Things*, Neil Cummings writes:

> The presence of an artefact, its relations, contexts, functions and associations, in short its rich life, concretely exists and simultaneously participates in a discursive and ‘textual’ space....There is no autonomy for things however desired; an artefact inevitably grows a textual appendage.\(^\text{16}\)

In this anthology of articles and photographs documenting material culture, however, the visual systems of minute observation so developed in archaeology are noticeably absent. As the title *Reading Things* suggests, the object is addressed through textual terms which imply that the use of objects and artefacts is comparable to the construction of sentences by means of grammatical forms. Vision and language are assumed to be of the same innate composition both in structure and systems of meaning. My dogged training in observation and the specificity of things in museums would suggest that the visuality of artefacts forms its own system of references. Rather than reflecting a mirror image of language,
visuality offers a parallel system with its own criteria. What is relevant in placing an object is, on the one hand, an awareness of these specific visual criteria within comparable contexts, and on the other, a shift to another channel, in ascribing textual meanings given to these objects by the culture in which they are found, and the people who use them.

**Visuality: artists ‘reading’ archaeology**

Philip Barker is his description of archaeological techniques writes:

..Some archaeologists have a better ‘eye’ for the ground than others but fieldwork is an art which can be transmitted by experienced and perceptive teachers, and developed by practice. Often only long acquaintance with the site and the area in which it is set will reveal the subtle indications of former earthworks, roads and buildings. A well known field seen daily under all conditions of light and shade, damp and drought, will quite suddenly, on a day of thawing snow, reveal for the first time, and for a few hours only, that it is full of the most ephemeral traces of ridge and furrow.17

Following on from the outline of contemporary archaeological theory is a consideration of the perception of archaeology in current art as _sight_ as well as _text_. Contemporary artists take the ‘look’ of archaeology: the categorization of seemingly unrelated objects in a museum, the fragment, the ruin, and rework it for

*Coptic vase fragment, 4th-5th century, British Museum, London.*
present relevance. Their stance is upheld by the semiotic theory that situates archaeology as a text to be continually re-interpreted. ‘Objective’ texts about archaeology are no more meaningful, in this reading, than our translation of them into the ‘subjective’ history of our own bodies and personal situations.

The fictions and recreations of nineteenth century archaeologists are now coming to seem newly interesting in the light of recent multi-textual readings into the past. Archaeology has always been a source of inspiration for artists and writers looking for other models. *Looking* at the fragments of the distant past is a primary source of knowledge. In Renaissance Europe, for example, ‘looking at’ the past resulted in written texts, or artworks about the extraordinary statues, ruins, and vases of the antique Mediterranean which could enable artists to reinvent their own world in the likeness of the ideal past.

This process continues in contemporary art. Lucy Lippard has pointed out how very ancient places have the status of marvels of nature, and often inspire not only texts, but all kinds of visual artworks as a way of relating the past to the present. She sees our nostalgic attitude towards nature as a major component in the romanticization of the ancient site. In her book *Overlay* she investigates the layers of time, the traces of the past that are enmeshed in the landscape. Very ancient art gets caught up in the concern for our ecology - and the ancient site seems almost like nature in its distance from us, and in the way it seems so much part of the landscape.¹ Eighteen The concern to understand our origins, so elusive in any post-structural understanding,
is as important to contemporary artists as it is to archaeologists. The past can be
seen as resolved and unchangeable to a present day society of shifting values and
priorities. Paul Patton writes about postmodernism:

Among the common responses to the increasing aesthetic, moral, and political
pluralism of our time is a kind of melancholy, tinged with nostalgia for a time
when there was a hierarchy of values and differences were clearly marked.¹⁹

One of the most influential figures in setting in motion such shifting values has
been Joseph Beuys, who was active in post-war Germany. With his radical concepts
he disassociated himself from the established art world, and looked to the ‘other’
times of prehistory and non-European cultures, as seen in his early animal drawings
that relate so strongly to the art of Lascaux. He expresses this forcefully:

I am no longer interested in the art world, in this little pseudo cultural ghetto.
That’s why I have no declarations to make about the creativity of artists and the
modern art world, but would like to make declarations about the creativity of
human work in general. We have to create a new base for art because the base of
present art has become terribly restricted during the course of the political
development of the last 100 years. It has become the territory of a few
intellectuals, far from the life of the people. But if the concept of art becomes
anthropological it is totalised and really does refer to human creativity, to human
work, and not just to the work of artists.²⁰
Beuys work ironically comments on the ‘objectivity’ of museum exhibits, the strange conjunction of objects placed together by some scientific ‘logic’. Donald Kuspit, the American critic, recalls visiting Beuys’ art in Darmstadt, in an old fashioned room with dim lighting:

I had a strong sense of Beuys’ work as not especially art objects but as belonging rather in a museum of natural history, more ethnographic than high culture in import. It was as if Beuys were deliberately reversing the direction early twentieth century art took: rather than beg, borrow or steal from ‘primitive’ sources to achieve a modern look, Beuys precluded a modern look by making his things materially raw, prehistorically unrefined, thereby saving the primitive from an artistic destiny. 21

The distant past is usually fragmentary, requiring the spectator to imaginatively reconstruct the fragment within given facts. Frequently the ‘material evidence’ of the past has come to look as if it were meant to be fragmented - witness the power of the broken torso, headless, armless, whose formal possibilities and romantic pathos was first seen by Michelangelo. The fragment evokes decay, transience and death yet for a society lacking wholeness it often seems more appropriate than the ‘closure’ of a complete artefact.

The British sculptor, Stephen Cox showed his fragmented stone reliefs in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1984. Lewis Biggs describes the implications of this splintered work:

Stephen Cox, Deposition II, 1985, travertine, black cement and oxides, 1.75 x 3.00 m. (The Biennale of Sydney, 1986)
There is never a whole image other than in imagination - a spectator will work to resolve and complete a fragmented image, actively participating in the creation of its meaning. Stephen Cox is fascinated by archaeological reconstruction... the ‘reading’ of old stones to enable deductions to be made about the past. Psychologically speaking, fragmentation can connote a state of emotional loss and destruction out of which can emerge an act of creative reparation. Fragmentation ensures that the work is seen as an object in itself, quite as much as a representation.

Most interesting to my project is the artist Susan Hiller, trained in anthropology/archaeology and working now in the United States. In her installation \textit{Fragments} in 1978, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, she used actual fragments of Pueblo pottery from a museum, placed within a grid on the floor, combined with gouache drawings, charts and handwritten texts that simulated the appearance of an ‘official’ archaeological report. Hiller questions the inflexible way western culture has imposed its classifications, its grid, without interrogating its own likely racism and sexism. How can we know another culture through such means? She mimics the whole process of archaeological actions, in order to uncover its unrelenting pose of ‘objectivity’. She comments:

The approach used in this piece has the traditional four stages of: 1. preliminary collection of data, 2. description and classification, 3. analysis, 4. presentation... There can be no doubt that a kind of contribution to ‘objective’ knowledge is involved: I have after all claimed academic competence. On the other hand, the initial impetus for the piece was coincidence; I was intrigued by the artful pairing of words and images, a pairing or a doubling that I have insisted on in every subsequent stage of description, analysis and presentation.
The pairing of images and words is seen as an underlying stratagem that is useful both for her original discipline of archaeology, and for contemporary art practice.

**The ‘material signifiers’, the sites and artefacts**

The quiddity, the engrossing ‘thereness’ of objects and sites may sometimes be overlaid with a concern for language structures. Yet it is the visual aspect of the past that so grips the contemporary artist, as I have demonstrated, as well as text. Visuality is as essential to an archaeologist as textuality - an optic world as complex and nuanced as the textual world. Materiality encompasses not only visual criteria, but also the subtleties of texture and surface.

The first training of a student in archaeology is in visual memory, in learning to see almost indecipherable visual criteria that enable artefacts to be understood. Learning to touch and feel are also essential in comprehending the texture of the soil or a potsherd. The knowledge I have from working in museums and on sites is a visual and tactile knowledge, not a verbal one, based on the ability of the eye to distinguish a multitude of subtleties in the surface of the ground, on the fingers to sense a variety of surface and ‘feel’ that exist separately to descriptions of them. Such infinite categorisations of touch and vision may be ‘like’ a language, but they are not verbal, and artists respond to these characteristics in ‘quoting’ archaeological references.

The archaeological places and the things found there are detached from the language and texts that describe them, as we can see from the various ways objects and sites are ‘documented’ over the one hundred and fifty years or so of archaeological description of sites. Once located, and categorised in a museum,
objects are there to be reinterpreted with each succeeding generation. Within the visual categorization and description of the objects is a respect for the intrinsic qualities of those objects, which of course, also documents the recorder’s mindframe in working within a particular bounded, empirical discipline, at a particular historical moment. Yet, for the archaeologist, the drawing still stands apart from the text: the drawing instantaneously demonstrates what can only be inadequately described in words. As a producer of hundreds of these archaeological descriptive drawings, it was always striking to me how much more a drawing could reveal than a photograph, by allowing many aspects of the object to appear simultaneously - front, side, back, top, bottom. Tiny scratches or corrosions could be drawn which were not able to be discerned by the ‘eye’ of the camera, always subject to the vagaries of light and shadow, which can be eliminated in a drawing. Sections through vessels of all kinds could be drawn with the aid of calipers, and broken vessels reconstrued in their original form. Archaeological drawing is very rigid, like most technical drawing, with sizes of pen nib specified for particular parts of an object, with scale strictly set out, with shading (if permitted at all) reduced to dots, or lines. The object is drawn on the horizontal, without perceptual distortion from the drawer’s eye, against a vertical upright - the fundamental ordering system.

On the site, detailed drawings are made from a grid placed across the earth, and are sometimes of vast scale. Philip Barker in his lucid book *Techniques of archaeological excavation,* already quoted above, warns of the problems in recording sites, and his preoccupation with *seeing* clearly is pervasive:

> Since features and layers will often merge imperceptibly into one another, or are distinguishable only by changes in texture rather than of colour, it is sometimes impossible to draw hard lines around the limit of each feature, in which case the drawing should depict the character of the feature as closely as possible, even

![Anglo-Saxon ornament with inlay, 7th-8th century, British Museum, London.](image)
though it may be necessary in the interpretation to distinguish the junction more clearly. In fact the principle of separating the evidence from the interpretation should be adhered to as far as it can be, though, inevitably the field drawing will include many elements of interpretation...It is therefore essential that not only the interpretation of the site, but also the drawing (which incorporates, however subtly, some of this interpretation) should be subject to constant discussion and criticism, and not merely left to a lone draughtsman...Checks on the accuracy and fidelity of the drawing must therefore be frequent, especially towards the end of the day.\textsuperscript{24}

Human fallibility in site drawing is implicit in this description, yet the discerning human eye is irreplaceable, with all its faults. Once the rules of this visual logic are understood, it can be ‘read’ across languages. (I spoke hardly any Italian, or Greek, when I first started working as a ‘disegnatrice’ but it was not obvious in my drawing that I was an English speaker. The drawings were identical to drawings done by Italians, or Greeks.)

Anatolian Bronze Age pot, c. 15th century B.C. Museum of Archaeology, Florence.
To learn to see and feel minute visual criteria, beyond what can be seen by a camera, demands practice in looking and touching, of relating the ‘material signifiers’ to a vast range of other material signifiers, as well as texts. If I need to identify a potsherd, my thought ranges over categories of images, not words, and categories of touch. A common sight to see at an archaeological storeroom table, is someone feeling a rough piece of broken clay, staring into the distance, or with eyes half shut, to accurately assess the exact ‘feel’ of the texture. Similarly, on the site, the tiniest differences in soil type - flecks of black perhaps indicating charcoal - can engage arguments about levels, whether another floor or posthole is indicated by minute variations invisible to most observers. To look, and to discern textures, is to know in a way different from a logical series of verbal thought processes.

The relative positioning of image and word in human thought has, of course been analysed by psychologists of perception. Rudolf Arnheim, in his book Visual thinking suggests that thinking often takes place in the form of imagery, as I have observed in the case of archaeological analysis, and goes so far as to suggest that vision is the primary mode of thought. Ernst Gombrich takes account of the extraordinary psychological range and complexity of visual patterning and image in his writing, particularly in The sense of order. Oliver Sachs observes that the roots of language and the roots of thought are dissimilar even if they come together - musicians, mathematicians and artists can put symbols together in connections not linguistic, even though they may later be described through language. Albrecht
Durer, a prolific visionary, said simply, ‘An artist is one who is inwardly full of images.’

So, although archaeology is text, yet there are other forms of communication within it which are just as powerful, and just as informative. The ‘material signifiers’, the site/artefacts may at first lead only to other ‘material signifiers’, other drawings, photographs or diagrams as a means of signification that may in the end result in the ‘signified’, in a text. Drawings, maps, diagrams of sites and objects impart information instantly about a multitude of visual criteria that would be tedious and painful to describe in words.

Stephanie Moser, an Australian archaeologist has written about the way visual images in archaeology investigate various reconstructions of Neanderthals. Imagery is not ‘innocent’, not ‘transparent’ and ‘objective’, any more than the analytic text may be. The self-reflexivity of the archaeological artist is vital, in not reproducing the stereotypes of the present on to the past. The ‘active’ role of men and the ‘child minding, food gathering’ role of women, as well as compositional devices which exaggerate scale, centrality, proportion, can be powerful unconscious devices in reproducing stereotypes of family, race, and gender, about the distant past. She concludes by emphasizing the importance of visual frameworks in archaeology:

The point of this discussion has been to show how images are not just vehicles or the popular ‘by-products’ of academic debates, and that they actually play a crucial role in the way we build our arguments. Finally at a time when attention is being directed at the textuality and literary structure of archaeological discourse, where archaeological explanation has been defined as a form of storytelling and evolutionary theories have been described as narratives, it is equally important to acknowledge the role of imagery in structuring the way we understand the past.

This system of signs contained in a drawing may be compared to a language, but is fundamentally different to linguistic structures. Joan Vastokas, in a study of Northwest Coast art in Canada comments:

Although language has provided the focus for cognitive studies ... it is clear that linguistic models or methods as such should be avoided. This is because visual systems are not completely isomorphic with linguistic systems, even though both art and language - as well as music, myth, and kinship - may be ultimately governed by the same rules of conceptual order...To ‘get at’ the tacit rules that govern visual art, we should not make the mistake of applying analytical methods
of linguistics. We must recognize that concrete works of art produced within a
given society constitute a cognitive sub-system parallel to, rather than shaped by,
the cognitive sub-system of language.30

It is never possible, or even necessary to entirely describe a drawing. A series of
drawings and plans for an archaeologist, as for an artist, give rise to a multitude of
visual associations that cannot be elided into the universals of a 'langue' (the
structuralist meta-language) that reduces all differences of the senses to abstract
concepts. Textuality as an elucidating tool can unmask underlying hypotheses, but
it is not the only means of enquiry, the mute and unspoken senses have their place.
Textuality should not become another kind of centralist discourse, a new
privileging of the word, already so indulged in western cultures.

The ability to see and relate visual and tactile criteria, to connect pieces and
fragments of perceived evidence in a meaningful sequence, is the basis of the
discipline of archaeology.


To test this process of a thorough consideration of visual criteria to open up broader movements within a culture, I use two case studies to approach contemporary art practice. The relationship between tapestry and archaeology, seemingly remote, comes through my own long involvement with textiles as an art form, parallel to and developing with my training in archaeology. Craft reviews frequently stress the individual personalities of the makers of contemporary artefacts as a clue to their meaning. Instead, I re-imagined these pieces as if they were indeed the anonymous artefacts on the museum table, so that the intention of the artist was muted, and a voice given to the materiality of the objects themselves. In the first case, I consider one tapestry as if it were an archaeological artefact, and in the second, a group of objects brought together by a curator for an exhibition is aligned to excavation or museum analysis.

Tapestry does have very different connotations from the beer cans examined by Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, just as everyday coarse pottery is far more common in excavations than the occasional fine painted ware. Tapestry is an artefact of our culture, however, and an archaeological sifting of its visual characteristics, its provenance and context can be applied, just as it can to mass produced objects. Tapestry in Australia is perceived to be a marginal art form, produced mainly by women, and archaeology is often concerned with marginal and peripheral conditions. My discussion of Kay Lawrence's tapestry House, Self takes one 'artefact' and tries to elucidate through a scrutiny of image, form, technique, medium and textual references, the whole interlaced contexts of history and custom of tapestry in Australia. After many years as a maker of woven tapestries myself, it seems very pertinent to reconsider the approaches of archaeology in writing about tapestry. A nice touch for a tapestry maker who has also been an archaeologist is that the word 'context' comes from the Latin 'contexere', to weave together or connect.

Kay Lawrence’s tapestry House, Self considered as an artefact

Before taking up the issues raised by the contemporary tapestry of Kay Lawrence, I would like to reflect on the criteria used in archaeology for understanding objects. 'Putting in context' is the principal activity of an archaeologist: always placing the
object in a network of similar objects through provenance, chronology, iconography and analysis of visual criteria. As we have seen, post-structuralist analyses also refer to the network of relationships that connect an object to other objects, and to the viewer.

Archaeology can then provide an approach for investigating the history of tapestry at a time when theories of history are under intense observation in current writing. The disunities, ruptures and marginal events in history, as opposed to the ‘master narrative’, are now seen to be of equal importance to continuities in an

*House/Self*, tapestry by Kay Lawrence 1989, 135 x 165 cm, Ararat Regional Gallery, Victoria.
understanding of the underlying structures of power. This insight underpins both archaeological and feminist discourse. The methodology of archaeology, like that of feminism and also postmodernism, requires the placing of the object within a whole spectrum of social practices and hierarchies, as far as these can be deduced from the excavation of the site and examination of contemporaneous texts of all kinds. Surviving literature such as plays and poems, lists of official records, inscriptions on gravestones and monuments are all consulted. The excavation of sites can never completely document all knowledge of the past, and yet the analysis of discovered artefacts links sites to sites to form a web of connections and trade routes, by which new techniques or decorative motifs travel great distances.

The indicators of medium, context and image do open up a network of relationships and associations. Considered in an ancient setting, the choice of medium - such as stone, clay, metal, glass or textile - arises out of particular social practices and religious functions. A permanent and laboriously worked medium such as the stone of a grave stele will obviously have different connotations to the domestic, easily broken clay cooking vessel. The different media contain their own histories, and this history conditions their appropriateness in any one area, whether it be clothing, domestic cooking, ritual and funerary ceremonies or the trappings of power that allude to complex belief systems and hierarchies. The choice of a particular medium thus directs the observer/archaeologist to expect certain cultural traditions to be embedded in the intrinsic character of the object.

The context of an object within the excavation of a site is crucial to its understanding and interpretation. An isolated object, such as those uncatalogued, unprovenanced fragments so often found in the storerooms of museums are problematical for reconstructing the cultural fabric of a long dead society. By contrast, in the careful excavation of the site, the association of a group of objects in a kitchen, a grave, a temple deposit, a workshop, give precise and valuable information about the social organization as well as the artistic imperatives of that society.

The images which decorate or mould artefacts open up another complex area of analysis, particularly if literary texts survive to supplement the knowledge of myths, personages and events. Yet in considering the images of the remote past, it is still difficult for the observer not to ascribe familiar meanings shaped by his/her own cultural background. The representation of a house on a Greek vase, on a Pompeian fresco, or on a Roman grave stele may have had completely different
implications within each of these social contexts and they may all be profoundly dissimilar to the contemporary meanings of such a familiar image.

Image and form are bound together, so the stylistic analysis of minute visual criteria of images and patterns is a major tool in archaeology. Sequences of objects of a related style are compared from site to site to deduce wider structures, continuities and discontinuities in that society. The concept of style, so out of favour in postmodern criticism, can be used in a wider sense in archaeological analysis. Writing in 1963 James Ackerman states:

‘Style’ designates a complex of behaviour patterns within a society, with ramifications far beyond merely visual criteria .... The virtue of the concept of style is that by defining relationships it makes various kinds of order out of what otherwise would be a vast continuum of self-sufficient products. A style is a class of related solutions to a problem, or responses to a challenge. 

In considering a recent art work through the distancing process of looking at it as if it were an artefact, it may be possible to elucidate its place in the semantic field of
contemporary art/craft practice. The ‘artefact’ I shall take as the door into the history of tapestry in Australia is Kay Lawrence’s piece, *House, Self* woven in Adelaide in 1989 and now in the collection of the Ararat Regional Gallery in Victoria.

The system I have used in cataloguing archaeological objects always involves placing text next to the photograph of the object, which has been numbered and measured with scientific accuracy. Present location, original provenance, are considered together with a close analysis of style and image for their social, religious and economic indications. This places an order, a meaning on an otherwise anarchic artefact, on Michel Foucault’s ‘inert traces’ of the past.

Following the archaeological model then, let me precisely describe this tapestry, which is 135 x 165 centimetres in size. It depicts a black sketchily drawn house plan, the various rooms indicated by their initials. Overlaid upon it is the white outline figure of a woman bending over and actually drawing this plan, which also nearly contains her. A border of houses drawn by a child takes up the top area of the tapestry. The background to these marks literally represents the ground, roughly textured. The colour is stark, giving the tapestry the look of a drawing in its silvery grey to black tonalities.

What is the medium? The technique of woven tapestry is made on a loom, by discontinuous weft threads which are woven across a rigid warp, to form patterns and images. The weaver must start making the image from the base of the design, working slowly up the piece in blocks as if building a wall, usually following a design or cartoon at the back of the loom. A square metre of tapestry might take a hundred hours to weave. The medium itself often has associations with romantic history: the intricate imagery of mythological sagas on castle walls forming a backdrop to political intrigues and affairs of state. The metaphor of tapestry is today used in every kind of writing from Mills and Boon evocations of the ‘tapestry of life’ to scientific description of the intertwining of the brain and nervous system. Tapestry as a metaphor is used to indicate connectedness, the layering of many elements combined in a close relationship.

I observe that the technique of this tapestry is derived from that of the influential Tapestry Department in the School of Art in Edinburgh in Scotland set up by Archie Brennan. He was also Director of the Dovecot Tapestry Workshop there for ten years, from 1962 to 1972. He saw new possibilities for tapestry as representing
a 'contemporary archaeology', including all the impedimenta of ordinary modern life, such as media images, sport, cards, games, parcels. Many Australian tapestry weavers studied in Scotland, and the Edinburgh model formed the basis of the methods of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne when it was founded in 1976. Kay Lawrence also studied in Edinburgh in 1977-78.

The translation from drawing to tapestry in her work comments on the 'appropriateness' of types of representation associated with each medium, and undermines that cultural expectation referred to above, in which a weaving may be expected to look 'weaverly' and not like a drawing. And yet, this ability of tapestry to mirror different processes and surfaces is characteristic of the Edinburgh workshop, and goes back to much older Flemish and French traditions. In Kay Lawrence's hands the interpretation of one medium into another also transposes and subtly alters the perception of the image.

The artist's journey, her interaction with distant places and artists becomes clear when looking at the work of other contemporary tapestry artists. The 'trade routes' of tapestry techniques and ideas become evident through consideration of these contacts.

In *Princess Di meets a medieval maiden* (97 x 107 centimetres), exhibited in Melbourne in 1988, Archie Brennan, the influential Scottish tapestry weaver mentioned above, exploits the ability of the tapestry medium to mimic other materials, both ancient and contemporary. The medieval maiden comes from a late fifteenth century fragment in the Metropolitan Museum in New York depicting a *Maiden taming the Unicorn*. Here she is contrasted with a minutely woven photographic image of a snapshot of Princess Di. This comments on our changed systems of representation which have opened such new vistas for tapestry.

Because painting has been a privileged medium, many viewers have come to see tapestry as woven paintings. The problem with this is that tapestries are seen to lack the qualities of painting while viewers remain insensitive to the language of the woven technique. In relation to the position of the tapestry medium to painting, and the difficulty of not seeing a tapestry as if it were 'just' a woven painting Ann Newdigate says
The medium itself is a signifier of meaning that often has nothing to do with the imagery or content, but which is the result of unconsciously learned attitudes about the hierarchical categorisation of art.4

In her tapestry called *But the happy/unhappy medium would not go away/ Think about it otherwise*, (180.5 x 88.9 centimetres) Ann Newdigate links the framed woman to the position of tapestry, as a victim of such categorisation, holding her box of rejected symbols. Her work shows connections to the renowned late fifteenth century tapestries in the Cluny Museum in Paris with their fastidious rendering of metal, flesh, brocaded textile and jewels. (Ann Newdigate set up a Tapestry Department within the Fine Arts Department, Monash University, Melbourne, during 1990, before returning to Canada.)

The wide associations of the *House, Self* tapestry are emphasised by the context in which it was first shown, in the *Makers Choice* exhibition in Adelaide organized by the Crafts Council of South Australia in 1989. Drawings from a series entitled *Homemaking Housekeeping* were exhibited in conjunction with *House, Self* and these pieces relate obliquely to the work of three other artists in this show who...
were chosen to participate by Kay Lawrence because of their influence on her. The tapestry weaver from Scotland, Maureen Hodge, taught her in Edinburgh, while works by Helen Garner inspired a series of drawings relating to this tapestry. Narelle Jubelin was working as artist in residence at this time in the South Australian School of Art, and making challenges to assumptions about women's history in Australia. Such connections place this work firmly in the matrix of history and contemporary art practice.

Provenance is never underestimated in archaeological discourse: where an object is made and its trajectory from this point to other locations is fundamental in coming to understand its position within the institutions and social practices of a society. Once produced, the object has its own journey, its own history of exhibition and ownership, a movement in time between public buildings such as galleries, museums, or corporate skyscrapers and government administration. In this case too, South Australia has a distinctive place in Australian tapestry. Unlike Melbourne where the Victorian Tapestry Workshop forms a focus for training and exhibition, tapestry has evolved in South Australia with a strong commitment to community tapestry as the training ground for individuals, creating quite a different ambience. Kay Lawrence has been notable as a co-ordinator of community tapestries, and has emphasised in an interview with me in 1990 the necessity for such a popular base. She was involved for five years in the designing of the Parliament House Embroidery in Canberra, which was made by the members of embroidery Guilds from every state as a Bicentennial project. This long and vivid narrative used a diverse array of images of Australia's settlement, a background to the more intimate preoccupations of the House tapestry.

The importance of identifying the meaning of the images through an understanding of story and myth, and by comparing analogous examples, is self evident to an
archaeologist. I am using myth here in the sense of a story with a symbolic meaning - and houses have always been the source of stories. Folk stories, fairy tales and the literature of western Europe represent the house as intimately related to the psyche of the inhabitant, to the whole locus of a life, and as a symbol of high or low status.

Houses are the first task of settlement, and much of Australia's pioneering history focuses with great emotion on the first crude huts and simple shelters. Graham Connah, writing about historical archaeology in Australia asserts that houses, as the containers of human life are the most informative of documents. Houses are not only the sites of excavations, but also as Gaston Bachelard writes, the topography of our intimate being.

He goes on -

Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are housed. The house is our first universe.

For women the fragile self identity has often been linked to the home, giving a legitimate territory to the private self, but also restraining and imprisoning it.

The images in Kay Lawrence's tapestry are inscribed over one another almost in a kind of archaeology, indicating diverse ways of representation. The charcoal drawing by a friend of the artist was made directly on cement with a burnt stick to explain the layout of her new house, thus symbolising a new sort of affirmation, a fresh identity. Her white outlined bending figure is derived from a photograph. The child's drawings are those of her daughter and show the little girl already aware of how houses contain and control, conditioning the growth of the self. The images all relate to the theme of woman, house, and self-identity which are seen by the artist to be a problematic and unresolved issue. In this tapestry all the images come from other sources than the individual drawn mark of the artist - from a child's drawing, from the hasty and completely 'inartistic' sketch done by a friend, and from a photograph. The artist's hand is seen in the composition of all these diverse elements within the framework of the tapestry and in the precise and ordered process of translating these elements into a woven form. Kay Lawrence says,

There's not a coherent sense of something being completed, it's always ongoing...

(Interview, 1990)
While the ideas contained in the images may still be unresolved and open ended, the tightly constructed form of the tapestry itself gives a sense of permanence and closure.

This ambivalent association of body/house/art, so pervasive an aspect of feminism, is also fundamental to the early work of Louise Bourgeois, an American artist. Her drawing *Woman-House* was made in 1946-47, and for the artist, refers to the home as a place of conflict. Yet the critics of the time interpreted this image as proving women’s domesticity, as it had a house for a head, completely missing the disturbing denial of the autonomy of the subject. The house clothes and stifles the woman, leaving the lower part of her body vulnerable and exposed. The identification of house and body is emphasised in writings selected by Kay Lawrence for the catalogue of the *Maker’s Choice* exhibition in Adelaide in 1989. This quote comes from Marilynne Robinson’s novel, *Housekeeping*:

I thought, Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone.

Drawing of a house by Ellie Wood, Kay Lawrence's daughter, catalogue *Distant Lives/Shared Voices*, Poland 1992
Women’s writing, such as this novel, form the ‘mythological texts’, which provide the contexts of ideas for this tapestry, and for the background to much of Kay Lawrence’s thinking. These quotes were also selected by her for Maker’s Choice:

The worst thing about housework is not the terrifying inroads it takes into time, but the state of mind it encourages in which the arrangement of objects is confused with control over one’s life.
Lynne Strahan, The half open door

Only, yes, it is my mother too, who should have died long ago, she was so tired with sweeping out her house and the world.
Janet Frame, Owls do cry

Her tapestries and drawings often incorporate text, seen here in the use of the initials to indicate the rooms of the house. The very process of making a tapestry is seen by many tapestry weavers to be like writing a narrative, building up the story in a consecutive chain. The narrative content of most historical tapestries often included text, and contemporary tapestry weavers use text as a potent sign. For example, Tass Mavrogordato’s tapestry, He who loves writes on walls, exhibited in Melbourne in 1988, (137cm x 198 cm.) shows a figure (herself, but androgynous) surrounded by graffiti on the walls of urban London, which forcefully contrast to the traditional associations of tapestry as an aristocratic and elite medium.

The narrative of House, Self is complex, with a layering of images and ways of inscribing them. Various ‘styles’ are held together in the overall image: the naive mark of the child, the dark scrawl of the house plan, the white outlined image derived from a photograph of a bending woman. Each style makes reference to ‘categories of behaviour’ in Ackerman’s terms discussed above. The child’s drawings of houses are intuitive and symbolic, forming a frieze to the plan of the house. In its ad hoc roughness and simplicity this plan has an archetypal force and could seem to be the plan of a house site thousands of years old. The bending woman is framed and positioned by the plan she is actually drawing, as though she is creating her own boundaries, and her outline, woven as if incised into the surface, makes reference to rock engravings.

Not only the image but also the marks that form it are implicated in the construction of the meaning of House, Self. The significance of the mark, so thoroughly under investigation in House, Self, is part of a body of assumptions about what art might encompass in the last half of the twentieth century. The
American school of abstraction (Pollock, Tobey, Kline, Motherwell, de Kooning to name but a few) with its fierce emphasis on gesture, on the mark as the source and origin of expression, has been a potent influence in Australia since the 1950s. Despite its lack of engagement with any feminist issues it has become absorbed into Australian art schools as the basic *modus operandi*, the 'natural' way to approach art. Referring back to anthropological approaches, we can observe that the significance and inherent meaning of the mark is one of our 'cultural assumptions' of what constitutes art. In this tapestry the flow of the drawn mark, its spontaneity and energy (a child drawing, a woman sketching a plan) is transformed by being translated into tapestry, the slowest and most time consuming medium, requiring another kind of passion. The impetuous sketch, the ephemeral mark are gestures which are translated into quite another movement of the hand, small repetitive movements which build up tiny units of intersecting warp and weft. The individual gestures of mark making take on heroic proportions in abstract expressionism, while traditional tapestry has been the vehicle for heroic representations, not of the individual psyche but of historical events.

Even the word 'tapestry' evokes unformed associations with large wallpieces thronged with incident - historical pageants, hunts, battles, marriages. As narratives, they seem to contain a beginning, a middle and an end. Tapestry is almost a sign for 'civilization'. The content and form of *House, Self* confuse the unconscious expectations of such memories, where the viewer assumes the tapestry will evoke this momentous sense of history. But here are scraps of personal life, unheroic signs, the transience of the drawn mark made into another kind of construction altogether, a mesh of threads, firmly beaten down into a permanent fabric. While nodding to the elevation of the mark, the tapestry also subverts the idea of art being essentially spontaneous, by taking the drawn mark away from its 'proper' sphere of fluid and easily malleable materials into the sphere of tapestry with its other realm of mnemonic signs. In this case the artist is 'bi-lingual', herself a draughtsman and weaver, crossing over between mediums in a process that enriches both.

Employing the methods of archaeology, with its concerns with context, provenance, medium and image, does offer an alternative approach to looking at contemporary artworks. Much art/craft criticism and history takes an aesthetic or stylistic approach, or an individualistic biographical account without a detailed consideration of visual and contextual factors. The approach adopted here,
however, can also clarify the meaning of an object, and the complex ways it relates to the society in which it is enmeshed.

My second case study was to write about an exhibition *Clashing Fragments*, in which the curator Sara Lindsay combined tapestry, ceramics and mixed media artworks. The apt title of the show encouraged an archaeological metaphor, and the multiplicity of subjects within an overall theme of process invited a reflection on the society that formed such work. The title, *Clashing fragments*, denoted an unstable, diverse situation, suggesting an imbalance of juxtaposed artworks which nevertheless may reflect fundamental concerns of our visual culture. Fragments take the archaeological parallel a step further, as partial, disconnected, scattered pieces of material evidence that may be reconstructed to form an idea of a whole. Their relationship to each other at the ‘site’ of the exhibition is another clue in their contextualisation. Fragments imply a site of loss and destruction, and their use as a contemporary form suggests an understanding of our partial knowledge of the past. Archaeologists pore over pottery fragments laid out from various carefully labelled sections of excavations, looking for connections in texture, colour, and form. On the sorting table of an archaeological storeroom, ‘clashing fragments’ would point to some major trauma in the society under investigation, some interruption to the expected flow of sequence and style. Is such a diagnosis upheld in the works brought together in *Clashing Fragments*?

In late twentieth century western art, concern with fragments is widespread, as evidenced in the work of Stephen Cox and Susan Hiller discussed in the previous chapter. The situation in the 1990s in the western world is marked by a pluralism of styles and attitudes, a lack of conclusive belief and faith in any one way above all others. A necessity of earlier ‘modernist’ art was to be unique and original, whereas, in contemporary practice the copy is also valid in generating meaning. Images from many cultures may be ‘appropriated’, without translation into an artists ‘unique’ style, with no concealment of their origin. In this eclectic world, absorbing, even plundering all forms of image from both popular and ‘elite’ artforms is a valid response to the mutiplicity of visual images in television, advertising, films, photography that so pervades our everyday life. John Thackera, writing in *Design after Modernism*, sees late twentieth century society as having a dynamic sense of perpetual change which obliterates traditions, where societies are dominated by multi-national capitalism which requires a rapid rhythm of fashion and style, and an enormous reliance on electronic media for producing and reproducing visual images and text. Lawrence Grossberg, another ‘postmodern’ theoretician, talks of contemporary culture as a
structure of feeling, a sensibility which involves the dissociation of meaning and affect, and the impossibility of the emotional investment in ideologies which used to be thought essential to the functioning of subjectivity. It is not that postmodern lives lack meaning, but rather that the meanings are multiple, temporary and unstable...11

The sources of the fragmentation evident in the 1990s derive from many of the art movements of the last decade or so, such as conceptual art, minimalism, the growth of photography and video as art forms in conjunction with installation and performance, and the social and political realities of influential minorities - feminists, ecologists, and Aboriginal groups. In trying to clarify the increasing complexity of art, the growing preoccupation with linguistic and literary modes of analysis - semiotics, the 'science of signs', involving structuralism and post-structuralism - seems to offer a new tool for perceiving and analysing visual art in a wider context. In Australia this interest conflicted with modernist mainstream art, which was criticised as being part of the 'establishment', commodity orientated, and yet another aspect of consumerism. This complexity of style and intention is the background to the work in *Clashing Fragments*.

Seven of the artists work in craft media, Marie Cook, Leonie Bessant, Meryn Jones, Catherine K and Tass Mavrogordato in tapestry, Stephen Benwell and Michael Doolan are ceramicists, and Stephen Killick, Joan Letcher and Diane Mantzaris work in mixed media, including electronically produced images. Technology and
craft in Australia today have become allied after earlier years of antipathy. The great momentum of the crafts movement in the 1960s and 70s was, in a sense, against the ideology of industrial production. There was a fervent belief, an almost religious veneration for the work of the hand which allied itself to environmental movements, to small-scale and personal as against multinational capitalism. Zen Buddhism, so influential at this time, valued the intelligence of the hand as equal if distinct from the acuteness of the intellect. The processes of making were a whole lifestyle - a lifestyle, it was believed, which would give harmony and wholeness to the individual, aside from the market success of the finished object. This lifestyle often meant rural living close to nature, animals and plants, and recourse to ‘primitive’ methods of hand spinning, of vegetable dyeing and woodfiring of kilns, as low impact, ideologically sound technologies. The excitement and energy generated by these ideals led to the exploring of previously unknown worlds of handmade objects and techniques from every culture. It led to the rapid expansion of crafts into art schools in the early 1970s, and to the formation of Crafts Councils. In 1976, parallel to a burgeoning enthusiasm for handmade textiles and sculptural fibre, the Victorian Tapestry Workshop was started in Melbourne.

The five artists in tapestry in *Clashing Fragments* are connected through their relationship at some time to the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. Weavers there are trained through working with the image-makers who designed the tapestries, to interpret through intricate technique the ambiguities of the painted or drawn surface into the certainties of tapestry. The professionalism of the Workshop came from a close connection to the Scottish tapestry workshops in Edinburgh, through Archie Brennan and Belinda Ramson who trained with him. Rigorous technical standards ensured that craft processes were transmitted to Australia from aristocratic traditions derived, through Edinburgh, from the great French tapestry workshops. This was no ‘lifestyle’ movement, but grounded in public patronage and large official commissions to enhance and enrich architectural and civic environments. Eventually, individual weavers detached themselves from the Workshop and became artists in tapestry working to their own personal inspiration, using the medium on a small scale for its ability also to convey the richness of the private imagination.

The tapestry artists in this collection, trained in a skill of representation that connects them with several millennia of European history, are exhibiting in a fractured postmodern milieu in the far south of a continent very distant from Europe. What does the anachronistic ‘sign’ of tapestry indicate at such a moment?
The laborious and time consuming technique must be significant to these artists, giving as Beatrijs Sterk puts it, an 'unconscious sensuality' to the conceptual content. The emotion invested in slow craft skills is still with us from our very recent history, still giving a different 'aura' to the woven surface than that of a painting or print. This aura indicates days of life, of thought spent constructing image and fabric simultaneously - metaphors of connection and interrelationship that have become part of our language. The medium, seemingly 'out of its time', reminds the viewer of past histories, to other possibly less fractured times, even though the content of the work may be that of the electronic world of rapid images in never ending succession.
The paradox of much contemporary tapestry is its fascination with the swiftest forms of representation, used to form the ‘cartoons’ or drawn background which guides the construction of the woven fabric. Archie Brennan tells how he was weaving a tapestry derived from a photograph of a runner in 1969 as the American rocket surged towards the moon. After the moon landing, the rocket returned to earth, and although weaving steadily, he had woven six inches of tapestry. The record set by the runner had already been surpassed by the time the tapestry was finished. Such temporal contradictions intrigue the viewer and underlie the ‘thingness’, the ‘quiddity’ of a tapestry. The dot matrix grid evident in enlarging newspaper photographs, and in drawing on the computer screen is eminently suitable for translation into tapestry, which is after all based on the intersecting grid of vertical warp and horizontal weft.

The juxtaposition of tapestry, seeming such a ‘crafted’ medium, with images made on computers and through the agency of photocopiers seen in the work of Joan Letcher and Diane Mantzaris, is not as strange as it might seem at first. The drawloom, (such as those used to weave the extraordinary detail of a Paisley shawl in nineteenth century Scotland) is an early prototype of computer technology, with each weft sequence represented by a punched card. The ability of computers to give infinite repetitions with variations according to mathematical formulae reproduce the skills of pattern weavers. The computer and the photocopier are still only tools, they do not ‘generate’ imagery from a vacuum, and laterally thinking artists use the computer like any other complex tool.

Technology and craft have common origins - it is the craft prototype that leads to the industrial production line and then seems by scale and immense reproducibility to invalidate those very craft processes. What is the concern in putting together the work of such seemingly diverse artists, of juxtaposing laborious hand techniques of tapestry weaving with rapid technological image making? At the Port Kembla steel works one can watch the vast crucibles of molten metal endlessly lifting their loads onto rolling belts that transform the shapeless mass of fire into sheet metal. The crucibles and the immense hooks that hold them are the size of rooms, encrusted with flakes and layers of hardened splashes of fluid metal. Yet the precise form of the immense crucible - rounded and cauldron-like with a spout for pouring - can be identified by museum comparisons as the same shape as the cup sized crucibles used by the Etruscans, by the Anglo-Saxons, fragments of which I had drawn for the archaeological record in Florence and London. Technology is about scale, about swiftness and endless reproduction. Yet that crucible shape had not changed, except
in its gigantic scale, since it was first evolved through the necessities of the work of farriers and tool makers of the Bronze Age. Craft processes originate the eventually vast technologies through an obsession with the right shape for the right purpose, culture imposing its necessities on the individual.

An artist such as Joan Letcher using technological sources of producing images, employ occasional craft techniques to subvert the slickness of the computer or xerox image - boxes, layerings, frames, ridges of glue to join printed sections. There is an excitement in cutting and pasting media images which jolt the viewer to question the teeming flow of imagery that pervades our lives, an excitement in working like surrealists or dadaists to make impossible or fantastic conjunctions of forms to create new mythical entities. The search to find the resonant image in the jungle of visual data that surrounds us is evident even in work most allied to traditional craft practice, such as the ceramic forms of Stephen Benwell and Michael Doolan.

Tapestry has a historic affinity for narrative, defined in the dictionary as a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Narrative is used most effectively in nonliterate societies, where images function like text to convey a story - and much of our culture is in fact more visual than literate. The current interest in narrative, after years when any kind of 'literariness' was held to detract from the pure apprehension of the artwork, is almost a recognition that our common daily bath of imagery is in the region of folklore, vital, vulgar, banal and various, engulfing politics, consumer mythologies of desirable and elusive objects, romances of passion and violent death. Here tapestry can enjoy a resurgence.

The connecting link within this group of artists is a concern with representation of images and objects in association with techniques that are repetitive, precise, persistent, even obsessive, to open up fresh meanings. The transient media image, the photographic reproduction of artworks and objects, is extended and meditated upon in dedicated processes which subvert the usual context of familiar images. In the case of tapestry the medium itself opposes fragmentation with its inherent connectedness of warp and weft. An underlying wholeness is suggested in the actual process of making, a belief in time-ridden constructions while conceding the instant flash of electronic representation. The fragmentation of imagery is countered by the use of ancient craft processes, the fear of the millenium is held back by old mythologies of binding threads and objects made by hand from earth
and fibre. The archaeologist at the storeroom table reflecting on ‘clashing fragments’ might consider that this is work from the end of a thousand years, work indicating transition, not looking to wholeness as any kind of solution. Yet the ‘fragments’ we see in this ‘site’ of Sara Lindsay’s curatorship offer subtle clues to past histories within their very substance, and ‘clash’ with a vitality that does not indulge trauma or melancholy.

**Conclusion**

The theories of structuralism that insist on the ‘inter-textuality’ of culture and individuals can extend the meaning of objects and bring a poetic factor to the empiricism of the archaeology I learnt as a student. Previously I quoted a broad definition of a contemporary archaeological position by Christopher Tilley:

> The field of material culture studies is one concerned with the relationship between artefacts and social relations irrespective of time and place.

Looking at individual works such as Kay Lawrence’s tapestry and exhibitions such as *Clashing Fragments* by a combination of visuality and textuality can illuminate the contexts of the present time, as a ‘field of material culture studies’. The fact that I am also a female maker of objects, and a participant in exhibitions, and that writing about contemporary work in an archaeological context actually conditions the work I make myself, upholds that other tenet of post structuralism, that the act of criticism is part of the total momentum of culture, not distinct from it. The more narrow empiricism I knew as a student, however, which assumed the grounding of archaeology in the site and the objects in it, was a source of great pleasure to me, and formed my sense of observation. As an artist I see myself, almost like the topographical and natural history artists who accompanied the Australian explorers, as having an obsession to record ‘what is’, to document the complexity both of sites and relationships between objects, people and place. The next chapter examines such relationships in the context of the actual places of archaeology.
Michel Foucault writes: ‘There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only through the restitution of a historical discourse: it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument’. The Archaeology of Knowledge, Tavistock, London, 1972, p. 7.


An article on this subject was published in Forceps of Language: An Anthology of critical writing, Ed. Bob Thompson, University of Technology, Sydney, 1992, pp. 114-120. A shorter version, presented as a paper at the conference Distant Lives/Shared Voices in Lodz, Poland, 1992, was translated into German by Beatrijs Sterk and published in Textilforum, Hannover, Germany, vol. 4, 1992, pp. 48-49. The tapestry House Self was exhibited in Identities: Art from Australia at the Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taiwan, an exhibition curated by Deborah Hart under the direction of Peter Shepherd and the University of Wollongong. See Diana Wood Conroy, ‘Kay Lawrence’, Identities: Art from Australia, pp. 97-99.

Ann Newdigate Mills, Look At It This Way, catalogue of tapestry exhibition with essay by Lynne Bell, Saskatoon, 1988, p. 8.


All women’s writings are quoted by Kay Lawrence in The Maker’s Choice catalogue, Crafts Council of South Australia, 1989.

This essay was commissioned by Sara Lindsay from ideas being developed for this thesis. The exhibition was held at the Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania at Hobart, in September 1993. An edited version was published in Craft Victoria Newsletter, vol. 23, no. 222, 1993/1994, pp. 10-13.

The fragment is a major motif in my own work, and further connotations of the fragment will be discussed in Part 4.


PART 2

FIELDWORK: THE SITE'S SETTING

CHAPTER 4: GREEK CONTEXTS

CHAPTER 5: AUSTRALIAN SITES: BATHURST ISLAND
CHAPTER 4

GREEK CONTEXTS

Archaeology is a kind of surgery, a selective operation into the extensive humus of ancient life. But its best reward is not its scientific result or a single object in a museum or any fulfilment of ambition. It is the sense of place I think. It is the rhythm and form of the villages that have survived, imposed on the unexhausted soil. It is the olive trees and the mountainsides and the traces of the dead.

Peter Levi

After the discussion about the relevance of archaeology in contemporary craft practice, this section will demonstrate a personal, ‘archaeological’ relationship to country. Attitudes to land are set in motion by the ‘invisible’ conditionings of our upbringing, place of birth and education. What is my relationship to particular landscapes, a middle class white woman of European descent?

The Greek sites

The feeling towards land, the complexity and strata of habitation and land use was sharpened by years spent in Greece and Italy working on archaeological sites and in museums. The letters I sent to my mother while in Greece in 1966 and 1967, when I was twenty two years old, form a significant reflection on the ‘documentation’ of work made twenty five years later, especially in relation to the sense of the site, the place. (I feel they are also ‘daughterly’ letters without being able to pin point this.) They were written while I lived at the British School of Archaeology in Athens.
and in a rented room in Athens, working out how I could bring together what appeared to be opposite polarities, an imaginative inner activity of art, and this archaeological world. In fact the two were incompatible to me at that time of much stricter divisions between disciplines.

I am including excerpts from these letters, which I had forgotten about until my mother produced them at Christmas 1993, because they form a parallel to the ‘contemporary texts’ used to document textiles and tapestry. In this case I am intending to cast light on my own orientations. What strikes me about reading them is re-living the urgency to convey the vivid quality of these mythical places. I visited these sites with a sense of awe, after so many years studying them in excavation reports, or in fragmentary objects in the Nicholson Museum. I am interested to note my use of particular descriptive detail, that I relate the specific places to the old myths, to the wide vista of the landscape (mountains, sea), to present activity (shepherds, travellers), to vegetation (such delight in the mythical flowers, to anemones, crocus and poppy, that grow on ruined sites). I see too, a particular affection for the unknown femininity of the ancient places of Demeter and Artemis, the ‘potnia theron’, the ‘Mistress of the Beasts’. The odd intersections of present and past time, what was happening at the present moment around the site
was always part of the wonder of them. Also evident is the association with death, often literally with bones, as these are ancient places of violent destruction and bloodshed. As Peter Levi, an old friend from those distant years says in the quote above, it is indeed, 'the olive trees and the mountainsides and the traces of the dead.'

Lefkandi, Euboea.
4 October 1966
I’m sitting on a hill in Euboea, at noon, on a most beautiful autumn day. In front of me are barren hills topped by Venetian fortresses and silvery olive groves while all around is a turquoise sea. This is a Mycenaean site - the whole hill was once a settlement, which the British School of Archaeology is now digging, I’ve been scrounging around the hill for interesting potsherds - I think there are more sherds than stones for people have been living here for thousands of years. I found some geometric ones (about 8th century B.C.) and many Mycenaean. They’ve only dug a small section but it goes down very deeply into the early Bronze Age. Its a bit incomprehensible to look at - stone walls and different coloured earth and many holes where there were burials - they always buried babies under the floors of
houses, so that the dead child might possibly be born again in the same family... In the letter is some minty herb that grew all over the Mycenaean hill, and at the bottom are some tiny shells that I picked up while washing potsherds in the sea.

13 November
Most of the time I've been down a 20' hole with Cressida and three workmen scraping and drawing sections of levels. We are in the Middle Helladic period, about 3500 years ago, in some yards adjoining houses inhabited by Middle Helladic people who must have broken masses of pottery and thrown it into the yard. So there's much red and grey pottery and odds and ends. But one never knows what will turn up next - walls, burials or what. To see 3500 years of settlement down the side of the trench is amazing really - fires, destruction, desertion, then re-habitation. We are going down to bedrock in these two weeks, which makes an awfully deep hole. One looks up from the brown earth to see clouds sailing overhead, or perhaps the fat cheerful face of Manoli the foreman with his head tied up in a yellow turban.

22 November
I have been kept very busy, mostly drawing plans and sections. Cressida's hole is deeper and deeper - about 25' now, in the Early Bronze age. I draw hearths and storage pits and walls. But in the Mycenaean levels of another trench we found a deposit of pots over which the walls had fallen when the town was destroyed - they
were lovely - tall graceful goblets like the ones Marinatos talks about. The best bit was part of a pot with handles in the shape of a bull’s head (very Picasso-ish) and an energetic warrior in kilt and leggings....

I have seen more dawns in a row together than ever before. and the landscape from the site is magnificent in these conditions. Dotted over the Chalcidian Gulf in the early morning are motionless black fishing boats, and I can see Aulis where the Greek ships gathered to sail to Troy and Agamemnon’s daughter Iphigeneia had to be sacrificed before the wind would blow. There are cement factories there now.

Here’s a little picture of Lefkandi but its all out of scale. The site is really very much longer and higher - sometimes one seems to be able to trace the outlines of walls and gates of an ancient city. The part we are digging is only about half to a quarter of an acre, and somewhere in it there is probably a palace. It is strange to think how much it must contain but after this week the dig finishes. I’ve been sitting 9 metres below the surface, on bedrock which at last we have found, drawing a storage pit for grain. It was very dim down there. I like drawing but I’m not very good at finding levels or talking to the workmen, they speak very fast and
slurred with Cretan accents... They correct my grammar which makes me nervous... I found a grasshopper sitting at the bottom of the trench, very shaken because he had obviously hopped over the edge by mistake. I took him up to the top again, he was quite passive.

I have been for more long walks through the Lelantine plain - called that because of the river Lelas which is dry now - accompanied by Roger who knows perfect Greek and many legends. (He has been doing a field survey of sites in Arcadia so he knows Greece well) We found a little Byzantine church set against a mountainside, with cypresses and a spring. There were paintings in soft faded colours from floor to ceiling with animated flickering figures of angels, saints, madonnas and crucifixions. Behind the church in deep caves in the mountains were human bones and broken pottery. Perhaps they were holy men. Because it was raining there was soft emerald grass between the rocks starred with miriads of tiny white crocuses.

25 November
Today was the last day of digging. I actually 'dug' today with Cressida, with a pick, on an Early Helladic floor with much pottery embedded in it. In the last few minutes we found another wall right at the bottom. Its very quiet down there when the workmen are gone and thousands of years of stratified habitation above you..

29 November.
I have had a wonderful day. I went to a place called Brauron with Jeff, on the east coast of Attica, which is the most ancient sanctuary of Artemis. We got a bus which set us down on the middle of the Attic plain on a perfect autumn morning.
We seemed to be on a plateau with Mt Hymettos on one side and rolling hills going down to the sea, all red with ploughed fields, and wide open to the sky. The road went to the horizon, with nothing on it except a green cart with red and blue wheels, drawn by a chestnut horse with a carved harness and bells. It stopped and the man offered us a lift - it is a wonderful way to travel. His name was Yannis, he had a humourous face and he told us he had been a general in the Civil War, probably quite likely. After he set us down we walked about 3 kms more to the ruins, away from any habitation and set in a marshy inlet of the sea overhung by pine trees. There is nothing left of the temple: the best thing is a 5th century bridge over green pools full of little gold and emerald frogs.

We then set off to a place called Porto Rafti, about 6 kms through pineforested hills over a dirt road. We met nobody except a shepherd with a gun slung over his shoulder and innumerable sheep. (It was at Porto Rafti that the Australians landed in the war, the cart man was telling us about it.)... At this time of year the place is deserted, a holiday town in winter. The only sound was the wind, and the odd 'splat' from a man beating octopuses against the rocks.

I went to Eleusis yesterday and found masses of pink geraniums and golden marigolds growing against the sea. Eleusis is the sanctuary where the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone were performed - its still a secret so no one knows what it was about. Demeter was the goddess of fertility and when her daughter Persephone was snatched by Hades, god of the underworld, she walked weeping over the earth and neglected her agricultural functions so that for the first time there was winter. You can see the cave which is the entrance to Hades, and the well where Demeter rested in her wanderings - it is still full of clear water.
December

I went to Mycenae on a most lovely day, the sort I like best, with great cumulus clouds sweeping across an icy blue sky and making moving shadows on all the hills. The Peloponnese is beautiful and I nearly became a Mycenaean archaeologist on the spot. One gets out of the bus in the middle of the country and walks about four miles to the village through orange orchards, with range upon range of mountains near and far, all hazy and changing colour continuously and in the distance the sea all silver with dark boats on it. Mycenae itself is quite mythical, exactly as the heroes left it, one knows immediately that this is right for the Bronze Age. The architecture is very heavy and gigantic, yet simple - to stand in the circular Tomb of Atreus is overwhelming. And the Lion Gate seems potent to guard it still. I went with Beryl and we were the only people there, and wandered right around all the walls and the palace, and ate near the bath house where Agamemnon was meant to have been killed - bread and cheese we'd brought.

There are two mountains directly behind the citadel and a ravine called 'Chaos' below - there was a flock of wicked black goats in it and a shepherd singing love songs to them. The highest mountains are snow covered - one can see over the plain to Argos and Tiryns.
11 January 1967
On Sunday we went to a deserted part of Attica, Ramnous, having lunch in Marathon. One goes along a muddy windy road to Ramnous across high and prickly hills inhabited only by flocks of sheep (and really the craziest lambs I have ever seen) guarded by severe shepherds and fierce dogs. Then suddenly one comes to a little acropolis and there is the sea, incredibly blue and the high mountains of southern Euboea all snowy and pink. There's a temple to Nemesis, and a fortified town, with massive stone walls and square towers, but now there's only birds and wild flowers and herbs. Its not cleared like most sites are but all overgrown, like a romantic print of the 19th century. At sunset we went back through the plains of Marathon, to the sea, which was very calm and grey, and just before it was quite dark I saw the high mound where all the warriors were buried after the battle. It is a very impressive place. Its an absorbing thing to wonder what would have happened if the Greeks had not won, and there would have been an oriental Europe - perhaps.

Crete, 28 February 1967
It was a wonderful drive to Psychro in the Lasithi plateau, through spectacular mountains and tiny villages. and it became colder and colder, there were no more flowers, even the almond blossom was not out. And then Mt Dicti was visible, all humped and glinting white above the Lasithi plateau. This plateau is very remarkable, about 8 kms long and perfectly oval and flat, with mountains ringing it. Its very fertile, so all the villages are built on the foothills not on the plain - and its covered with thousands and thousands of windmills. The village of Psychro was very delightful, it was built on exactly the same principle as the Minoan town, with steps going up to the second storey on the outside of the house and all the animals, cows, pigs, choooks goats and sheep on the bottom floor. There were animals everywhere. I found an inn, of sorts, very cold and bare. There was a very large brown cow tethered to the toilet in the back yard, and several goats lurking in the vicinity too.
I wandered around the village and went to see women weaving the bright rugs they sell in the tourist shops. I'm fascinated by these looms, one day I must have one - they're very simple. In all these mountain villages the women sit on the doorsteps or graze the goats or the cows on the hills with long spindles and distaffs, spinning continuously. In their cloak like brown or black clothes they are like Rembrandt women, and also reminiscent of fairy godmothers. I went to sleep early because the village is without electricity and the lamp wasn't strong. The stars seemed almost to be resting on the mountains they were so big and near.

Next morning it was bitterly cold and the whole place smothered in a thick white mist, all the plants crystallised in frost and all the cobble stones with patterns on them. It was uncanny. I got a guide, a very hairy man with large boots and a soft white dog and we all set off up the mountain to find the cave where Zeus was born. (The cave of Dicti.) It was my birthday. Suddenly as the path got steeper we emerged from the white mist into brilliant sunshine - it was still only about 8 am, and there was all the plateau before us, like a white ocean exactly with streams and curlers of mist rising slowly up. And all the mountains of the far side, sharply profiled against a vast sky. It really felt as though the whole self-contained plain was miles above the earth and that if one got beyond the mountains there would be sheer bottomless precipices descending into space. The cave was huge, in the side of a hill with two great openings going steeply down into darkness for 200 feet. There were fig trees and pomegranates growing over the entrance all glittering in the sun with newly melted frost. And no sound except the irregular dripping of water from the stalagtites.

Woman spinning on black figure lekythos, Nicholson Museum, University of Sydney
The guide and I ate some almonds; he was a nice man, and he got some candles and we started down until the light was all greenish, and then the candles were lit. The story is that Zeus' father Cronos swallowed all the children that his wife the giantess Rhea bore him, because his son was destined to be greater than he was. So she hid in this cave, and hid the baby Zeus too and gave his father a stone to swallow. Very primitive, but to go into the darkness of the inner chambers, with the immense roofs covered with a tracery of pillars and melted rock was very overpowering. It is the sort of cave that would make legends by itself. And there was a pool too, very dark, and full of votive offerings from Neolithic times.

I stayed on the hill drawing until all the mist had risen and went down into the village to eat. It is very enjoyable to sit in the square and eat an omelette and a great hunk of brown bread, in the sun, and watch the women come to the fountain with buckets and amphoras, and wild men on donkeys and horses go by and people leading all kinds of animals. Everyone moved very slowly, the women talked together leaning against the wall spinning and the men sat motionless in the sun. And then my bus came with a lot of noise and dust, and I went away back to Iraklion.

Naxos, 19 April

On Sunday we went to find the gigantic statues which lie buried in the hills, gigantic - abandoned because they broke when being shifted from the quarry. (These are the huge 6th century BC Kouroi.) ...We stopped in a lush valley, all glistening in the morning and overhung with purple wisteria and orange blossom with a Venetian castle on top. It is wonderful to be among trees and lush gardens again.
But the road to the statues led out of the valley up into the hills, all sculptured in a turmoil of rock, with pink marble drystone walls. There are little emerald green lizards everywhere too, and all kinds of orchids and a kind of wild white rose and yellow broom. But after a few miles we came to another valley, dotted with cypresses and lemon trees, and a spring. And then the road stopped at an avenue of beeches, very strange - the first large trees I have seen for a long time. In all this wilderness there was a great walled garden, with a wrinkled old brown face peering at us with extremely blue eyes. He ushered us in, he was stone deaf and a bit simple, but a magical gardener. We walked through orchards of apple blossom, past cisterns full of gold fish to a wicker gate, and there in al little garden all of its own was the statue, all slender and stiff lying amongst irises. And further up the hill among all the bare rocks and orchids was another statue, more primitive and bigger, at first hardly distinguishable from the other rocks round about. After that I started seeing fallen statues in all the rocks everywhere.

Kerkyra, 15 May
I met an old woman looking after her sheep in the castle, and I went home with her to lunch in a little house on a bare rock above the sea. She has a son, Avrilio. We ate home made bread and strong sheep’s milk fetta. They brought out a vase that they’d found in the garden - it was a shapely black amphora with a moulded relief of athletes and horses, of Hellenistic date. (2nd century B.C.) In all the starkness of the surroundings it was very beautiful.
These descriptions of places in Greece are distinct from describing places of even greater antiquity in Australia. Although so distant in time, there is a familiarity even in the names of the Greek sites and landscape which reverberate through English literature - the Chalcidian Gulf, Aulis, Arcadia, Mount Hymettos, Marathon, Eleusis, Artemis, Atreus and Agamemnon evoke poems, paintings and tapestries from centuries of European culture. A fundamental difference between Greek sites and Illawarra sites is language - although my Greek at this time was basic, it was adequate for everyday communications. I had studied ancient Greek, I knew the deep connections in linguistic structures to the structures of English. The stories and myths of the Greek landscape had become built into psychoanalysis and European art generally, so that to be on these sites did seem to be coming into contact with the unconscious of my own culture. I had read Homer in translation, but also, fumblingly in the original Greek. I stayed in Delphi in cold rainy winter weather, and heard with a sense of unbelief the owner of the hotel describe the swirling fog as ‘omigli’, a Homeric term for mist.

Coming to the even more ancient sites of the Illawarra around Wollongong, there is a different sense of loss. The remote past of these places is not part of our cultural heritage as Europeans and we cannot make sense of them by comparing them to European patterns of civilization. Neolithic sites in Europe are interpreted as having an analogous sense of land use to our own - agriculture and settled habitation. We cannot make such assumptions about the patterns of living in the ancient Illawarra. Our loss is not only in the loss of material artefacts and language,
but in our inability to 'read' what is there, because of our unconscious alignment to the structures of our own culture and language. The language of these sites is unknown, and unconnected to a European sense of structure. The stories are mostly lost, or dim and bastardised versions transcribed through early settlers. There is also the sense of sadness in being of the colonizers' race, whose culture and policies destroyed the connection of the people to the land, and the cohesiveness of the whole society. These issues will be developed further in the documentation of the Illawarra site drawings.
After I graduated with Honours in classical Archaeology in 1965, I worked as a Research Assistant in the Nicholson Museum, Department of Archaeology, University of Sydney, where I had been employed for three years as a student researcher, re-organizing the Museum display. I went to Athens on a part scholarship, to further study at the British School of Archaeology in Athens in July 1966. My topic was the relationship of the classical past to contemporary European art - a topic I knew to be hazy. I wanted to be an artist and a scholar, though I did not know how. But I also wanted to have adventures.

CHAPTER 5

AUSTRALIAN SITES: BATHURST ISLAND 1974

Knowing the country is a fundamental part of archaeology, delineating all the intricacies of present and past connections that are centred in the specific site. Much experience in looking at ancient places in Greece and Italy, particularly that conjunction of past and present, led me to consider the real past of Australia. I felt I knew little about the depth of the past in my own country, compared to my understanding of the European past. So I made an effort to follow up my earlier studies of Aboriginal art by working in the Northern Territory, to endeavour to grasp what I felt was another kind of understanding of country than that of Europe. Connections of people and place, so absorbing in Greece and Italy, would surely have a very different connotation away from the frameworks of European thought.

Working with Aboriginal people in remote bush situations did change my perception. What was hardest to understand is that it is not so important for the person to know the place, for the man or woman to ‘frame’, categorise, and classify each element of the country, what was really important was that the country knew the person. This simple observation is a reversal of the procedures of our environmental sciences. I saw, early in our stay on Bathurst Island, a woman sitting

Beach camp, Kilimiraka, Bathurst Island, 1974. I have selected from my photographs of this time images which stress the empathy between people and place.
on the ground outside her hut in the bush, making a basket. Over her outstretched leg was a trail of green ants walking from one of their tree nests to another, across the ground, across her leg, and on to the next tree. She made no move to change this situation, and seemed impervious to it. I did realise then that my concept of nature was essentially 'other' to my sense of myself, that I had no sense of green ants being as intrinsic to the scene as I was. I would move to establish control, and distance.

The 'otherness' of nature means that we also perceive it as 'beautiful', and I never heard any comments on the aesthetics of the bush, no matter how striking, from the Tiwi people. The bush, and the creatures in it were treated entirely without sentimentality, as one would treat members of one's family, as a kind of natural extension of the human community. The country had to know you, had to be visited and 'maintained' so that the status quo would continue. A person out of his or her own country was in danger, had to be constantly alert.

To parallel the Greek experience I quote below from letters written on Bathurst Island, Northern Territory, in 1974 when I was co-ordinator of Tiwi Designs, living on the Sacred Heart Catholic Mission at Nguiu. My husband Joseph Conroy was employed to assist traditional artists to gather materials of high quality, and buy the work at reasonable prices for controlled galleries being set up by the new Aboriginal Arts Board, who were employing us. I have selected these excerpts from the diaries and letters of that time because they seem to show a growing realisation of the common stereotypes about Aboriginal people, and a shadowy perception of land, kinship, and material culture that was almost invisible to us.
because of the strength of what we imagined ourselves to be in relation to the Tiwi. After this experience of the intricate inhabiting of the country by the Tiwi, the southern bush in New South Wales seemed pervaded by loss and silence.

Bathurst Island letters

15 March 1974
I woke up at dawn to find pouring rain outside. Looking through the wooden louvres to the beach huts, I saw an old woman patiently lighting a fire without a speck of covering over herself or it. Eventually she did it, the water boiled over smouldering sticks, and an extremely large family crept out of the hut into the rain for hot tea.
Even though this house is so simple, I’m ashamed of our refinements when I see such a stoic confrontation, morning after wet morning.

30 April 1974
A momentous few days - I’ve never experienced anything like the pukumani or mourning ceremony at Carslake Is., six miles north of Snake Bay (about 50 miles from here). It was a most exceptional place, a sandy grassy spit with long beaches (famous for oysters) and scattered she-oaks. The grass is already quite dry and orange, so the colour was vivid, with blue-turquoise sea and white sand.
The ceremony was for an extremely popular leader who was murdered by his wife and there must have been five hundred people participating. It was really as though white people had never come.... Everyone was ‘painted up’ all day Saturday,
sitting in groups among the trees on a low hill looking over the grassy plain. The intricate body patterns and quite amazing masks of yellow, red and white, with plaited armlets and crowns of feathers in the hair transformed people I knew. Late on Saturday, as the sun set, a long procession went slowly down to the sacred area, with all the women wailing, and dances on the way to ‘kill’ the spirit of the woman (in gaol in Darwin) who had killed her husband.

Then the dancing and singing began in two carefully prepared areas on either side of the grave. It went on until late at night, with one lone man chanting in a broken voice all night until dawn. Everyone lit fires, and women and boys made huge grass fires to light the dancers and singers - the whole space filled with drifting smoke with most extraordinary effect - the hundred little fires and dancing figures were like one of those medieval paintings. We slept in a fragmented way on the beach with everyone else, under magnificent stars, and the new moon setting into the sea. At dawn another singer began a new chant, singing to the spirit of the dead man, here in his country. As the sun rose to great heat, so did the dancing increase in intensity. The two dancing grounds went simultaneously as well as women singing around the grave. At each ground there were eight or ten solid brilliant pukumani poles in a much older tradition than those being made on Bathurst Is. As the afternoon went on the tension of the ceremony was almost unbearable. Then the dancing stopped, all the poles were carried to the grave and set in the ground around it. There was an enormous burst of wailing and screaming as everyone
threw themselves on the grave, trying to hit themselves, throwing sand over their faces with that immemorial gesture, head thrown back, arms up.

The Mission opposed us going to this distant ceremony, telling us it would be a drunken brawl. In fact there was no drink at all, forbidden by the elder who organised the ceremony, the murdered man's father. I think we were tolerated, even welcomed, because we hired the only Bathurst Island flat bed truck prepared to go all that way, and as many people as could fit (an impossible number to me), travelled there and back on the platform.

26 May 1974
We had our first proper lesson in Tiwi - such a very intricate language after all the logic and order of Italian or Greek. All verb forms have special forms for morning, midday or evening, and suffixes and prefixes without number - some words are literally endless. And the sounds are so indecipherable for an English ear. It must be so difficult for the Tiwi to learn English too.
23 July 1974
The contrast between the Mission and the outside world was heightened this week by the visit of sixteen bishops from all over Australia who were variously entertained by the Tiwi. Some of the bishops were very doddery and often not really there, you know how important people are so full of themselves that they can't really communicate with other people. They were not really an impressive lot of clerics: many of them sagging and sweaty. To be quite honest I thought the old Aboriginal men sitting motionless and crosslegged at the gathering looked far more 'spiritual' and aware than the portly white men.

29 July 1974
We all went out bush with Declan Apuatimi and Stanislaus Purantatameri to cut down ironwood - Stanislaus knew where there were some weathered bits. On the way home there was a goanna over the track, we stopped, Declan got out treading softly on his toes and whistling in a high toneless sound. He crept after it, and breaking its neck with one blow from a branch carried it very carefully back to the truck.
He looked at me sideways and said 'lunch' - he knows white people well and their stereotypes of the Tiwi.
Playing the same game, we met Bob One on the beach, in a loincloth, still covered in red ochre from a ceremony. He was reading a Phantom comic that the Mission Post Office is now selling. As he hopped on to the ferry for Melville Island he gave us a terrific grin and said ‘Phantom is my real brother’. Its the Tiwi who are really controlling many situations, and gently mock us.¹

On Thursday we got a truck and went over to Garden Point and Snake Bay on Melville Island, it was mercilessly hot and dry. The settlement seemed bleak, all the artists in decline, or not wanting to talk to us. Old ‘Black Joe’ at Snake Bay has died, he’s really the last of the fully tribalised leaders with all the mythology in his head. So it was very sad.

28 August 1974
I’ve just had an extraordinary few days. I decided to go out bush with a group of ten women and twenty two children of all ages, and Liz Murphy from the Mission, to a beach about forty five miles from here, nearly at Cape Fourcroy. After a long dusty journey on the back of a flat-bed truck eating tinned peaches with our fingers (the last store delicacy) we were deposited at such a beautiful beach, and the truck went back to the mission. The beach had high white sand hills covered in a rich vegetation, almost jungle like in parts, and a creek about a quarter of a mile from where we camped. Two vast fig-like trees looked up and down the beach. The women divided into two groups and we made our camps. It was the most perfect
place, cool and shady all day and sheltered at night - we slept on sand around fires. Apart from a few packets of tea, sugar and flour, no supplies were brought. We were to live from the bush.

I went out hunting morning and evening - you look at the bush with quite a different eye. Usually five or six women went out together and divided into smaller groups, constantly calling out to each other - the bush is bewildering, easy to get separated. But they could look at footprints in the sand and tell you who it was. It was obviously incredible that one would not know a friend or relative's footprint, as distinctive as any facial feature. Hollow logs were of particular interest, you kneel down and shine the reflected light from a milk tin lid or tobacco tin down into the inside. If you're lucky there's a carpet snake, or a bandicoot - so you chop a big hole in the log and manoeuvre so that you can grab the animal and quickly kill it. Bandicoots and possums are whirled around by the tail and thumped on the head - a very quick death. Most of the women were rather scared of the big carpet snakes, all over eight foot long, so there was much screaming and joking, and then we all killed it with sticks lying to hand in the bush. (I helped them kill, wanting to get the animals out of their misery as soon as possible.) The women watched the carpet snake writhing with its last breath and said, 'Poor thing, look at her, she's cryin for her husband'. (They always hoped to find the 'husband', but all the snakes we caught were single.)

But it wasn't only hollow logs - all the standing dead trees were minutely scrutinised for possum scratches or sugar bag. You can see the tiny stingless bees
going in and out, if your eyes are very sharp and attuned to the flash of a minute wing against the sky. We always seemed to find sugarbag about fifty feet up in huge old bloodwood or ironwood trees, but nothing would deter Milly or Anna, they'd get to with their tiny axes with incredible determination (who said the Tiwi were lazy? hunting is such hard work) and sooner or later that big tree would come crashing down - then they'd rush to check any hollows for possums and get the sugarbag. The sugarbag comes in reddish brown waxy cells - like little bags, not proper honeycomb - there are different kinds. The bees can't sting so it's quite easy. And the honey is so delicious - you suck the soft wax until it squeezes out - it has such a delicate flavour and is so fortifying in the hot exhausting process of hunting. They tell me it cures all sorts of illnesses which I can believe.

Quite apart from animals there were plants. The thick patches of rainforest which stand in the dryer gum and palm forest were avoided because of the likely presence of spirits, despite food sources there. A lone black cockatoo flying over the trees was immediately identified as a spirit creature. We dug for yams, and cut the centre part out of those fanleaved palms to roast - a nutty flavour. There were nuts as sweet as macadamias on some jungly trees, and the pandanus nuts are like almonds. And cycad nuts, which have to be soaked for three days.

After the first day's hunting we were sitting by the fire, and Pauline, the oldest woman, started to yawn and said that that meant the turtles were coming up the beach to lay eggs. It was bright moonlight - almost like day on the white sand, and the tide halfway in. So Milly, Margaret Mary, Anna and I went along the beach for about two miles - and found turtle tracks, fresh ones and a big mound of sand where she'd just laid her eggs (forty six of them they counted later) and there she was in the moonlight, a huge creature hurling sand around with her flippers as she dug another hole. They have such gentle faces, I really hated the idea of having to kill her. There are hundreds of turtles coming in all up and down those remote beaches, and the women were beside themselves with delight, jumping up and down like little girls. They wanted to tell the others back at the camp, but didn't want to leave their prize, so I went back alone along the beach to call the others. Also, it is known that the ever present night spirits don't trouble a white woman, even when she walks alone. It was so quiet there, just fires, everyone asleep, but when I said in a matter of fact voice - 'They've found a big turtle', there was instant pandemonium, everyone surging down the beach in an instant. I couldn't look while the turtle was turned on her back and killed, and then dragged all the way back to camp.

I stayed out in the bush four nights and learnt so much. I played and swam a lot with the children who improvised amazing games and taught me to dance. They taught me to whistle hermit crabs out of their shells, and seemed to think nothing
of walking four or five miles down the beach to see a place where giant footprints had been seen recently. I shared a blanket at night with Millie's little girl Rose, where we slept on the beach beside the fire. One night I woke about 2 am, chilly, to put more wood on the fire and noticed Pauline, the older woman and mother of at least six children crouched over a sparky fire laughing softly with a friend. They'd decided to have a meal in the middle of the night, and looked so happy, absolutely at home.

Milly kindly spoke English to me, and I often sat with her and Anna and listened to the endless stories of complexities of kin, of 'wrong' marriages cursed with infertility, of having to abandon the Mission in the war when they were children, because of the Japanese raids, and go back to living off the bush. Lots of talk about spirits, the 'mopaditi' whom the children claimed to see quite often, even in the old mango beside the Mission store.

It was such a memorable place, to watch dawns and sunsets, moonrise and set, and stars, and such an abundance of birds and insects. I can see how hard it must be to adapt to all our complications after living like that. The women were so warm and friendly to me.

These Bathurst Island letters contrast with the places described in the Greek letters, because of the vital presence of the Tiwi which is held within the larger context of the burial peninsula or the beach campsite. The bush sites become alive through the active imagination of the people living in them: an imagination profoundly different to the assumptions we make, through long traditions of western scholarship, of the inhabiting of ancient Greek places. The abandoned and fragmentary sites on the Illawarra coast near Wollongong become all the more haunting, after having observed the living presence of the Tiwi, with their precise and complex mapping and linking of every aspect of country. The rich intricacy of language and ritual is not reflected in the simplicity of the material culture as I have described it at the beach camp, a fragile network which vanishes without a trace. The broken bits of shell and bone, the stone tools on the Illawarra sites give little indication of the language in which they were immersed, of the actions and subtle behaviour patterns that formed them.

Reciprocity with land

What I realised when living close to the Tiwi, watching artists at work, attending ceremonies or just talking to people, was a different framing, a different set of
assumptions about what is 'normal' in our relationship with the land. Western art forms assume it is 'natural' for there to be a separation between the observer and the observed, that one is active, one passive. The landscape is seen by the artist, but it would seem an animistic throw back to assume that the landscape also 'sees' the artist. Anthropocentric assumptions are so normal to us that they are invisible. People working closely with the land, however, sometimes have this sense of reciprocity, in European as well as indigenous cultures. Archaeologists certainly become aware of the character of the site in a total way, of weather and circumstance, of working with the site, or against it. Ian Wedde in talking about the connection to landscape in Rosalie Gascoigne's work describes exactly this sensitivity to nuances:

Any eye trained in the history of location will not need to find in it monuments of significance. The most minimal of occasions - a wrinkle on the land's surface - will invoke a whole community of signs, and a whole community of people who understand them.²

Post-structuralism dissolves this duality of observer and observed, in theory, and therefore opens out possible interpretations, a 'community of signs'. Ivor Indyk, in a lecture on postmodern perceptions of landscape³, stressed that significance is found not only in things themselves but in the relationships that form them, such as mapping, tracing, site topography. Thus the mutual relationship between Aboriginal people and land is in fact central to understanding the results of that relationship, which may be what we call 'art'. He inferred that the eclectism of current thought is itself an expression of the way our experience is formed by migration and displacement, loss, and unexpected returns, that is, by our changing relationship to place.

Similarly, Ross Gibson talked about the intermeshed connections with land in a lecture called Enchanted Country, where he investigated a heritage of many different approaches to mapping the land, each requiring a different 'map'. The same stretch of country mapped by a Chinese market gardener, an Aboriginal, a geographer may all give a different emphasis to the physical elements of the landscape because of different psychological requirements. The stories we tell of the land, the 'chants' that bind us to place, like those Greek myths that are still so inseparable from sites, are part of our understanding of place.⁴ It is the exact nature of our relationship to the land that influences how we represent it, there is no 'right' model. A multiple 'reading' of country, colonial, agricultural, artistic and
Aboriginal is presented in the book *Reading the Country* where these wide ranging and sometimes incompatible readings of a particular stretch of the Kimberleys in Western Australia emphasize precisely this point of differing relationships to land.\(^5\)

Banduk Marika, a contemporary Yolngu artist from Yirrkala in northeastern Arnhemland was asked what art meant to her people, and replied, ‘Art is our roots, art is our land, - but we don’t call it ‘art’...’ \(^6\) That is, art is not a separate activity to the one of looking after and being looked after by the land, it is a result of this ordinary and essential part of daily life. The story may function as a bark painting but equally, it may be a map. If you know the stories you know the land - to be guided across Arnhemland you would need to find people in adjoining territories who know the connecting link in the journeyings of the mythological ancestor who first traversed that tract of land. By singing that story, you would have the map.

This reversal of our normal perception, that is, of country becoming conscious of the person, of land informing the actions of those encompassed by it, rather than people assuming control over land, was brought home to me forcefully while attending a conference of Traditional Elders at the headquarters of the Iroquois Confederacy, at Onondaga in New York State, U.S.A.\(^7\) I attended as a ‘minder’ for Banduk and Dhuwarrwarr Marika, and was the only white woman living in that very large assemblage of indigenous people from all over the Americas and elsewhere. Because of outrage towards actions of white people I was in a vulnerable position as a representative of the race of oppressors, and was excluded with some animosity by the Mohawk women from taking part in the daily circles of discussion. Some of the older men were concerned at the tension surrounding me, and decided to mitigate the situation by performing a ceremonial blessing, where I was introduced to the land by the elder, and the land was asked to help me. The connection between people and elements of the landscape for which they had a particular affinity (eagles, rain, deer, crows) was continually affirmed, with these elements almost forming another participating entity throughout the conference. Ben Pease, a ceremonial leader of the Crow people, whose ‘language’ name was translated as ‘Takes the gun from enemy camps’ (a peacemaker) performed this blessing for me.

Ben took me along the road to the sweat lodge, through the camp of the Seminol Indians, down a narrow track into the woods - sumac and closely growing small trees - to a low dome-like structure made of 14 willow sticks lashed together (the number of stars in the Big Dipper constellation), with heavy canvas on top, cedar
leaves on the earth floor, a pit in the centre. Everything was swept clean and orderly. A small creek nearby was dammed to make a shallow greenish pool, rimmed by many wildflowers, and inhabited by a large frog. Ben found a patch of sunny grass not far from the stream, and sat me down facing east - took his box with an Indian pattern on it, and an eagle feather that a woman had given Monty, his adopted grandson on this reservation. 'I would have had to borrow a fan otherwise' he said - 'there's a right time for everything, and this feather was just left by the child beside me.' He got out a tiny pottery hearth, took a bit of charcoal and lit it from a candle. Turquoise, red and tan, with a touch of yellow are the colours of these much-used objects. He took out three leather bags, tightly thonged; one contained sweetgrass for the valleys, one had sage for the plains and prairies, and one cedar for the mountains, crushed and dried. He sprinkled sweetgrass on the burning coal and blessed me in the language - touching eyes, hands, mouth, feet, with the feather and holding up the little hearth so that the smoke was very close to my nose. He began with the 'valleys of the world' because we were in a valley and asked them to know me, to help my hands to be skilful, my mouth to speak the truth, to help my loved ones and all those close to me, and for my feet to walk close to the earth. This was a rough translation, he said, and at the end of each section he said Aho! and asked me to repeat it. Then he sprinkled on sage - so pungent, and asked the plains of the world to bless me, help me, and then next, the cedar, for the mountains of the world. The same words were repeated again and again in the extraordinary clicking elusive language.8

This interaction with the landscape is found too within marginal European peasant traditions, even in colonial Australia, away from the Cartesian model of reason as the ordering principle that first stirred in the anthropocentrism of early Greek civilization. In Australia the land shapes us, as much as we try to control it with our rational grids of order. As I write, bushfires inflame the country around Sydney, indicative of our lack of 'reciprocity' in mediating the forces of weather, wind, and circumstances of house sites.

Conclusion

Being sensitive to the intricacies of the site bind me to that piece of land, my whole organism, working on the site from dawn to dusk, becomes aligned to that place, the body in fact changes. Even drawing for a whole day in the sand dunes and middens, changes me. And yet, the language I speak, the inherent assumptions of the linguistic structure which goes back to the prehistory of Europe, the facts of colonization mean that the relationship with the land will never be identical or even comparable to that of an Aboriginal person of pre-contact times, or to a
contemporary Koorie. Another history and language has been layered on to the ground.

Having located the influence of the archaeological eye on ways of perceiving place, this study now turns to tapestry and textiles, the area of my practice. Although grids, layers, sections, and tiny and laborious markings inform both archaeology
and tapestry, the real connection between these very different disciplines is the preoccupation with 'a sense of place' as both subject and inspiration.

1 The European names of the Tiwi were given to them by the Mission, which was run by the Order of the Sacred Heart. The names were all saints' names, sometimes names very unusual in 1970's Australia - Bede, Hyacinth, Gabriel, Agnes, Antoinette, Annunciata, Raphael, were the names of people I worked with closely. Each European name was accompanied by the 'surname' of the family group. Although my use of the European names has been criticised as paternalistic by Koori people, I felt that in some ways I would have been trespassing on very personal territory to use the Tiwi name. Other names such as 'Bob One' or 'Sugar Bag', 'Mickey Rooney' were nicknames given in the war, or by traders, and certainly did not have the resonance of the Mission names.


6 Banduk Marika, Postgraduate Research Colloquia, School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, August, 1991.


8 From my Onondaga diary, August, 1990. It did seem to soften the situation, the Mohawk women noticed what the men did, and the Iroquois women we were staying with were supportive.
PART 3

TAPESTRY AND TEXTILES

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INTRODUCTION

PART 3: TAPESTRY AND TEXTILES

All my friends who could left Australia in the 1960s to get to Europe, away from the unbearable sense of compromise, lack of intellectual passion, to complexities of talk and thought, away from the rigid frameworks of the late Menzies era.

My mother’s and grandmothers’ lives had not encompassed university, or any other possibility of escape from the domestic round. The homes were full of treasures, particularly intricate textiles, made at night - crochet, embroidery, closets full of linen brought from Scotland to give substance to the ‘colonial’ household. Embroideries of angels with beaded wings and floating draperies, and of Queen Elizabeth I made out of old Victorian silk wedding dresses had haunted my childhood. Women’s lives were channelled to glorify the intense private relationships of family, the rituals of table, of being well dressed and ornamented. My aunt who had never married was considered eccentric for her lack of constraint, for having seven cats, for wearing three dresses at once, for having ice cream for breakfast, and pinning a selection of huge opals all over her saggy front with large safety pins, and neglecting to wear corsets. Yet to me she seemed freer, more alive, though her eyes were so sad, ‘wasting’ her inherited fortune on boarding stray cats, than the women struggling to be impeccable in ordered households.

In Europe, in Florence where I worked in a museum, there was an edgy unrest among young people. My Italian friends questioned every rule, the ties of marriage, the structures of state, of capitalism, of the art establishments. Pop art came to Florence, from America, Arte Povera and a retrospective of de Chirico.
was shown in the baroque Palazzi. There were seven varieties of communism defended in the museum workplace. The students in all Tuscan universities went on strike, against inadequate and outmoded institutions. Strikes were held constantly for basic workers rights. I moved amongst it all, only really clear that the certainties and clear demarcations of a 1950s childhood would never exist again.

In London I was introduced to tapestry and fibre through a night class in weaving. At this time there seemed to be an insatiable fervour for the materiality of texture, the thingness, the uncontrollable abundance of exotic fibres - jute, sisal, flax, hemp. All kinds of animal hairs - alpaca, camel, silk of many kinds, rabbit, goat, coloured sheep were roughly spun or twisted in most rudimentary ways in an orgy of physical immersion in the properties of malleable, unknown fibres.

This was the era of the pill, of new freedoms for the domain of Eros - the sensuous materials said what language hardly dared. Magdalena Abakanowicz filled the Stedelik Museum in Amsterdam with giant vulva-like woven forms. People landed on the moon, and we watched on television. Wild bands and mind-bending drugs were evident where we lived on Notting Hill Gate. Curators at the British Museum came to work under the influence of LSD, in purple suits. A time to break free, to reject the past. There was a fear of the future as well as fear of the constrictions of the past. Environmental doom began to be talked of. The Cold War, the Iron Curtain were immutable, even though Kruschev had seemed to soften the image for awhile, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 made communism seem unchangeable, and monstrous. In Australia my brother just missed being sent to the Vietnam war.

How can the rise of textiles as an expressive force not be linked to the passions of the time?

Notebook, December 1993

Perhaps those early years in London working at archaeological drawing in the British Museum by day, absorbing ancient textile and pottery fragments as objects to handle and document, and learning the processes of tapestry at evening classes, are emblematic of the layers of involvement experienced later in the growing crafts movement of Australia. In approaching this layering I shall refer to the insights of feminism and psychoanalysis, as well as the object and relationship centred methodologies of archaeology and anthropology. My own ‘layers’ involved domestic textiles, those finely worked cloths of my female ancestors, as well as an orientation to the structures and processes of the Bauhaus orientated textile
movement, and the oppositional movement to establish an image based flat tapestry in Australia.

Connecting archaeology to tapestry first came about through working with Coptic artefacts and textiles from late Roman Egypt in the British Museum. The women in my family, who had never had 'careers' had always made textiles, especially embroidery, and I had tried to learn tapestry weaving in Sydney before leaving for Europe. No one had any information, although I had found a book on the Harrania tapestries made by children in Egypt. Tapestry seemed to offer a wide scope compared to the feminine constraints and domestic arena of my family textile tradition, yet retained a sympathetic world of imagery and touch. The traditional constraints presented textiles as a private domestic affair outside any serious arts endeavour in the wider sphere.

My mother is talking, as we sit down to lunch. On the table is an exquisite linen cloth with drawn thread work and a finely crocheted edge. 'My mother (Ida, born Scotland 1887) made this as a little girl, with Granny (born Scotland about 1860), she used to say how terribly hard it was to draw out the threads. Granny did the fine embroidery. There was nothing else for them to do, the men did all the important work. They just used to sit, looked after by servants and do this fine, fine work.'

Notebook, 2/3/93

I became enchanted with the medium of woven tapestry in London, just as the crafts movement was expanding and developing all over the western world. Tapestry seemed to offer a materiality of image, a substantiality that could be explored to evoke images in a different way from painting. The antiquity of the tapestry technique, its resonant associations with the European past, seemed to suggest a piquant contrast to the harshness of the Australian environment, to which I eventually returned. Without losing the love of objects from the classical world, it was satisfying at last to be able to imagine and make work in the present after such an immersion in the past.

The archaeological grid is comparable to the tiny grid of connecting threads that construct a tapestry and requires punctilious measurement, analysis and reflection, a sifting and placing of fragments of material within a context. Similarly, tapestry and textiles are about connections, building up a web in many minute overlappings of warp and weft. The physical site may require years of work in collaborative
relationships; similarly a tapestry requires a thorough immersion in its ‘site’ in terms of time. The time-consuming character of tapestry, so often considered derogatively by artforms valuing the gesture, mirrors the slow excavation of the site. Zagora, in Andros, was excavated by the Department of Archaeology, University of Sydney, over a ten year period.

Because textiles and tapestry in Europe have for time immemorial been the province of women, they have been overlooked in the archaeological record, which has predominantly been the province of male archaeologists. Elizabeth Barber has re-assessed the early evidence for weaving in the Mediterranean and has pointed out that Greek vasepainting of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. is much more likely to document mnemonic textiles, rather than being derived from wall painting. That these designs could represent textiles was not able to be perceived by archaeologists whose sensitivities were honed to the arts of painting and sculpture and who were entirely unfamiliar with the ‘feminine’ realm of textiles.²

Similarly, the emergence of women as artists and craftspeople over the last twenty five years in Australia has lead to a theoretical re-assessment of textiles and tapestry in contemporary practice. The very marginality of textiles and tapestry can open up areas of current theory. The third section of this study examines the meanings ascribed to these practices, and their relationship to each other.

CHAPTER 6

TEXTILE UPRISINGS: THE TACTILE UNCONSCIOUS

The warp is stretched
For warrior’s death.
The weft in the loom
Drips with blood.
The battle darkens
Under our fingers
The tapestry grows
Red as Heart’s Blood
Blue as corpses
The web of battle.

What is this woof?
The guts of men
The weights on the warp
Their slaughtered heads
These are our spindles
Blood splashed spears.
An iron loom frame
And the reels, arrows;
With swords for shuttles
This war web we weave
Valkyries weaving
The web of victory...

Eleventh century Song of the Valkyries^1

The identification of textiles with parts of the body, in terms of dismemberment and fragmentation is forcefully articulated in this northern Europe poem, where the power of the weaver over the textile was likened to the power of the Fates, the Valkyries, as they control life and death.

The resurgence of textiles as an expressive medium is examined in this chapter, textiles whose size and scale, and overwhelming textural presence bore no relationship to domestic textiles. Beginning in the mid 1960s in eastern Europe and in the United States this textile revolution made its way to Australia and by the early 1970s was a dominating force in the emerging craft world. Tapestry was perceived merely as part of the vocabulary of textile techniques by fibre artists. On the other hand, the understandings of the textile medium by tapestry practitioners who desired a pure Gobelin form of tapestry remained fundamentally different to and often opposed to the assumptions made by the fibre movement. Because I was involved in both areas, some of this study will be informed by my own vivid memories of that time.
The 'documents' of the period provided both samples of work and texts about those images. Considerations of the actual objects and their physical characteristics and contexts are also fundamental in coming to terms with this time.

Object-centred approaches are juxtaposed with current discussions of feminist and psychoanalytic ideas, in trying to fully comprehend what seems in retrospect a brief outpouring of tactile sensibility. In the 1990s this period of the 'hairy monstrosities' is often referred to derogatively, and even with abhorrence. Weavings at this time were often called 'wall-hangings' or even 'tapestries' but they rarely incorporated images into a flat surface. There was a great sensual involvement with exuberant texture and a three-dimensional surface. A sense of excitement grew about the large scale possibilities of this new medium, and its relationship to architecture. The 'signs and traces' of very old traditions from many cultures were raided and transformed into a new kind of textile that could be exhibited in major galleries and command serious critical attention, even from the avant-garde artworld.

These fibre works still bring forth strong responses, often expressions of intense dislike and embarrassment. For example, Stephen Inglis of the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa has referred to the distaste museum curators had for such work, in storing and conserving the vast scale and heaviness of these giant textile pieces of the 1970s. He continued:

Even more problematic was the baggage these pieces seemed almost literally to carry in the public imagination. The initial excitement of such works seemed in inverse relation to the longevity of their appeal and as their attraction was often more physical than intellectual and social they quickly sank into stereotype. That this phase of textile art still generates so much emotion and derision, such as a notice in the Encyclopaedia of Bad Taste, indicates to me that it was mining a rich seam of social sensitivity.

Such emotions and antipathies need to be investigated. There is a sense in which much of this work is now seen as almost obscene, tasteless, representing perhaps an anal and infantile corporeality that is best concealed, and certainly not displayed in the public sphere.
The major force in textiles in New South Wales in the 1970s was what might be called sculptural weaving, with its origins in Eastern Europe, but also influenced by the work of American weavers such as Sheila Hicks and Lenore Tawney who first exhibited widely in the early 1960s. There was a tremendous interest in ‘ethnic’ weaving. Ancient Coptic and Peruvian techniques were eagerly discussed, and all kinds of primitive looms and dyeing techniques resurrected. The alternative movement, back to the earth ideologies, the growing environmental concerns all seemed connected to this obsession with primeval forms. The new feminism aroused intense discussion and polemic, as did all the aspects of a liberated sexuality.

Textiles and language

At the same time as the new surge of interest in craft throughout the western world, philosophies of language became influential as a way of structuring society, as a way of understanding kinship, mythology and religion.

The fact that language not only describes and reflects reality but also helps to construct and form it has become a main preoccupation of those thinkers, some of whom were anthropologists and linguistic analysts, who are known as structuralists and poststructuralists. The linguistic units that make up a language are seen to be a structural system that can be applied to social systems, narrative and image-making. The association of language with textiles is a very ancient one: the very development of textiles is entangled with words that are embedded in the way we think about the processes of connection and relationship. E.J.W. Barber has shown in a recent comprehensive study of prehistoric textiles, how the investigation of linguistic evidence from Latin, Sanscrit, Greek - all Indo-European sources - can enable archaeological and technical inferences to be made about the processes of textiles.5

Language is also pervaded with metaphors from textiles. The manipulation of thread into cloth of all kinds has been a metaphor for the structures of the imagination through the long history of woven and sewn artefacts, not only in Australia, but in the countries from which our material culture derives. This quote from The Golden Bough imparts an atavistic quality to textiles, as though they were a kind of ‘throw-back’.
All the quaint superstitions, old world maxims, venerable saws which the ingenuity of savage philosophers elaborated long ago and which old women at chimney corners still impart—all these antique fancies clustered, all these cobwebs of the brain were spun about the path of the old king, the human god, who enmeshed in them like a fly in the toils of a spider could hardly stir a limb for the threads of custom, light as air but strong as links of iron, that crossing and overcrossing each other in an endless maze bound him fast within a network of observances from which death or deposition alone could release him. 

But it is worth recalling that the Latin root for atavism is \textit{atavus}, meaning ancestor. The connotations of ancestry indicate the antiquity of persistent textile metaphors for holding, binding and intersecting. The frequent use of such metaphors in every kind of text, (from Mills and Boon romances to scientific treatises on the nervous system) means that there is often more likelihood of meeting an ‘art’ textile in a text than in reality - textiles become a generally understood, amorphous body of signs quite apart from their material reality. In such a powerful text as the Valkyrie poem at the head of this chapter we can see that the relationship of metaphor to artefact is a close one. In simpler societies to be involved in the process of making the artefact is actually to be involved in the process it represents metaphorically. For example the indigo dyers of Indonesia transform, and have power over, the transition to death when they control the making of shrouds, of fertility, when they make the bride dress.\footnote{The thing \textit{is} the quality it symbolises. The artefact orders the imagination, as well as the other way around. Things which are no longer common, but which once were, pervade the language still as metaphors: horseshoes, candles, veils and tapestries. As Terence Hawkes states: } 

\begin{quote}
Metaphor is not fanciful embroidery of the facts. It is a way of experiencing the facts. It is a way of thinking and living: an imaginative projection of the truth. As such it is at the heart of the ‘made’.
\end{quote}

In trying to understand how language might form and construct our society contemporary French thought has suggested a layering in the levels of language which reflect the layering of society. Below all conscious thought, according to Jacques Lacan\footnote{Over this inchoate mass is imposed language, which forms a ‘symbolic’ order, which structures and gives system and law to the unformed, unconscious signs and traces beneath it. These ideas are influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud, who also tried to understand the structures and conflicts in society.}, is a primary level of sensation which precedes the acquisition of language in the child. Over this inchoate mass is imposed language, which forms a ‘symbolic’ order, which structures and gives system and law to the unformed, unconscious signs and traces beneath it. These ideas are influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud, who also tried to understand the structures and conflicts in society.
by comparison with the formation of the ego in the psyche of the child.

In this chapter the position of textiles is compared to that of the pre-linguistic area of pure sensory experience. Textiles such as unnoticed rags, scraps, as well as coverings - curtains, carpets, quilts and blankets, soften our everyday lives, and become an almost invisible background for events and actions. The association of textiles in our culture with the feminine and the domestic, with the cloths that accompany the private rituals of birth, marriage and death, is indisputable. Nappies, sheets, towels, muslin, mosquito nets pervade our lives, as do veils, cascades of satin, silk, lace, embroidery, family heirlooms. The close physical association with the body is intrinsic to cloth, and our first memories are often imbued with textiles. A friend told me her earliest memory was being pressed to her grandmother's soft and scented chest. Similarly, Virginia Woolf recounts a memory of her mother's floral dress, while sitting on her lap in a train when little more than a baby.10

To continue this analogy, the more conscious layer which orders and controls this underlying, pre-linguistic area can be compared to the areas of dominant art practice. Despite an ideology of revolution the dominant art practices are related to the power structures of law and capital, and are seen as being 'critically significant' in comparison to textiles. At certain crucial historical moments, according to the influential French writer Julia Kristeva, the control of this upper ordered layer lapses, with the result that 'madness, holiness and poetry' erupt into social orders.11 In these abnormal periods of rupture and renovation boundaries
are transgressed, but then the unconscious elements become absorbed into a new code of order.

Because of the constant references to an innate physicality in fibre art of the 1970s, to a world of tactility and structure bound up with ‘nature’ and reflected in the ‘instinct’ of the artists, psychoanalytic/post-structural areas of theory are very relevant. There seems to me to be alluring convergences in playing off ideas of the formation of the subject, of pre-linguistic modes of being, against the very materialistic, and very feeling world of this exceptional moment in fibre in 1970s. In fact, the psychoanalytic and semiotic ideas of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, were being developed at the same time in history, in the 1960s and 70s as this emerging ‘fibre art’ in Europe and America. Do these theories help in understanding the sudden eruption of these non-traditional works, without function or ancestry? I think the theories do offer an intriguing model for placing textiles within the wider social realm.

**Reading Craft Discourse 1972-1985**

The evidence to substantiate these ideas is found by letting the artists and writers of the time speak for themselves. The first twelve years of the magazine *Craft Australia*, 1972-85, give numerous references to fibre exhibitions, commissions, and biographies. The *Handweaver and Spinners Journal*, is one of the earliest craft journals, as the Handweaver and Spinners’ Guild was formed in 1949, but in this study I have found the issues for the years 1978-1979 when Beth Hatton was the editor particularly useful. One of the first surveys of Australian craft, *The
Artist Craftsman in Australia: Aspects of sensibility, published 1972, is typical of the time, with individual profiles of artists talking about their work. The early 1970s were a critical time for the crafts, with the establishment of Craft Councils, and a new Labor Government which greatly extended funding for the crafts through the Australia Council. By 1985 the great momentum of the ‘fibre’ movement had begun to quieten and dissolve. As well, catalogues of exhibitions are quoted which refer to the same artists described in the journals. The craftspeople here all used constructed textiles, that is, weaving and knotting techniques.

The ‘archaeological’ method of investigating the ‘documents’ that accompany the objects is followed through a textual analysis of the understanding of material and its relation to the craftsperson made in these writings, both by artists and those writing about them.

Materiality and process

The writing in these journals stressed the materiality of work as a prime
motivation, the exploration of different materials and technical processes were seen as essential. Most of these artists first mentioned materials, rather than any concept, when they began to talk about their work. The materials are the concept, containing in themselves a key to a different perception of the natural world.

Prue Medlin, a weaver of vibrant images with a strong tactility, said in 1972:

I like richness of colour and texture in the materials I use. The materials must be strong, but warm, of linens, lincoln fleece roughly spun, dyed but not with natural dyes though in natural dye colours, brilliant yet consciously uneven and subtle.14

Mona Hessing, an extremely influential Australian weaver exhibiting internationally expressed her feelings about her work at the same time:

My initial excitement and stimulus comes from basic materials at hand. They activate ideas and provide a palette to visually speak my thoughts... I appreciate materials responding in a direct and immediate way, allowing manipulation and construction of manoeuvrable and pliable forms.15

Roger Oates, a distinguished English weaver, also talked of ‘raw’ materials and ‘in one’s hands’ in 1974:

I began to appreciate the qualities inherent in raw materials. The importance of these textures, when combined with weaving structure, can be exploited on the loom... It’s always the thread, structure, interlacing.. one’s hands can form rope into something in terms of its own sculpture.16

The outstanding influence in textile fibre art at this time came from Polish artists. Many of the articles about weaving and constructed textiles in the two Australian journals constantly refered to the awe inspiring example of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Eva Pachuka and from Rumania, Ritzi and Peter Jacobi. Magdalena Abakanowicz’ theatrical and compelling use of fibre was demonstrated in a large exhibition in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1976. She described her use of the material:

In the mid 50s Poland was the only European country where artists started to show interest in weaving as a means of free artistic expression, and they carried out experiments to combine various techniques and materials. I joined them because I felt what I had to say had to be said in a soft material and on a large scale.. I felt that a skein of thread contained enormous and as yet undiscovered possibilities for
The communication of these strong feelings about materials, the contact with the instinctive and creative within each person was seen frequently as an essential responsibility of the fibre artist. Teaching was therefore an ideal, a communication of creativity, to unleash repressed creativity in the student. Ewa Pachuka, talking about her hope of teaching people in Tasmania in 1977 emphasised:

I want to see craft coming from the very roots of the people. They are close to the land and the animals. It is their subconscious and they all have the potential to be creative and innovative.18

Jutta Feddersen gave workshops where each student investigated a particular aspect of form and material:

I believe that in fibre sculpture your form is the most important thing, then texture and colour. I stressed step by step how she must understand the material - fine parts and fine areas, and interrupting the heavy parts sometimes, colour relationships...19
Ian Arcus came to tapestry very much from the Bauhaus viewpoint of materials and form, not through the explicit content of images:

Of primary importance in designing for a tapestry...is that the weaving technique itself dictates the form of the tapestry...My approach is to allow designs to emerge from the weaving, then I do not need to bother about the technique limiting the design... I have reached the stage where I can direct the expression to fit the technique.20

The importance of visiting 'master craftsmen' like Roger Oates is emphasised, and models set up for local emulation. Marianne Straub at a Loomcraft School in 1979 said in an interview with me:

In weaving you must explore the structural possibilities of the technique: designing does not come from the head only, it comes from the interaction between you and your material. If you put a toddler in the sandpit you do not tell him what to do. The child gradually becomes more conscious of sand, getting to know the 'design limits' of sand while playing. The child establishes a dialogue with himself and the sticks, stones and sand with which he plays. The intuitive understanding of the material is therefore of primary importance.21

It is intriguing to note in these statements the frequent mention of the child's relationship to materials, as though this was the forming experience that is being recaptured. Such a connection to early experiences is indicated in an interview with Claire Zeisler a notable textile artist in the United States whose pieces are characterised by their free-falling fibre. She identified childhood longings as a source for the libidinous flow of threads in an interview published in an American journal in 1983:

I'm so crazy about raw threads, ...air must have some kind of special meaning for me way back in my past... I always wanted to have long flowing hair, but my hair never grew. I had a nurse who had such long hair she could sit on it. I thought that was marvellous. And when I was a good little girl she allowed me to comb and brush her hair. I think all my pieces came out of that.22

**Materials and Nature**

Nature is the background to the material world, and the world of natural forms in their pristine purity is essentially related to the 'natural' materials so prized by the
weaver. Nature interfered with through human agency, or human culture itself is hardly touched on. It was an ideal, untouched, even uncultivated nature, an ‘original’ nature that the artist wants to evoke. Mystery and unpredictability in the response of the materials is allied to these qualities in the landscape. At this time, the preservation of ‘wilderness’ areas were ardently advocated, and conservation societies emerging.

Janet Brereton commented on her large knotted pieces in 1972:

The formal symmetry of nature is combined with the splitting and merging of knotted strands reminiscent of vines and tendrils...The combinations of different shades of colour add a light to the form which suggests the natural environment in which I live, the pale green tips against darker rainforest foliage or the shades of brown and fawn on the natural dune grasses.... The soft materials are above all organic by nature. The rope strands grow and expand and can fill enormous areas within the confines of walls and spaces.23

Like Solvig Baas Becking and Jutta Feddersen, the pure forms of ‘nature’ were allied to the ‘nature’ of weaving structures in Ian Arcus’ perception of his work:

Landscape is very important to me and all the patterns I use relate to natural forms which become synthesised in my head.\(^{24}\)

Heidi Wursig’s knotted fibre was described by Heather Johnson in 1984 in terms of its relation to nature, to furrowed land, to circular Aboriginal sand paintings. Her fibre was seen as an evocation of primeval land.\(^{25}\)

Magdalena Abakanowicz articulated the parallel of fibre and nature clearly:

> Rope is like a petrified organism, like a muscle devoid of activity. I sense the strength of rope which is carried by all twined elements, such as a tree, a human hand, a bird’s wing, all built of countless cooperating parts. I have developed a growing interest in the problem of fibre - the fibre omnipresent in the whole organic world around me, the fibre in the plants and cells of our bodies.\(^{26}\)

My woven forms grow with a leisurely rhythm like creations of nature, and like them they are organic. .. The fibre which I use in my work, derives from plants and is similar to that from which we are ourselves composed.\(^{27}\)
Beyond the known

Risk taking in regard to materials was the exciting and provocative element in textiles of this time. The unknown factor of risk was paralleled in ideas in painting which also favoured a gigantic scale. A liberating freedom in use of previously unused materials is also referred to in terms of individual self expression, as the exploration of new realms of texture, surface and three dimensions.

Mona Hessing describes the making of her large pieces in 1972:

The element of mystery is an important part of the experience... The concept of a non-rigid, yielding, flexible form that grows and develops at each touch is tremendously exciting. It includes the subtle relationship of things within things and the final form that contains within itself countless co-ordinated events.28

Ritzi and Peter Jacobi had an influential exhibition in 1980 of monumental tapestries and soft drawings in the Coventry Gallery in Sydney, where the catalogue emphasised their freedom from old traditions, to the extent that they incorporated everyday objects into their work. They themselves described how the political openness of east Europe in the 1960s allowed all kind of experimentation - they combined wooden elements, fibre cables, threads woven into boxes, to make work of a kinetic quality:

After a time we realized that most of these pieces in this experimental stage were not the final point, but were steps to what we do today. They were very important because we went very rapidly, in a span of two or three years, from flat tapestry into three dimensions, sculpture... We worked in all these media, and the experiences we got from one went consciously or unconsciously into the others. .. One of the main problems was to free the tapestry from the decorative, from the artisanal... and get tapestry into a freer field.29

Magdalena Abakanowicz in an interview in Sydney in 1976 put this freedom from convention as central to her work:

To redefine anything one has to question an accepted view: one has to rebel. Self definition is only possible as the result of taking a risk... I don't like rules and regulations, antagonists of the imagination. I use the technique of weaving and make it yield to my ideas. My work has always been a protest against what I have found in weaving...30.
I like neither rules nor instructions, these enemies of the imagination ... Repetition is contrary to the laws of the intellect in its progress onward, contrary to imagination..

Solvig Baas Becking gave priority to this lack of tradition in talking about wallhangings in 1977:

Wallhangings and 3D pieces, of course, are the area in which the weaver is most free. As long as the hanging does not fall apart, is reasonably cleanable and hangs well no limits are imposed by the function. The weaver is free as a bird to use his creativity. All fibres, all yarns, all weaves and techniques can be used, as well as used together in the piece...

The content of the work

The meaning of the work was never talked about in a literary or narrative sense, but only in terms of the discovery of materials, and their association with a hazy notion of an ideal 'nature', almost a nature of platonic forms and structures, but rarely a specific nature. (This of course is the great period of 'Untitled' in all art exhibitions, when the self-referentiality of the work is considered inviolable.) Magdalena Abakanowicz again can be used as a model of this lack of literary reference:

Each form is a set of meanings and as such it is true. Nothing should be translated into concrete terms, or reduced to a single plane of reference. This would result in annihilation of form. In everything I do however, the constant factor and my permanent necessity is searching for and revealing secrets, also those inherent in structure, the phenomenon which all organic world on our planet has in common, a mystery which can never be revealed to the very end.

Heather Johnson talked about the formal explorations of Heidi Wursig, claiming that in her latest works the technique and material was subservient to the ideas, yet the 'ideas' were never specifically mentioned, except in terms of material manipulation:

She has achieved a change in the texture of her work from the coarse, hairy sisal texture of previous works, to a softer look of wool and cotton, and the smooth sheen of linen and synthetic silk. ..she has succeeded in using fibres in ways which evoke other materials.
The writer was concerned that the reader should not doubt the artist’s integrity in regard to materials:

However one could never accuse these works of being fibre trying to masquerade as something else.\(^{34}\)

Michael Butler, while Director of the Secheron School of weaving in Hobart wrote about the content of his own work, singling out ‘imagination’ as against ‘logic’ in these terms in 1979:

The greatest problem at the present time is to tie myself down to the development of a single idea to its logical conclusion, rather than to pursue in all directions, those particular elements of structure and colour which seem simultaneously to take hold of the imagination.\(^{35}\)

In every profile of textile craftspeople in these journals (John Corbett, Ben Shearer, Ann Greenwood), the individual would always refer to the work in terms of structure and material, or with very vague references to universal natural forms. Specific references to traditions or meanings other than technical processes were
astonishingly absent. There was no overt mention of politics, of liberation movements for ethnic and sexual minorities, of particular and local traditions - these were all consumed in the very gesture of making, radical in itself. Most noticeably, any historical reference, any connection of this fibre to traditional forms was perceived as irrelevant.

The fibre/textile movement drew on ‘universal’ traditions, not specific regional ones, even though early craft traditions in Australia were very much under investigation at this time.\(^{36}\) Authenticity was given to Australian textiles by craftspeople brought out from overseas, and also by emigrant weavers professionally trained in Bauhaus traditions who formed such a powerful impetus in the 1960s and 70s. In my own experience I remember particularly the impact of Erica Semler, Marcella Hempel and Solvig Baas Becking and the extraordinary skill, confidence, and speed, they showed in working with materials.

In the desire for experimentation of technique and structure, world craft traditions of ‘ethnicity’ were analysed, craftspeople at this time feeling free to borrow and adapt techniques from any part of the world, from past and present societies. In the craft journals under review, Micronesia, Melanesia, Indonesia, Japan, Coptic Egypt, Equador, Solomon Islands, American Indian, New Guinea, Phillipines, Maori, as well as Aboriginal Australia provided detailed source material for new techniques, with only the barest reference to the meaning and context such work might have had in its own culture. This was a ‘right’, an essential component of modern art and craft, and was part of the belief in ‘universal’ values of craft.\(^{37}\)

**The body of work and the body of the weaver**

The ideas of people working in all areas of fibre at this time, as in influential beliefs of American Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, decried the intellect, the over-conceptual and wanted the work to bring out unconscious intuitions in regard to a totally ‘new’ apprehension of materials. In this way of thinking, the body of the weaver is related to the substance and process of the work, a very ‘body’ of knowledge, transmitted through hands, as intrinsic to its meaning.

Marcella Hempel in 1979 held to this belief as a spiritual conviction:

> My teaching is based on Bauhaus principles combined with a personally evolved philosophy regarding the importance of using the hands. I see the craft process as a dialogue between the mind of the craftsman and his material, an interaction in
which the participants become enriched. Everything we do developed from our hands: we began exploring and understanding with them and our brains developed through their use.  

Eva Pachuka, another internationally acclaimed artist from Poland, who came to Australia in 1971, used only the simplest of tools, a crochet hook for her three-dimensional installations, shown in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In an interview with April Hersey in 1977 she emphasised the corporeality of her art.

Our whole involvement is with our bodies. The body is for us a visual object. It is rotting, changing, always there for us, visually an object until the dramatic moment of death. I try to stretch the possibilities, to observe the disablements. I try to master my ability with fibres because this material is more human than marble or wood. To me it looks more like flesh.

Magdalena Abakanowicz was clear about the intense physicality of her pieces:

I seek to create the possibilities of a total communion with the object whose structure is tactile and supple through gaps and openings. I seek to get the observer right into the piece, right into the innermost recesses.

The movements of my hands correspond to the natural rhythm of my body, to my breath.

Or again, Olga de Amaral, whose huge, intricate constructions were exhibited in the Bonython Gallery, Sydney, in 1975, accentuates the consuming quality of the organic, as described by Rose Slivka:
de Amaral has made objects now, pieces more or less discreet, though often scandalous in their reference to innards, to that whole part of life that lies under the skin, the outrage of organic process. Some of the pieces moreover have no reference whatever to fabric, to textile, they coil, they hang. There is a reference to the horrible demonism of nature, of vegetable growth. Thrust your hand into the centre of this horsehair jungle and you will receive a shudder of capillary assault. The harsh smooth fibres offer none of the comforts of cloth - you are on your own here in the darkness of what is loose, close, engrossed.40

Tadek Beutlich, of Polish origin working in England, was particularly influential on my own development for his combination of flat woven tapestry with more textural explorations. By 1981 his work had become entirely three-dimensional and ‘off-loom’. Kathleen MacFarlane described it:

Whereas flat tapestry needs to be ‘read’ by a form of surface scanning, these ‘free warp’ three dimensional works have a special quality of significant inwardness, an interiority which invites the eye to peer and probe into their intumed, convoluting recesses.41

I remember attending an ‘Off-loom’ workshop at a summer school in Armidale in 1974. A large container of materials was spread out over the floor, and there began a rapturous touching, rubbing, rummaging amongst the slippery blond jute, the coarse sisal, the cloudy camel and shiny coils of unspun silk. The different muted shades of wool fleece held out so much promise. We felt them like wool classifiers, with an acute sense of a break, a weakness in the fibre, rejoiced in length, softness and texture. Each of these raw materials seemed to offer, like a new personality, an opportunity to engage in undreamt of areas of discovery. Although it seems hard to imagine in 1994, twenty years later, this world of materials seemed so fresh, so positive, so unlike anything else, that to immerse oneself in touch and surface was almost enough in itself. Here was the act of ‘letting go’ inhibitions and a cathartic sense of coming in contact with pure sensation. These workshops of the ’70s were like theatrical performances, and what was left at the end, half finished and often dubiously constructed, never seemed to live up to the intensity of the vision.

The gigantic and the grotesque

One of the most striking characteristics of much of the fibre work of this time is its huge scale, dwarfing the human body. Our sense of scale is of course located in our own feeling for the proportion of the human body. What implications does
such vastness have? In her investigation into the miniature and the gigantic, Susan Stewart comments:

> We find the miniature at the origin of private, individual history, but we find the gigantic at the origin of public and natural history. The gigantic becomes an explanation for the environment, a figure on the interface between the natural and the human. Hence our words for the landscape are often projections of an enormous body on it: the mouth of the river, the foot-hills, the fingers of the lake, the heartlands.

She goes on to describe any manifestation of the gigantic as

> a mixed category; a violator of boundary and rule; an overabundance of the natural and hence an affront to cultural systems....The gigantic unleashes a vast and natural creativity that has within it the capacity for (self) destruction.

We have certainly found an animosity to the ungainly materiality of these huge textile pieces in the comments cited above, which do seem to affront the cultural systems of the 1990s. The idea of the natural world as allied to fragments of gigantic bodies is also very evident in fibre sculpture. Breasts, hands, genitalia, whole bodies, or bodies without heads, or torsos, are materialised in fibre as a metaphor for the flesh and blood 'natural' body. The edges and convolutions of folds of skin and flesh, cuts, slits, openings, are enlarged beyond recognition through the textile structures. Susan Stewart quotes a section from the Brobdingnag section of *Gulliver’s Travels* which is curiously appropriate as a description of fibre works:

> The most horrible images in the Brobdingnag section of *Gulliver’s Travels* have to do with women’s bodies as images of the consuming body particularly the breast, which often is so overly cultured and literally disembodied as an image to be consumed, is inverted here into a frightening image of growth and contamination.... First there is the description of the nurse’s breast: ‘I must confess no Object ever disgusted me so much as the Sight of her monstrous Breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the curious reader an Idea of its Bulk, Shape and Colour. It stood prominent six Foot, and could not be less than sixteen in Circumference. The nipple was about half the bigness of my head, and the Hue both of that and the Dug so varified with Spots, Pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous.'
Such immensity applied to a familiar part of the body engenders disgust at such superfluity, and also makes it difficult for the viewer to envisage the whole organism when the single part is all that fills the field of sight. If we accept Susan Stewart’s contention that the grotesque body is also a form of the gigantic as a body of disjointed parts, we can perhaps place the ‘monstrous’ nature of the more extreme 1970s fibre within this grotesque tradition. The Oxford Dictionary definition of the grotesque is ‘decorative painting or sculpture of human forms interwoven with foliage’, which parallels the tendency of fibre to identify itself both with the substance of nature and the very flesh of humanity, as we have seen above. In the fibre of this time suggestions of bodily concavities, convexities and orifices are jumbled in a sometimes abstract, sometimes fragmented way, with the impact of their hugeness always associated within the organic.

The grotesque parodies of dramas on Greek vases of the fourth century B.C. show padded satyric figures with long penises that drag on the ground behind them. Satyrs, half goat, half man, accompanied Dionysos, who offered women ‘ecstatic irresponsibility’, a release from domestic confinement through bodily abandonment. To distend and exaggerate organs of the body, particularly the

organs of reproduction and fertility, in carnival or theatre, is to emphasise the possibility of misrule, of a different order, a need to transgress even briefly the boundaries of known hierarchies.

At this time known hierarchies were being challenged at many levels, and particularly through the women’s movements.

**'Fibre' art and Feminism**

Feminist historians were at this time re-writing women’s histories through an intensive examination of textiles. Old quiltmaking traditions in the United States, the immense and undocumented body of work made by women in the home began to be reassessed in feminist repositionings of monolithic art histories. These domestic references entered the work of the American artist Miriam Schapiro as ‘femmage’ in work shown in the Art Gallery of NSW in 1979, which used collaged fabrics and appliqued textiles, and actual ‘domestic’ embroideries as part of the assemblage.
It can be argued that emotional views about the positioning of women’s art were contained within the revolutionary tenets towards the textile medium, and did not become any obvious or easily read part of the content. As Sue Rowley has indicated, women were certainly dominant in the organisation of Crafts Councils during the 1970s, and outnumbered men in the area of textiles particularly. Yet ‘Feminist’ art in Australia which consciously appropriated domestic textiles to reinstate them was hardly part of the ideology of the fibre art movement as outlined above. The fibre sculptures which were often so sensually confronting were not necessarily involved in a political agenda to redress the position of women. The critical awareness of gendered language is absent, as seen in the use of the term ‘craftsman’ and ‘he’ in all the quotes cited above.

A very clear political agenda, on the other hand is evident in Sydney in the mid 1970s with the presentation of The D’Oyley Show, collected by the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group. Vivienne Binn’s installation in the western suburbs of Sydney, Mother’s Memories: Other’s Memories also formed part of a different, if often overlapping set of tenets towards textiles. The confining and limited associations of domestic textiles were still dominating for those textile craftspeople, such as myself, with 1950s childhoods. The new experimental materials, their scale and ambition, seemed far more ‘revolutionary’ than re-invoking a painful past through the sign of the domestic.

The tactile unconscious

Despite the lack of feminist theory on the part of the emerging fibre movement of the 1970s, I would like to further develop comments on the theory of French psychoanalytic and feminist thinker Julia Kristeva, as a way of comprehending the characteristics of fibre work summarized here. Her writing has been influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, who ‘rewrote’ Sigmund Freud in a way that opened paths for feminist utilisation of Freud’s theories, particularly of the unconscious. Her work is also influenced by semiotics, the analysis of the sign which is the basis for French linguistic writings, and of structuralism. (It is interesting to reflect that the theories of the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss who was so influentional in the the whole Structuralist project, were well known in the 1950s, and Levi-Strauss’ idea of the intersection of language/culture/nature is quoted by writers documenting the Fibre Arts.)

Much of Julia Kristeva’s work revolves around the ‘producing subject’, that is the
the interplay between the two forces that form an infant, the maternal pre-linguistic 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic' acquisition of language. She writes:

The two trends ('semiotic' and 'symbolic') ...designate two modalities of what is, for us, the same signifying process. We shall call the first the 'semiotic' and the second the 'symbolic'. These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry). On the other hand there are non-verbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic... Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he(sic) produces can be 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic.53

She goes on to describe the 'semiotic' and the loose and always moving articulation, the 'chora' which holds the instinctive drives.

We understand the term 'semiotic' in the Greek sense: semeion = distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration...
She describes the semioticised body as a place of kinetic, moving drives, always closely related to the maternal body, which involve pre-Oedipal (pre-linguistic) functions - anal and glottal drives (remember Abakanowicz’ ‘gaps and openings’) voice, gesture, colours. These drives are chaotic, unordered, even including the death drive, and have to become regulated by the social and familial restraints placed on the child. These regulations form the beginning of identity in the child, an identification with ‘symbolic’ orders, ultimately orders of family, state, art, of structured language and social law. These ‘symbolic’ forces will require that the pre-Oedipal forces, the close maternal attachment must be repressed.

In her clear summary of this aspect of Kristeva’s thought, Elizabeth Grosz writes:

Kristeva’s interest in unsettling or disrupting the received unities of social and historic life...the unity imposed on discourse and representational practices in order to make them coherent and meaningful - means that she continually affirms the unspoken cost, the price extracted by civilization on subjects and the maternally orientated semiotic.... The cost of the patriarchal order is the sacrifice of maternity and femininity, which must nevertheless remain the silent underside of all cultural production.54
The relationship of this underlying 'semiotic' force - of tonality, tactility, rhythm - to artistic production is profound. The 'symbolic' order, which overlays the 'semiotic' provides grammar, syntax, logic, rules of harmony and narrative. Taking into account the corporeal and material aspects of the textiles we have been considering, the upsurge of the textile arts (whether by women or men) can be related to the 'semiotic' layers of instinct. Even though contained within 'symbolic' design systems, these systems, as we have seen in the examples above, are continually transgressed by 'that whole part of life that lies under the skin' to quote Rose Slivka again. The 'semiotic' textile disrupts the avantegarde, which is excited for a brief moment, during this tumultuous time in the twentieth century from 1965-1985 approximately. After this, the 'symbolic' orders reassert themselves into new patterns, and textile art is no longer lauded by the art establishment, but becomes a backwater of embarrassing excess. The 'Art Fabric Mainstream' asserted by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen has never gained artworld credibility. Art fabric did not seem 'mainstream' to critics who had never heard of the these fibre artists who themselves in turn, appeared to be without a 'mainstream' language.\textsuperscript{55}

The eruption of textile art at this time was not the only art movement to insist on the materials of art as directly carrying experience. The 'arte povera' movement in Italy produced 'anarchic' work that could easily be exhibited as 'fibre' art. Mario Merz, one of the outstanding artists of this orientation showed work in 1992 in Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany, that emphasised natural materials - birch twigs - and roughly painted cloths juxtaposed with 'symbolic' human artefacts represented by neon lights as ordered number systems.\textsuperscript{56} Such work, still current throughout much of Europe, sees the use of found materials as opening up unconscious associations in the viewer.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Robert Bell, \textit{Tensile Arrangement}, earthenware and linen, 72 cm x 31 cm. \textit{Craft Australia}, vol. 4/1, September 1974}
\end{figure}
Another extraordinary body of work was created by Eva Hesse in the 1960s which also parallels the sensitivity to substance, hanging, dragging, in totally inarticulate objects made at the same time as Magdalena Abakanowicz. Lucy Lippard hints that the soft encompassing objects could almost be a mother surrogate, as Hesse's mother had died early:

There is a profound identification between the artist and her materials, her forms. In this regard I once used the term 'body ego' which I understood to mean a strong, virtually visceral identification between the maker's and or viewer's body and abstract or figurative form.\(^{57}\)

The unconscious resonances of fibre which so reflect Kristeva's concept of the 'semiotic', and the continuing antipathy often felt for these works by critics and the art establishment is expressed in uncompromising terms by John Perrault, a Visual Arts Director of the Cultural Center, New York. He wrote the following on the occasion of a large fibre retrospective exhibition, *FibreR/Evolution* in 1986 in Milwaukee, United States:

It is in fact, the haptic, or touchable, nature of fiber art that throws off most art critics: they are only comfortable with the optic, granting tactile values a very low position on the aesthetic totem pole. In fiber one cannot avoid the haptic and the haptic/optic conflict or, more graciously, the haptic/optic interplay. Thus it is awkward to say the least that the English language, and most particularly the critical language is haptic poor.\(^{58}\)

He goes on to suggest that fibre art gains from its lack of status, from its peripheral position:

I like the artworks or art proposals that upset my perceptions and my preconceptions, that rend the texture of language...What most interests me at the moment - and I know I am indulging in paradox - is that which is gained by persisting in seeing fiber art as non-art, as something other than art...We are at a privileged moment. Except for chronicles, puffery and biographical treatments, fiber art is outside language. We are on the edge. The mesh of fabric, rather than concealing what is naked, is itself naked.

This perception of a 'naked' fibre art 'outside language' is very much like Kristeva's 'semiotic' as Elizabeth Grosz summarises it:
all forms of artistic production rely on the subject’s often unrecognised corporeal processes, energies and impulses to provide their impetus and force: the motive for cultural production is thus not the expression of ideas, emotions or psychical contents - meanings- but resides in the co-ordination and expression of hitherto uncontrolled corporeal forces.

We have seen that the statements of textile artists do continually emphasize the materiality and softness, the malleability of fibre as the central concern of their expression. Evocations of this ‘unspeakable’ semiotic are powerfully described by Magdalena Abakanowicz in 1969, whose work had such immense impact through its sensuality:

Music or smell, a thoughtful pause, a casual word, a landscape, can release nostalgic images and dreams. They express always much more than the person who experiences them can in turn convey in words...It seems to me that these images can bring people closer more effectively and in a more fundamental way than in analytic language... it means to see the world in its entirety, since the point of the images is to show all that which escapes conceptualisation.

This description from one of the foremost sculptors in fibre emphasised again the primal image outside traditions and language. The pre-linguistic associations of textile have also been associated with the baby’s fetish of the mother, the torn and tattered blanket or soft toy. The fact that such transitional objects are textile is another reference to the deeply atavistic attributes of textile. In a review of an exhibition *Discerning Textiles*, intitiated by the Goulburn Regional Gallery New

Diana Wood Conroy, detail of Banksia tapestry, 1.2 m x 90 cm, 1978. Photograph taken in 1978 by artist.
South Wales in 1993, Evelyn Juers comments:

What is that grubby, deeply loved 'shmotshki' that toddlers habitually shlep around with them? It is of course much more than it appears to be - the famous Winnicottian 'transitional object', vehicle for the child's first illusory experience, first creative thoughts, first attempts to discern inner and outer realities... Tactile, textural, mobile, warm, it can be sucked, smelled stuffed, caressed, remembered, and sometimes with dire consequences forgotten or lost. In its capacity as the original deliberately externalised object of fantasy and desire, in its symbolic potential, the transitional object is also the first text.61

In another reflection on textile as a transitional object, Neil Macinnis positions textiles as an invisible cultural form in contemporary western society, and looks at marginal groups, such as HIV positive patients in hospitals, at drag queens cross dressing, as another manifestation of an adult use of textile as a transitional object. The distance between the 'mother' (safety, home) and the self is then provided by the AIDS quilt, or fetishised satin, taffeta or black leather.62

And yet, the revolutionary excitement associated with the growth of the fibre movement must be attested. Why were these gigantic objects so desirable, so compulsively produced? Can we align their tactility with an area of the 'semiotic' or with Jacques Lacan's 'imaginary' stage, when the subject is still being formed? Like Neil Macinnis, Susan Stewart suggests that the recognition by adults of this forming phase goes on being necessary, long after the child becomes adult. The sense of being in a body within a body of very early babyhood needs to be evoked, as childhood also needs to be remembered. She writes:

And out of this adult desire (for the dual relation with the mother before it was lost) springs the demand for an object- not an object of use value, but a pure object, an object that will not be taken up in the changing sphere of lived reality but rather will remain complete at a distance. In this way it resembles childhood, which will not change.63

The unity with the process of making described by all the craftspeople quoted here, the evoking of the body and a tactile sensitivity give credence to the interpretation of textiles within this pre-linguistic area of experience in the formation of the personality. The notion of a tactile unconscious that we bring with us from our earliest pre-verbal experiences provides an explanation for the excesses of this fibre art, and their power. An aversion is felt for many of these
pieces twenty years later in the 1990s, when a professional ‘design’ aura and a sophisticated technique, rather than a rough and gutsy one, is desirable in craft.

Yet the recent burst of ‘grunge’ art also draws on the same ‘disgusting’ reaction in the viewer, while recognising the hold such antipathies have on our psyche. Kathy Temin, an Australian artist recently featured on the cover of *Art+Text*, works with fake fur, shiny synthetics and forlorn, sentimental, soft toys. Such practice draws on the repugnance roused by ‘tasteless’ materials, which can be outside the conventional critical language, and also evokes that pre-verbal obsessive relationship to the tactile object. Her dangling pieces, superficially so like Eva Hesse and textile expressions of the 1960s and 70s, are, however, informed by a very different time, a time coolly knowledgeable of the ‘postmodern’ assumptions of feminism and psychoanalysis. These assumptions may recognise the importance of the formation of the subject, the layering of language, the growing knowledge of the interaction of self and society in a more self-reflexive way than was evidenced in the fibre movement I have been discussing.64

The revival of textiles in the 1970s was a ‘transgressive’ moment in the avantgarde. At this moment, the banked-up forces of underlying, unnoticed craft traditions, techniques and processes, overflowed into the mainstream of art practice. The fissure that allowed all this intensive, and popular, activity to flow through the art/craft of this time seems to have closed over in the 1990s, and textiles have more diffused and layered subtleties, far from mainstream arenas. There is little interest from connoisseurs and collectors in the sculptural and textural fibre of the 1970s, compared to, for example, the same period of florescence in ceramics.

At the time, I found myself in an ambivalent position in relation to the fibre movement. I had been drawn to tapestry for its ability to translate and convey complex imagery and pattern, while recognising the power of the tactile surface. I remember vividly showing Mary Leland, President of the World Crafts Council, some of my gouache designs for tapestry in 1974, when she visited us on Bathurst Island. She dismissed the idea of translation from a painted concept as being outmoded, a false understanding of the essentially structural nature of textile.65

Nevertheless I felt that image and pattern could exist despite the dogmas of the fibre movement. I wove several major commissions in the 1970s where I
emphasised pattern and colour in conjunction with a varied and textural surface. The largest of these commissions, five metres wide by four metres high was made for St Andrews House in Sydney Square in 1976, and is still in place. In this piece I combined vivid colour with repetitive abstract plant forms. At the time I thought this piece distinctively different from other woven work of this scale, but looking back now it is obvious how much I was influenced by the predominant fibre movement of the time.

For myself, I find many of the pieces from the 'fibre revolution' still reverberate. My much loved maiden aunt, who made little effort to conceal her eccentricity, with her sagging body and soft drooping old lady clothes can easily be overlooked in the light of more famous and virtuous lives. Yet such remembered images, imbued with touch and smell, are the touchstone of our earliest emotions.

In comparison to this textile uprising, tapestry weavers in Australia consciously opposed an emphasis on tactility, on corporeality and unconscious intuitions in the materiality of their craft. The evidence for tapestry in its early years in Australia, in contrast to textiles, suggests an identification with 'symbolic' orders in the rigour of the tapestry language, and even with patriarchal institutions for credibility and status.

2 Some of my ideas in this chapter were first published in an article 'Textiles

3 In Sydney in the 1970’s weaving was shown in huge exhibitions in the best galleries. Mona Hessing’s work filled the Bonython gallery in 1971, where Olga de Amaral also showed monumental wrapped and woven wall pieces and sculptures in soft and vibrant colours. Magdalena Abakanowicz showed in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1976 jute and sisal sculptures of great theatrical presence and prehistoric resonance. Ritzi and Peter Jacobi had their large sculpture *Transylvania* on display at the Coventry Gallery in 1981, constructed from paper and wrapped fibre elements. Other Australian weavers who worked in an individual way within this sculptural idiom were Bruce Arthur, Solvig Baas Becking, Robert Bell, Deanna Conti, Rinske Car, Jutta Feddersen, Ann Greenwood, Kate Hodgkinson, Prue Medlin and Eva Pachuka, to mention only some.


27 Magdalena Abakanowicz, Malmo Konst Halle, Sweden, 1977, p. 35.
29 Al Paca (ed.), ‘Ritzi and Peter Jacobi: An After-hours conversation with two famous artists at the 9th Biennial of Lausanne’, Fiberarts, July/August, 1981, pp. 50-56. See also catalogue of Ritzi and Peter Jacobi: Tapestries and soft drawings, Art Gallery of Western Australia, National Gallery of Victoria,
Coventry Gallery, Paddington, Goethe Institute in cooperation with Crafts Board of the Australia Council, July-October 1980.


35 Michael Butler, ‘Secheron School of Weaving’, p. 6.


37 It was only after living on Bathurst Island in the NT with the Tiwi that I became aware of how insidious the assumptions of white craft professionals could be in interpreting traditional art, often in untraditional materials, for a mainly non-Aboriginal market. An understanding of techniques does not give an understanding of complex meanings that may fold an object in a web of interchange and custom quite separate from any market value.


40 April Hersey, ‘Olga de Amaral: A Rare experience’, quoting Rose Slivka in *Craft Horizons, Craft Australia*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1975, p. 28.


43 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, p. 73.


48 To me the sensuality evoked by this world of textures does seem to resonate with the inescapable discussions of sexuality found in many women’s magazines of the time. This new frankness about women’s sensuality in such magazines could be juxtaposed with a craftwork page on how to make a ‘wallhanging’, suggesting an openness to experience of the senses at all levels.

49 Sue Rowley, ‘Serious Practising, Professional: Identifying Australia’s artists’, *Periphery*, no. 16, August 1993, pp. 13-18, also ‘Warping the Loom: Theoretical frameworks for craft writing’, *Craft in Society*, Ed. Noris Ioannou,


56 Documenta IX, Catalogue, Cantz, Stuttgart, 1992, p. 166: “Mario Merz’s position can be called anthropological. Merz seeks out the connection between a zone of dark impenetrable naturalness and intellect”

57 Lucy R. Lippard, Eva Hesse, Da Capo, New York, 1992, p. 188.


60 Magdalena Abakanowicz, Malmo Konst Halle, Sweden, 1977, p. 36.


63 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection, p. 125.


65 Bathurst Island may have been remote, but I fed and housed several international visitors every month in the old presbytery where we lived. Gallery directors, officials from Crafts Councils, and well known craftspeople interested in Tiwi art, as well as eccentric priests sent up to the north for ‘a rest’ were a constant distraction. Jane Burns from the Crafts Council of Australia accompanied Mary Leland to Bathurst Island. Mary Leland also gave workshops (on aspects of knotting) in various Australian capital cities.
For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it rather a Penelope work of forgetting?....And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope’s work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting.¹

Like so many significant Australian weavers of European origin, tapestry itself is an immigrant, coming from elsewhere to find new life in Australia. This quote from Walter Benjamin indicates the long antecedents of tapestry, associated with the classical myth of Penelope and Odysseus in metaphors of time and memory as a woven fabric. As Benjamin pointed out, the very Latin word ‘textum’ from which comes our word ‘text’ means the ‘web’ of woven cloth, linking structures of language and weaving from distant Indo-European pasts. Equivalent to classical archaeology from the Greek and Roman world, tapestry is identified with an ambience of history and myth that could be said to uphold an image of ‘European civilization’. The short history of tapestry in Australia can be traced through my own life span, as through that of other tapestry weavers.

The documentation of the history of both tapestry and textiles in Australia began recently, and is often entwined as one history. In 1986 I was involved in detailed research with Jennifer Isaacs for the Bicentennial book *The Gentle Arts: 200 years of Australian Women’s Domestic and Decorative Arts* which investigated neglected and almost unknown areas of women’s domestic textiles, including some tapestry, in both private and public collections. During this period I was working as a professional tapestry weaver making commissioned work for public and private spaces but felt isolated from the critical acceptance of the artworld.

At the same time, I gave information to Grace Cochrane as she began her enormous task of compiling a history of the crafts movement in Australia, and also advised Darani Lewers who was working on the scope of ideas behind the development of the crafts in order to set up the display at the new Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.
The Powerhouse Museum enterprise was to document crafts and social history. Grace Cochrane's *The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History* published in 1993 contains a densely meshed account of the individuals and events in the development of the self-conscious crafts movement which had a very different idea of professionalism and public profile from the domestic crafts investigated in *The Gentle Arts*. Grace Cochrane does document the emergence of fibre/textiles in Australia among other crafts, yet the particular trajectory of tapestry and the innuendos of a critical viewpoint can hardly be addressed in such an encyclopaedic collection of data. It is this particular trajectory of tapestry as the medium used by artist weavers, and its relationship to the broader field of textiles that I want to elucidate.

The network of meanings and associations that surround the introduction and development of tapestry in Australia since 1970 will be examined in this chapter. The different categories of Australian tapestry, and the development of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop from 1976, resulted in a distinctly separate path from that of the broader textile or 'fibre' community.

Unlike the extensive variety of individual approaches in textiles the emphasis in learning the technique of tapestry was to uphold the strictness of that method, with its own language and rules. This 'language' of tapestry was seen as the key to its meaning, as important as content. In western Europe, America, Canada and Australia 'tapestry' is associated with imagemaking in traditional flatwoven techniques using wool, linen and cotton, though each of these regions has its own specific techniques. The French Gobelin technique is distinctly different to methods of contemporary American tapestry weavers who have been more influenced by the Aubusson workshops in France, where Jean Lurcat worked in the 1940s. The major influence on the establishment of 'classic' flat-weave tapestry in...
Australia, apart from the influences from Europe and America, was that emanating from the Edinburgh workshop, principally through Archie Brennan and his associates, and the Australian weavers who studied with them. The Edinburgh workshop tradition stretches back through William Morris influences to French and German tapestry workshops. Significant Australian tapestry weavers trained in the Scottish workshops, such as Kay Lawrence and Belinda Ramson, and it is this 'school' which was fundamental in the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne in 1976.

This thesis examines critical issues that affect practice, and can amplify the understanding and positioning of that practice. A particular issue in Australia has

been this pervasive 'aura' of tapestry as historically defined through a long European past, and as a static and merely interpretative medium. If textiles can be analogous to a 'semiotic' prelinguistic area of the subject, tapestry, to play with this paradigm further, can be likened to a 'symbolic' order of experience.

The 'symbolic' mode, in Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva's writing, is acquired with language, with the naming and perception of the world as outside of the subject. According to Kristeva, separation from the 'semiotic' maternal ambience brings the child into the realm of the 'father', the world of social structures and institutions. Such a psychoanalytic model for looking at the phenomena of textiles and tapestry is advantageous because it pinpoints the unconscious roots of actions and offers a useful comparative model for explaining the contradictions and
underlying relationships within the textile/tapestry field. The role of the whole area of textiles/tapestry has been constituted as 'feminine' in relation to the dominant 'masculine' artforms that hold most prestige: painting and sculpture. In this modernist understanding, deeply rooted in the demarcations of western art history since the sixteenth century, the craft area can be perceived as art's 'other'. The complexities of relationship within the textile/tapestry arena will be elucidated in this chapter. Tapestry plays a 'paternal' role, identified with public institutions and symbols that carry the power of the state in this arena, while textiles are allied to more corporeal and sensual processes that refer to 'intuitive' maternal domains.

The 'documents' that recount the artists and institutions, the 'artefacts' of tapestry when it was first re-established in workshops in the 1970s, both in Australia and overseas are examined here. The writings and images published and discussed at

The Three Kings, 4m x 4m, tapestry woven at Tournai 1440-1465, Historical Museum, Berne.

I viewed this tapestry for a considerable time and found it extraordinary for its rich colour and stylised form, quite unlike tapestry post-photography. From a postcard purchased in Bern.
the timewill be considered, as evidenced in craft journals and exhibition
catalogues. From *Craft Australia, The Australian Handweaver and Spinner*, the
American *Fiberarts*, and the British *Crafts*, articles for discussion will be selected
that stand for commonly expressed viewpoints. The point of this exercise is to
establish the kinds of associations and connections that so closely affect the
cultural values attached to tapestry, the ‘aura’ of tapestry that underlies the
interpretation of the viewer.

Tapestry and textiles are discussed differently in these articles. Tapestries are
referred to by the institutions who support and finance them, through the tradition
and reputation of these workshops, and to the reputation of the artist, usually male,
who designed the tapestry. In the textile articles examined for the same period
there was much greater emphasis on the individuality of the artists, stressing
experimentation and new use of materials.6

*Le Jardin du Reveur, the Garden of the Dreamer, 2m x
2.95m, tapestry by Jean Lurcat, Aubusson Workshop, 1947. I saw very similar tapestries to
this as a young art student in Southampton, U.K. in 1960. (Catalogue, *Les
Domaines de Jean Lurcat*: 1966-1986, Nouveau Musee Jean-Lurcat at de la Tapisserie
Contemporaine, not dated, c. 1990, p.48.)*
The authority of the past

The *Australian Handweaver and Spinner: Quarterly News* was published from 1954 as the mouthpiece of the Handweavers’ and Spinners’ Guild, founded at the end of World War II. Many items about tapestry appeared from 1970 when it emerged as a distinctive discipline.

In 1972 the report edited by P.R. MacMahon on the tapestry curtains for the Sydney Opera House, reminds us of what was happening in Sydney - a new sense of growth, experimentation, and risk taking in regard to the difficulties of building the provocative vision of the Sydney Opera House. The new Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, had brought relief from outworn conservative policies, and a new vigour and focus to government funding in the arts. Parallel to avantgarde art movements such as conceptual art, or minimalism, there was a growing interest in tapestry, seemingly at the opposite spectrum.

MacMahon began her article on the Opera House tapestry curtains by stressing the close ties tapestry had with architecture and history, and predictably went on to reassure the reader that tapestry had ‘developed with the times’. The proof of this was in the huge tapestry curtains, weighing ‘more than five hundredweight’. Their great cost, $100,000, was made clear at the beginning of the article. She continued with a description of the Aubusson and Gobelin tapestry workshops in France, ‘the oldest and best known weavers of tapestry in the world’, followed by a detailed
account of the lengthy process of designing and weaving such vast tapestries (52’ x 25’ and 64’ x 17’). The time it took was underlined. A brief history was given of the resurgence of tapestry under Jean Lurcat in France after 1945.

The absences in this article are interesting. The meaning of the symbols in the tapestries is not mentioned, nor their relevance to an emerging international profile for Australian art. Not one woman, or any feminine institution comes into the article, although it is written for a guild that is mostly female. The weavers’ gender is not specified, only their expertise that has ‘produced tapestries for generations’.

The prestige of tapestry was not prejudiced by any hint of the daily domestic sphere. In fact, the attention of important men, whose renown is fully described, added to the importance of the medium. Tapestry was fulfilling its time honoured role of conferring an almost mythological status and upholding the institutions of the state.

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Et l’ange prit l’encensoir, And the angel took the incense burner, panel from the Angers Apocalypse tapestry, 1.56m x 2.45m, late 14th century. Jacques Cailleteau (editor). La Tenture de l’Apocalypse d’Angers, Association pour le développement de l’inventaire Général des Monuments et des Richesse Artistiques en Region des Pays de la Loire, Nantes, France, 1987, plate VIII, p. 135.
The ingredients in this description by MacMahon of a notable artistic event gave tapestry great status, through its extraordinary depth of history, 'a thousand years', through the exceptional artist, John Coburn, foremost in his field, who made images that brought together the deep past and progressive modernity, and the time consuming and mysterious process itself. All the institutions and important people were given their full titles.

Jean Eldridge and Belinda Ramson both recorded studying tapestry in centres of excellence overseas, one at a Gobelins workshop at Venasque, and one at Edinburgh. Belinda Ramson, who played a notable role in training weavers in the early years of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, gave a sensitive account of the differences between Archie Brennan's innovative direction at The Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh and workshops in France. The greater rigidities of the French workshops only permitted precise reproductions of the artist's design, rather than challenging translations. She concluded with the comment that although small, the
studios had a broad outlook, and tapestries on the loom during 1973 were designed by Gottlieb, Hitchins, Hockney, Motherwell and Phillips. The status of the Dovecot was thus confirmed by the involvement of acclaimed, and all male, artists.

The move to re-establish tapestry as a viable artform, and in some cases initiate new workshops, is paralleled in the United Kingdom and America in the 1970s and 1980s. With regional differences of emphasis, the same accentuation of tradition was found, combined with contemporary design, with public patronage, and a continual affirmation of historical tapestry techniques. Ruth Scheuer who started a tapestry workshop in San Francisco in 1980 stressed the centrality of tradition:

The Scheuer Tapestry Studio is a place for weavers and artists to apply old techniques to new ideas. In the spirit of the humanist, Bernard of Chartres: 'We are dwarves on the shoulders of giants... so we perceive more things than they... because we are elevated higher thanks to their gigantic size.'

She expressed the wish to combine contemporary images with the certainties of the traditional techniques.

Kathleen Rowley overviewed the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop in 1983 with the same emphasis on historical stature, which can be transmitted to the New World:

Aubusson style tapestry uses a technique that has remained basically unchanged since the famous Unicorn tapestries were woven, almost 500 years ago… The (San Francisco) workshop is patterned after the European atelier. Beginners are taught the history of French tapestry weaving in the Aubusson technique as well as tapestry design.\(^{13}\)

Designers honoured in the artworld were also mentioned - Judy Chicago, Mark Adams and Yael Lurie.

European tapestry workshops accentuated their connection to tradition and history, while working with contemporary artists. Charles Talley described the Swedish Handarbetets vanner, a tapestry workshop in Stockholm distinguished by its support for women:

Founded in 1874 Handarbetets vanner was in the forefront of both the women’s movement and the crafts revival… originally organized to help women secure a means of support independent from their husbands, Handarbetets vanner also sought to preserve Sweden’s textile tradition….Quality is the foremost consideration…\(^{14}\)
Similarly, Chris Rex described the famous Gobelin workshops in Paris in 1983. History and tradition were prominently mentioned, and also the high standard of design by ‘famous’ contemporary artists:

A visit to the Gobelins Royal Tapestry Works in Paris spans three centuries of tapestry making. Looking into the studios reveals modern tapestries from the designs of famous contemporary artists taking shape on the large looms, but the building compounds and the techniques used are steeped in history.... Today the weavers continue the tradition of centuries in historic and picturesque surroundings with designs from the best artists of our times.15

Joanne Soroka, Director of the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh in 1983 reiterated the historical authority of tapestry:

The fourth Marquess of Bute, a prominent Scottish nobleman, founded the Dovecot studios in 1912 to weave tapestries for his many family homes. He built a studio, filled it with large high-warp looms and hired two master weavers from William Morris’s famous Merton Abbey workshop in England.16

The predictable words were ‘unchanging’, ‘history’, ‘famous’, ‘tradition’. The collaboration and cooperative relationships between all members of these tapestry workshops were also consistently mentioned. Thus we can conclude that the same pattern as seen in Australia also appears in the United States, Canada, and in Europe itself, where traditional European workshop techniques were adhered to rigorously and defensively, despite, or because of the ‘wildness’ of the fibre movement.
It is pertinent here to consider how tapestry has acquired such prestige, and what this signifies in the relationships around tapestry. In the great blossoming of tapestry between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries in Europe tapestries were used like portable walls, often woven in a linked series of stories and allegories, and although of overwhelming decorative impact were also closely enmeshed with the artistic imperatives of the time. The most prized tapestries accompanied the affairs of state and were objects of serious attention. These European tapestries have become a sign, a symbol of that western 'civilization' which has pervaded artistic criteria since the Renaissance. All historical summaries of tapestry emphasise its status and power, for example Edith Standen, in her comprehensive series of articles describes fourteenth and fifteenth century tapestries in Europe as 'objects of conspicuous display' which were acquired by 'the leading men of the age'.17
What are the associations of 'powerful' tapestries? In their anthropological analysis of cloth as a 'material signifier' in human societies, Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner enlarge on 'the human actions that make cloth politically and socially salient.' They identify various spheres of meaning:

In... ceremonies of investiture and rulership, powerholders and aspirants to power declare that particular cloths transmit the authority of earlier possessors or the sanctity of past traditions, thus constituting a source of legitimacy in the present... In ceremonies of rulership, cloth is generally in the hands of men.

There is much evidence for the role of tapestries as transmitters of power, of bearing the stories of classical mythology that then confer distinction on the present prince. As we have seen, this claim to inherit past glories can also be relevant in Australia, can justify and enhance the display of power:

Once cloth attains a degree of permanence, absorbing value from the passage of time, political elites attempt to hoard and store it, not as capital for eventual deployment or merely for display, but as treasure to be saved in the face of all exigencies that force its dissipation. More than an economic resource or an

affirmation of political status, treasure facilitates claim to the past - its names, legends and events - that justify the transactions and extend the power of living actors.18

Tapestry, so tightly woven and firmly beaten, is one of the most permanent textiles, and can be handed on from generation to generation as tangible evidence of time and history. The authors continue:

Relationship between a greater degree of permanence in cloth and a greater elaboration of political hierarchy is not coincidental. The two go together because a hierarchy depends in part upon sumptuous paraphernalia to objectify rank and, more importantly, to constitute a physical bond between past and present.19

**Great men and unchanging techniques**

In texts about tapestry not only prestigious institutions and the strength of 'tradition' were emphasised, but male 'experts' were a constant focus. Belinda Ramson, in remembering her early years in tapestry accentuated the fact that tapestry was a male discipline at this time, organised by men and using male artists' designs.20
The four month stay of Professor Marin Vurbanov, Professor of Art in Sofia, Bulgaria, instituted one of the first formal tapestry courses in New South Wales, and demonstrated the need for international tuition.\textsuperscript{21} His role was to convey the old traditions of Bulgaria and the inviolability of the tapestry technique even in the face of the radical materiality of textiles.\textsuperscript{22} Ross Griffith commented:

Professor Vurbanov has stressed in this course the validity of textiles as an art form. He has stressed the role of the artist/weaver, and whilst he has given considerable emphasis to the teaching of design principles, he has equally been concerned that the discipline of the weaving technique be thoroughly mastered.\textsuperscript{23}
P.R. MacMahon, in discussing the Opera House curtains in 1972 emphasised the prestige of their designer:

The designer was Queensland-born artist John Coburn, now head of the National Art School in Sydney, and State Supervisor of Art in the Department of Technical Education. From painting he developed an interest in tapestry design and was invited to work for the Aubusson tapestry makers in 1966 and was so successful he took up residence in France to work closely with the tapestry weavers. Mr. Coburn submitted his original sketches for the curtains before leaving for France and six months later he was commissioned to produce scale designs. A little later he had final discussions with Mr. David Hughes, the Constructing Authority for the Opera House, and the great project was underway. 24

The interest in French tapestry was reflected in an Australian wide tour of an exhibition of tapestries by Jean Lurcat (died 1966) by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation in 1973. The introduction by Eric Langter stressed the importance of patronage to tapestry, and placed the patronage of Peter Stuyvesant, a progressive modern industrial leader, as inheriting the role of popes and princes of an earlier age. The ‘great man’ eminence of Jean Lurcat is the focal point of the show.25

Alice Filson talks of her experiences with tapestry in the context of a ‘French tapestry expert’ Bernard Dupont from a prestigious gallery, the Sebert galleries, in the central city, Sydney, in 1973:

    It was his approval of the integrity of my weaving that gave me even greater pleasure than the high value he put upon my tapestry.26

Alice Filson continued her article by stressing the fixity of the tapestry technique:

    Either it is a tapestry, woven according to an unchanging tradition, or it is not. There are no in betweens, and no new experiments. It is a fixed medium.

In the United States, the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop was set up in 1977 and once again, the impetus to found the workshop came from prestigious institutions and a master weaver from a great tradition. Joyce Hulbert has described the circumstances:

    The crucial event in 1976 was ‘Five centuries of Tapestry’, the extensively catalogued exhibition of the renowned tapestry collection of the Fine Arts...
Museums of San Francisco. Concurrent with this exhibition was a large international symposium on tapestry by leading scholars. Also, a tapestry weaving demonstration using the graduate students in Textiles at San Francisco State University was initiated by the newly arrived master Aubusson weaver Jean Pierre Larochette. Additional inspiration was a cartoon titled ‘California Poppies’ designed by Mark Adams.27

Ruth Scheuer, a strong force in tapestry in the United States, described how she came to set up her own workshop:

In 1979 I left the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop to study at Les Gobelins. While there I was deeply impressed by the virtuosity of the weavers’ technique. They used methods that I had never seen or read about anywhere. However the Gobelins approach to design was much more formal and static than that of American fiber artists.

She wanted to combine the freer approach of United States weavers, yet:

For inspiration I looked to the great Gothic tapestries, such as The Apocalypse of Angers and the Lady and the Unicorn. Medieval weavers were given but a general outline: using their skills they filled in the details to create a tapestry that was not merely a reproduction of something...

In 1978 the Scottish Tapestry Artist’s Group was formed, obviously wishing to develop avant-garde forms of practice, ‘passionately committed to the pursuit of general excellence and the encouragement of each person’s individual development’ and using the term ‘tapestry’ in the loosest way. Yet it is still maintained by Maureen Hodge and Fiona Mathison that:

Tapestry in Scotland has generally meant the high loom variety which is known as ‘arras’ or ‘gobelin’ and it is from this tradition that we discover the area of common interest which links this group. The medium is the language which carries the ideas...

The Edinburgh School of Art, so influential in Australian tapestry, is described by Nigel Coates in 1982 in discussing the work of the English tapestry weaver William Jefferies:

San Francisco Tapestry Workshop, Jean Pierre Larochette with beginning student Fibenarts, June 1983.
The Edinburgh School of Art, where Jefferies had studied previously, insisted on the rigorous commitment to technique - learning the slog of the loom. There the monastic brotherhood of Scottish weavers depended on a historic respect for the craft.30

In an article about Ingunn Skogholt, a Norwegian tapestry weaver living in Scotland, Francesca Temple Roberts commented on her technique in 1980:

There is no reason for Ingunn Skogholt's tapestries to be other than conventional in their technique: she is not concerned to push tapestry weaving to its furthest limits, into three dimensions or into novelty materials, experiments which ultimately run the risk of betraying the medium.31

It is obvious that the processes of tapestry were much less exploratory than textiles, more likely to 'reproduce' images. The retention of the slow anachronistic tradition was vital. Through architecture tapestry was allied to a public presence, by state subsidy and patronage tapestry enhanced the civic environs. As recently as 1992 James More, Managing Director of the Edinburgh tapestry company reiterated this historical position:

For thousands of years handwoven tapestry has been a sophisticated means of man's displaying the paradox of his existence...Tapestry has always been highly prized and central to the regalia of prestige and power...Louis XIV took tapestry to the apex of opulence in his workshops at Gobelin, as he melded the greatest craftsmen and artists in his pay to adorn his palace at Versailles in evidence of his secured political power.32

It could be said that tapestry has been the decoration for Machiavellian power games since its prevalent use as a wall covering from the sixteenth century. There
is a French expression, 'behind the tapestry' which indicates the hiding place for listening in on affairs of state and political intrigues. Tapestry has also been invested as a symbol by extreme dictators - Beatrijs Sterk commented that tapestry was patronised by Hitler as an ideal artform, and also by Stalin. There is certainly a paradox in this conjunction of a stately fabric and political power, as Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner observe:

Precisely because it wears thin and disintegrates, cloth becomes an apt medium for communicating a central problem of power: social and political relationships are necessarily fragile in an impermanent, ever-changing world.

Against such fragility, Archie Brennan, in a reflective article on earlier American tapestry noted the importance of a formal and traditional tapestry 'language':

The steady pilgrimage to Paris for training at the Gobelin workshops coupled with the now strongly rooted and powerful San Francisco Workshop and Jean Pierre Larochette, has produced a rich corpus of skilled tapestrymakers and a body of orthodox works where surface uniformity, relative fineness of weave, and the 'hachure', 'demi-duite' and 'double weft interlock' are, as they say, de rigueur.

The importance of a framework of traditional techniques, with very limited scope for alteration became a fundamental component in the identity of tapestry in Australia.
The authority of the past and the Victorian Tapestry Workshop

It is intriguing to link the eventual establishment of the ‘official’ tapestry workshop, supported by the Victorian State Government, to the social and political circumstances of Australia in 1976. At a moment when air travel made international exhibitions and contacts accessible, we affirmed our ties with our language roots in Europe, and with an idea of power and credibility being linked within a medium, tapestry. Tapestry could function as a ritual object in an increasingly de-ritualised artworld, where radical art practice was assumed to be anti-establishment.

By translating the work of noted Australian artists through the new interpretative skills of an ancient tradition freshly invigorated in Australia, contemporary painting could be made accessible to the public buildings and the burgeoning architectural restructuring of our major cities. I suspect that the main impulse in establishing tapestry was essentially conservative at a period of rapid change: to retain and build up ancient traditions in a land with few ceremonious artefacts. The archaic technique gave resonance and solidity to the vigorous and questioning image makers of Australia and substantiated a ‘claim to the past’.

Sue Walker has been the Director of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop since 1978 and has successfully worked with the arts community of Victoria to validate the workshop as a Fine Arts institution, patronised by major government organisations and corporations. She is a fervent spokesperson for tapestry, and it is this model of interpretative practice, of weavers interpreting and translating the work of artists, that has become the main paradigm for tapestry in Australia.

Tapestry, in Sue Walker’s perception, was established independently from the great upsurge in interest in hand processes in the late 1960s, and came from the interest of institutions and respected authorities in having the work of noted Australian
artists translated into tapestry. (John Olsen and John Coburn had already had
designs woven in the workshops of Aubusson in France and in Portugal in the
1960s.\textsuperscript{37}) The condition of tapestry as Fine Art, allied to great artists and
institutions must be maintained at all costs.

In an article in \textit{Craft Australia} in 1978, Sue Walker made reference to the long
history of tapestry associated with powerful institutions:

...We are all conscious that the decline of tapestry as an art form
occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when slavish reproduction
and colour matching were at their peak.
She stressed her hope for continued Government subsidy and:

hoped that large corporations, banks, universities and collectors, who are the patrons of the arts today, would support the venture...Within Australia we have received commissions to weave tapestries for banks, colleges and universities, public corporations, cultural centres and parliamentary buildings.  

In my interview with Sue Walker twelve years after this early article, in 1990, the first issue raised by her was the fact that textiles and tapestry are so far removed from each other. Textiles was seen as ‘feminine’, instinctive, communal, undisciplined and irrational, and she perceived the tapestry world ‘at war’ with this force. Tapestry was aligned with the central area of Fine Art, not the peripheral area of the crafts:

I think the first thing that needs to be said is that the impetus for establishing this workshop had no connection whatsoever to anything that was happening in the so-called textile world at that time...So the initial challenge for us here was first of all to capture the confidence of the artists, the original image makers, and it was really essential that the people we employed understood the artist’s language. We needed the confidence of the image makers, the original thinkers, with whom we were to be able to work to interpret their designs. One of the big difficulties we had in the early days was to let people involved in hand weaving and textiles understand that we were not looking for people who had a fabric style background. Its very easy to learn to go under and over - its the sensibility of what you do with it - you need to be able to draw.

The impetus for this workshop was very much from the Fine Arts way of thinking, because it was from an exhibition of French tapestries in the National Gallery, and it was supported in the main by people, who with hindsight had more Fine Art, or applied Fine Art sensibilities, people from the National Gallery, and a Professor of Architecture....

The Workshop received a substantial subsidy from the Victorian Government to cover its first years of operation, with a mandate to develop and augment the distinction of contemporary Fine Art. Any reminder of domestic fabric weaving, with all its undertones of restricted feminine privacies, far away from the scenes of power and influence, could have undermined the hard won historical status of tapestry as the bearer of great myths.
Although, of course, tapestry is a textile, is formed by interwoven threads, and much of its unconscious force as a visual sign derives from its 'textility', this textility was hidden by the force of a traditional connection to painting. The 'textile' aspect of tapestry must be controlled so that the medium was obedient to the original image-makers, the artists. All questions that I asked Sue Walker about 'skill' or 'technique' were deflected, to emphasise artistic decisions:

So, taking all that as a backdrop to the question you asked about have our skills developed, expanded since 1980, I don't think its to do with skill, I think its to do with artistic confidence, certainly we've become more confident and sometimes artists hand us work and would almost rather that we didn't collaborate, would just rather see what happens, so that gives us a strength.

The 'Fine Arts' spectrum stressed originality, conceptual and imaginative vigour as imperative for art in the 1970s. Yet this conceptual vigour was rarely the province of the weaver, who is seldom the author of the work being woven. The weaver's task is like that of a skilled performer in an orchestra: to interpret the score (the image) with all possible sensitivity. The 'original image makers' are mostly established painters. Sue Walker accentuated this aspect:

I have always been interested in weaving and textiles, but I'm not an original image maker. ....my whole excitement at the idea of starting the workshop was to
do with the concept of the collaborative role, between a painter and a tapestry artist. It was really essential that the people we employed understood the artist's language. It isn't easy to attract that kind of person so initially we did have to take some people who did have more varied backgrounds - I don't know if the original weavers only had a textile background - we had a graphic artist, a professional designer and a sculpture degree - basically they were all Fine Arts trained, so that the initial interpretive dialogues that we undertook had this as a main feature, more, there's collaboration. ...A whole spirit of excitement has come into the visual arts in the last ten or fifteen years, so we found it easier to attract people to work here who had painting qualifications because they could see that it wasn't a corruption of what they'd been taught at art school. 40

The issue of working with the ‘original image-makers’ was crucial for the new Victorian Tapestry Workshop. In a catalogue essay introducing one of their first exhibitions of a collection of tapestries from the work of Australian painters in 1978, Patrick McCaughey placed tapestry as a decorative art, as a supporter and enhancer of the qualities of modern painting. The role he gave to tapestry was a ‘wifely’ role, ‘humanizing and ameliorating the living spaces of buildings’, a ‘right to console’ and to ‘invite the senses’. The ‘quality of conception’ that was essential for its aesthetic, he says, was provided by the pictorial tradition, by artists. It is to be observed that this workshop of mainly women weavers, with a woman director, had an admired male critic of art to introduce this exhibition, and that every painter whose work had been interpreted was male. The list of artists in this 1978 exhibition is Henri Bastin, Charles Blackman, Mike Brown, William Kelly, Roger Kemp, Richard Larter, Alun Leach-Jones, Keith Looby, Rolin Schlicht, Jan Senbergs, Jeffrey Smart, Guy Stuart, Eric Thake and Ken Whisson. 41 Tapestry therefore, as the ‘wife’ of painting was seen not to initiate or conceive images, it provided the consoling and sensual role that enlarged the (male) pictorial tradition. Through famous men and their works it was implied, tapestry could maintain a foothold in the artworld, despite its underlying basis in the senses. Its position in regard to textiles must be carefully controlled or tapestry itself might slip back into that inarticulate realm of tactility, that is so far from a position of power and centrality.

The position of tapestry was therefore derived, not only from the past, but also to its close relationship to civic, professional and governmental management. Robert Nelson has written about the close association of architecture and tapestry, and in the course of a debate in Craft Victoria in 1991 about the nature and place of
tapestry warns that a ‘soft’ approach to tapestry is hardly appropriate, a ‘hard’ status, a male status, better fits the facts:

Alun Leach Jones (painter) Emerald Hill Yellow 1976/1977, 2.03m x 2.36m. Tapestry woven in the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. Catalogue, Tapestry and the Australian Painter, National Gallery of Victoria, 1978, no page numbers. The artist comments: 'It is the interpretive response of the Weavers to my ideas and images and our collaboration in the early stages of the tapestry that is crucial for the ultimate success of the work. I am completely opposed to copying paintings in wool.' Despite this, none of the weavers’ names are mentioned. Of the 14 painters in the catalogue, none are women. This situation has been redressed in the 1990s.
For most of its history, tapestry has been an art of public and private splendour and has had nothing modest in its social and aesthetic charter...The history of tapestry suggests a decorative presence which abundantly reflects the 'hard' status of its patrons... The situation with the VTW is not so different. The patrons of tapestry are no softies; and the spaces for which the tapestries are designed and destined (Parliament, the High Court and so on) frequently symbolise the supreme authority of the land.42

It can be clearly perceived how 'tapestry' taught through its structure as textile, as it had been in Victoria, and in other states prior to the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in 1976 could not be recognised. Tapestry as it was taught in New South Wales by highly trained European weavers such as Solvig Baas Becking, Erica Semler or Jutta Feddersen, had no status in comparison to the rigorous language of tapestry taught through institutions that could prove a direct link to the famous historical tapestry centres. It is intriguing to consider that Margaret Grafton in New South Wales wove a large tapestry in 196343 the first major tapestry commission given to an Australian weaver. This work was inspired by the children’s tapestries made in Harrania, Egypt,44 and woven directly in handspun and dyed wool without a cartoon being designed first. It therefore did not fit the definition of tapestry established by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. I too, was influenced by the idea of weaving images directly on the loom and wove large pieces for commission from 197345. This whole momentum in New South Wales has never been acknowledged as 'tapestry' by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, as such experimental approaches seemed dangerously close to the 'undisciplined' language of fibre. Ian Arcus, another New South Wales tapestry weaver of the mid 1970s is quoted above as saying that the design can emerge out of the technique. This 'weaving-y' way of making design fit the tapestry medium, a Bauhaus assertion of form as content, was denied by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop as being regressive and not reflecting the essential nature of tapestry as a partner and interpreter of Fine Art.46

Any association with the inchoate maternal, textural forms of 'wall-hangings' was undesirable in establishing a focus for the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in the Fine Arts. Sue Walker consistently mentions the 'arrival' of tapestry in Australia as taking place in 1976, with the founding of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. For example, in the International Tapestry Network exhibition catalogue of 1992, she maintains that tapestry has only existed in Australia since 1976.47
The Victorian Tapestry Workshop re-writes the history of tapestry in Australia to follow a desired model, with the central impetus always generated by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. In this way of thinking, individual tapestry weavers working before the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop could not be considered trained in the the Fine Arts understanding of tapestry technique, because the technique of tapestry was enshrined in historic workshop traditions. It follows that although the Workshop has often been a source of controversy for individual tapestry weavers it has given a national focus to Australian tapestry, a centre for teaching, learning, and disseminating information from international sources - even perhaps an academy to rebel against. It has set high technical standards for any individual tapestry worker, by bringing the best European traditions into an Australian context without being dominated by them.

Although there is a case to be made for a separate history for tapestry derived from Gobelin techniques, which does not include the wider field of textiles, I feel that the extraordinary momentum of the craft revival in the 60s and 70s, the interest and curiosity in every kind of woven phenomena from all cultures, encouraged the development of tapestry and a sensitivity to the nuances of the woven surface. Looking at the circumstances from a broad social spectrum makes it hard to see the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in 1976 as merely coincidental.
The Lausanne Biennale and tapestry: complex positionings

The shiftings for position by ‘official’ tapestry in Australia in relation to textiles were reflected in the conflicts between the different directions of the two areas in the history of the Lausanne Biennale in Switzerland, the most highly regarded exhibition forum for those working in fibre of any kind.

It was established by Jean Lurcat in 1962 to promote tapestry world wide, by creating a permanent centre in Lausanne known as the International Centre of Ancient and Modern Tapestry. The centre included in its aims a creation of a library, a repository for tapestry cartoons and a card file of designers, as well as the organisation of international Biennials ‘to assess the evolution and vitality of contemporary tapestry in the world.’ \(^{48}\) In the book *Textile Art* published in 1985 the authors document how this original charter was gradually diluted so that the ideals of French tapestry were overcome by the momentum of untraditional expressive textiles.\(^{49}\)

By 1969 there was a strong protest against the Gobelin/Aubusson tradition of an interpretative tapestry in favour of new materials and off-loom techniques, which resulted in an increasing loss of hegemony for the French tapestry school. Jean Lurcat, the great master of French tapestry, challenged the textile artists by referring to them as ‘charming feminine comrades, formerly fashion designers’. He is reputed to have said, ‘Watch out for those little girls who knit’. What horrified Jean Lurcat most, it seems, was not only the female gender of many of the artists, but also the ‘act of revealing beneath the image of tapestry the hidden language of textiles.’ \(^{50}\)

The material exploration of fibre as an expressive element in itself, where the artist was also the weaver/maker overwhelmed the image based flatwoven tapestries. The ‘semiotic’ had its moment, rising to overwhelm the ‘symbolic’ institution of tapestry in an irresistible tide. In the late 1960s there were still plentiful examples of flatwoven tapestry in a modern art idiom, but increasingly a sculptural and textural momentum made images almost redundant. Janis Jefferies described this phenomenon:

> It is worth recalling that from 1965, the biennials have shown a range of work far beyond the original definition of tapestry, to include embroidery, stitch, applique, felt, paper, metal, wood, printing, collage, photographic montage, mixed media, soft sculpture, installation, environmental and performance based activity.\(^{51}\)
The new artists from Poland exhibited such verve and force in their use of untraditional materials and a huge scale, that the pendulum swung more and more towards Eastern Europe, and more recently, to Japan and the United States. In 1981 the Biennial emphasised every aspect of technique and expression through fibre. Michel Thomas wrote at this time:

To extend the Biennial to non-tapestry techniques was to permit the emergence of a way of thinking based not only on the translation into textile form of representational subjects or patterns, but also on the utilisation of the specific characteristics and functioning of fibre as a creative language.

He continued by accentuating the importance of tactility in this development:

Many artists are creating tactile works, as though the visual element, triumphant and triumphal for so long with techniques used in film and television, clamoured for a new approach using the hands and recalling our primary sense - touch.52

Yet there was increasing criticism about the criteria of judgment. In 1983, for example, the criticism was made by Janis Jefferies and Maria Lewandowska that the work shown had become part of a sterile International style, with process and form playing a dominant role without interrogating social, political or environmental issues.53 Textile art, like modern architecture, had become a universal style, where a particular concern for forms, materials and processes crossed national borders between Asia, Europe and America. The 1987 Biennial, the 'celebration of the wall' was the third thematic exhibition, following 'environment' in 1983, and 'sculpture' in 1985. Diana de Rham commented that 'the return to the source' in 1987 was expressed in subtle technical refinements, and a return to tapestry, in works from Australia, such as Tom Moore's Just Another Day, and from United States, Canada and Poland. 'The return to the slow process of classical weaving with its necessary premeditation,' she said, 'meets with the quest of a specific language, in which technique, material and contents join in a genuine and original practice... reflecting a broad diversity of issues'.54

Out of the twenty nine selected works in the 1989 Biennial, only four came from Europe. The previously dominant position of European artists, particularly those from eastern Europe was replaced with a high proportion of work from Japan and America.
Australian artists did manage to pierce the intense competition to be shown at Lausanne on several occasions. Mona Hessing in 1969, Beryl Anderson in 1973, and Tori de Mestre in 1987, were all working in a sculptural and material based aesthetic. Gary Benson and Tom Moore were artists working in tapestry, but using a personal tapestry technique, whose work was shown in Lausanne in 1979 and 1987. None of the artists working in the 'symbolic' mode of tapestry initiated by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop and the weavers and teachers within its sphere of influence have been exhibited in Lausanne.

Despite outstanding works of contemporary tapestry in the 1987 Biennial, the most recent Lausanne Biennial in 1992 did not have one piece of 'tapestry', that is, a flat surfaced textile woven on a linen or cotton warp (vertical threads) with a mainly woollen weft (horizontal threads) to form images. Finally, the name of the exhibition was changed from 'Lausanne Biennale of Tapestry' to 'Lausanne Biennale of Contemporary Textile Art' in 1992, when traditional flat woven representational tapestry was excluded. I visited this Biennial in June 1992, having seen the Biennial of 1973 in exactly the same imposing exhibition halls. Not only were no pieces of flat tapestry shown, but the textile art itself had become tasteful and well designed. Stylistically the works were characterised by repetitive abstract elements with little reference to personal or public worlds, and looked, with few exceptions, like extremely well presented design exercises. The confrontational corporeality, the excessive textures and exuberance of the 1973 Biennial had been replaced by well-mannered materials, highly designed, technically and aesthetically sophisticated. The original intentions of the organising committee to chart the evolution of tapestry have succeeded, but traditional tapestry has become excluded from its modernist aims. Philippe Jeanloz wrote in the catalogue of the 1992 Biennial:

Ever since its creation in 1962, the International Lausanne Biennial has always been receptive to the slightest emanations from the world of contemporary textile art. Formerly the International Biennial of Tapestry Exhibition, this event is now known as the International Lausanne Biennial, Contemporary Textile Art. This recent rebaptism is not the product of chance, but the reflection of various tendencies. Leaving the area of applied arts in favour of that of the plastic arts, textile art has thrown off the constraints of the loom. It has broken free of the wall and shrugged off traditional weaving techniques.
The Biennial, after thirty years, had become itself a ‘symbolic’ institution, fixed into formalist modes of sculptural textiles, which can be analysed as having as rigid a stylistic framework as the modernist flat-woven tapestry they replaced. In one sense, ‘traditional’ tapestry, bound by the constraints of the loom, has become the new radical force, which does not confuse innovation and contemporary relevance with a particular style of structural textiles. In Lausanne, as textile art has developed its own ‘symbolic’ order it has displaced both the disturbing ‘semiotic’ textile and the traditional ‘symbolic’ tapestry. Tapestry artists interested in maintaining ‘symbolic’ modes have moved away from Lausanne and initiated their own organisations, to set up new opportunities for exhibition and discussion. As in other European pasts, the salon of ‘refused’ artists has moved away from the ‘academy’ of textile art which Lausanne now represents.

In this chapter I have endeavoured to show that the official ‘symbolic’ view of the re-emerging tapestry of the 1970s saw it led by prestigious institutions allied to influential artists and public patronage. In comparison to the fibre movement of the same period tapestry seemed bound by rigid structures within its very form and process. This differed markedly to the extraordinary hunger for experimentation so evident in the textile world, where every possible way of interlacing and interweaving threads was explored. We have moved a long way from the beginnings of tapestry in Australia, those first importations of the French woven tapestries by the Australian masters John Olsen and John Coburn, and the early isolated tapestry weavers like myself who were drawn to the medium before the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop.

**A new tapestry?**

A marked development since 1988 is the lesser emphasis on tapestry workshops, and a growing phenomenon of individual artist/weavers who have emerged from intensive training in the tapestry institutions of excellence. These artists identify themselves, in Australia, through the ‘symbolic’ tapestry tradition emanating from Edinburgh, which is the ‘language’ of tapestry upheld in the Victorian Tapestry Workshop and by individual tapestry makers, such as Belinda Ramson and Kay Lawrence who trained with Archie Brennan or Maureen Hodge, his successor at Edinburgh.
It does seem that the international movement to affirm a 'symbolic' tapestry has been set in motion, first by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop's organization of the huge Tapestry Symposium in Melbourne in 1988, and subsequently by artist-oriented initiatives in Poland and Vancouver. The content and impact of this new maturity infers that tapestry may no longer take a subservient and 'wifely' role, but is also able to initiate and foster radical concepts within the practice. Postmodernism allows a radical practice to function within a structured discipline of technique. Such a concept of 'radical' was impossible within modernist beliefs in transgressing the very nature of materials and traditional structures as a fundamental component of 'cutting edge' practice. The International Tapestry Network was set up in the United States in 1989 to coordinate this growing
international community of artists, and has curated two international exhibitions of tapestry that have toured the United States and Canada in 1990 and 1992.57

The 'symbolic' perceptions of tapestry described in this chapter are being augmented by an emerging group of artists who use tapestry as a medium that can enhance and extend current ideas about gender, place, memory, history and identity. National identities have always been associated with the formal establishment of tapestry in Australia and have been a principal means of gaining government support. A majority of the contemporary artists are women who subscribe to an intensely personal realm of images to explore the meanings of our late twentieth century culture, and who emphasise this aspect rather than monumental architectural commissions.

Tapestry is diverse, and tapestry makers move from the personal exploration, to the public commission, to co-ordinating community tapestries. These artists, both men and women, form an international 'community' that endeavours to rupture stereotypical viewpoints in relation to the patriarchal nature of institutions and organisations, by a self reflexive awareness which is open to current concerns, and collaborative in scope. Yet it is essential to these artists that many of the 'symbolic' features of tapestry are retained.58 By using the tapestry medium for all its signifying associations artists do, as Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner so aptly explain, 'facilitate claim to the past - its names, legends and events' and by doing so, extend the perceptions and resources of the of the present moment.

Some of the developing ideas for this chapter appeared in the article ‘Tapestry: Signs and histories’ in which I mapped out the terrain of tapestry, *Object*, Spring, 1992, pp. 24-28.


7 This guild formed a valuable service at the beginning of the crafts movement, with classes, materials and information, and I remember its dedicated office holders with affection.


9 P. R. MacMahon (ed.), ‘Tapestry Curtains For the Sydney Opera House’, pp. 11-12.


18 This is in marked contrast to the objects of the ‘textile uprising’, which decayed and fell to pieces quickly, being made of untested materials in untraditional techniques, at a time when the idea of historical permanence was irrelevant.


20 Telephone conversation, September, 1994.

In trying to address the issue of training craftspeople, the Crafts Council of
Australia in the 1970's did bring out well known weavers from Europe,
America and Japan who gave important workshops to cater to the growing
interest in tapestry, e.g. Mary Leland from USA visited Australia in 1974,
Professor Vurbanov from Bulgaria in 1975, Magdalena Abakanowicz from
Poland in 1976, Jun Tomita from Japan in 1977.

11-12.

Hommage a Jean Lurcat, touring exhibition Australia, June 1973 - November

Alice Filson, ‘An Unchanging Tradition . . .’, pp. 4-6.

Joyce Hulbert, ‘Reflections In San Francisco’, International Tapestry Network,

Ruth Tannenbaum Scheuer, ‘The Scheuer Tapestry Studio: Applying old
techniques to new ideas’, pp. 39-41.


Nigel Coates, ‘Banners of Optomism’, p. 35.

Francesca Temple Roberts, ‘Unsentimental Education: Tapestries by Ingunn
Skogholt’, p. 34.

James More, ‘Tapestry: Art, craft and collaboration’, Royal Society of Art

I am indebted to Catherine Kay, a native French speaker and tapestry weaver
for this observation.

Beatrijs Sterk, ‘A Personal View of Tapestry Art’, International Tapestry
Network Exhibit 1, ITNET Inc. Anchorage, Alaska, 1990, pp. 18-19.

Annette B. Wiener and Jane Schneider, Cloth and Human Experience, p. 6.

Archie Brennan, ‘Tapestry In America: An Overview from slightly outside’,
Fiberarts, January/February 1990, p. 31.

Large scale tapestry weaving in the 1960s had to be commissioned from
outside Australia. Art collector and gallery owner Kym Bonython
commissioned John Coburn (born 1923), the well known painter, to design the
first Australian tapestries to be woven at Aubusson in France, to be followed
by those of John Olsen and Arthur Boyd. I remember very well seeing John
Olsen’s tapestry ‘Joie de Vivre’ in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the
mid 1960s, long before I knew how to weave. Grace Cochrane, The Crafts

p. 31.

24-28 and also ‘Interview with Sue Walker’, October 1990.


Tapestry and the Australian Painter: Two years of work by the Victorian
Tapestry Workshop, Catalogue, Patrick McCaughey (Intro.), National Gallery
of Victoria, 1978.

Robert Nelson, ‘Harder Than You Think: Reflections on tapestry in
In 1963 Margaret Grafton was commissioned by Philip Cox to make a 1.83 m x 4.88 m tapestry for the Tocal Agricultural College near Maitland, New South Wales. See Grace Cochrane, The Crafts Movement In Australia: A History, p. 171. Margaret Grafton is still an active weaver and theorist.


My early commissions included: Macquarie University, 3 metres square, 1973; New South Wales State Planning Authority, 7.5 m x 2.4 m, 1973; University of Sydney Union, 1.5 metres square; St. Andrew’s House, Sydney Square, 3.3 m x 4.8 m 1976; Aldo Moratelli, Architects, North Sydney, 1976.

Even in 1988, at the Victorian Tapestry Symposium, the achievements of New South Wales tapestry weavers outside any institution of tapestry was concealed. Tom Moore, who exhibited a large tapestry in the 1987 Lausanne Biennale, was discouraged from displaying this tapestry during the Melbourne International Tapestry Symposium. Because the New South Wales tapestry weavers drew on the structural aspects of textiles, as much as the conceptual elements of fine art, their work did not qualify by the name of tapestry to the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, being seen as a kind of textile folk art, without drawing skills or any relationship to the fine art world.


Michel Thomas, ‘Christine Mainguy and Sophie Pommier,’ Textile Art, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1985, p.120.


Diana de Rham, ‘Celebration Of the Wall’, Craft Arts, February/April 1988, pp. 28-33.


I have documented the issues of the international tapestry symposia in Lodz, Poland in 1992: ‘Distant Lives/Shared Voices: A Report’, International Tapestry Newsletter, Fall 1992, vol. 3 no. 3, p. 3-10; and also in Vancouver, Canada in 1993: ‘Making a Place for Tapestry: Report on Vancouver tapestry
symposium, September 1993’, *International Tapestry Newsletter* (USA) Winter 1994 (in press) and *Object*, Summer 1993/1994. In Lodz, Poland, an international conference *Distant Lives/Shared Voices* was held for a week in June 1992 with the participation of forty-five artists from twenty countries. This tapestry retreat attempted to investigate the context of contemporary tapestry from many angles: the artists’ perceptions, education, exhibition, writing were all discussed, with visits to the many exhibitions of tapestry and textile art on show in Lodz. I began this journey with some idea of how I imagined I would place work being done in Poland, but I was unprepared for the intensity of the textile world to be found there, or for the Polish perceptions of our tapestry.
CHAPTER 8

CRITICAL CONTEXTS OF CONTEMPORARY TAPESTRY:
TRANSLATION AND APPROPRIATION

The clear divisions between 'symbolic' tapestry and 'semiotic' textile in the 1970s, the distinct boundaries between the instinctive force of a haptic textile, and the historical collaborative structures of tapestry, have carried particular theoretical alignments. Following its initial upsurge in the 1960s and 1970s textile art, using abstract and repetitive forms, was allied with a modernist formalist approach. Janis Jefferies outlined the developments of textile art:

Textile artists, while continuing to espouse many of the basic tenets of the Arts and Crafts movement and the 'form follows function' notions developed in the Bauhaus, expressed new interest in coming under the theoretical umbrella of the modernist aesthetic, 'officially' known to apply only to the world of painting, sculpture and architecture. A major strategy in this regard was to declare a 'divorce' from the limitations and functional associations of the loom, while at the same time identifying the textile artist, not merely as a technician executing the works of others, but as a bonafide artist steeped in the spirit of individualistic expression.

The Lausanne Biennial has come to represent individualistic textile artists within a modernist tradition, which is no longer revolutionary but has become an 'international' style. This modernism is described by Marcel Marois, the Canadian tapestry artist, as 'a negation of representation, a repression of history and tradition, and an attempt to renew work essentially through its structural and material properties'. The resurgence of tapestry in the late 1980s and 1990s accompanied the shift in theory away from art/craft modernist discourse, allowing cross referencing between visual art theory, literary theory, anthropology, philosophy and psychiatry.

In the following discussion of Lyotard's postmodernism Linda Nicholson uses the analogy of a weaving to express these pervasive ideas of multiplicity, shifting perceptions of boundaries and categories that once seemed fixed and even universal, but now appear fragmentary in a 'postmodern' world.

What holds a society together... is not a common consciousness or institutional substructure. Rather the social bond is a weave of crisscrossing threads of
discursive practices, no single one of which runs continuously throughout the whole.

In describing her approach to postmodern feminism she uses another tapestry metaphor:

In short this theory (of postmodern feminism) would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven of a single colour.³

It is illuminating that the very outlines of current critical thinking are here presented through the archaic structure of a tapestry and suggest a many stranded, multifaceted paradigm in which discussions about both tapestry and textiles can be opened out.

**Tapestry and painting**

Although tapestry had its origins in Australia under the influence of what is now called ‘modernist’ art over the past twenty five years, it has essential characteristics which may be denied by insistence on modernist values. As Sue Rowley⁴ has pointed out, the unresolved arguments about the positioning of art and craft are part of the construction of modernism. In this construction, craft can never be equal, its insistence on ‘making’, aligns it with the feminine. Its production processes, its functions, can never come near the ‘conceptual originality’ of ‘art’ as defined by modernism. Tapestry may be ‘symbolic’ in relation to textile’s ‘semiotic’, but in relation to painting, tapestry shifts to a ‘semiotic’ position itself. Its undeniable alliances to woven fabric, place it in an ‘instinctive’ and ‘feminine’ relation to painting.

The idea that the form of the work is also its content sits uneasily with the much wider traditional parameters of tapestry. Tapestry traditionally depicted maps, histories, vast narratives and allegories derived from literary fictions and myths, where the individual is always part of a wider cosmos. These subjects and their physical construction were produced through collaboration. ‘Integrity’ is doubted, from the modernist viewpoint, when individual weavers find themselves, of necessity, bound to share and to collaborate in the production of a tapestry.

What then are the fundamental approaches of modernism that can create difficulties for tapestry? Clement Greenberg, the influential American critic
associated with the rise of Abstract Expressionism in New York in the 1950s, believed that the work of art was expressed solely through the inherent qualities of the medium. Other aspects, such as narrative and subject matter, were detrimental to this main impetus. Clement Greenberg sees the position of the modern artist as self-evident:

Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself... subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like the plague.\(^5\)

The actual single object, the tapestry has to be considered as part of a network of relationships and intentions, rather than one individual's. It often has a 'ritual' function, being called into existence by a client rather than being created 'out of the blue', and its assessment as an aesthetic object depends on whether it fulfils the requirements it was made for, as well as its intrinsic worth. A viewer cannot judge a tapestry 'as if' it were a painting but must learn to look for other signs, if s/he wants to understand the woven work in its context.

Valerie Kirk, Head of the Textile Department at the Canberra School of Art, commented to me in relation to this misunderstanding in June 1993:

Tapestry in Australia is perceived as a crafty woolly thing that people learn through hobby classes.... until very recently in Australia tapestry has not been taught as part of a tertiary arts degree. I suppose coming from Edinburgh and the Royal College of Art, we have never questioned the training, background and area that tapestry is placed in. If the critic I met recently who expressed such doubt about tapestry had worked alongside Maureen Hodge (at the Edinburgh College of Art) for three years she would not question tapestry as a medium for image making and the expression of ideas. We do have a long way to go.

**Interpretation and translation: the critic**

One of the main difficulties for commentators of tapestry is this very perception of tapestry as a sensual interpreter and enhancer of painting, as expressed so clearly in the Patrick McCaughey article above. The double act of creativity involved in making a tapestry, that is, the designing of the cartoon, and then the actual weaving of the tapestry, contradicts deeply held modernist ideas about the immediacy of the spontaneous mark and the integrity of a single artist in conceiving and making a piece of work from start to finish. Tapestry is thus perceived as a passive medium,
static in itself, 'safely removed from creative struggles' and as subservient to painting in being merely a woollen copy of the painting.

The issue of translation/reproduction is uppermost in discussing any validation of tapestry, and particularly in relation to the 'innovative' textile. A typical expression of this focus on the relation to the painted image is found in Michael Bogle's brief but definite essay entitled 'Contemporary Tapestry', commissioned for Textile Fibre Forum in 1992. Bogle states that tapestry is inherently undermined by:

aesthetic concessions that compromise the inherent spirit of tapestry. While the subordination of tapestry to contemporary interior decoration has done much to devalue the medium's currency, the most damaging issue in tapestry is the well established practice of commissions rewarding weavers copying other artists work.

The article is silent on issues of meaning and content and concentrates on one aspect of tapestry, its interpretation of painting. This is a familiar position for critics of tapestry to take, as Archie Brennan points out in his reply to Michel Bogle. Because of its expense, Brennan admits that tapestry studios do compromise by interpreting the work of famous painters to subsidise the workshop, but goes on, 'He merely repeats what has been endlessly argued in words and in weaving for the last 100 years... That tapestry can be a creative process is there for the seeing..' There are many other forms of tapestry, which Michael Bogle chooses not to see.

We have seen that tapestry has an entirely different theoretical framework to textiles although tapestry has been seen as part of 'textiles' in broad craft categorisations, for example, in the Powerhouse Museum exhibition in Sydney. Rather than limiting discussion entirely around medium, as Michael Bogle does, it would also be possible to follow the anthropological model and try to see analogies between works in perhaps several different media, that have the same role or function in the wider society. For example, the interpretation of another artist's painting into tapestry in a workshop may be more similar to the interpretation of a composer's score by a group of musicians, than to a tapestry individually designed and woven by one artist endeavouring to establish herself in the contemporary art world, or to tapestries designed and woven by a community to reinforce and celebrate a sense of local history and identity. Finer divisions of practice suggest that tapestry could be seen to be closer to a canvas painting (also a
woven fabric incorporating images) than it is to a multi-shaft textile such as a bedsheap or upholstery fabric, or to a piece of ‘fibreart’ sculpture. Tapestries of differing function and purpose are probably less like each other than they are like other art works, such as painting or sculpture with similar functions.

Tapestry has been positioned as the decorative, softening and sensual medium that has a profound historical connection to eminent institutions and great men. Michael Bogle takes this ‘official’ position as indisputable, and then accuses tapestry of not being ‘creative’. His article shows very little knowledge of other forms of tapestry, both within and outside the European tradition. He assumes, as does modernism, that the only proper model for tapestry is one-off work which is not a collaborative production, and which must never ‘copy’ or be ‘hybridised’ in any way. European tapestry, with all its local variation, has always been a collaborative enterprise, where painters and weavers worked closely together, often producing multiples of the one subject.9

The tapestries he cites, from workshops all over the world, are not considered in the context of their commissioning, or in their site of display - but taken out as entirely self-referential objects, which can be grouped under a universalist value system without reference to any other aspect, in order to be derogatively compared to painting. His article only shows tapestries that interpret ‘famous’ painters, not the work of contemporary artist weavers who question and extend the associations of the historical medium. He comes to tapestry with a battery of preconceptions, and selects work that conforms to these preconceptions.

He suggests - again a cliche in ‘modern’ tapestry writing - that the Raphael cartoons, now in the Victorian and Albert Museum in London, were the beginning of the slavish copying of paintings by tapestry, and that tapestry declined from this moment (c.1519). These huge drawings were in fact the product of many hands from Raphael’s workshop, and tapestry was another step in the conversion of an image through many material translations.10 Tapestries made from Raphael cartoons in the Uffizi Galleries in Florence circa 1530 are works which evoke a world of myth and allusion, and a complex refinement in the weaving that is entirely unrelated to the narrow assertions of this article.

This process of categorical dismissal of interpretative tapestry by Michael Bogle is not unlike the kind of criticism Albert Namatjira received from the rigidly modernist artworld of the 1960s for his watercolours that seemed to ‘copy’ the
watercolours of his teacher, Rex Battarbee. In the 1990s Albert Namatjira’s work has been reassessed through new tenets of criticism, that consider the whole complexity of cultural contexts and the mesh of meanings that hold an artefact within a community.11

The assertions of the modernist school, which associated innovative style as identical with innovative content, cannot be applied to cultural forms outside the modernist construct, if there is to be any real understanding of the work. Because craft is so often positioned as ‘other’ to dominant artforms, anthropological analyses of the way meaning is construed by the viewer across cultures are also relevant in considering the viewer’s relationship to tapestry.

Nelson Graburn, an anthropologist of Northern American cultures, made an investigation in 1971 of the responses of the art collecting society towards ‘primitive’ art/crafts in the form of wooden artefacts by Cree people of the sub-Arctic, and Innuit soapstone sculptures of the Canadian Arctic. He found that aesthetic judgments are determined as much by the context in which the art is presented as by the forms themselves. He distinguished three main facets of the context:

1. The location and setting of the objects displayed, such as in a museum, in display cases, in use as masks or ritual paraphernalia, or even in films or as illustrations in books.
2. The wider context includes the audience’s knowledge and biases about the creatorpeoples or the artists themselves, leading to expectations and judgments about what criteria are fulfilled and what are not...
3. Most important is the cultural context of the viewer’s themselves in providing the background against which these other judgments are being made: this would include such culture-bound notions as the nature of the arts and crafts themselves, and about relations between materials and art genres within the tradition of the viewer’s culture. 12

After an analysis of questionnaires distributed to viewers it was also clear that their value system placed ‘originality’ higher than functional or mass produced objects, and that their romantic ideas of the maker’s cultures influenced them to sentimentalise the narratives within the objects without questioning why these particular narratives were there. He concluded:

I would suggest that we look with great discernment at the aesthetic judgments we make about all art forms, in terms of the cultural categories and temporal
characteristics of the audiences, especially critics, and the accidental or managed images we have of the artists themselves. 13

Tapestry has a very distinct set of ‘culture-bound’ values attached to it and the context in which tapestry is presented - so often as a poor relation of painting - can clearly influence the viewer/ critic. What other kind of evidence is there for a
perception of tapestry which takes note of pervasive 'culture-bound' values but endeavours to position the medium within another set of meanings? I would now like to turn to the artists, for their understanding of the same issues of translation and interpretation.

**Interpretation and translation: the artist**

Let us place the idea of translation from one medium to another in another frame of reference. Merlinda Bobis' paper on 'The Bilingual Poet translating herself' suggested that for a poet with two languages, each language can be enriched in the process of translation between them. New subtleties and affinities emerge from a close consideration of the differences between languages. Tapestry is like a language, parallel to the many other forms of representation such as drawing, photography, painting, and design that inform its images and narratives. The transpositions and translations from drawing and painting to tapestry, and from tapestry to drawing, can enhance both mediums. Most individual tapestry makers are bi-lingual in painting and tapestry, and like the poet, there is no necessity to privilege one language over the other. The tapestry medium transforms the image into another entity, with another grammar and set of associations. Lynn Collins a South Australian painter, commented in 1987 on why he wanted to have his paintings of violations of human rights translated into tapestry:

A tapestry seemed to offer the potential for increasing the shock of recognition and for addressing a different audience. The alternative medium and change of scale promised technical and aesthetic adventures for both Sue (Rosenthal) and me.

Lynn Collins found it necessary, in order to get the sense of outrage of an arm being burnt with a cigarette, to insert 'renegade hachures' of thread over the tapestry, which was woven to his direction by Sue Rosenthal. With both artist and weaver working together the image was transformed from the original painting:

More than we had anticipated, the tapestry added another dimension to the original picture through the transference: the violation metaphor is exemplified by the steady mechanical weave being over-ridden by the renegade hatching. The conflicts of artist and artisan, of methodologies, disciplines and concerns are not overt. The interaction, compromises and resolution were in retrospect rewarding and presented new possibilities.
The tapestry may be a ‘copy’ of an original design only as much as a film ‘copies’ the novel it is derived from, or the printmaker ‘copies’ the drawing to make a lithograph. It may be more relevant to compare the tapestry cartoon to the plan of a building before it is built. Each medium brings its own unconscious with it to the viewer’s arena.

Ann Newdigate, a Canadian tapestry weaver who set up a Tapestry Department within Monash University in 1990, has specifically drawn attention in her work to the issue of translation from paint to tapestry. She saw painting as the privileged medium which unconsciously conditioned the eye, through learnt hierarchies, to see a tapestry as if it were merely a woven painting, thereby negating the significant qualities of the woven construction. Her work addressed this ambivalence, this victimisation of tapestry in relation to painting.
She recognized the viewer's active role in constructing meaning, in a way very similar to the anthropological observations of Nelson Graburn, and played with the 'double' image of the tapestry by giving her work two titles.

Recently I have been responding to the way in which my tapestries are often, from a distance, thought to be paintings and are frequently compared to paintings. Thus, I now have two titles for each tapestry. The first speaks to the viewer's spontaneous reaction to the work, while the second challenges the change in reception that the viewers have after they come up close to the work and realize that the medium is tapestry. Invariably the message changes then according to the preconceptions of the viewer. The medium itself is a signifier of meaning that often has nothing to do with imagery or content, but which is the result of unconsciously learned attitudes about hierarchical categorizing of art.16

These unconscious attitudes are linked to the nineteenth century positioning of tapestry by John Ruskin as a household art of women, and tapestry's subsequent demeaning in relation to painting. Ann Newdigate's Master's thesis investigated this historical positioning of tapestry as 'feminine' in relation to the dominant artforms. Attitudes that categorised work within specific groupings of art/craft, public/private, male/female which were prevalent in the nineteenth century are still assumed to be 'natural' on the part of contemporary art institutions.17 Here, of course, I am stressing the 'masculine', and public orientation of tapestry in relation to textiles, while acknowledging that all such distinctions between tapestry/textiles are merged by the larger overview of dominant artforms.

The titles of her work in this exhibition were:

*The nomad lit a candle and waited/Look at it this way*
*The first to arrive were some unwelcome memories/What did you expect?*
*Then there was Mrs Rorschach's dream/You are what you see*
*Followed by a projective taste/You see what you are*
*But the unhappy medium would not go away/Think about it Otherwise*
*And from the southern hemisphere came a wrong sign/It ain't what you say, its the way you say it*
*Finally a lesson from tapestry/It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it*

Lynne Bell, in her essay on Ann Newdigate, described the weaving of the sixth tapestry in the series *And from the southern hemisphere came a wrong sign/It ain't what you say, it's the way you say it*. This tapestry was woven at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop to Ann Newdigate's design. Because of the Victorian tapestry
Workshop’s insistence on its Fine Arts allegiances, this is one way a tapestry can be raised to the status of a Fine Art commodity. She continued:

However in moving easily herself between the roles of artist/designer and weaver/craftworker, she also subverts the traditional distinctions drawn between the artist’s mental skills and the craftworker’s manual skills, and questions the mind/body polarisations upon which these distinctions are based.

The other part of the title of the tapestry is It ain’t what you say, it’s the way you say it. which refers to the fact that the woven image is considered less valuable, both aesthetically and economically, than a painted image. A large brushily painted cross in a modernist style dominated the tapestry, to indicate that it is the language of modernism and its elite constructions of history that have devalued and set aside pictorial tapestry.

Another reflection on the way different media are validated is found in the last tapestry of the series, Finally a lesson from tapestry/It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it, which repeats the cross motif, this time with the application of paint on to the tapestry. Such a multi-media work is distressing to purists in both the tapestry and painting areas, and the tapestry proclaims this: ‘Two Wrongs’ are woven into the bottom section.

The final part of the title It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it, challenges the canonical fine art tradition which, as Newdigate Mills repeatedly points out in the seven panels, is the historical accretion of so many factors and so many stifling assumptions.\textsuperscript{18}

Ann Newdigate is representative of the growing number of individual tapestry makers/artists, like the Canadian Marcel Marois quoted above, who are acutely aware of current theoretical issues, and of the loose positioning of ‘textiles’ as ‘body’ and ‘tapestry/image’ as ‘mind’. Such artists often have an affiliation to tapestry workshops, and may have trained in one, but they use tapestry as a medium in which their own artistic ideas are best expressed. Tass Mavrogordato, who succeeded Ann Newdigate in the Tapestry Department at Monash University, says firmly:

I weave tapestries and as an artist involved in such a discipline consider myself a tapestry weaver, not a misplaced fine artist, a weaver of cloth, sewer of petit point, or a frustrated painter. Tapestry like any other practice, has qualities and properties unto itself, a unique artform with its own visual language.\textsuperscript{19}
The artist/tapestry weaver has an involvement with the language of tapestry which does not underestimate its capacity for layered nuances in the weaving of an image - in no sense a passive reproduction of an image, but an active signification and enlivening of form.

Marta Rogoyska, the very well known British weaver of Polish ancestry, commented on this aspect of tapestry in 1982:

Painters and sculptors always ask, ‘But isn’t it very dull, like painting by numbers, very fulfilling and therapeutic?’...I’ve observed myself and it isn’t like that. I find it very demanding physically and intellectually. I’m pent up, tense, yet relaxed, standing back, looking at it sideways, making a shape then unpicking it if I don’t like it. If the interlocking shapes and colours don’t work, out they go. All your imagination couldn’t have told you that they were going to have that kind of reaction. It’s a terribly consuming thing. You have to be twenty times more alert, twenty times more intelligent and twenty times harder on yourself than in painting, so that you do bloody well unpick what has taken you two days to do if its wrong. Because tapestry has to be done in a strict sequence from the bottom upwards, you have to be more visionary too, very much in the sense that you must visualise what is coming and what has been. You are committed and there is no going back. I see its affinities with life so much, balancing on this crazy tightrope, trying to be intelligent about the future, learn from the past and be very much involved in the present.\textsuperscript{20}
Appropriation and translation: Tass Mavrogordato

Contemporary tapestry weavers have been negotiating new positions that blur the edges of 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' positionings, yet use the force of both. Tass Mavrogordato is an artist working in tapestry through an amalgam of appropriated images to recontextualise the 'official' notions of tapestry, by an often confronting array of bodily representations. Her tapestries are unequivocally allied to the great symbolic systems of the European past, yet the patriarchal emphasis of this past has been subverted by representations of androgyny, an 'unofficial' view of sexuality. Tass Mavrogordato has used images from popular culture to contrast with the historic aura of tapestry, and this tension between the personal and the political is essential to her work. She concurs with Barbara Kruger, the American artist who has written:

I am concerned with who speaks and who is silent ... I want to be on the side of surprise and against the certainties of pictures and property... there is politics in every conversation we have, every deal we close and every face we kiss... 21

Surprise and uncertainty confront the viewer in Tass Mavrogordato's work, as the first impression of brash iconic imagery and text is overlaid by the dawning realisation that these vibrant collages from popular culture and photography are represented through the medium of woven tapestry. What is the background to this paradoxical conjunction of commercial stereotypes and comic book characters with one of the most long lasting and laboriously constructed mediums?
A tapestry of the *Life of St. Vincent* in the Historical Museum in Berne, Switzerland, has haunted me since I viewed it for its odd alignment to Tass Mavrogordato’s themes. This fifteenth century narrative shows the judgement, torture and slow death of the saint, with his bloody and wounded body repeatedly appearing in each segment of the long horizontal tapestry, until finally he is resurrected among angels. A woven text above explains the action. The saint’s life is to illuminate and inspire, a model of a godly man for every viewer, a man struggling with his time. The symbols of his life are embedded in the turmoil of the narrative: the ravens who protected his bleeding body from scavenging animals, the millstone that was tied to his body as it was thrown into the water. Despite the unconscious assumptions we have of historical tapestry as a purely romantic and decorative medium, dedicated to Courtly Love, to flowers and unicorns, there is also pain and death throughout the great early tapestries, and no flinching from representations of the most extreme physicality. It is as well to remember the breadth of symbolic representations in tapestry tradition in coming to Tass Mavrogordato’s work, which seems at first sight to be the antithesis of these traditions.

Tass Mavrogordato grew up in London and the artists who had a lasting influence on her formative years in the early 1980s were Gilbert and George who subvert suburban cultures while appearing to relish vulgarity and consumer display. The medium of photography was changed by them into a seemingly lavish decorative artform with huge panels of vivid colour filling museum walls. Despite the shiny

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*Tapestry of the life of Saint Vincent, no measurement, Berne Historical Museum, early 16th century.*

accessibility of such pieces, evidence of their personal/political commitment is shown in the work donated for an Art for AIDS exhibition about 1988. She was so much a part of this ‘appropriating’ postmodern culture of the 1980s that it never occurred to Tass at this time that popular imagery of what was happening in the streets around her, the subcultures and the graffiti, might not be the usual content of tapestry.

In 1986 she wove *He who loves writes on walls* which stood out in the *World Tapestry Today* exhibition in Melbourne in 1988 for its graphic and poignant use of contemporary emblems. As in all her subsequent tapestries there is a sense of being true to a long symbolic tradition - here with the use of text suggesting a narrative, and such an ancient woven motif as Eros. At the same time contemporary images drawn from every source of visual representation - comic books, Disney drawings, kitsch tourist art, photographs of herself - inform her work with humour and irony in the way our lives are centred around such fascinating banalities. What may seem banal in its familiarity is, of course, of primary significance in terms of the momentum of our whole culture. The popular force of comic book superheroes with their invincible and unwavering strengths - especially The Phantom, can be set against the menacing representations of the AIDS virus which incorporates that medieval symbol of mortality, the Grim Reaper.

In every large piece Tass Mavrogordato places herself, using photographs to work from, as an ambiguous androgynous figure. This is in no sense a portrait - she uses herself as an example of the figure bombarded with images from contemporary life. Who are we? How do we find identity, political or sexual, in this neverceasing flux of slogans and visual representations in the media?
Although there may be a debt to Pop Art here in the use of both parody and celebration to convey the diversity of our visual world, there are closer links to more recent preoccupations, of Barbara Kruger’s awareness of the underlying powers of advertising in relation to the construction of femininity, or Cindy Sherman’s obsessive search for her own identity in playing out fantasy roles from films. Sherman too sees photography, for all its seeming transparency, as the contemporary equivalent of a mask. Another influence would be Juan Davila, who investigates the construction of national as well as personal and sexual identities in a ‘bricolage’ of images, all reproductions of other images referring to many possible narratives. Here there is no ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ source coming from the artist’s own imagination: the artist’s identity (and the viewer’s?) is constructed by a play of eclectic elements.

Who are we? The firm hierarchies of heaven and hell are in place in medieval tapestries, the oppositions of good and evil are symbolised in a complex visual language where every flower and rabbit has its own place in this binary system - rabbits mean fecundity, therefore Lust, but the rose is the symbol of the Virgin, sometimes of martyrdom, and is known also to be the flower of Aphrodite or Venus. (Tass Mavrogordato’s small ‘organ’ tapestry of the Womb and Rose refers to such antecedents.) Medieval iconography is anything but simple, and the juncture of one symbol to another changes the meaning of both or alludes to double meanings. The explicitly detailed images of these contemporary tapestries
can be enjoyed for their own sake by anyone. When juxtaposed, these emblems take on double meanings, opening up the sometimes fantastic stories of our own society, and forming the surprising link between Tass Mavrogordato’s work in the Antipodes and the medieval world.

The medium of woven tapestry is embroiled in the very construction of these images. The ‘sign’ of tapestry suggests metaphors of interweaving and relationship; such phrases as ‘tapestry of life’ permeate romantic fiction. There is a piquancy in translating images produced by the most recent technology - the momentary gestures of photography or advertising - into the slow, ordered, and permanent, tapestry medium. The nature of the medium unifies and gives an underlying coherence and three dimensionality to these often transient symbols scattered within the borders of the tapestry. The life of St Vincent is less remote than we might suppose: here is another figure seeking identity among the teeming images of her time.

Intimacy and politics: suppressed histories in the work of Narelle Jubelin

Issues of identity and a questioning of dominant histories have marked feminist practice in the late 1980s and 1990s. A notable artist using a ‘tapestry’ medium to reflect with irony on Australian histories and a wide ranging investigation of postcolonial issues is Narelle Jubelin. This artist uses not woven tapestry, but the ‘tapestry’ embroidery, the petit point technique always called ‘tapestry’ in popular craft shops. For example, on the inside cover of Craft Arts no.1 October/December 1984, is an advertisement for ‘Legacy Tapestries’, offering ‘dozens of different designs’ of ‘beautiful reproductions of historic European tapestries from the eleventh to the nineteenth century and a stunning selection of modern designs created by the leading artists of Europe’ which will provide that ‘extra touch of distinction’. These terms, as we have seen, are stereotypical - ‘historic’ and ‘leading artists’ being exactly what we have come to expect from the ‘sign’ of tapestry, even from a much more sophisticated perception. This medium of ‘tapestry’ embroidery, which always reproduces mainstream artworks in what is regarded by ‘high art’ devotees as a’kitsch’ popular artform has been utilised by Narelle Jubelin in recontextualising history. The reproduction and translation from the ‘high art’ original to petit point embroidery is accompanied by unconscious associations of the demeaned and feminine embroidery medium. In Jubelin’s case,
there seems to be a collusion with this positioning of the medium she uses with such effect - her work is never placed in a context where it can be seen as ‘craft’, but she allows it to be shown only in the ‘symbolic’ and significant visual arts arena, despite its constant reference to marginal histories.

During the preparation of my doctoral thesis and exhibition I was particularly interested by the work in needlepoint of Narelle Jubelin who came as Artist in Residence for three months in 1991 to the School of Creative Arts. Her acute eye in ‘appropriating’ little known documents of the past considerably influenced my own practice. After conversations about textiles as documents opening up history, she used photocopies of textiles from my collection to render in petit point as part of a meditation on the nature of exchange and labour in the colonial world of the British Empire, presented in Glasgow as Dead Slow in 1992.

**Feminism: New Histories**

Through the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1970s the history of European women’s art was reassessed. One of the main issues addressed by feminist historians was the social context in which art is produced leading to ‘permissible’ forms of expression that were in the home, and centred on textiles.

Embroidery, for all its beauty and flowery delicacy, has been closely implicated in the voicelessness of women in Western history. Although an ancient technique with a rich iconography, embroidery was not recognised as a significant artform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of its growing association with feminine domesticity. While its voice was lost strategies to convey serious concerns did emerge.

The making of textiles may have brought an absorbed harmony to women’s lives, but it was also seen as symbolic of the repressed and limited lives of many women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when women were denied social, economic and political autonomy. Rozsika Parker begins *The Subversive Stitch* with a 1927 quote from Olive Schreiner:

> In that bit of white rag with the invisible stitching, lying among fallen leaves and rubbish that the wind has blown into the gutter or street corner, lies all the passion of some woman’s soul finding voiceless expression. Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?
We use a textile medium because the physical characteristics desired in an object can be reached in particular textile constructions - whether it is complex patterning, softness, drapability, texture, subtle tactile surfaces, depth of colour, heaviness, lightness, or transparency. These elements of form make up the textile ‘language’.

But can these elements be considered separately from the dense associations of textiles, and particularly embroidery, with European women’s history? Each technique holds its own implicit history, but the association of domestic textiles with one gender ensures that the historical powerlessness of women is perpetuated in the often lowly positioning of textiles. In this history embroidery is seen as an indicator of ‘feminine’, of woman in her place adorning the home.

Narelle Jubelin (born 1960), who trained as a visual artist, uses the textile medium of petit point to open up significant areas of contemporary practice. She has been exhibited in ‘cutting edge’ exhibitions both nationally and internationally since her emergence in 1986. She was chosen by an international committee to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1990, yet her success is often questioned by textile artists who perceive an increasingly obscure theoretical emphasis in the artworld. To many practitioners, ‘craft’ is seen as ‘intuitive’ and its forms as arising from the process and material rather than from a seemingly alien body of theory. This position is located in the modernist beginnings of craft practice, in the belief in individualistic explorations of medium described above by Janis Jefferies. In Australia, there was a belief, as Grace Cochrane puts it-

in the autonomy of the craft object and the personal expression of the maker as an individual ... when the artworld started to question Modernism, the craft world generally remained with the thinking it had found comfortable.24

Jubelin’s work on the other hand draws on cultural theory concerned with how meaning is made, how an object is enmeshed in a broad social context which conditions its form, design and function. This theory drew on feminist theories and also on the literary theory of semiotics, or signs. Her work interrogates the deeply problematical historical positioning of embroidery, and also the unconscious associations that embroidery arouses in the viewer. Her viewpoint is fully cognisant of the artworld, and makes no concession to the culture of craft.

Jubelin seems to use the embroidery medium for its very connotations of being lowly and insignificant in High Art terms. Her work pivots on the ‘unthinking’
assumption of the viewer that needlework is decorative and without a political
basis. The petit point gains piquancy from the perceived subjugation of
needlework: this small scale 'feminine' medium is ironically used to comment on
fundamental political issues.

Vivien Johnson describes Narelle Jubelin's 1986 exhibition at the Mori Gallery in
Sydney, called Hi(s)tory: A small reminder:

The show consisted of embroidered miniatures of historic monuments around
Sydney, mounted in sardonically ornate frames from second hand shops. Everyone
appreciated the point of petit point. The ironic twist of a woman artist exploiting
the patriarchy's trivialisation of embroidery as 'mere' domestic art to bring its own
heroic pretensions down to size was like a breath of fresh air in the ponderous
atmosphere of contemporary High Art....

The joke of the petit point pieces was always also on the thousands of nameless
women embroiderers indited by the artists reliance on the trivialising effect of their
medium to make her point. By acknowledging women's active rather than merely
passive role in the events of history, Narelle Jubelin obliquely signals underneath
the conceptual gloss a more respectful attitude.

In fact her work in 1986 was grounded in the perceptions of feminist re-writings of
history, which became the basis for further exploration and research into the
complex issues of global colonisation.

Although the detailed analysis of embroidery history through social and economic
factors is well documented, textile artists often appear to be unfamiliar with the
feminist revisions of history. However, the feminist interrogation of hierarchies in
the artworld - of how work is given significance or dismissed as insignificant - is
essential in understanding the precise positioning of Narelle Jubelin's work. Here
the emphasis is as much on the viewer, the receiver of the artwork as it is on the
intention of the artist. The feminist art historian Lucy Lippard writes:

The whole hierarchy of low to high craftspeople and low to high graphic artists is
based on relationships among producer, receiver and object that the artworld rarely
acknowledges ... these divisions are products of both class and gender separations
and of the degree of economic support for the art in question.
The Women's Domestic Needlework Group was formed by a group of artists in 1979 in Sydney to remedy the deficiency in historical knowledge, and resulted in an exhibition *The D'oyley Show* which outlined the development of Australian d'oyley designs from the late nineteenth century to the second World War.

It is particularly interesting to observe in almost all these designs the use of patterns and transfers bought or cut from magazines that travelled to remote parts of Australia. Narelle Jubelin's use of photographs and patterns from other objects
refers to this history of textile processes, this selectivity of pattern from reproduced images, rather than individual ‘creation’.

Under the influence of feminism recent investigations of the history of Australian women’s arts have revealed how embroidery has been used to comment with intense feeling on contemporary events. Women made the Eureka flag for the gold diggers’ rebellion in 1854, and a descendant of one of these women, Mrs Val D’Angri, made the petit point replica of the damaged flag now in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. During both World Wars, embroiderers showed their patriotic strength on doyleys, covers and cloths, with such mottoes as Unity is Strength, or Our Bit. (This particular motif, found on a doyley in the Pioneer Women’s Hut at Tumbarumba, has been critically re-commemorated by Narelle Jubelin in petit point.) Quilts were made in both wars to raise money for the soldiers, from people who paid to have their signatures embroidered in red on the white cotton of the quilt.

The desire of women’s Embroiderer’s Guilds throughout Australia to contribute to a sense of Australian history in the Bicentenial year 1988 resulted in the monumental Parliament House Embroidery designed and co-ordinated by Kay Lawrence. This long narrative embroidery draws together many layers of the Australian landscape and settlement in images derived from quilts, illustrations, maps, photographs and letters, as well as drawings.

Very recently embroidery has been used to make emotional ideological statements against nuclear installations, at Greenham Common and Pine Gap. The identification of embroidery with the ‘feminine’ is implicit, but with a concept of the feminine that is not afraid to oppose and condemn ‘male’ aggression. In the last five years the AIDS quilts have drawn on another aspect of textile history, as a political analogue to those men and women who have died of AIDS. These individuals have often been marginalised politically and socially while alive because of the fear and unreason associated with the HIV virus.

The demeaning of the embroidery medium by Jubelin is thus more apparent than real. Looking beyond the confines of the medium she perceives clearly that in the mainstream artworld embroidery is still seen as a sign for domestic triviality. Realising this, she uses the technique with a full appreciation of its seductive qualities and ability to represent a wide variety of other surfaces with an acute mimicry.
Jubelin’s thoughtful and pointed use of medium, exemplified in her installation *Dead Slow* in the Sydney Biennale, makes petit point a door into social and private memory.

**Dead Slow: an installation at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow, and Biennale of Sydney, 1992**

The range of Jubelin’s ideas were brought together in a one person exhibition held at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow in May 1992. This collection of found and handmade objects includes references to other major themes of her exhibited work: to trade and exchange, to post-colonial ideas of our relationship to the ‘primitive’, and to private and public memory.28

The installation which was placed on a textured ‘harled’ wall included petit point renditions of May Day photographs from Glasgow and Wollongong, of *The Call of the Homeland* (an undated book printed in Scotland), two actual wood-chipped Australian chairs c.1900, nine real editions of Therese de Dillmont *Encyclopaedia of Needlework* (c.1890 - 1940 but not dated), seven nineteenth century Gujarat hand cut wooden printing blocks, a petit point renditions of a Paisley shawl, c.1870, and hemmed linen from Bathurst Island Mission (Tiwi Designs) c. 1974. The artist

![Narelle Jubelin, two framed petit point renditions of woven cloth: Paisley shawl c. 1870; Bathurst Island mission hemmed linen 1874, produced Tokyo and Sydney 1992. catalogue *Dead Slow*, 1992, p.20.](image)
then places herself in this complex assemblage through a double silhouetted self portrait in petit point.29

All the objects, seemingly so diverse, allude to the web of interchanges between Scotland and Australia, and their close association with colonised peoples of the British Empire (India and Aboriginal Australia). The title Dead Slow comes from traffic notices around ports (it is also the last category before Stop on the great ship’s steering wheels I remember from P & O liners). Contacts and journeys between such distant countries - Australia, Japan, India, Scotland - are slow, intimated also by the processes of the hand which are immensely time bound and deliberate.

Apart from the finished object, the labour intensive processes of traditional techniques are themselves imbued with meaning. The intricate process of making was traditionally as significant as the end result. Women stitching together formed strong bonds among themselves and brought enhanced wealth and status to their households. As I have reiterated above, our language still uses spinning, weaving, stitching and piecing as metaphors for making meaning and order out of the disparate elements of life.

Part of the Dead Slow installation was particularly moving to me, as it involved my own family textiles. My mother gave me a very beautiful Paisley shawl, woven in Scotland in about the 1860s, which had belonged to my great grandmother. I wrote to Narelle about this during her residency in Tokyo in 1991, and sent her photocopies of sections of the shawl.

She responded with enthusiasm and started a needlepoint rendering from the photocopies. Such a textile evokes a wealth of other associations - motifs imported from India, silk and wool fibres provided by colonies far from Scotland, associations with a particular style of dress for a particular class of woman, and woven in Paisley by the last remnants of independent skilled craftsmen. Such a shawl holds within its making not only traditional techniques, not only evocative personal stories reaching back a hundred and thirty years, but also indicators of material and design which could open up a substantial part of the travel, trade and contacts of the British Empire of this time. Such a history from a ‘marginal’ textile can indeed open up the central preoccupations of a society, as Foucault postulates, and as an archaeological analysis would surely prove. In Narelle Jubelin’s petit point rendition of a fragment of the shawl, framed in ornate metal, the feminist
references of domestic textiles are taken much further into the widest parameters of cultural exchange, not forgetting the reverberations such public exchanges have on private lives and intimate objects.

Another piece from my own collection and recollections is Narelle’s petit point rendition of the hemmed linen edge of a tablecloth embroidered by Miriam Babui and Annunciata Pilakui on Bathurst Island, Northern Territory, in 1974. French Catholic missionaries first came to Bathurst Is. about 1916, and set about inculcating (European) feminine skills in the Tiwi women. Making embroidery samplers, learning homemaking techniques of mending and decorating, were skills drawn on in the early years of the Tiwi Designs silkscreen printing workshop to finish off the printed textiles. For me, the mission trained Aboriginal women, with their concern for decorum and precise use of the English language, harked back to a much earlier pioneering Australia in a way I found innately unsettling during my stay on the island. The substantial achievements of Aboriginal embroiderers working in European traditions across Northern Australia are hardly documented.

The various parts of the installation *Dead Slow*, makes different references to labour and the work of the hand, organized Unions, pattern books of trade and domestic embroidery, anonymous handcrafted woodwork, the very old craft traditions of a subjugated colony (India), and feminine craft traditions from Europe instilled in Aboriginal women of Northern Australia. Last is the work of the artist’s own hand in making her own time-consuming record, of putting herself, as an Australian artist invited to exhibit in Glasgow, in this long history of overlapping influences and contacts.
The installation context

Jubelin constructs meaning for the viewer by the careful control of where and in what context her work is shown. The same petit point work in the Royal Easter Show, in a mixed craft exhibition, in a boutique or in a contemporary art gallery has entirely different connotations because of the changed expectations of the viewer. If a petit point artwork is seen in a craft context, it may well look just like needlepoint, and be seen entirely through its technique and medium, losing the potential of its conceptual significance.

Jubelin looks at institutional structures and delicately manipulates associations of power, memory and history. In her work, the individual mark of creative emotion so dear to most artists is controlled in a passionate discrimination between objects. I would like to propose that the embroidery itself provides the unconscious, non-rational element when the work is shown in a 'High Art' context. The fascination with process takes the images used - generally drawn from other artforms - into a realm where the viewer tries to make the intricate technique 'fit' the subject. The technique of tiny opposed stitches is so fine it is almost magical; another world of meaning seems to be presented here beyond what is openly offered. The less conscious perceptions of 'making' held by a viewer may inform her work with a richness that the content does not otherwise indicate - this may be the true subversion.

Bringing together all these aspects of her work Andrew Renton writes in *Flash Art*

> If needlework is a manifestation of one form of sexual marginalization, Jubelin's display is a devastating, physical, and exquisite accumulation of evidence regarding colonial marginalization. The work does not seek to uncover hidden agendas, but rather observes cultural blind spots. As an Australian, Jubelin bears witness to the motion across continents, as one culture is transposed, infolded into another.31

As seen in Narelle Jubelin's body of work textiles is firmly located in personal and public histories. Artists at the 'cutting edge' of contemporary practice over the past twenty years (such as Joseph Beuys in Germany or Robert Raushenberg in America), have recognised these powerful associations and have drawn on textiles in their own work for its association with the banal, the common, the ordinary almost invisible object. Women artists may also assert other more positive meanings in the medium, meanings drawn from other histories.
Practitioners of textile art approach their medium with a knowledge of complex **stylistic** histories. How style and technique are interwoven with social and political history is much less emphasised. There is a pressing need to recognize the diversity of function and meaning in this history, and to remember that in the past embroidery has often been used in strategies of subversion to comment on the ideologies of the times. Jubelin has used the potent sign of petit point to reflect on the textile medium where the nature of its associations and meanings is still very much a matter for contention. We may feel that she herself is uneasy at being too closely identified with the ‘tapestry’ medium of petit point embroidery by her careful control in positioning her pieces within the mainstream context.

Finally, having considered the positioning of the tapestry medium in the work of Ann Newdigate, Tass Mavrogordato and Narelle Jubelin, the issues of ‘symbolic’ and ‘semiotic’ as criss-crossing threads across tapestry and textiles will be surveyed in current curatorship and exhibitions.

2 Marcel Marois, 'Postmodernism For Tapestry: Appropriation from the past', *International Tapestry Network*, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 3.


8 Archie Brennan, 'Response to *Contemporary Tapestry* by Michael Bogle', *Textile Fibre Forum*, no. 38, 1993, pp. 2 and 43.

9 For example, the *Passion of Christ* series of tapestries described by Anna Gray Bennett, *Five Centuries of Tapestry*, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1992, pp. 42-45.


14 University of Wollongong, School of Creative Arts Postgraduate Conference, 1991.


30 Jennifer Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts: 200 years of Australian Women’s domestic and decorative arts*, is aware of this whole fascinating area. See also documentation about my time on Bathurst Is. in 1974 in *Identity*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1975; *Art in Australia*, December 1975.
31 Andrew Renton, review of ‘Dead Slow’, to be published.
CHAPTER 9

TAPESTRY AND TEXTILES: CURATORSHIP AND EXHIBITION IN 1990s

At the beginnings of the two streams of tapestry and textiles in Australia, divisions between the two were marked, and both areas were marginalised from mainstream art practices. In the late 1980s and 1990s a new momentum has become evident in an artist-driven organised network and nuanced understanding of tapestry as both textile and art, where traditional attitudes to techniques have been combined with a contemporary self-reflexivity and involvement in feminism, postcoloniality and issues of the environment.

As a tapestry practitioner the relationship of tapestry/textiles, not only to an international tapestry network, but also to the wider artworld is of primary importance in defining the territory of practice. The sense of being less 'significant' in content and concept than mainstream practices makes plain the marginal nature of this territory, enhanced by the fact that the great proportion of textile/tapestry artists are women.

What are some of the ways contemporary tapestry/textiles are exhibited in relation to what is considered 'art'? What exhibition practices endow tapestry/textiles with significance, and give them value to the 'art establishment'? That term encompasses public art galleries and museums, curators, critics, reviewers, educational institutions with their teachers and artists, craft and art councils, all of whom have a large influence on public perceptions and on funding. The very concept of marginalisation has become more 'central' to the art establishment, as Biennales and public exhibition spaces of the 1990s have found margins, borders and boundaries of particular interest, overlapping previously despised areas of 'kitsch', 'grunge' and popular crafts.

The background to the late twentieth century's insistence on de-centred forms may be found in the ideas of Michel Foucault, the influential French theorist. His ideas on the discontinuities of histories may serve as a possible model for looking at the concept of marginalisation. Clare O'Farrell, writing about Foucault, points out that the very word 'marginal' came into popular usage around 1968, about the same time as the great resurgence in craft practice and interest in 'ethnic' techniques and customs mentioned previously. What are these margins? She described Foucault's approach:
Given that there is a 'mainstream' of historical thinking and action, there are
certain fringes who exist at the limits of society and do not fully participate in the
general activities, behaviour, belief or ideas that prevail at the time. Each
society, at any given period, practises certain exclusions, or posits certain limits
which invite transgression, thereby creating a 'system of the transgressive', where
the values and very limits of the society are called into question.\(^1\)

In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault, like other contemporary
writers in this area, was critical of the Enlightenment idea of the central position of
reason in understanding history:

> In the disciplines we call the history of ideas... attention has been turned away
> from vast unities like periods, or centuries to the phenomena of rupture, of
discontinuity. Beneath the great continuities of thought, beneath the solid,
> homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or a collective mentality.... beneath
> the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline or theoretical activity, one is
> now trying to detect the incidence of interruptions.

He saw the total picture of a society as not only made up of great integrated eras
such as the Classical period of antiquity, or indeed the Modern Period, but as much
more fragmented.

> The Classical age.. is not a temporal figure that imposes its unity and empty form
> on all discourses: it is the name given to a tangle of continuities and
> discontinuities, modifications within positivities, discursive formations that appear
> and disappear.

Such a formulation of history as a decentred narrative (the centre previously having
been the concept of humanism and a continual progress towards knowledge and
reason) is found in the many current critiques of cultural theory, linking up areas as
diverse as literature, anthropology and art criticism. The perception that margins
may illuminate the character of the centre has led to curatorial strategies such as the
Adelaide Biennale *Unfamiliar Territories* in 1992 or the Sydney Biennale *The

Such curatorship includes textile constructs within an 'art' category and allows
more focused exhibitions to explore these territories which may have been
categorised a decade earlier as 'craft', with implied hierarchies. At the end of
twentieth century, there is on the one hand, a refined perception of the very
different histories and associations between, for example, ‘symbolic’ tapestry and
‘semiotic’ textiles, and on the other hand, a blurring of the divisions between
textiles and other media in the development of installation as a major strategy in
national public exhibition spaces.

‘Invisible’ textiles in mainstream exhibition

At the Adelaide Festival in March 1992 there was no exhibition specifically
advertised as ‘textile’, yet the constructs and materials of textiles were everywhere.
The perception of textile artists themselves is that they have been marginalised
from the dominant art practices of our time. This may be so of artists insisting on
being first and foremost ‘textile’ artists, with their own history and traditions. Yet
textile concepts, the use of natural fibrous materials, were abundantly evident in the
work on exhibition at this showplace forum for visual arts in Australia and
overseas. Perhaps this is indicative of the way we use terms - if a piece is called
‘textile’ it might seem to be less significant than if it is called ‘art’. This ‘textile
concept’ in Adelaide could be defined as structures using systems of relationship
and interconnectedness that carry a meaning in themselves - whether woven,
intertwined, interlaced, pieced, stitched, draped.

One of the prestigious international speakers at the Artist’s Forum at the Adelaide
Festival in 1992 was Marian Pastor Roces, a textile curator, writer and
anthropologist from the Phillipines. The last fifteen years have been spent
researching indigenous textile material from the innumerable small island
communities of the Phillipines. She has rediscovered meanings in these
wonderfully varied and intricate textiles which were invisible to the white
anthropologists who originally described and categorised them. The particular
resonances of meaning, the references to transformative states of mind were
invisible to the European scholars who were outside the indigenous tradition they
were so confidently classifying. This idea of concealment of a tradition is a
pertinent concept in considering the place of textiles in mainstream exhibition,
just as archaeologists investigating classical antiquity have found textile traces
‘invisible’ to their way of seeing. The eyes that look may not able to see -
something may be under our noses but because we believe it is not there, cannot be
there, we do not see it. There may have been no ‘textile’ artists exhibiting in
Adelaide, perhaps even the organizers and curators may not have thought of
including specifically ‘textile’ artists, but the work shown was rich in textile associations, an ‘invisible’ but potent tradition for artists to draw on.

Timothy Morrell was the curator of *Unfamiliar Territory*, the 1992 Adelaide Biennal of Australian Art in which was found so much work rich in textile associations. His description of his curatorship of this exhibition explained why this work is so sympathetic to a craft perspective with its emphasis on the integrity of the made object:

This Biennial is comprised of paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs and other objects, but it is most strongly based on ‘other objects’: works which cannot be accommodated by conventional categories of medium. An attempt was made to find works with a puzzling or intriguing physical identity which has evolved from the artists exploring their medium rather than allowing borrowed ideas to impose a style.\(^4\)

He went on to emphasise the importance of exploring materials:

The failure to realize how much intellectual rigour can be required in exploring the identity of art materials is symptomatic of readings of contemporary culture which make whole areas of art inaccessible.

Seiglinde Karl from Tasmania showed three related pieces, *Veils of Mourning* and *Demigod* which investigated the theme of loss through the sensitive use of natural materials. The very beautiful aesthetic of these works related them strongly to the intense investigations of the nuancing of texture and material in 1970s fibre sculpture. For example, Ritsi and Peter Jacobi’s piece *Transylvania* in goat hair and paper exhibited in the Coventry Gallery in Sydney in 1980, showed a very similar preoccupation with materials. *Demigod* was constructed of fragments of paperbark inscribed with Hazel Smith’s sound text of the same name, and when not being worn as a cloak in performance formed a bark shelter. *Veils of Mourning* also made a poignant reference to vanished Aboriginal traditions with their use of shell fragments and *xanthorrhoea australis* spines. In the catalogue essay Anne Brennan wrote about the context of this work:

The mythological references in a title such as *Demigod* extend the metaphor of the worn object further. Just as the mourning garment can signify in the wearer the responsibility for inscribing boundaries between the mortal and spirit worlds, so *Demigod* becomes a symbol for inscribing new boundaries between cultures, as a way of renewing a cultural and psychic connection with nature.\(^5\)
Boundaries between cultures were also evident in Judy Watson's piece *Groundwork*, in powder pigment and pastel on canvas, which extended along the floor of the gallery. This installation was immediately sympathetic to anyone involved in the surface design of textiles for its subtle tones and marks and its warm rubbed colour. But its meaning went beyond stylistic attractiveness. The accompanying label in *Unfamiliar Territories* stated:

> In 1990 Judy Watson travelled with her (Aboriginal) grandmother and other relatives to the part of North Queensland which is their family's country, and from where her grandmother was taken as a child. These paintings are about that country. In learning about the land from her grandmother the artist came to see it in a new way. Likewise by representing the landscape in this horizontal format she is able to see painting in a new way.

Materially these works could be described as floor textiles, almost like carpets. They are given intricate overtones of meaning by the fact that they are made by an artist trained in European traditions whose ancestry lies also in Aboriginal society.

Another artist who related to this 'concealed' textile tradition at the Adelaide Festival was the British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy. As for both Judy Watson and Seiglinde Karl land, place, and material are of primary importance. Andy Goldsworthy had several bodies of work on display in Adelaide as part of his artist-in-residency at the Adelaide Botanic Gardens and at Mount St. Victor in the desert north of South Australia. His often ephemeral sculptural pieces can only be understood in the environment that produced them, and have an astonishing aptness that reveals unperceived aspects of material and place.

As the margins of art - familiar territory for textiles, even if 'unfamiliar' in national galleries, - are becoming a focus of attention in international art arenas, textiles have been admitted to major exhibitions, although not categorised in any way as 'textiles'. Their very awkwardness in display, their ubiquitous everydayness, their power to raise associations and memory in the viewer are qualities which commend textile characteristics to artists working at this edge. Ian Burn discussed the shifting focus of art museums in an article 'The Art Museum More or Less':

> Today, most of the political, economic and aesthetic investment in the art museum presupposes the separation of museum space from everyday life. This represents investment in the institutional coding which distinguishes between decorative
painting and wallpaper, between ‘bad art’ as a style and plain bad art, between de-skilled techniques and technically incompetent art, between advertising styles as art and commercial advertising. The borderline between museum art and kitsch, ‘amateur’ art, designer decoration, mass media etc. has never been more tenuous or contentious.6

Such an overlapping of categories is evident in the Sydney Biennale held over the summer of 1992-93 with the title *The Boundary Rider*, curated by Anthony Bond. Like *Unfamiliar Territory*, the hybrid, the boundary of the accepted mainstream was the focus of this immense collection of work. He selected artists from thirty seven countries who questioned convergent mainstream agendas and used objects and materials that related to everyday life in a ‘bricolage’ of different elements.7 Much of the work was in the form of installations using common objects for their inherent, if hidden power. Margins are often areas of pain, and the painful boundaries of the body were evoked by objects most closely associated with it, such as shoes, or mattresses. Textiles are imbued with implications of bodies and were used by artists to call up unconscious connections of these bodies in the viewer.

To take just a few examples out of so many - Doris Salcedo used the shoes of the ‘disappeared’ behind translucent sheets of skin made into luminous boxes, roughly stitched. Annette Lemieux of the United States exhibited a mannequin’s head covered in cloth mounted on a pedestal with a cross stitched across the mouth. The sewn mouth was a jolting metaphor for a silencing. Zuzanna Janin (Baranowska) of Poland used translucent parachute silk to reconstruct dreamlike rooms and spaces, once again equating textile to the roots of childhood memory. The glittering beadwork textiles of Antoine Oleyant of Haiti showed Voodoo deities on flags used in ritual, hybrid images showing both African and European influences.

A similar eclectic use of textile materials and processes was seen in the *Documenta IX* exhibition in Kassel in Germany in 1992. Textiles were used as a ‘sign’ to open up high art to a more popular level - their very ‘invisibility’ to mainstream art practices recommending them. The curator Jan Hoet commented in his catalogue essay that more and more artists sought to locate themselves where they could deal with the things of everyday life. He continued:

> Because we live in an age of cultural indeterminacy, a transitional zone that generates a bewildering state of relativity, things themselves have got to matter more than what we say about them.8
Eugenio Dittborn of Chile showed large collages of images stitched and drawn on cardboard that could be folded and sent by mail anywhere in the world. Matt Mullican of the United States exhibited organised structures, in pictograms and diagrams used by people in diverse areas. A group of domestic textiles formed one of his collections of formal ‘signs’. Another American artist, Christopher Wool, investigated the ancient laws of ornament, which he saw as stronger than the weaker conventions of a written language. The most potent conjunction of ‘textile’ and ‘text’ was an installation by Joseph Kosuth called Passage work. Fragmented philosophical quotations were printed on draperies which concealed the traditional sculptures in the long side galleries chosen for this piece.

This use of textiles by ‘cutting edge’ artists may be an encouraging widening of the textile arena, but textiles in these exhibitions are frequently used for their reference to the popular, the unvalued, the disregarded, the disappearing ethnic, the feminine - in a sense reinforcing the stereotype. The difficulties of the textile artist in exhibiting work as ‘significant’ contemporary art, but within the boundaries of the craft discipline, and with a full expression of skills, still remain largely unaddressed by official institutions and museums.

The textile artist often has a very different point of view to the cutting edge artists shown in such exhibitions as the Sydney Biennale. The processes and complexities of technique are for him or her a whole language of intricate criteria - the space and tension between the warp threads, the sheen or dullness of thread, the exact hue of a colour make a great difference to the eventual outcome of the work. The skills of the hand are a whole form of knowledge, needing long and patient training, with their own history within each discipline. This ‘language’ will indicate that variations and differences in techniques do have their own implications of meaning and history. Looking at a tapestry, I can tell by the characteristics of warp and weft where it is made, in which of the different countries of Europe, Australia or America. The kind of thread - coarse, fine, precious, or handspun tells me something of the attitude and social position of the artist, the tension and space between warp and weft, tightness or looseness, irregular or regular weaving, all open up associations to particular traditions and areas of meaning.

Passing reference to basic elements such as stitching, piecing and draping, while pleasing to see in such major exhibitions as Biennales, use only a child’s vocabulary and ignore the poetic range possible in a full and rich use of the textile ‘language’. Perceptions of the subtleties of such skills are like an invisible
language to the uninformed viewer, just as someone familiar with the basics of a foreign language is unable to follow a discussion using the full scope of poetic metaphor and allusion. I suspect that many viewers in the artworld are not aware of the intricacy and range possible in the textile ‘language’.

An exception to this discrimination against traditional ‘craft’ skills has been made by Deborah Hart, curator of *Identities: Art from Australia*, which was held in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in Taiwan from December 1993 to February 1994. She included tapestries by Kay Lawrence for their perceptions of gender and personal identity, giving a significant mark of attention to Australian tapestry. These tapestries were woven by the artist with exquisite skill, but in this case, the sophisticated ‘language’ of tapestry history did not jeopardise inclusion in a major exhibition, but was seen to enhance the conceptual value of the work. Interestingly Kay Lawrence’s work was seen by the Taipei audience as some of the most confrontational work in the exhibition. The bi-sexual image intrigued, and also shocked Taiwanese viewers, who perceived the construction of gender, and the understanding of maternity in their own cultural terms.

**Textiles: process and exhibition**

In the 1990s a pluralist conception of textiles and tapestry may blur the edges of formerly clear boundaries. The position of textiles in the wider society is reflected in exhibition contexts. A compelling comparison to the Australian situation is found in Scandinavia.

In Sweden in 1992 I talked to Kajsa af Petersens, a textile artist. She has worked at many levels: her large canvas constructions were placed in rigorously selected shows like the *Nordic Textile Triennale* which positioned her pieces in a ‘high art’ context. Most of her income came from freelance design work of fabrics for companies such as Ikea, and also the Underground Railway of Stockholm which employed her to decorate the walls of their lifts. Another area was traditional linen handweaving of towels and house fabrics which she loved to do in the summer, considering it very important to transmit knowledge of such skills to her family and friends. Her training assumed that although she would work as an artist whenever possible she would use all her design skills in industry at the same time. This multi level approach to textiles was repeated by other textile artists I spoke to in Denmark, Norway and Finland, where a passionate involvement with traditional
techniques was combined with a commitment to working with industry and with experimentation for its own sake. There is a less clear tradition in Australia where these very different areas within textiles and tapestry are not expected to co-exist within one person.

The belief in the power of the making process is revealed in the prevalent use of textile metaphors of interlocking and connection in so much contemporary writing, especially when trying to deal with concepts of time, of memory, death and fate. In Australia groups involved with textile processes have developed and refined their organization and training since the great momentum of the craft movement in the 1960s. Stitching, quilting, applique, embroidery and printing on fabric give rise to a distinctive surface often intricately worked and folded. In techniques which actually construct the textile, such as tapestry, rug and fabric weaving, detailed attention must be applied to weave structure, and sensitivity to materials condition the final form. Such skills require a sense of order and pattern which is not duplicated in the processes of painting and sculpture but is particular to textiles. Much contemporary textile work shows clearly this inventive care for repetitive structure and process, where the pattern unit takes meaning from the scale and number of the repeated series of motifs in relation to the overall structure. This emphasis on design as form is at the basis of the structural discoveries which, over millennia, have made the development of our complex industries, and indeed computers, possible. The importance of an intuitive tactility so characteristic of textiles in the 1970s has been replaced by a much greater knowledge and skill in the manipulation of techniques and processes, as well as an interest in the 'forgotten' aspects of textile history.

There is a difficulty about the 'slowness' of such craft skills in an art environment inherited from the traditions of abstract expressionism where the spontaneous mark and concepts rather than skills have primary value. If the very processes of handwork often seem anachronistic at this stage of our technology what can give textiles meaning in gallery and museum contexts?

For a practitioner, the process of making is at least as important as the end result - so many small crucial decisions which determine whether there will be a breakthrough, whether it will 'work'. Artists construct their own meaning, if not that of the wider community, by constructing the object. The complex timebound character of the resulting textile, with its multitude of tiny intersecting units, speaks
to the viewer in a language different from that of any other medium, an idea further developed below.

Textiles still have a symbolic function even in our society as ‘ritual objects’ that mark the passages of life. Birth, adulthood, graduation, marriage, death, each have their appropriate textile - a garment or covering that separates these occasions from the everyday. Yet the accolade of being ‘significant art’ is realised under a different set of guidelines, associated with exhibition in acknowledged galleries and institutions. Textiles have frequently seemed inappropriate to the traditions of such ‘official’ galleries and arbiters of culture, because of their alignment to the community through their decorative and practical functions. On the other hand this very embeddedness in other kinds of histories, the history of women, of emigrants, of small scale non-industrial societies opens up a wealth of emotive and powerful associations to be explored by a discovering artist.

Craftspeople since the formation of Crafts Councils in the early 1970s have always been prepared to make their own opportunities for exhibition, as well as using sympathetic commercial galleries. Weavers and quilters have formed guilds and societies to solve the problem of a forum for exhibition, and to organize themselves effectively as groups. Such a group of fibre artists organized the first Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in the mid 1970s to stimulus and open up opportunities for this new area.

Although providing an important focus for the development of textiles the more recent Tamworth exhibitions have taken on a different approach to those of the ‘truth to materials’ founders. Jennifer Sanders outlined the background to this ongoing debate about the requirement of traditional skills located in an historic framework in her review of the Tamworth National Fibre Exhibition in 1987. She expressed the view that both the experimental, and the functional/traditional were successfully illustrated in this show. A more ‘fine arts’ approach to curating the show has resulted in a very different look and work that hardly touches on the breadth of textile history and technique. Much of the work given prominence in recent Tamworth shows was made by artists not necessarily calling themselves ‘textile artists’. The ‘baby language’ of rudimentary textile skills in many of the pieces is justified by the sophisticated concepts of bricolage, putting together found objects, as in *Unfamiliar Territory, The Boundary Rider*, and *Documenta IX*.
Yet for many highly skilled and respected textile artists whose work was rejected from this exhibition the problem seemed to be more with those curating rather than an intrinsic lack of quality in their work. Crossing boundaries between textiles and the broader art world is a positive and lively phenomenon, but should not jeopardise the possibilities of exhibition for artists working within the rich fields of textile traditions and skilled experimentation with process and structure. Both kinds of exhibition are significant for a growing appreciation of the extent and variety of textile expression in the Australian context.

Discerning textiles, Goulburn Regional Gallery, 1993

In response to requests from textile artists for a serious, well-curated survey of current textiles Jennifer Lamb, Director of the Goulburn Regional Gallery, asked for submissions in 1992 from artists on the theme of ‘new directions’ in textiles. This exhibition was generated by a group of artists working across the textile/tapestry field, who felt there had been little opportunity for exhibition within the Sydney artworld. Not only were the themes of the exhibition to come directly from the artists, but the whole process of developing the shape of the exhibition, with the individual concepts within the greater whole, was fostered by a series of seminars leading up to the exhibition. The artists critically discussed their work in a forum developing the range of their ideas and the way these might be formed by specific textile processes. Textile artists opened themselves to conceptual areas

beyond the initial constraints of textile art as formed by its structure and material, blurring the boundaries between ‘semiotic’ and ‘symbolic’. A fresh rigour became evident in addressing diverse histories of materiality, and personal issues of memory and gender.

Conceptual clarity and awareness of the wider field was seen as imperative but the breadth of textile history embodied in the processes themselves was felt to be a source of strength and not to be concealed by making textiles appear like sculpture or painting. The ‘semiotic’ attributes of textile, its unconscious associations with with earliest childhood and with the haptic qualities of texture were combined in this exhibition with conceptual enquiries into issues of environment that have far reaching implications for personal identity and spirituality. Evelyn Juers, in reviewing *Discerning Textiles* commented:

This show, heady with messages about environmental maintenance and destruction and fertile with the excellence of conception and design - appears to have a third agenda. *Discerning Textiles* seems to be experimenting with the ideas of clothing and enclosing some of our most primal needs and wishes in the ‘textile’ language of fibres stitched, stretched, quilted, hung, placed or woven.12
Even in comparison to Kajsa af Petersen in Sweden, such initiatives as the Goulburn exhibition *Discerning Textiles* promise new territories in Australia for textiles. In order to avoid the pitfalls of the ‘survey’ show, the exhibition was tightly curated to show linking concerns, both thematically and technically. The energy of the artists themselves, with imaginative curatorship, brought fresh perception of a marginalised artform to our major museums and art galleries. The notion that craft based disciplines can be both technically sophisticated and conceptually adept is one that is still an ‘unfamiliar territory’ in our artworld. The Goulburn project, artist-driven but with intensive seminars and discussion, has been observed as being of particular interest in Europe, and catalogue essays from *Discerning Textiles* have been translated into Spanish and published in Madrid, in the journal *Arte/facto*.

**The international tapestry community**

In the international community of tapestry there is a distinct voice for tapestry that emerges as separate from the wider textile field, particularly in western Europe, America and Australia. From the Australian viewpoint this international network began in 1988 when the Victorian Tapestry Workshop organised the very successful *International Tapestry Symposium* in Melbourne, with extensive seminars and major exhibitions of international tapestry, which attracted artists from all over the world. Artists who met in Melbourne in 1988, Kay Lawrence from Australia, Sharon Marcus and Ruth Scheuer from the United States, Janis Jefferies from England and Aleksandra Manczak from Poland worked for three years to bring together another conference in Poland *Distant Lives/Shared Voices* in 1992, which led to *Making a Place for Tapestry* in Vancouver, Canada in 1993.

As the voice of tapestry was silenced at the Lausanne Biennial, which had been originally conceived as tapestry’s main forum, the *International Tapestry Network* was set up in Anchorage, Alaska, with distinguished Board members from all over Europe, America and Australia. A quarterly newsletter has been published from Anchorage, which has brought together artists, teachers, curators, academics and collectors to discuss a multitude of issues around tapestry. As well as publishing a regular newsletter, the International Tapestry Network organised in 1991 and 1992, through Helga Berry, two international tapestry exhibitions which toured through the United States and Canada in 1990 and 1992-1993. Upholding the ‘symbolic’ technique and tradition, while allowing many regional variations was the consistent
emphasis of these two exhibitions which offered a survey of flat Gobelin tapestry across cultures, but with no thematic unity.\(^17\)

The European Textile Network was set up by Beatrijs Sterk from Hannover, Germany, in 1989 to initiate contact across the dissolving borders of eastern and western Europe. She edits the influential magazine *Textilforum*, published in Hannover with an English language component. Beatrijs Sterk has often stated that Australia is responsible for some of the most lively tapestry being made in the 1990s. The development of this international tapestry community is due not only to the increased ease of travel, but also to the fax machine and computer communication systems across international networks.

The International Tapestry Network fulfils the needs, not only of established tapestry institutions and workshops but also of the individual artist/weaver who is responsible both for concept and realisation of the tapestry. Individual tapestry weavers, often trained in workshops, may weave both their own designs and those of others, and may incorporate other techniques to enrich the surface. It was a group of such individuals who organised the international conference in Poland in 1992 for artists who both conceive and weave their own tapestries.\(^18\) Surveying tapestry’s brief period of establishment in Australia, it appears likely that it is individual artists, rather than workshops, who will explore and extend the boundaries of tapestry, bringing together the power of the medium as a sign, and the ‘symbolic’ ambience of tapestry.


My involvement since 1992 in the curation of *Texts from the Edge*, both as part of the curating group, as a participant artist and writer of the catalogue, clarified and developed the theories investigated here in relation to tapestry and textiles.\(^19\) This exhibition was planned to present the thoughtful self-reflexivity of artists at the ‘cutting edge’ of current thinking and also great skills in the perception of medium. This rare exhibition in a public space of twelve artist weavers from South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania evolved through debates and conferences that have developed since the Melbourne International Tapestry Symposium of 1988, particularly the international tapestry conference *Distant lives/Shared voices*.\(^20\) These four artists who visited Poland, with Sara Lindsay and Liz Nettleton, became the ‘core’ group in discussions with the Jam Factory in November 1992 for a substantial exhibition of tapestry.
At first, the key aim for such an exhibition of tapestry was conceived as historical by the 'core' group. Originally, the scheme was to include many significant tapestry weavers from the 1960s and 1970s in New South Wales and from the highly trained weavers who developed through the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ambitious plans at first considered representing New South Wales tapestry weavers working before the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in 1976. For example, Margaret Grafton made the earliest commissioned tapestry in Australia for the architect Philip Cox in 1963 and Mona Hessing made a vast flat woven tapestry for the John Clancy Auditorium at the University of New South Wales in 1971. Ian Arcus, Tom Moore, Mary and Larry Beeston were all active in fulfilling tapestry commissions in the late 1970s and early 1980s and Lise Cruickshank in the late 1980s. In New South Wales 'tapestry' at this time was often deeply imbued with the structural principles of the burgeoning fibre arts movement, and associated with it.

In Victoria the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in 1976 led to the training and employment of many notable weavers who not only interpreted the
designs of other artists but also designed and wove their own pieces. Cresside Collette, Meryl Dumbrell, Joy Smith, Cheryl Thornton and Kate Derum have all contributed to the rich field of tapestry practice in Victoria. Younger artists, such as Catherine Hoffmann have trained with Marie Cook through the influential tapestry course at Warrnambool. Because of the pervasive authority of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop artists in Victoria developed a crisp and intricate 'style' of flatwoven tapestry and a dialogue between the woven and drawn image that is quite different from the New South Wales emphasis on the materiality of medium as content.

South Australia, like Victoria, had also developed a distinguishing emphasis on community tapestries, with tapestry weavers such as Elaine Gardner working collaboratively and as coordinators of community groups. As well, individual bodies of work have come from Pru La Motte (previously Medlin), Gary Benson, Margie Patrick and Sue Rosenthal, artists who have achieved remarkable pieces in tapestry, working both with large commissions in public spaces, and in the private domain. Other tapestry practitioners such as Lutcia Pichler are developing a heightened private expression, and working as community artists in the tapestry medium.

The unwieldy nature of a comprehensive survey which would try to give equal balance to all these elements in the different regions soon became evident to the curating group. Rather than trying to offer a wide survey of tapestry, *Texts from the edge* centres around issues of contemporary practice, addressing the relationship between tapestry and the painted and drawn image. An intense meditation on personal issues includes tapestries investigating the borders of gender and the innuendos of text, of family histories of journeys and loss, and perceptions of environment.

It is clear that historical tapestry in the last three hundred years in Europe has had a 'male' status, connected to the institutions of power and organised by men. In *Texts from the edge* we find a group of women using this traditional vehicle for the interpretation of 'great art' in an idiosyncratic way. The historical emanations of the tapestry medium itself are juxtaposed with seeming subversions of this history, with often disturbing autobiographical images and journeys and a private realm of domestic interiors and intimately observed landscapes. Yet because of the past history of tapestry as 'symbolic' of systems of power and claims to the past, such
developments in content in tapestry take on a political and social perspective, and do not merely evoke personal positions.

Much of the work in this exhibition has its roots in an investigation of subjectivity, the ‘who am I’ which lays claim to an identity. Subjectivity is itself defined by political structures, by the relative positioning of male/female, black/white, middle class/working class. (It was apparent to tapestry artists travelling in Poland in 1992 that subjectivity took a very different form in the radically different circumstances of Polish art and society.) Autobiography is an expanding artform in the late twentieth century, which sees a multiplicity of forms of describing the elusive self. As Sidonie Smith comments about women’s writing, ‘on the eve of the twenty first century we find autobiographical subjects all around us, and they are stretching textual forms... to fit their excessive negotiations of subjectivity, identity and the body...’

How can women see themselves as ‘artists’ when the idea of ‘self’ has traditionally been constituted as male, unhindered by a body dedicated to nurturing? Women

Robyn Daw, Detail of Francophitia, 70cm x 130 m, 1993. The influence of ancient emblems of tapestry is very evident from her time studying in France.
have been excluded from innovative roles in western tapestry history, except as 'imitators' and interpreters of male styles. There is no mirror of the past in which to reflect a clear role for women artists in this medium, except the antique Greek myth/history. For women (and men) born after the second World War, as Marie Cook observed to me, the issues of feminism underpin thinking, issues which are not resolved, and require a continuing balancing between the requirements of nurturing and the will to have power in one's chosen field.

Stretching ideas of subjectivity does not lead to strident positionings of the female in opposition to a dominantly male history in this exhibition, but 'corporeal residues' are evident. Sharp lines between male and female are blurred in images of ambivalent gender boundaries explored with wit and irony - Kay Lawrence's phallic mother, Tass Mavrogordato's androgynous heroine, Liz Nettleton's Lesbian policewomen, or Marie Cook's angels. In Meryn Jones' installation matriarchy is clearly evoked, and the fertile and desiring female body fully re-instated.

Such content is a departure from old models of tapestry where the producing and receiving eye was constituted as only male. The order and logic, the historic force of the medium is delicately subverted by confrontations with 'peripheral' worlds of women's imagination. A serious woman's voice is involved in Catherine K's playful texts, which contemplates the symbolic language of patriarchy through a speaking, weaving feminine stance. The piquancy comes in noting that the much loved medium itself is not in any sense 'male', though in the last two hundred years it may have come to speak for a dominant 'symbolic' position.
In *Texts from the edge* the 'semiotic' area of the haptic, maternal and the corporeal are subtly asserted both in the content of these pieces and through the tactility of the woven medium. This textural quality is enhanced through attention to non-conventional materials such as rags and paper, to tiny gaps, slits and ruptures in the fabric of tapestry.

The 'symbolic' aura of tapestry, with its weight of power and history is acknowledged as fundamental by these contemporary tapestry weavers. This is why it is *essential* that these weavers retain the framework of traditional techniques. This tapestry 'language' is used in conjunction with provocative and confronting images - the piquancy of image works *because of* the contrast with the disciplined and historic language. Another contradiction is the fact that many contemporary weavers rely on and value tapestry workshops, but also feel the need to question the centrality of belief systems and the alliance with essentially patriarchal institutions. These artists greatly value the weight and prestige of the 'symbolic' language of tapestry, but must accost it. Thus Tass Mavrogordato makes exquisitely woven tapestries of enlarged organs of reproduction, a penis, a womb, mocking the inviolability of the language she uses with such fluency. Kay Lawrence, in the *Gender* and *Mother* tapestries, presents bi-sexual personas drawn by her daughter. Such individual artists question the cultural certainties that seem
so inherent in the medium, while finding the medium itself imbued with a poetic and historic richness. Other artists making tapestries in this vein are Marie Cook and Meryn Jones in Victoria. Their work refers more to the medieval world of love and death, where depictions of an unalloyed physicality were common in tapestry. In such works the powerful 'symbolic' order of tapestry is not afraid to be welded to the maternal unconscious, to that 'semiotic' knowledge of our bodily existence which so pervades everyday life.

The 'historic aura' of the medium holds in check any tendency for such 'semiotic' forces to overflow, and the tension between the two, as between conscious and unconscious, illuminates contemporary tapestry.

2 Timothy Morrell (curator), *Unfamiliar Territory: Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, 1992, pp. 3-4.


6 Timothy Morrell (curator), *Unfamiliar Territory: Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, 1992, pp. 3-4.


10 These ideas on curation were published in a catalogue essay, ‘Textiles and the Artworld: Curation and exhibition’, *Discerning Textiles*, a textile project coordinated by Jennifer Lamb and curated by Dr. Sue Rowley and Diana Wood Conroy, Goulburn Regional Gallery, New South Wales, 1992/1993.


12 The *Discerning Textiles* idea will continue in 1995/1996 with another project at the Goulburn Regional Gallery - *Below the Surface*. Another major exhibition of textiles and textile related artwork is *Crossing Borders*, curated by Dr Sue Rowley, which will tour USA in 1995/1996, funded by the Australia Council.


15 In September 1991, the Advisory Board members of the International Tapestry Network consisted of: Laima Bredikiene, Lithuania; Marie Cook, Australia; David Edlefsen, USA; Marianne Erickson, Sweden; Lloyd Herman, USA; Dr. Irena Huml, Poland; Janis Jefferies, UK; Dr. Ludmila Kybalova, Czechoslovakia; Gina Morandini, Italy; Daniela Zanella, Italy; Sylvie Ollivier, France; Courtney Shaw, USA; Silver Stanfill, USA; Beatrijs Sterk, Germany.

The forum in Poland was initiated by Kay Lawrence, Australia; Sharon Marcus and Ruth Scheuer, USA; Aleksandra Manczak, Poland; all tapestry artists. Janis Jefferies, UK, later joined this organizing committee to provide a western European link.


In 1963 Margaret Grafton was commissioned by Philip Cox to make a 1.83 m x 4.88 m tapestry for the Tocal Agricultural College near Maitland, New South Wales, see Grace Cochrane, The Crafts Movement In Australia: A History, New South Wales UP, Sydney, 1992, p. 171.

Mona Hessing’s work is well documented in Grace Cochrane, The Crafts Movement In Australia: A History, p. 172. Diana Wood Conroy’s early commissions included: Macquarie University, 3 metres square, 1973; New South Wales State Planning Authority, 7.5 m x 2.4 m, 1973; University of Sydney Union, 1.5 metres square; St. Andrew’s House, Sydney Square, 3.3 m x 4.8 m, 1976; Aldo Moratelli, Architects, North Sydney, 1976.


