

# String theory

Over the last half-century, art convention and hierarchy has been turned inside out. One example is how what was the province of craft material; fibre, felt and other fabrics – have moved from the margins into the mainstream of art practice and theory. **Lesley Millar** on a book which documents a significant part of this transformation.




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**String, Felt, Thread: the hierarchy of art and craft in American art** by Elissa Auther  
(University of Minnesota Press)

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This is an immensely useful, thoroughly researched account of the hierarchy of art and craft in American art, with particular reference to the 1960's and 1970's. Elissa Auther has provided excellent support material in the form of reviews and quotes, demonstrating a deep knowledge of the main protagonists of the period, and the critical stance taken by reviewers. Although there is a sense, throughout this account of the period, that Modernism and the fine art tradition has plundered 'fibre' for its own ends, there is evidence of a strenuous attempt by Auther to be even handed in the clarity of the writing.

Auther deftly outlines the ways in which the hierarchies of art and craft were maintained in the latter part of the 20th century. Terry Smith has summarised the differences distinguishing art and craft from an art historian's perspective observing that there is: "a generalised view that art and craft differ". He then goes on to say:

"Essentially, in ways; in their preferred relationships to materials (for artists they are a vehicle; for craftspeople they are sacred); to composition (for artists an arrangement of imagery or images won out of the medium or against it; to craftspeople mostly a surface effect); to purpose (for artists a communicative act about something of significance usually beyond art but often about representation itself; for craftspeople the execution of an appropriate design

for the provision of an object of satisfying usefulness). And for those who receive the artwork or craftwork, a different pleasuring of the eye: one intimately associated with the hand, touch (Haptic); the other with sight (optic), ideas, suggestions, concepts (cognitive)".

However, it is the quotes from Greenberg that exemplify Auther's ability to silhouette the protagonists views against a period of deep cultural change. This is the kernel of Auther's argument, that there is art, there is craft, and there is also a hybrid form flourishing with all the fresh energies of new growth, brought into being by the feminist movement.

*String, Felt, Thread* commences by presenting an account of the use of fiber as an artistic medium, making clear the distinction between fiber as an art form and fiber used within a craft based activity. Quite quickly we see that Auther is presenting us with an overview of the hierarchies of craft and art from which events emerge, rather than an argument towards an end conclusion. This approach is buttressed by the excellent series of quotes, which establish the period perfectly: "An object contemplated by the educated eye" rather than being "known and handled intimately". This suggests the division of optic and haptic, "between complex ironic truths about the world" and "skilled labour devoid of the idea". Thus Greenberg's enthusiasm for the de-skilled in favour of "inspiration, vision and intuitive decision, as opposed to finish, polish and a finished object." This becomes, in Auther's account, as partial a view of its time as Fry's "significant form".

Auther's aim, in the first section of this study, is to chart the two decade long process of the art world's