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# Hands On Politics

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## HANDS ON POLITICS Nicole Archer

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*Fray: Art + Textile Politics* by  
Julia Bryan-Wilson. Chicago:  
University of Chicago Press, 2017.  
Pp. 326. \$55.00 cloth.

We live in fraught times, when it seems not only impossible but downright undesirable to position oneself above the fray of contemporary politics. It is for this reason that Julia Bryan-Wilson's latest book, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics*, could not have arrived at a better moment. At its heart, *Fray* is an examination of the sorts of political insights gained, quite literally, from setting your hands to work. More than a book about textiles, *Fray* is a varied survey of what it feels like to try one's hand at making another world possible—a critical project that focuses on a set of undeniably haptic works of art and material culture, aided by the author's personal commitment to continually “measure her own reach,” as a critic.

Beyond the way textiles and their familiars (such as clothing, banners, soft goods, and quilts) serve to represent our personal identities, Bryan-Wilson challenges herself, and her readers, to consider the kinds of political entanglements that the situated work of making, handling, wearing, and caring for fabrics can activate. From the book's beginning (a close reading of a feminist T-Shirt handed down to the author from her mother), Bryan-Wilson works to carefully locate herself relative to her objects of study. It is not a move new to feminist theory, or even contemporary Art History, but Bryan-Wilson distinguishes her approach by meticulously attending to the

textures of her varied encounters: noting which objects are at her fingertips and which ones resist her caress—which objects can/cannot be handled. Taking cues from Eve Sedgwick’s powerfully haptic analyses in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Bryan-Wilson writes that “texture is a unique quality,” it “invites two distinct temporal imaginings, as the viewer both considers the object’s origin (looking back to its process of conception and the whole sweep of its physical existence) and projects forward to a future moment of speculative touch, fondling, interaction” (183). In accounting for the textures of her chosen objects, Bryan-Wilson consequently (and unabashedly) lets the reader in on what she’s “feeling”—what she is and isn’t able to sense, and what is at stake, politically, in this difference.

*Fray* differs from recent texts that profess to focus on the political power of “materiality,” texts that lay claim on “the material turn” but refuse to acknowledge the potent capacities that actual material culture has in establishing key relays between abstracted, strategic expressions of power and more tactical, situated acts of critical resistance. Bryan-Wilson avoids this trap by employing a strategy that braids art historical methods of formal analysis together with rigorous archival research, and the political investments and frameworks

offered by intersectional feminist and queer theory. Early on, Bryan-Wilson concludes an extended reading of the extravagantly decorated, yet modestly handmade costumes worn by the irreverent, “genderfucking” members of the 1970s San Francisco-based performance groups the Cockettes and the Angels of Light, with a reflection on “the fragmented, piecemeal nature of history, itself” (71). Here, the tatty, crocheted knickers worn by performers, such as Scrumblly Koldewyn, are not simply *like* the threads of time but serve as literal indexes of queer temporality and world-making.

If the book has a primary, defining logic, it is the author’s interest in locating a series of tears within the social fabric. She learns whatever she can from the fray, from the edges of an artwork or the remnant of a shirt once worn by a disappeared loved one. Without making false equivalences between such categorically different objects, Bryan-Wilson explores the tensions that open up through their material similarities, and it is these tensions that organize each of the book’s chapters.

After an introduction that locates *Fray* relative to other critical works on textiles found within Feminist Art History and Critical Craft and Material Cultural Studies, there are three main chapters. The first, “Queer Handmaking,” explores how the reshaping and repurposing

of traditionally gendered material practices (such as crocheting, sewing, and rug making), were “craftily” queered in 1970s USA, giving form to a variety of queer subjectivities. The chapter juxtaposes the handcrafted costumes worn by the Cockettes and the Angels of Light (who lived and loved collectively in the Bay Area) with the braided rag-rug paintings (or *Floorpieces*) made by the lesbian artist Harmony Hammond. Bryan-Wilson details the way these different practices parlayed feminist efforts to critically claim a set of fiber practices associated with highly “domesticated” forms of femininity, while attending to the deeply racialized and classed histories that are often overlooked in discussions of such works. By the chapter’s end, it becomes clear that what distinguishes these works as “queer,” isn’t simply the kinds of camp code-switching that they each employed but how, in Hammond’s own words about the *Floorpieces*, these works engaged an “esthetic of survival” (77). Fabricated from discarded, or undervalued, materials—the scraps of capitalist, neoliberal culture—the sparkling hodgepodes worn by the Cockettes and the highly conceptual, museum-destined artworks braided and painted by Hammond find common ground in their simple insistence of being, otherwise.

It’s this esthetic of survival that carries over into Fray’s second

chapter. Entitled “Threads of Protest,” this chapter considers how textiles—the material support for so many of our individual and collective identities—can be mobilized to critique state violence. The chapter opens with the work of the Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña, and examines Vicuña’s adept ability to use “the language of thread” in order to speak volumes about the cultural dislocations and divestitures that mark contemporary (art) worlds. In contrast to Vicuña’s broadly conceptual gestures—which rely on the tensile strength of the thread itself, in order to produce “aesthetic lessons” that knot indigenous women’s craft to high modernist art practice—the second half of the chapter turns attention towards a set of *arpilleras*—small, appliquéd burlap-backed wall hangings—“that graphically depict the tortures and other human rights violations of the Pinochet era” (107). Here, Bryan-Wilson offers readers the opportunity to appreciate how the power of these searing material testimonies is located less in the scenes of violence and protest that they dare to image, and more in the fact that the fabrics used to form the first *arpilleras* were often cut from the empty clothes that remained in closets long after their wearers were abducted by Pinochet’s regime and never seen again. The very occurrence of these objects is evidence of an unspeakable absence.

Following Bryan-Wilson's discussion of the textile's capacity to witness unimaginable forms of cruelty, the book's final, full chapter presents a close reading of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Unlike in the previous two chapters, the author does not introduce a material counterpoint within "Remains of the AIDS Quilt," rather, she focuses exclusively on the making, displaying, and archiving of the AIDS Quilt. She accounts for the quilt's critics, alongside its committed caregivers, and she builds on insights offered in previous pages—observations on queer temporality and the textile's capacity to mediate what might otherwise seem like irreconcilable scales of violence and tragedy. The chapter concludes with a series of critical notes on preservation that are grounded in the quilt's intrinsic, material resistance to serving as an obedient, fixed memorial for those taken by the AIDS epidemic. Here, it is at the register of the textile (and all of the quilt's undone

seams, flaking, iron-on images, and loose sequins) that the politics of AIDS persists long after the medical industrial complex has claimed to have metabolized "the threat."

*Fray* closes with an afterword, "The Currency of Cloth," which moves readers out of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, and aims to stake the textile's claim on current politics by reiterating the need for all of us to literally work towards the possibility of feeling something different—individually and collectively. Bryan-Wilson introduces a variety of artistic practices that are united through their commitment to unravel global capitalism's smooth textures, practices that encourage our desires to reach out and touch one another in manners of support and solidarity.

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