

Vanessa Marr, University of Brighton. UK

v.marr@brighton.ac.uk

Enticing and enacting visual domestic narratives by drawing with thread upon a duster: An autoethnographic study.

Extended Abstract

My area of study sits within creative arts practice-based research, underpinned by theories of drawing, narrative and autoethnography. I investigate female autoethnographic domestic biographies, both my own and that of other women, which are physically voiced through the embellishment of stitch upon a duster. Fundamental to this investigation is the prolonged and contemplative engagement with the duster through stitch, the collaborative sharing of stories and the exhibition of collected narratives.

This paper will discuss practice-based and critical work in progress from an ongoing collaborative research project that I've been running since 2014. It invites participants to commit through thread their own views and experiences on the relationship between women and domesticity. Members of the public from every walk of life, without prejudice towards skill or creative capabilities, nor age, social background are asked to embroider their perspectives on this theme. The invite has not been gender-specific but with the focus on women's perspectives, overwhelmingly women have responded. The result is a growing collection of over 100 hand-embroidered dusters featuring personal reflections and insights that include poetic quotes, resentful statements, images and fond memories. It is regularly exhibited in the UK, 'performing' a collection of voices that call for acknowledgement (see fig.1), seeking reciprocal responses from their audiences through collaborative workshops and discussions that entice the discussion and sharing of personal experiences. This structure builds upon practices of autoethnographic, reflective story writing within which collaboration and sharing are key, inspired by the collective memory work of Frigga Haug (1983) and June Crawford et al (1992).



Fig.1: Dusters on display for International Women's Day at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, UK, March 2016. Exhibitions are usually accompanied by practical workshops, which invite contributions to the collection.

As a woman I speak with knowledge of this gendered, domestic experience, seeking to make sense of it through the process of stitching as writing, a method that 'connect[s] the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (Ellis, 2004) through discussion and exhibition. Personally speaking, this means that my experiences become not just my own but a voice amongst many, for domestic experience is common to us all and in the home, we can research the life we live. 'Researchers are in some ways always part of the lives and world they are researching' (Pink, 2012).

This paper will also present and critique research from my PhD study, which builds upon this project to join practices of autoethnography with phenomenology; storytelling with the embodied experience of drawing with thread, to question how these theories and practices can fit together to prompt uniquely informed and expressed narratives. For me, making is a process of storytelling and time spent engaged with an object that 'speaks' its own language. I interpret this act of stitch as drawing with thread as an embodiment of the experience that time spent with a particular object facilitates, underpinned by Merleau-Ponty's theory that through drawing, 'phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner of thinking' (1945). As Sherry Turtle discusses in her book *Evocative Objects*: 'objects are able to catalyse self-creation' they also 'bring together thought and feeling' (2007, p.9). The embellished dusters tell autoethnographic stories, both in their making and their performance. Each cloth is a unique biography of domestic experience, framed within the

social and cultural contexts of gendered female domestic expectations that persist in modern media (Greenhill et al, 2018) and the feminist ideals that seek to challenge them.

I selected dusters (cleaning cloths) because they are mundane and unadorned. I've chosen an object that is unacknowledged and kept under the kitchen sink as an aide to visualising the invisibility of domestic tasks. The traditional yellow duster I've selected is well recognised in the UK and has a sense of striking nostalgia with its vivid yellow and characteristic red stitched hem; it is pleasurable to embroider too, a reference to the comfort of domesticity. The combination of cloth and embroidery was selected as a means of expression and embellishment to form a relationship with the past as historically cloth-working has predominantly been defined as women's work (Barber, 1995). Red thread was chosen to match the hems, and because of its historical representation of the feminine (Gordon, 2011).

Undoubtedly this craft practice provides a platform for narratives of active discussion (Greer, 2014) and quiet proclamation, which emancipates all participants, including myself, from the boundaries of our domestic expectations, giving voice to our experiences. My paper will discuss, share and celebrate these voices.

Paper for Presentation: Doing Autoethnography 2020.

Introduction

My area of study sits within creative arts practice-based research, underpinned by theories of drawing, narrative, craft and autoethnography. I investigate female autoethnographic domestic biographies, both my own and that of other women, which are physically voiced through the embellishment of stitch upon a duster. Fundamental to this investigation is the prolonged and contemplative engagement with the duster through stitch, the collaborative sharing of stories and the exhibition of collected narratives.

This presentation will discuss my own autoethnographic creative outcomes and a selection of examples from a collaborative research project that I've been running since 2014.

Intro to duster project

My collaborative 'Women and Domesticity – What's your Perspective?' project invites participants to embroider their views and experiences on the relationship between women and domesticity onto

a duster (a soft yellow cleaning cloth, commonly used in the UK for dusting). It includes members of the public from every walk of life, without prejudice towards skill or creative capabilities, nor age or social background. The invite has not been gender-specific but with the focus on women's experiences, overwhelmingly women have responded. The result is a growing collection of over 100 hand-embroidered dusters featuring personal reflections and insights including poetic quotes, resentful statements, questions, references to domestic violence, humour, and fond memories. It has been regularly exhibited in the UK 'performing' a collection of voices that call for acknowledgement.

I seek reciprocal responses through collaborative workshops, talks and discussions that accompany these exhibitions to entice the discussion and sharing of personal domestic experiences. Within these workshops I've developed a practice-lead methodology inspired by June Crawford's book 'Emotion and Gender' (1992), which sought to construct meaning from memory inspired by Frigga Haug's collective work on memories of female sexualisation (published in 1983). Whilst my study does not explore emotion specifically it does explore gender specific recollections of an experience upon which emotion has a bearing, so some useful comparisons can be made. Both studies used a form of autoethnographic, reflective story writing within which collaboration and sharing were key. In response I've developed directed a number of drawing, stitching and note-making exercises that prompt the sharing of individual domestic stories upon, and in response to, the duster.

Intro to personal work

My own autoethnographic practice forms the focus of my current PhD study, which joins practices of autoethnography with phenomenology to tell my own domestic story. The duster is also my visual focus; acting as a catalyst for creative expression to contextualise my own uniquely informed and expressed domestic narratives, which I realise through drawing, craft and creative writing practices. My domestic experiences are embodied within the duster as I stitch into it or sculpt it into soft shapes: acknowledging it consciously as a cleaning cloth and unconsciously through time spent 'drawing' into it with a needle and thread. This is underpinned by Merleau-Ponty's theory that through drawing, 'phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner of thinking' (1945).

Because it is the process, even the performance, of this stitching and the resulting messages that story these autoethnographies, I interpret stitching as drawing rather than as the skill of embroidery. This allows for phenomenological engagement with my choice of cloth, the duster, connecting domestic tasks and the process of stitch through hours spent with the cloth.

This methodology has been inspired by the observation that something changed within both myself and the project participants when we spent time engaged with the duster, necessary for the laborious task of hand embroidery. Whilst the duster initially acted as means of quickly identifying the context through its recognised role as a domestic tool, it also became catalyst for contemplation and subsequent discussion. Embroidering the duster became a means of autoethnographic storytelling, inspired by time spent engaged with an object that 'speaks' its own language.

Why dusters

I selected dusters because they are mundane and unadorned. I've chosen an object that is unacknowledged and kept under the kitchen sink as an aide to visualising the invisibility of domestic tasks. The traditional yellow duster I've selected is well recognised in the UK and has a sense of striking nostalgia with its vivid yellow and characteristic red stitched hem; it is pleasurable to embroider too, a reference to the comfort of domesticity (Rybczynski, 1986). Red thread was chosen to match the hems, and because of its historical representation of the feminine (Gordon, 2011).

For me, the duster perfectly embodies the mixture of pleasure and pain that is my personal experience of domesticity. The pleasure of a clean home, a home-cooked meal and a comfortable space, is mirrored by the pleasure I experience when seeing the duster's brilliant yellow, the way the fabric holds my stitch with an equal tension of thread and cloth, and how it feels soft to the touch. The resulting stitched duster is satisfying too; a visually powerful combination of red and yellow that tells its stories boldly, without any legacy of demure feminine reserve.

At the same time, the relentless invisibility of the domestic tasks I undertake daily frustrates me. This is reflected in the duster cloth, which is not valued in esteem or money. It is used to clean dirt away. It would not be given as a gift and once used it remains stained and out of sight (much like women in some cultures). This lack of value reflects the low status of domestic tasks and 'free' female labour.

For me, these contradictions are the perfect catalyst for stitching a story about my domesticity. Undoubtedly this craft practice provides a platform for narratives of active discussion (Greer, 2014) and quiet proclamation, which emancipates all participants, including myself, from the boundaries of our domestic expectations, giving voice to our experiences.

The purpose of this research

As a woman I speak with knowledge of this gendered, domestic experience. I am seeking to make sense of it through the process of stitching and writing, connecting my autobiography to contexts that are cultural, social, and political. The female relationship with domesticity is complex; a mix of often-silent pressures supported by the legacy of 'women's work', a patriarchal, capitalist society that depends on our free labour (Hochschild, 1990) and our righteous desire to care for our families whilst also maintaining the autonomy of our own selves. Stitching mirrors this complexity. As Rozita Parker writes, it is a process that is linked to our powerlessness as much as our emancipation. For hundreds of years it was both our source of income (Barber, 1995), a limited source of education and a means of controlling our freedom (Parker, 2010). More recently women have claimed it again through Craftivism (Corbett, 2017) to become a voice that challenges the patriarchal status quo.

I'm also seeking to bring new insight into the relationship between lived-experience, objects, drawing and narrative. In *Evaluating Ethnography*, Laurel Richardson begins with the statement: 'the ethnographic life is not separable from the self.' (Richardson, 2000). Similarly, Sarah Pink writes that: 'researchers are in some ways always part of the lives and world they are researching,' (Pink, 2012). Domestic experience is common to us all and in the home, we can research the life we live. By investigating a relationship and an experience that is common to both my collaborators and myself I can complete a study that is by its nature collaboratively autoethnographic. Ellis (2004) writes that autoethnography is: 'research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political'. In my work the draw-stitching into a duster becomes both the writing and the method, the personal stories are told visually upon the dusters and the method is further extended into exhibition, which connects these stories to wider cultural and social issues. The collaborative nature of the workshops also entices discussion and sharing of personal experiences, which in turn contextualises them within a wider social context.

Because I am not alone, because this female experience is shared, albeit divided by the walls and fences of modern living, I want my story to be heard among the voices of many. This is not just my autoethnography, it is also the autoethnography, the personal domestic story, of womankind. I have insider knowledge. I know this research area personally because I am a woman who, like others, empties the dishwasher at 6.30 in the morning before I go to work. Creating this work enables me to 'manoeuvre through [the] pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty' that myself and others experience through resentment of the fact it is we are often left with the responsibility of completing these tasks; to 'break [the] silence' and 're) claim [our] voice' (Holman-Jones et al, 2013). These are

my experiences, these are also their experiences, these might not be your experiences, but this is our autoethnography.

The importance of the stitching the domestic

The interpretation of domestic experience as art through drawing, object manipulation and presentation deserve academic recognition as an ethnographic record of lives lived; expressing personal narratives that record and visually manifest legitimate and worthy experiences. The creation and analysis of narrative is both a 'mode of reasoning and a mode of representation' (Richardson, 1997, 28), which I argue is applicable for those of us who are stitching the dusters and also for those who view them. Richardson and Ellis (2004) explore this idea within the context of imaginative writing; my study extends this further towards imaginative stitch-drawing onto an object (duster), which acts as a catalyst to 'reason' our expression, tied to the context it represents (domesticity) and exhibited as a 'mode of representation' of both process and voice.

As Sherry Turkle discusses in her book *Evocative Objects*: 'objects are able to catalyse self-creation' they also 'bring together thought and feeling' (2007, p.9). The embellished dusters tell autoethnographic stories, both in their making and their performance. Each cloth is a unique biography of domestic experience, framed within the social and cultural contexts of gendered female domestic expectations that persist in modern media (Greenhill et al, 2018) and the feminist ideals that seek to challenge them.

Richardson also writes: 'Creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical... is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified' (2000). My study seeks to 'view' and contextualise the stitched expression of the female domestic experience through the analytical lens of theory by investigating practices of autoethnography, drawing and phenomenology, feminism, literature and craft. Likewise, it seeks to magnify and visualise female domestic experiences through the lens of the creative arts by the stitching and performance of personal narratives upon a duster.

Each lens is focused on the domestic autoethnographic self.

Bibliography:

Barber, Elizabeth. (1995). *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*. Norton.

Crawford, J et al. (1992). *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*. Sage Publishing

Ltd.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Greenhill et al. (2018). *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*. Routledge

Greer, Betsy. (2014). *Craftivism: The Art and Craft and Activism*. Arsenal Pulp Press

Gordon, Beverly. (2011). *Textiles: The Whole Story*. Thames & Hudson.

Haug, F, et al. (1983). *Female Sexualisation: A Collective Work of Memory*. Verso Classics.

Holman Jones, S., Adams, T E., & Ellis, C., (Eds), (2013) *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 281-299

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.

Pink, Sarah. (2012). *Situating Everyday Life*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Turtle, S. (2007). *Evocative Objects: The Thing We Think With*. The MIT Press.