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**LACED MESSAGES**

**Professor Kees Dorst**

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Lace is beginning to speak to us again, after sleeping for hundreds of years. And it has important messages for us, now — yet in the chaos of modern civilisation it is all too easy to ignore its voice. Its whisper is drowned in the deafening noise of our hyperactive media-mad lifestyle. And we have little time to listen to lace: like balls in a pin-ball machine we run madly running from experience to experience. Our senses need to be stretched to breaking point before we are able to sense anything at all.

To remedy this condition we must look for the eye of the storm, something that speaks to us with a soft and subtle voice about qualities that are almost forgotten. The qualities that lace brings us are in themselves firm and strong, and they will never disappear because they are so deeply human. We just need the time and sensitivity to listen.

This publication is an exploration of the qualities of lace, an endeavour to let lace speak again in a voice that fits our contemporary world. The translation of the qualities of lace into the present is an incredibly subtle thing: the voice of lace can easily be distorted beyond recognition. We have seen examples of this in our contemporary design scene where designers have taken an aspect of lace (say, the floral pattern) and have blown it up to a gigantic scale. A beautiful visual effect, but it has nothing to do with the qualities of the original. That is not the aim of Hefter's exploration. Her aim is to see how we can translate the qualities of lace into the here and now.

The qualities of lace… what would they be? Lace is ethereal, with a restrained and controlled aesthetic. It is delicate, intimate, quiet. It is also feminine, closely tied to the lives of the women who made it, wear it, handle it. The incredible patience and dedication needed to
produce lace and its precious aesthetic render it beyond the utilitarian. So it is also, in a sense, completely frivolous. Its aesthetic is its own subject—an autonomous craft that pre-dates autonomous art by centuries.

These qualities are seldom seen in our hectic existence. This lends a real urgency and importance to the expression of these qualities. We need the values that lace embodies, and the emotions that it can spark within us. Yet that may be difficult. Lace is a sleeping beauty that does not look so young anymore. Our perception can easily be reduced to regarding it as an example of a now extinct craft, like so many others. The development of lace appears to have stalled. That is, until recently.

Cecilia Heffer has taken on the formidable challenge of translating the qualities of lace for our time. She has taken Rosemary Shepherd’s definition of lace as ‘an openwork fabric in which the pattern of spaces is as important as the solid areas’ as the starting point for a fascinating exploration of the qualities of contemporary lace. This is a subtle thing—as she said, ‘it is almost like designing something that is not there’. In her extensive explorations, which are both playful and thoughtful, she gently but firmly pushes the boundaries of what lace can be. And each line of exploration and investigation ends by achieving a new synthesis that is represented by one of the works in this publication.

If you enter this publication with an acute and sensitive mind you will start to understand the nature of lace, the rhythm of fabric and spaces. You will encounter new lace constructions in which Cecilia is even exploring the alternatives to an open-work structure. But while doing this, the work remains faithful to the definition and quality of what lace is—always breaking some rules, but never all of them at the same time. Thus we enter a new world of lace, translated from a traditional craft into a space between art and design.

LACED: AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rosemary Shepherd OAM
LACE-MAKER, LACE HISTORIAN

‘Thomas Fuller, writing in 1662’, described lace as ‘a little thread descanted upon by art and industry’. This description, however charming, ignores the fundamental characteristic of lace, namely the spaces created by the ‘little thread’ or threads. In other words, without the spaces there would be no such fabric as lace.

Lace is unusual among textiles because, despite its sensational history, it has never had a useful purpose. In fact, its very existence is owed entirely to the pursuit of fashion. The decorative role of lace began with the embellishment of scams in garments or household textiles more than five hundred years ago. In the early 1500s it emerged as a fashion accessory and by the late 1500s it was an essential part of fashionable dress for both men and women throughout Europe.

From the beginning lace was associated with wealth and status and this remained so until the early 1800s. At various times in its complicated history the wearing of lace was frowned upon or legislated against for its frivolity and extravagance. During the 1600s, when men wore more lace than women, many were on record as mortgaging, or selling property outright to raise the money for the latest lace fashion. Collective spending on Venetian lace and other luxury fashion goods almost bankrupted France at this time and seriously damaged the economies of other European countries.

The first half of the 1700s—the age of elegance—could be regarded as the golden age of lace. Flemish bobbin laces, in particular, are some of the most exquisite textiles ever produced—a triumph of mental agility and manual skill that produced laces so fine and intricate it is hard to believe they were made by mere human beings. Fortunately its intrinsic and artistic value has ensured