

**"Making Something for Myself": Women,
Quilts, Culture and Feminism**

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Contents

Certificate	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract	iii
Introduction: Finding the Pattern	1–9
1: A History of the Australian Quilt Revival	10–40
2: Quilt Culture in Australia Today	41–82
3: Sewing and Listening: the Semi-Public Space of Quilting	83–110
4: Quilted Metaphors	111–144
5: Feminism, Art and Craft	145–172
6: Leisure, Pleasure and Feminism	173–202
7: Folklore and Culture: Finding the Process	203–226
Conclusion: Binding Quilts	227–229
Appendix: "To Make a Quilt"	A1–A2
Bibliography	230–251

Certificate

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Production Note:

Signature removed prior to publication.

Emma Grahame

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This thesis juxtaposes a historical and ethnographic account of a highly organised women's activity -- quilting -- with an examination of feminist discussions on art, craft, leisure, culture and folklore. In describing and analysing the quilting revival in Australia, I attempt to show how quilters have collectively constructed a space in which they avoid, and indeed, deconstruct, some of the ideas and practices which constrain women. As a case study, quilting reveals the practical 'workarounds' that these women have found, which enable them to take time and space for themselves in the face of family responsibilities, to be creative and proud of their artistic efforts in the face of conventions of womanly modesty, and to arrange their own public events in the face of training in silence and backroom support. In so doing, they break down the divisions between professional and amateur, commercial and voluntary, and even public and private.

For the most part, feminist analysis has ignored or misunderstood such women. Although feminist philosophers, academics and artists have often used the products of traditionally feminine crafts as metaphors, examples and parables, they have not always done so with knowledge or familiarity. My study of feminist art and craft writing suggests that this is because of a complex interaction between the political and strategic needs of academic feminists at different times and a lack of detailed attention to the actual creative choices of such women, who often refuse the label 'artist', though they are indubitably cultural producers. Similarly, feminist theorists and researchers of leisure have been concerned with why women do not choose the same leisure activities as men, but have discounted the specific pleasures of traditional women's skills, and the homosocial organisations they inspire, as positive reasons for the choice of such activities. Cultural studies analysis, with its emphasis on the products of the commercial media has underestimated the popularity and importance of voluntarily organised cultural production, such as quilting, especially when such production has not been seen as politically interesting. Feminist folklore studies provides the only model for research which takes such activities seriously, and pays attention to the complex ways in which they both subvert and support women's traditional roles.

Introduction

Finding the pattern

There are thousands of women in New South Wales and all over Australia, who meet regularly, in women-only gatherings, to talk, to teach and learn, and to produce creative works which speak of their experience as women. These works are part of a genre with a long history, a complicated aesthetic, and great metaphoric power. The women who make them feel comfortable with their role as creative cultural producers in this tradition, empowered by its standards and organisations, and enriched by its plentiful social contact and support.

These women are not feminists, for the most part, and in Australia, no feminist analysis of this numerous group has been done. This thesis describes and analyses this vibrant culture and asks why it is that feminists have for the most part, failed to see it as interesting or significant.

The culture I am writing of is that of quiltmaking -- more specifically, the quiltmaking revival which has taken place in Australia since the mid-1970s. Chapters One, Two and Three describe in detail the features, structures, oddities and strengths of quiltmaking culture, and the women-only spaces it fosters. A complete 'leisure-world', quiltmaking culture ranges from classes, quilt group meetings and organised Guilds, to exhibitions, lectures and competitions, to magazines, kits, books, fabrics and special gadgets. Like many leisure cultures, it is largely run by volunteers, and often closely tied to charitable causes. Many quilters produce many quilts, which cover beds and walls in their houses and the houses of their children and friends. This thesis, however, will not be focussing on the quilts, or reading their messages separately from their makers. It will be concentrating on the other artefact that quilters have made -- quiltmaking culture itself -- as a space for women's self-development and cultural creativity which is as impressive as the quilts themselves.

Finding the pattern

For the quilter, new quilts seldom spring fully formed into the mind, and are almost never directly transferred from there into the hand wielding the scissors, needle and thimble.¹ A new quilt can be inspired by a particularly striking colour combination, like the jacaranda against the stone and grass of Sydney University's quadrangle, or a special group of fabrics newly seen in the quilt shop, or a particularly beautiful quilt at the Quilters' Guild Exhibition. A contemporary quilter who uses traditional designs will go to her books and patterns to find the design which best expresses her inchoate vision of the quilt. She will select from her extensive fabric collection (or the even more extensive one of her local quilt shop) the particular fabrics which extend, complicate, and complement the colour inspiration, and then set to. Borders, bindings, backing fabric will probably be left until later, when she knows more about the shape the quilt has taken, when she can 'hear what it is saying'.

The ability to imagine (but not necessarily to visualise) what a given design might look like in entirely different fabrics -- to abstract the geometric principles and variations from the specific formulation they are given in any particular quilt -- is a most useful skill, for any given set of shapes will produce entirely different patterns when differently coloured. It is crucial to be daring. The brave quilter will include fabrics which look too strong, or which are actually ugly on their own. Some fabrics might push the geometry either to the limits of perceptibility through subtlety, or to heights of contrast, risking imbalance. Both risks can be richly rewarded in the final effect. Some of the pieced blocks or units she produces will not end up in the quilt -- she must also be profligate with her resources, time and effort, and some blocks will be too discordant, too retiring, or inaccurate in size. Many times in the process of construction, the growing pile of finished blocks will be set out on the floor for other quilters to admire and comment on, many times the pieces will be re-ironed, contemplated and culled by the quilter herself.

¹ For an explanation of basic quilting processes and terms turn to the Appendix which includes a typical set of explanations from a commercial quilting magazine. This description is close to my own quilting practice -- quilters who make applique or wholecloth quilts, or who mostly piece by hand might have minor adjustments to make to it.

The beginning of a new quilt is exciting – the pile of folded colours, the scribbled calculations, the threaded needle or machine, and the sharp rotary cutter are all anticipations of the mind-quilt which will be brought into being through the careful skilful repetition of geometries, and the arrangement of colour. Even if the edges of the quilt are hazy in imagination, the strength and softness of a finished quilt remind one of the goal. A quilt is at the end of the process.

Intellectual work is rather different, the result less clear. This thesis started out as one kind of research project and has ended up another, because of the power of the 'material' -- the quilting culture itself, and my friends and informants in it -- to resist my initial efforts to understand it and its power to reshape my thinking in response to it. In the struggle to understand what I was seeing in quilting, I turned my attention to the tools I had started by using, and they too became the objects of my study in this work. Once I did that, I found altogether different focusses in my field studies, ideas drawn from the practical and capable lives of my quilting friends. What follows is the synthesis derived from an interrogation of a traditional women's subculture, a subsequent interrogation of a number of different but relevant kinds of feminist intellectual work, and a return to the field. The long process of writing itself has further refined the result.²

This dialectical process explains the particular structure of this thesis. The empirical material *shaped* my reading of the literature, and the order of chapters shows that. I did not start with 'theory', and neither does this thesis. Chapters One, Two and Three, start with the detailed background, evocation and analysis of quilting in Australia, in an attempt to make this as real to the reader as it is to me as the researcher after ten years of involvement and seven years of study. What I have found in quilting culture, is a complex mixture of apparently contradictory forces, which quilters have moulded, collectively into a culture which offers them a space for their creativity, their own priorities of family and home, their camaraderie and need for homosocial contact. Most notably, this thesis argues, quilting culture provides women with a semi-public, semi-private space, in which several of

² Had this begun like a quilt, I feel I might have reinvented the scissors, discarded thimbles altogether, and produced something rather un-quiltlike, after such a process. But I do not wish to think of this thesis as a quilt -- for quilts are objects which carry meanings of their own, and not to be used purely as a source of metaphor for other, more privileged endeavours. It will become clear why I eschew the metaphor of quilting standing for intellectual pursuits in Chapter Four.

the dualities so powerful in societies at large are reversed, sidestepped or worked around. What I have identified in quiltmaking culture then, is a practical solution, a 'workaround' to some of the thorniest problems of feminist philosophy and practice.

Such an innovation is rarely recognised in women's traditional cultures in the developed world. In Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven, I turn to feminist work in the disciplines of philosophy, history, sociology, art and craft criticism and folklore studies. In these chapters, I have tried to ask and answer questions about the ways in which feminists have understood, or failed to understand, traditional women's cultures, why they have seen them the way they have, and what uses they have made of them. In using the conclusions of my empirical research to interrogate theoretical and comparative reading, I have been reminded of the power of the assumptions we, as intellectuals, hold, and how they govern the questions we are enabled to ask.

Notes on Method

This thesis has an ethnographic basis, although it draws on the disciplines of history and literary analysis. Ethnography has a long and chequered history, and the approach adopted here owes more to the kind of cultural studies which emerged from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s, than it does to the ethnography of social anthropology. The crucial differences of studying groups from one's own society and milieu, and of bypassing a painstaking and elaborate stage of language-learning and acculturation indicated that a methodological approach developed for subcultural analysis within one's own greater culture might be appropriate for my purposes. Consequently, as I read the methodological literature, I looked for the sociological, cultural studies and urban anthropological work which most closely resembled what I was trying to do.

The most important insight of that reading, and the one which has continued to influence this thesis, is the insistence of Paul Willis on the capacity of qualitative interactive research 'to surprise us'.³ Willis points out that the 'moment of reflexivity' is a crucial one:

³ See Willis, P., "Notes on method", in Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A., & Willis, P. (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, Hutchinson CCCS, London, 1980, pp.88-95.

It is...in this interlocking of human meanings, of cultural codes and of forms, that there is the possibility of 'being surprised'. And in terms of the generation of 'new' knowledge, we know what it is precisely *not* because we have shared it -- the usual notion of empathy -- but because we have *not* shared it. It is here that the classical canons are overturned. It is time to ask and explore, to discover the differences between subjective positions, between cultural forms. It is time to initiate actions or to break expectations in order to probe different angles in different lights. Of course, this is a time of maximum disturbance to researchers, whose own meanings are being thoroughly contested. It is precisely at this point that the researcher must assume an unrestrained and hazardous *self-reflexivity*.⁴

Margaret Yocom's formulation of 'the second way of knowing', resembles this despite its very different terminology. Yocom's 'second way' 'involves monitoring our own reactions and emotions in the field and using them as guides' in order to 'be open to the feelings that fieldwork stirs up'.⁵ Yocom's special insight (discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven) which extends Willis's much drier and more rational formulation, is that

It is not that we as women fieldworkers -- with professional careers and often nonconventional ways of structuring family responsibilities -- do not understand the traditions we see; it is that we often understand too much. It is like looking into a mirror, a wavy carnival mirror and seeing the life that might have been. There is a knock of recognition that calls forth deep seated emotions -- often unresolved -- from our own life situations.⁶

It seems likely that some of the power of Paul Willis's most successful ethnography, *Learning to Labour*,⁷ came from his own experiences as an intellectual with a working class background. The 'knock of recognition' is not confined to women.

The vast amount of cultural scholarship, however, failed to help me understand that knock of recognition, which I had found in the field. It brought to attention the fact that no feminist work on women's traditional pastimes seemed to be built on such a knock of recognition; in fact, most feminist analysis specifically disavowed any such recognition. Chapters Four

⁴ Ibid., p.92 Emphasis in original.

⁵ Ibid., p.37.

⁶ Yocom, M., "Fieldwork, Gender and Transformation: The Second Way of Knowing" in *Southern Folklore* 47 (1) 1990 pp.33-44, p.37.

⁷ Willis, P., *Learning to Labour*, Gower, London 1977.

to Seven are the results of that examination of feminist scholarship, and they postulate a number of reasons for such an absence. The cultural power of the devaluation of women's activities, mediated through the metaphorisation of many such activities, is chief among these reasons, even for feminists. The lack of empirical attention to women's traditional cultures, coupled with their ready use as metaphors for all kinds of contradictory phenomena, combines to make such cultural forms seem both known and unknowable, useful and powerful at the level of rhetoric, but pointless and uninteresting at the level of practice. It is my contention that this valuation entirely reverses the real interest of these practices: my work attempts to show that quilting culture is useful and empowering for women at the level of practice, but that quilts are misunderstood and traduced when used as rhetorical motifs. It is only in the context of a meaningful subculture that their metaphorical power is released.

Yocom's account of the emotions aroused by her fieldwork among women who make dolls is a painful one, dealing as it does with the feelings of loss of a child, and of conflict with her own mother. But she expresses gratitude too, for the insight these powerful emotions afforded her, into both her research, and herself:

Being open to the feelings that fieldwork stirs up is no easy task for me, but the rewards have been great. Following the leadings of the second way, I have seen details and made connections that I never could have imagined. And the personal rewards have come too; I have inadvertently learned more about myself, even when I have not wanted the lesson.⁸

What she calls the 'way of process, surprise and mystery' does produce a different type of knowledge, and this difference is captured in the contrast between Chapter One of this thesis, researched as a historical piece, and Chapters Two and Three, where ethnographic techniques, and immersion in the many resources of the quilting subculture produced quite a different kind of understanding.

Each of the methods of research that I employed had different results, and differing emphases in the final product. At an early stage of the project I organised and conducted interviews with a number of quilters, thinking that they would give me answers to direct questions that I could transcribe and

⁸ Yocom, "Fieldwork, Gender..." op. cit., p. 37.

analyse. This approach failed, and the interviews were never used. The quilters I spoke to wanted to talk about their quilting in terms I could not then understand, and refused to give me the answers I wanted. I was asking questions which assumed, I now see, that they shared the general valuation of sewing as a women's craft as second-rate, or second-best: something they would only do if prevented from undertaking more high status activities. Quilters, generally, as indicated in Chapters One to Three, do not share this view, and so the questions were irrelevant, even meaningless. I also asked questions which assumed that women in traditional and conservative life situations would be both dissatisfied, and prepared to tell me about it. In both assumptions I was wrong.⁹ What this failure of method enabled however, was a greater understanding of the way in which non-articulated, non-verbal communications were used in the subculture. Sections on learning to quilt, and on the discussion of quilts, in Chapter Three benefited greatly as a result. I learned that not everything can be said, that some things have to be shown. In the end, I discarded the interviews.

After the failure of my interviews, I turned to more unobtrusive methods, attempting to see how this subculture worked by watching and participating. This was far more productive, but also far more confronting. I had to analyse my own enjoyment of being able to talk about my children and show photographs of them, spend time with my mother without being thought strange and spend listening time using my hands by sewing.¹⁰ In entering into long term friendships and relations of reciprocal warmth with quilters in the various groups profiled in Chapter Two, I undertook (albeit without knowing it at the time) to produce a reading of the culture which was fully appreciative of the ways quilters (like myself) see it, although, perhaps using different terms. This is something with which feminist ethnographers and cultural critics such as Janice Radway, Margaret Yocom and others have also grappled.

⁹ I should point out that I was welcomed, fed, given sewing and life advice, and warmly treated by all the quilters I interviewed, and they did their generous best to put up with my ineptitude. The questions I was asking did not make sense to them, in a real sense, (as they would not make sense to me now) despite all my reading in feminist research methods. I was expecting proto-feminist analysis to emerge fully formed. It took a long time, and a reevaluation of my own life, for me to realise that proto-feminist talk is nothing to the real empowerment of women that homosocial organisation can provide.

¹⁰ I have not had the courage to bring my sewing to seminars, despite my great admiration for that diligent seminar-knitter, Bev Kingston.

I have been critical in some chapters of this thesis, in my discussion of the work of feminist critics who discount the interpretations of women about their own lives. This is not the same as agreeing with one's informants in every point, and indeed one's informants rarely agree with each other in every detail. But I have taken my ethical duty as a researcher to include both a serious attempt to see the culture 'from the inside', and a real attempt to write it up in such a way as to be intelligible to the people who made the research possible for me. This has involved a strenuous attempt to forge and use a kind of writing which eschews academic ornamentation, but which is not oversimplified, and to use concepts in an integrated way when they are relevant.

This is not to say that I, as researcher, am 'just a quilter'. I joined the quilting groups I joined for the purposes of research. I was there for work, where my quilting companions were there for the sheer enjoyment of their joint pastime and each other's company. There were times when that was abundantly clear, and when the duplicitous motivations of the researcher made my position difficult. This served to remind me of the importance of the research, because as Radway has pointed out: "For many individuals and sub groups, in fact, the conceptually subordinated leisure world is the primary site for the elaboration of what is taken to be meaningful identity".¹¹ As the research progressed there were many times when I wished I *were* just a quilter, and some times when I jettisoned the notebook and just threw myself into the sewing and camaraderie. But the purpose of this research was not to discover the ways in which women are socialised to enjoy "second-class" activities, in some scale of artistic activity, but to try to understand what it is in particular about this popular women's activity which makes women want to do it, and continue to do it, so passionately. As that question took shape, after the failure of my interviews, I began to realise that I was, myself, a research subject.

Self-analysis is a difficult, even dangerous task, and I have attempted to widen my field of research as far as possible in order to avoid solipsism. Thus there is a wide range of data in this thesis, from the field (at local, regional and state groups, at meetings, exhibitions, classes and lectures) and in the range of textual material I have examined, from the commercial products of quilt

¹¹ Radway, J., "Reception study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects" in *Cultural Studies*, Oct 1988, pp.359-375.

publishing both in Australia and abroad, to the local and national newspaper coverage of quilting, and the products of the voluntary labour of the quilt organisations such as the Guild, Ozquilt, and Australasian Quilters. Steeping myself in quilt culture both oral and written, American and Australian, scholarly, commercial and popular, has illuminated things which might otherwise have been misinterpreted, and has widened the scope of the thesis, to the examination of the scholarly use of quilts as metaphors.

The title of this thesis is "Making Something for Myself". My contention is that quiltmaking women have made a culture for themselves, one which in its workings reveals different relations to some of the powerful ideas of the surrounding culture than might have been expected. In doing so, they have created a new kind of space for themselves, where their creative work as cultural producers is enabled within a framework which does not devalue their commitments to family, their cooperative style, or their practical intuitive working methods. Feminist research has hardly touched on this kind of women's organisation, yet it is all around us. There is as yet, no intellectual "field" within which such a wide-ranging examination of a women's subculture can be undertaken. I have found myself at the edges of several fields, attempting to draw insights from them all, and constituting, for the duration of the work, my own field of interest, eclectic and contradictory, yet focussed on the phenomena of the quiltmaking subculture in all its richness and interest.

Most pervasively, perhaps, my research has been shaped by a recognition of the active agency of the women with whom I worked. It became clear that quiltmakers have both choices and discrimination, and that they shape their social organisations the way they want them to be: overwhelmingly made up of women, inclusive and only competitive in very controlled ways, supportive and co-operative for the most part. Moira Gatens has written that "[c]reating other modes of conceptualising human culture that do not involve the passivity or invisibility of women is obviously of the greatest importance".¹² Looking at the ways in which women have actively produced subcultures of their own is a good place to start.

¹² Gatens, M., *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London 1996, p.58

Chapter One

A History of the Quilting Revival 1970 to the Present

A recent general history of the crafts movement in Australia has attempted a comprehensive overview of all the practitioners, tendencies, movements, events, contexts and forms of elite crafts practice in Australia since the 19th century.¹ In doing this, the author gives only cursory coverage to non-professional craft, and only then in cases where it has been influential on teaching or professional practice, or where it has come to be seen as "excellent" within the craft world's shifting definitions. Though Grace Cochrane recognises that "[i]n our world, what is not documented does not exist"², she takes as her object of study a notional entity, "the contemporary crafts movement", which ignores the greatest number of craftspeople in Australia: the amateurs. As a result, her research only touches on the social history of the domestic uses of those craft skills disseminated by the teachers and practitioners of the crafts movement. Neither in Cochrane's work, nor elsewhere, is there an account of the influences on people's everyday lives of the practice and the products of their crafts. This gap needs to be filled, but is beyond the scope of this thesis, which focuses more narrowly on one particular amateur craft, quilting, and on its particular practices and cultures.

This chapter gives an historical outline of the development of the quilting revival, setting the scene for the more detailed description of quilting culture to follow. It also examines the historiography of quilting in Australia. The empirical focus of this chapter is on the 1980s, the time of greatest expansion and change for Australian quilting. As will be demonstrated, this period shaped the current state of quilting as a subculture. While evidence from other states will be used where available, the chapter concentrates on New South Wales, as the immediate context of my field work.

¹ Cochrane, G., *The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History*, NSW University Press, Sydney, 1992.

² *ibid.*, p. xv

Quilting before 1970 -- a discontinuous history

In North America, where quilt history is an established speciality, with its own scholarly societies, journals, state and national projects,³ as well as a whole range of quilt museums and galleries, it is possible to find histories of quilts and quilting at every level of specialisation. There are historians of quilt patterns⁴, quilt publishing⁵, quilting in particular localities or among ethnic/racial groups⁶, types of quilts⁷ and the materials they are made

³ The American Quilt Study Group publishes an annual journal of research papers, *Uncoverings* and a quarterly bulletin, *Blanket Statements*, holds an annual conference, and maintains a research library. The Canadian Quilt Study Group publishes *Cover Stories*. State quilt projects, such as the Kentucky Quilt Project Inc., collect, survey and document old quilts on an ongoing basis. Kentucky Quilt Project also publishes *The Quilt Journal*, but many other such projects produce books about their finds, as well as curating exhibitions. Museums such as the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and the Museum of American Folklore in New York City, hold large collections of old quilts. See for example Oliver, C.Y. (ed), *55 Famous Quilts from the Shelburne Museum*, Dover Publications NYC, 1990, or Tuckhorn, N.G., "A Profile of Quilts and Donors at the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum" in *Uncoverings* 1990, pp.130-148.

⁴ Barbara Brackman is the perhaps the most eminent. Her publications include *An Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns*, Prairie Flower Publishing, Lawrence KS, 1984, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts*, EPM Publications, McLean VA, 1989 and numerous articles.

⁵ See for example Stehlik, J., "Quilt Patterns and Contests of the Omaha World-Herald, 1921-1941" in *Uncoverings* 1990, pp.56-87, or Smith, W., "Quilt History in Old Periodicals" in the same volume, pp.188-214.

⁶ For example see Ramsey, B., and Waldvogel, M., *The Quilts of Tennessee*, Rutledge Hill, Nashville TN, 1986, Bresenhan, K.P, and Puentes, N.O., *Lone Stars: A Legacy of Texas Quilts 1836-1936*, University of Texas, Austin, 1986, or Cross, M.B., *Treasures in the Trunk: Quilts of the Oregon Trail*, Rutledge Hill, Nashville TN, 1993. Cuesta Benberry is a pre-eminent non-academic historian of African American quilts, with many articles in *Uncoverings* including "Afro-American Women and Quilts: Introductory Essay", *Uncoverings* 1980, pp.64-67, and "White Perceptions of Blacks in Quilts and Related Media" in *Uncoverings* 1983, pp.59-74, but see also Fry, G., *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South*, Dutton Studio Books, NYC, 1990.

⁷ See for example, Clark, R., "Mid 19th Century Album and Friendship Quilts 1860-1920" in Lasansky, J., (ed), *Pieced by Mother: Symposium Papers*, Oral Traditions Project, Lewisville Pennsylvania, 1988, pp.77-86, or Cozart, D., "A Century of Fundraising Quilts: 1860-1960" in *Uncoverings* 1984, pp.41-53.

of⁸, quilts in state fairs⁹, memorial quilts¹⁰, examinations of the collections of particular museums¹¹ and much more.¹² A great deal is known about the ways in which women have made quilts since the arrival of Europeans, how their quilts were used and exchanged, the meanings of quilts for their makers, and other aspects of quilting culture, as well as about the quilts themselves as enduring objects. American quilt historians have combed diaries, letters and documents for evidence about quilting¹³, and have collected an impressive body of knowledge and scholarship. While serious quilt scholarship remains slightly out of the academic mainstream, and still seems more open to amateur scholars¹⁴ than some other historical specialties, quilts and their history have a salient place in the public historical imagery and iconography of North America. Feminist writers know about quilts, even if they don't make them themselves, and use them, metaphorically at least, in their thinking and argument. This is discussed at greater length in Chapter Four, below.

⁸ See for example Nickols, P., "The Use of Cotton Sacks in Quilting" in *Uncoverings* 1988, pp.57-72, or Ordonez, M., "Ink Damage on Nineteenth Century Cotton Signature Quilts" in *Uncoverings* 1992, pp.148-168.

⁹ See for example Furgason, M.J., and Crews, P.C., "Prizes from the Plains: Nebraska State Fair Award-Winning Quilts and Quilters", in *Uncoverings* 1993, pp.188-220, or Gunn, V., "Quilts at Nineteenth Century State and County Fairs: An Ohio Study", in *Uncoverings* 1988, pp.105-128.

¹⁰ See for example Trechsel, G.A., "Mourning Quilts in America", in *Uncoverings* 1989, pp.139-158, and Krone, C., and Horner, T.M., "Quilting and Bereavement: Her Grief in the Quilt" in *Uncoverings* 1992, pp.109-126.

¹¹ For example, Bowman, D., *The Smithsonian Treasury American Quilts*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 1991, or Peck, A., *American Quilts and Coverlets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Dutton Studio Books, NYC, 1991. This actually extends to museums outside the United States: see Betterton, S., *Quilts and Coverlets from the American Museum in Britain*, The American Museum in Britain, Bath, 1978.

¹² This scholarly publishing is in addition to the popular publishing on the subject of quilts, which often mixes some historical material with explications of traditional techniques and detailed instructions and patterns.

¹³ See for example, Bonfield, L.A., "Diaries of New England Quilters before 1860", in *Uncoverings* 1988 pp.171-198, or Brackman, B., "Quilting on the Overland Trails: Evidence from Women's Writing" in *Uncoverings* 1992, pp.45-60. Use of such sources has also been supplemented by more innovative resources -- see for example Mahan, V.A., "Quilts Used as Backdrops in Old Photographs" in *Uncoverings* 1991, pp.50-82, or McMorris, P., "Quilts in Art", in *Quilt Digest 4*, Quilt Digest Press, San Francisco CA, 1986, pp.66-75.

¹⁴ The proceedings of the American Quilt Study Group, and the notes on contributors in *Uncoverings* reveal an intriguing mix of professional curators and researchers, and amateur scholars, with a small but increasing number of academics. Recent moves within the AQSG to change the format of the annual seminar were perceived as being too favourable to academics, and aroused some controversy among members. See *Blanket Statements*, 1994, *passim*.

This is not the case in Australia. Until very recently, it was assumed that quilts were not made in Australia in great numbers, that almost no historic quilts had survived, and that those which had were not likely to be significant, either from an artistic or a historical point of view. People interested in antique quilts mostly collected American quilts on their trips to the United States¹⁵, and curators believed that Australian quilting and patchwork examples were extremely rare.¹⁶

Two publications in 1987 broke this long period of neglect, and made Australian quiltmakers more aware of the long, albeit intermittent, tradition of Australian quilting. Australian quiltmakers already had, and retain, a strong interest in the history of American quilts and quilting. As will be shown in a later chapter, the pleasure that quilters find in their feeling of historical continuity with earlier quilters is not diminished by geographical distance. Australian quilters appreciate that connection, even when it is American, Canadian, Welsh or Northern English quilters' history which is being dealt with¹⁷. In contrast to much of the North American work, though, these two books, Margaret Rolfe's *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*,¹⁸ and Jennifer Isaacs' *The Gentle Arts*,¹⁹ deal directly with particular examples of extant historical quilts *as objects*, rather than with a culture of quilting²⁰.

¹⁵ The most eminent Australian collector is Annette Gero, who has written on Australian historic quilts for *Uncoverings* and other publications. Her early collection was largely American quilts, but more recently she has attempted to collect Australian quilts, especially waggas. Personal communication, 1993; also see her "Collecting American Antique Quilts" in *Australian Business Collectors Annual*, 1984; "The folklore of the Australian Wagga" in Lasansky, J., (ed), *op. cit.*, pp. 61-67, and "Documenting Old Australian Quilts" in *Down Under Quilts* Sept. 1988 pp.18, 24, 39. A less published, and less public collector is Narelle Grieve, a past president of the Quilters' Guild Inc. of NSW, whose American quilt collection has been shown to the Guild on a number of occasions, including Quilters' Guild Inc. meetings, Camden NSW, 13 April 1991, reported in *The Template* 9 (4) June 1991, p.8, and Newcastle NSW, 13 June 1992, reported in *The Template* 10 (3) June 1992 p.4.

¹⁶ See for example ANG curator John McPhee's remarks in the 'Foreword' to Rolfe's book, cited below. "When Margaret Rolfe first talked with me about writing a book on historic Australian quilts I was most sceptical about the likely success that it seemed any publication on the subject would be a slim volume indeed."

¹⁷ Lectures, books, displays and magazine stories about traditional quilting techniques, histories of particular areas or types of quilts and accounts of the lives of nineteenth century quiltmakers are extremely popular with Australian quilters. Many of my informants noted their feeling of connection with 'women of the past', which they believed came from their quilting.

¹⁸ Rolfe, M., *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, Greenhouse Publications, Melbourne 1987.

¹⁹ Isaacs, J., *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts*, Lansdowne Press, Sydney, 1987.

²⁰ This can be compared, for example, with a book such as Cross, *op. cit.*, which is subtitled "Memories, dreams and accomplishments of the pioneer women who traveled

At about the same time these two books were published for the general market, more scholarly articles about Australian historic quilts were published in a number of journals.²¹

Rolfe's history, based on a five-year survey and search for patchwork and quilts, is arranged by the categories of quilts she found in private, museum and gallery collections, rather than chronologically. This approach is itself an indication of her concentration on the artefacts. Starting with skin rugs, made by Aboriginal people long before the Europeans arrived in Australia, Rolfe describes and documents nineteen types of quilts made in, or brought to Australia, some of which are earlier versions of the kinds of quilts made today by contemporary quilters, others of which are types which are now rarely made. Some chapters focus on a few outstanding examples of a particular type. One is titled "Advance Australia: Two Quilts with Australian Themes", and one discusses the three patchwork quilts made by women in the Changi prison camp in Singapore during the second World War. But despite Rolfe's painstaking documentation of many old quilts, it is clear that there was not the same kind of widespread tradition of quilting and patchwork in Australia as there was in the United States and Canada. As she points out, Australia's milder climate, the ready availability of manufactured woollen blankets for most of the colonial period and a small population meant that fewer quilts were made. The extremes of temperature, humidity and light, and the dearth of storage space in most Australian houses, which lack attics and basements, meant, she writes, that fewer quilts survived.²² Though Rolfe found several hundred old quilts during the course of her search, most of today's quilters had never seen or heard of a patchwork quilt of the kind they are making now, until they discovered American patchwork quilts and began to make one.

This indicates one of the major differences between the Australian and American quilt revivals, closely tied though they are in other ways. Where the American quilt revival is in great part, a revivification of what was a

[sic] the Oregon Trail", and which uses the extant quilts illustrated in the book to construct a more general account of women's lives during the westward migration.

²¹ Gero, A., "Quilts and their makers in 19th century Australia", *The Quilt Digest* 5, Quilt Digest Press, San Francisco, 1987; "Australian Patriotic Quilts" in *Uncoverings* 1987, pp. 25-40; "Australian quilters from our past" in *Australiana* 8 (2) 1986. See also Rolfe, M., "Quilting: Its Absence in Australia" in *Uncoverings* 1988, pp.87-128.

²² Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, op. cit. "Introduction: Incidence and Influences", pp.7-13.

residual but still living tradition, the Australian quilt revival is something different. It has entailed the creation, almost from nothing, of a new kind of creative community.

Isaacs's book, *The Gentle Arts*, a general survey of women's domestic craft, is also the result of a national search and documentation project. It reveals a national women's tradition of fine knitting, crochet, embroidery and woodcarving, among other less prominent crafts, including patchwork and quilting. Along with Rolfe and others²³, Isaacs identifies the utility quilt, or "wagga" as the quilt type which is most clearly part of a settler tradition in Australia.²⁴ Waggas were most often made of blankets, old clothing or sacking, with a pieced cotton cover, tough and useful²⁵. In particular, the book includes a number of interesting examples of group or commemorative quilts, a form which, as we shall see, remained relatively common and was revived during the Bicentennial of 1988.

However Isaacs', and Rolfe's concentration on extant objects, rather than on investigation of quilting practices, has the result that they are both unable to do much more than speculate about the extent of the various waves of quilting interest they describe. Some of these waves were fashions in handcraft that appeared in many parts of the English speaking world, such as the widespread popularity of the "crazy quilt" among middle class ladies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a phenomenon which also appears in quilt histories in both England and America²⁶. The absence of a

²³ Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, op. cit. "Chaff Bags and Cretonne: Wagga Rugs", ch.17, p.96. See also Cochrane, op. cit., p.6, for a restatement of the "no quilts" line: "Works in fibre and fabric, resourceful and innovative in many ways, were usually made in the domestic sphere and so were not valued culturally and, because of the nature of the material, did not last as well as other crafts or decorative arts. Sometimes, as with the 'wagga' quilts made of sacking, these were necessities..."

²⁴ This view has since been taken to heart by contemporary art quilters such as Jocelyn Campbell and Judy McDermott, who have made numerous quilts which are reinterpretations of the wagga as a specifically Australian form. Wider implications for a number of quilters were shown by a 1995 art quilt exhibition in Sydney, *Beyond the wagga*, Manly Art Gallery, July 1995.

²⁵ For another description see Rolfe, M., "Quilting..." op. cit., p.96.

²⁶ Rolfe, "Scraps of Sentiment: Crazy Patchwork" pp.55-65. Isaacs discusses crazy patchwork on p.82. American work on this style of quilt includes Gunn, V., "Crazy Quilts and Outline Quilts: Popular Responses to the Decorative Art/ Art Needlework Movement 1876-1983" in *Uncoverings* 1984, and McMorris, P., *Crazy Quilts*, E.P. Dutton, NY, 1984. Crazy quilts use small richly coloured pieces of luxury materials such as silk and velvet in irregular shapes and sizes, heavily embellished with silk embroidery. Not intended for everyday use on beds, they were used as 'throws' and draperies in highly decorated Victorian drawing rooms.

chronological narrative in her history means there is no attempt on Rolfe's part to analyse why one popular style gave way to another, or why the development of quilting in nineteenth century Australia might have been different from that in America, other than the circumstantial factors cited above. Both authors also confine themselves, for the most part, to speculations about the meanings, pleasures and skills found in quilting by the quiltmakers whose work they admire. The most interesting parts of both books are the places where contemporary letters or descriptions of quilting, or carefully recounted family stories, give the material objects the context that such items have so often lost. For example, Rolfe quotes extensively from a letter which provides a detailed provenance for almost every piece of fabric in a crazy quilt made by Marion Gibson of Hay in 1890, and which gives an indication of the social nature of the *making* of the quilt:

There is a bit of pink stuff which your great great grandmother Gibson wore for wedding dress -- & what made it more valuable -- it was the same material as your great great Grandmother Alston was married in. There is also a small bit of the wedding dresses of your great Grandmother Gemmill (they were both good pious women) & great Grandmother Gibson ... I joined these with other dear departed friends in one place, & that was a sad duty I performed. I felt as if beside their graves all the time ... there are a great many brides' dresses represented -- poor Mrs Turnbull's is there and a little bit of Brown silk Mrs Murray (nee Lang) wore. ... I must add I spent many a happy hour on it -- it formed the subject of many pleasant conversations at my own Fireside & recalled many memories of 'Auld Lang Syne'. I know you prize it as a keepsake from your 'Grandma'.²⁷

As the only detailed historical research on old quilts in Australia, Rolfe's work has been widely used in more general work on the crafts.²⁸

The popularity of crazy quilting went into decline about the time of the first World War, although some later examples exist. Patchwork in Australia from that time, until the revival in the 1970s, mostly consisted of English-style patchwork, consisting of hexagons, pieced over papers, in a traditional pattern often called 'Grandmother's Flower Garden' (see below for a more detailed discussion of this type of quilt and its prevalence).

²⁷ Quoted in Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, op. cit., p.58.

²⁸ See Cochrane, op. cit. passim, and as another example Hults, D., "Australian Craft: Within a Folkloric Context" in Iannou, N., (ed), *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1992, pp.79-98.

It seems that by the 1930s, patchwork and quilting had largely fallen out of fashion in Australia. Rolfe quotes an Australian embroidery book from the period thus: "Patchwork is one of the less important forms of embroidery", and she goes on to note that few new styles of quilting are to be found in Australia before the second World War.²⁹ But, as Rolfe has noted elsewhere³⁰, while embroiderers looked down on it, and publishers and writers failed to notice it, some quilting went on. Some of these quilters, or their daughters, were later to be caught up in the quilting revival, and their stories will be examined later in this chapter. So far, the detailed histories of domestic craft practices in Australia that would enable us to piece this together completely, remain to be done.

Patchwork quilts in the public sphere

Various histories of women's organisations give some glimpses of the place of domestic handcraft generally, and quilting more particularly, in some areas of Australian society since the 1940s. Cochrane's contextualisation of the "crafts movement" emphasises the role of the Country Women's Association and the Red Cross in the maintenance and teaching of a number of the fibre arts, particularly after both world wars.³¹ But she also points out that the association of these groups with the fibre crafts meant that "this area of the crafts tended to lose its professional profile". The textile crafts which grew in popularity and artistic sophistication in the period immediately after the second World War were handspinning and weaving. Maintaining contacts and associations made during rehabilitation work with soldiers, a network of guilds, training, exhibitions and publishing grew up. These were greatly influenced by a few highly skilled migrants, and by the preeminence of the Contemporary design style in architecture and design, from the 1950s. The Handweavers and Spinners Guild of New South Wales, established in 1947, maintained an "insistence that weaving was for pleasure and personal challenge, and not for economic gain".³²

²⁹ Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, op. cit., p.13.

³⁰ Rolfe, M., Catalogue Essay, *Quilt Australia 88 National Exhibition Catalogue*, Quilters Guild, Sydney 1988, p.12.

³¹ Cochrane, op.cit., passim. She also notes the high levels of needlework skills taught to schoolgirls from the early twentieth century.

³² *ibid.*, pp.65-67.

Cochrane's brief mentions of the CWA, and its ongoing contacts with women's crafts,³³ are tantalising. Helen Townsend's history of the New South Wales Country Women's Association³⁴ indicates the kind of research which could usefully fill out the history of domestic craft. It is used in this chapter, along with other accounts of women's organisations, to help fill in the gap between the 1940s (where Rolfe's work finishes) and the revival of the late 1970s. Family recollections, either from interviews or from the profiles of quilters published in the quilt magazines, are, it would appear, the only other source of information about the practice of domestic quilting in the postwar period.

The CWA sponsored craft groups, classes, and exhibitions from its inception in the 1920s, and patchwork was included in the crafts taught and displayed. The CWA's long-running involvement in Australian wool-growers' campaigns to encourage people to "Use More Wool" was initiated in the early 1930s, with exhibitions of woollen handcrafts in regional towns, and later in David Jones' Sydney store³⁵. The focus on wool meant that knitting, crochet and weaving were more important than patchwork,³⁶ usually done in cotton fabric, but CWA members were also eager to learn piecing and quilting, and from its first classes in 1936 the CWA Handicrafts Committee provided demonstrators in quilting, as well as spinning, weaving, basket weaving and

³³ *ibid.*, pp.78-9, 173.

³⁴ Townsend, H., *Serving the Country: the history of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales*, Doubleday, Sydney, 1988. This is not a scholarly work, but its lively account of the various activities and preoccupations of the CWA arouses interest. There has been a more audacious (and academic) attempt to re-appraise the CWA as a feminist organisation by Elizabeth Teather. See Teather, E., "Mandate of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales as a political lobby group" *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 31 (1) 1996, pp.73-94.

³⁵ Townsend, *op. cit.*, pp.82-3.

³⁶ Although woollen quilts have more recently been seen as another particularly Australian form. The Victorian group Running Stitch held an important exhibition highlighting historical quilts of this type in 1986. The exhibition, "Wool Quilts Old and New", which toured Victoria, was described thus: "These people have enthusiastically tracked down old quilts, probed historical associations and recorded anecdotes relating to each. But the overwhelming sentiment gained from experiencing this work is pride – an admiration for the resourcefulness, versatility and practicality of people in times of poverty, isolation and hardship". Heynatz, J., "In the Gallery", *Latrobe Valley Express* (Morwell, Victoria) 16 August 1986. Since then numerous exhibitions and quilt shows have concentrated on wool quilts and the work of contemporary art quilters Judy McDermott, and Jocelyn Campbell includes some interesting woollen quilts. See *OzQuilt Network Newsletter*, September 1994, p.1 and June 1995 p. 1 for accounts of the genesis of two exhibitions which relate to wool quilts: the Running Stitch *Contemporary Wool Quilt Exhibition*, National Wool Museum Geelong, Vic, September 1995, and *Beyond the Wagga: the New Quilt 1995* held at Manly Art Gallery, NSW.

glove making³⁷. Townsend points out the emotional and creative needs served by handcrafts for the CWA members during the 1930s. She quotes from one woman's letters in the CWA journal thus: "We might make a fortune and be bankrupt the next day by a sudden change of currency, but a picture we have painted, a piece of wood we have carved is ours and nothing can take it away from us."³⁸ Another wrote:

It is as if the people of the world had said "We are tired of destruction. Let us make things instead." They are making things no world depression can destroy. Let no one jeer at the amateur of the arts. The things she is making are of vital importance to us all. They are born of a state of mind that leads to peace.³⁹

After the second World War, the CWA widened its interest in textile crafts, to include handcrafts brought from Europe by its new immigrant members, as well as crafts such as millinery and dressmaking, whose popularity Townsend links to new fashions and styles, and a reaction against wartime austerity. Canvaswork embroidery (widely, though incorrectly, called tapestry) became very popular. A founding member of the CWA Handicrafts Committee, Miss Roma Field, later a stalwart of the New South Wales Embroiderer's Guild, is quoted as saying: "I taught myself how to do things. There weren't many books available like there are today ... I'd like to see people do more rugs and quilts -- things that can be used".⁴⁰

Roma Field's lifelong devotion to embroidery did include some minor interest in patchwork, and her body of work included at least one patchwork quilt. But her book makes clear that patchwork was seen as something of a novelty, and a respite from what she considered the greater demands of "fine work".⁴¹ The patchwork items shown in the collection of her work, a set of crazy and other patchwork bags, and a small silk quilt, are not of the type later popularised by the quilting revival. Interestingly, Field notes the provenance of the tiny scraps of silk and velvet in her crazy patchwork bag, and despite detailing that "each patch has a very tiny deep gold silk feather stitching over

³⁷ Townsend, op. cit., p. 84

³⁸ *ibid.*, p.81.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 82. .

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.91. Unfortunately this quote is undated and unsourced.

⁴¹ Field, R., *A Lifetime of Embroidery*, Embroiderers Guild of NSW St Ives Group, Sydney 1980, *passim*. Miss Field's descriptions of the plates showing her work are fascinating accounts of the changes in style, and availability of materials over her long embroidering career from 1907-80.

the joins and the outside edge is finished with a piping of deep green velvet", she describes the piece as "more a novelty than a piece of needlework".⁴² Her small silk quilt, the only piece in the book made with a sewing machine, is also described in terms of its historical curio value, rather than its intrinsic worth, or beauty. "[S]trip quilting, a type of patchwork quilting done in the American pioneer days when material was so scarce and precious that every tiny strip had to be utilized. Like many of the early quilts it is made in squares".⁴³ Despite the words quoted above, Miss Field's bias in her own work towards the most difficult, intricate and purely decorative of embroidery skills is clear. One piece, an exquisite round cloth in Hedebo Embroidery (a kind of needlepoint lace) "took three months of close work to complete" and had a diameter of 84 cm.⁴⁴ Field's patchwork has nothing of the intricacy of design, or painstaking skill of her embroidery, and may well have been seen by her as restful, easy or recreational.

In the mid 1970s, just before the quilting revival began in Australia, the CWA was teaching patchwork, applique, and quilting amongst its many other needlework crafts,⁴⁵ but as Townsend points out elsewhere in her book, by that time the CWA's pre-eminence as an influential women's organisation was already waning. Membership was falling, and the Association was failing to attract younger members.⁴⁶ Also, as I will discuss below, it seems likely that a strong rural-urban divide had already separated the CWA (and their showplaces such as the Royal Agricultural Society Easter Show in Sydney) from domestic craft trends in the cities. It was in the cities that the new quilting revival began, and although it spread very fast to the country, it was to interest a different and younger group of women than that which had been the mainstay of the CWA.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, patchwork was still seen by organised embroiderers as a small part of the larger craft of embroidery, as it had been since the 1930s. A history of the Embroiderers' Guild of the ACT makes this very clear. Describing the rapid production in 1964 of a replica patchwork bedspread for Blundells' Cottage, owned by the Canberra Historical Society, Loma Rudduck writes: "Three weeks and 1,448 patches later, the bedspread

⁴² *ibid.*, p.102.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.104.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.20.

⁴⁵ Townsend, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 209-211.

was finished and spread over the old iron bedstead. What is more, the *embroiderers* had had sufficient energy to embroider their names on the lining of the bedspread".⁴⁷

A number of the quiltmakers I interviewed for this research were members of various Embroiderers' Guilds during the 1960s, and their accounts showed that they experienced some problems as practitioners of a skill which was not highly regarded by fine embroiderers. However, patchwork was taught by the Guilds as a small part of their comprehensive classes,⁴⁸ and some quilters later active in the Quilter's Guild of New South Wales initially learnt their skills as embroiderers. Quilters such as Norma Loch managed to bridge the gap. In the late 1980s she still taught and exhibited for both Guilds.⁴⁹

The craft exhibition and competition at the Royal Agricultural Society Show, held in Sydney each Easter, has been a long-running attraction for New South Wales craftworkers of all kinds. Smaller country shows also exhibit and reward local amateur craftspeople's finest work. Isaacs' carefully collected provenances for the craftwork in her book include many collections of ribbons and award certificates for prize-winning items. Unlike the United States⁵⁰ there has been no historical or cultural analysis of the significance of such shows yet published in Australia.⁵¹ Patchwork and quilting has been a category of entry at the Sydney Royal Easter Show for decades, but, since the quilt revival, has languished both in numbers and quality, as quiltmakers established other avenues for exhibiting their work. Until 1991 there was little contact between the New South Wales Quilters' Guild and the RAS

⁴⁷ Rudduck, L, *And So to Sew: A History of Embroidery in the Australian Capital Territory*, Embroiderers' Guild of the ACT Inc., Canberra, 1992, p.31, emphasis added. It is interesting to note that Mrs Rudduck considers Margaret Rolfe's *Patchwork Quilts in Australia* to be one of "several substantial books about Australian embroidery" (p.14) recently published, and notes that Rolfe is a member of the Guild.

⁴⁸ The Embroiderers' Guilds had a strong emphasis on training and technique, sponsoring their best students to sit the London City and Guilds examinations in hand embroidery. See Cochrane, *op.cit.*, pp.81-2 for accounts of the NSW and Victorian Guilds.

⁴⁹ *The Template*, 9 (3) March 1991 p.11, and personal communication. Mrs Loch has taught embellishment and embroidery skills to Quilters' Guild members at workshops and classes for some years.

⁵⁰ As an example and this is only in relation to quilts in state fairs, see Furgason, M., and Crews, P., "Prizes from the Plains: Nebraska State Fair Award Winning Quilts and Quiltmakers" in *Uncoverings*, 14, 1993, pp.188-220.

⁵¹ Historian Kate Darian-Smith has work in progress including an analysis of the large annual shows in capital cities, such as the Royal Agricultural Society (Easter) Show in Sydney (personal communication, April 1997).

patchwork and quilting sections. Narelle Grieve, the president of the Guild in 1991, wrote:

Last month I judged the quilts at the Royal Easter Show. I was most disappointed in the standard, the organisers were also disappointed in both the low standard and the low numbers of quilts being entered ... There is another problem and that is the short notice the Guild has from the R.A.S regarding the entries. We have been receiving the information much too late for us to publish in the *The Template*.⁵²

This indicates to me that the Guild and the Royal Easter Show were in fact addressing different, though related, subcultures. Different groups of quiltmakers were being drawn upon, and certainly during the 1980s, the quilts displayed each Easter showed little of the technical development or artistic influence evident at the Guild's own shows. The Guild is now involved in judging the exhibit, and encourages members to enter their work. In 1995, of 21 prizewinners and commended quilts in 7 classes (the classes have recently been changed on the Guild's recommendation), only 3 were made by non-members of the Quilters Guild. This could be seen as a takeover by a more organised group.⁵³

Individual quiltmakers preceding the revival

Individual quiltmakers, whether or not eminent in Australia's quilt subculture, sometimes reveal that their interest in quilting precedes the revival. This kind of long-standing interest is rare enough in Australia to be remarked upon, (by quilting magazine profiles, for example), although it is not rare at all in the United States. Lectures illustrated by slides with the theme "My development as a quiltmaker" are a common genre of self presentation for teachers of quilting. Unlike those of American quiltmakers, Australian teachers who give such lectures in Guild meetings or quilt workshops very rarely include a picture of a quilt made by the speaker's mother or grandmother. They do, however, always include their own first quilt.⁵⁴ This is most usually the pattern (mentioned above) called

⁵² Grieve, N., "President's Report", in *The Template* 9 (4) June 1991 p.3. Dedicated quilters were also put off entering the RAS show because of problems with security, care and insurance of valuable quilts, issues which Quilters' Guild Exhibitions take extreme care with.

⁵³ Wright, M, "Quilts at the Royal Easter Show", in *The Template*, 13 (3) June 1995, p.19.

⁵⁴ Some examples include: After Dinner Address, by Megan Terry, "Quiltskills" conference July 1992; lecture by Fiona Gavens, Quilters' Guild Inc. meeting, Wollongong,

Grandmother's Flower Garden, made of hexagonal patches tacked over paper templates and then strongly oversewn together in what is called the "English style"⁵⁵. This is the type of quilt most often made in Australia in the postwar, pre-revival period⁵⁶, the kind that appeared in embroidery textbooks or English craft publications, and was taught, by the New South Wales Embroiderers Guild.⁵⁷ It is a difficult and limiting style of quilt, slow to make, and confined to hexagonal shapes, which produce a limited range of pattern variations. Quilters, in the "meet the members" interviews published in *The Template* often recall it with rueful amusement:

Zoe: Patchwork started for me, as for so many, with the inevitable Grandmothers Flower Garden using heavy cornflake box cardboard with no knowledge or advice...

Jo: I stated patchworking 18 years ago with the inevitable Grandmothers Flower Garden and from then on my love for and satisfaction from this craft grew...

Chris: Would you believe it, I too started with hexagons - about 15 years ago (can it be that long?) ... That Grandmothers Flower Garden eventually took me seven years to make...⁵⁸

A 1991 report of a meeting of the Silver City Quilters of Broken Hill describes another such quilt: "Dora showed a quilt recently finished. This latest is a random hexagon quilt made from the family's scrap fabrics. She began the quilt in 1949 ... and only recently finished it – although she has made about 30 quilts in between."⁵⁹

12 February 1994, Lecture by Judy Hooworth, Quilters Guild Inc. meeting, Caringbah Sydney, October 1994.

⁵⁵ For a more detailed description see Rolfe "Quilting..." op. cit., p.89.

⁵⁶ Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, op. cit., p.27. My mother, Rachel Grahame made several of these in her early married life in the early 1960s, having never seen an American style quilt. I can remember her sending away to England for the precisely cut hexagonal papers, and carefully re-using them, after sewing the first lot together.

⁵⁷ Loch, N., Sullivan, C., "Meet the Members", in *The Template* 9 (3) March 1991, p.11, and see also Loughhead, P., "Meet the Tutors", in *The Template* 6 (2) September 1987. The Embroiderers' Guild teacher of English patchwork was Audrey McMahan, who taught this technique from the 1960s. All three of these women, then, came to patchwork, through the Embroiderers Guild. Norma Loch and Carolyn Sullivan remain active in both the Quilters' and Embroiderers' Guilds.

⁵⁸ Birch, J., Higgins, C., Lane, Z., "Meet the Members", in *The Template* 10 (3) June 1992, p.20.

⁵⁹ Scouler, L., "The Silver City Quilters", in *The Template* 10 (1) December 1991 p.13.

One well-known contemporary quiltmaker whose quilts and garments have been widely published and exhibited in Australia and overseas, learned the skills of American-style patchwork in Australia from family members. From the late 1950s Megan Terry's mother and aunt made patchwork quilts without papers, using American piecing techniques, and Megan herself made quilts as early as 1964.⁶⁰ She has become an eminent quiltmaker and was founding president of the Australian Quilters' Association. Every profile and introduction to Terry's work emphasizes how early she came to the techniques of quiltmaking, and this in itself shows how unusual such a personal history is.⁶¹ Terry's lectures about quiltmaking include slides of her mother's quilts as well as her own.⁶²

Some Australian quiltmakers taught themselves American piecing from books, as did Ilma Hinwood, a quilter since the 1930s, whose father, a publisher, imported American books.⁶³ Elisabeth Kruger, a younger artist, also learned from books. Her one-woman show of quilts in Canberra in 1978 was important in creating the interest which led to the setting up of The Patchwork Group (later Canberra Quilters Inc.) in 1979.⁶⁴

Trying to work out unfamiliar patterns alone could be difficult. Bonnie Johnson, who joined the Quilters' Guild on its foundation in 1982, started a Dresden Plate quilt in the 1930s, from a McCalls' pattern bought in Sydney. She finally finished it in the 1970s after taking a class at The Quilting Bee in Gordon, one of the early shops of the quilting revival. In the meantime, she had begun an embroidered quilt from a pattern sent to her from Canada.⁶⁵

Irma Chelsworth began quilting, teaching herself from books, in Melbourne in the early 1970s. She described herself in 1992, after winning prizes for her

⁶⁰ Paddy Childs-Green, "Megan Terry," in *Down Under Quilts* 1 (4) December 1988 p.21.

⁶¹ Glennda Marsh, "Sharing Something Special," in *Down Under Quilts* 4 (1) March 1991 p.14.

⁶² Terry, M., Lecture "Chasing Rainbows" to "Quiltskills" Conference, Sydney 1 Sept 1992.

⁶³ Margaret Rolfe, Catalogue Essay, *Quilt Australia 88 Catalogue*, Sydney, Quilters' Guild Inc., 1988, 12.

⁶⁴ Glennda Marsh, "Quilts in Women's Lives: The Australian Post War Revival," in *Down Under Quilts* 2 (3) September 1989, p.10-12. See also Cochrane, op. cit. pp.221 and 369, for two of Cochrane's few mentions of quilters.

⁶⁵ Johnson, B., "Meet the Members", in *The Template* 7 (3) April 1989, p.12. She goes on "The quilt is now in England as a gift to my second daughter who well remembers the dresses etc. made with the materials used."

quilts as "self-taught, with the inevitable mistakes, needless to say my first quilt was a handmade Granny's garden." Chelsworth, like many other early quilters, now enjoys the large number of books available.⁶⁶

Although these women discovered quilting before the revival, their individual knowledge, and the patchwork and quilting taught by the Embroiderers' Guilds, was not enough to spark more than scattered interest. It was not until the late 1970s that quilts gained the cultural salience in Australia that would enable the enormous surge of interest which occurred in the 1980s. That cultural visibility came from the United States.

An American-led revival: the 1970s

American scholarship has shown that there have been a number of quilting revivals there, usually associated with renewed interest in American history, and in the history of the colonial period in particular.⁶⁷ However, as Lasansky points out, the latest one is slightly different: "Not until the late 1960s and early 1970s does the colonial revival -- as mirrored in quilts -- come full force again, inspired in part by the 1960s back to earth movement and the looming Bicentennial celebration. This time around in fact quilting usurps spinning and weaving as the 'colonial' craft".⁶⁸

Susan Bernick has identified three separate events which significantly changed the status of quilts and quilting for different groups during the 1970s in America: "The 1971 Whitney show, 'Abstract Design in American Quilts' is the one usually pointed to by the art quilt culture, while the American Bicentennial in 1976 and Robert Rauschenberg's 1955 mixed media piece *Bed* are foregrounded in discussions by the traditional quilt culture and the feminist quilt culture, respectively."⁶⁹

Jonathon Holstein, curator of the Whitney Show, looked at quilts as though they were abstract art, and was the first to hang them as art in a mainstream

⁶⁶ *Down Under Quilts*, 5(3) September 1992, p.8.

⁶⁷ Lasansky, J., "The Colonial Revival and Quilts 1964-1976", in Lasansky, *Pieced by Mother*, op cit., pp.97-105.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.104.

⁶⁹ Bernick, S.E., "A Quilt is an Art Object when It Stands Up like a Man" in Torsney C., and Elsley, J., (eds) *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia MO, 1994 p. 145. This article and its arguments are discussed in more detail in ensuing chapters.

museum. Although the mixed effects of this certification as high art are still being felt and discussed by quilters and by feminist art critics,⁷⁰ the visibility of quilts within the wider culture of the United States began to rise from that time. The American Bicentennial of 1976 renewed an interest in the making of quilts, though quilting had never entirely ceased. From that upsurge of interest began the revival of quilting culture, organisation, and the commercial opportunities that came with it.

Beginnings in Australia: The Yorke Fair show 1976

The first major quilt exhibition in Australia was held in Western Australia, at the 1976 Yorke Fair. Accompanied by a residential workshop tutored by Penny Whitchurch (who also won first prize in the exhibition) the show had the American Bicentennial as its theme. A follow up sewing day organised to finish the quilt started at the workshop led to the formation of the West Australian Quilters' Association. Its first official meeting was held at the CWA Craft Room in West Perth, attended by twenty eight people.⁷¹

For some time in the late 1970s and early 1980s the link between Australian quilting and American developments was very substantial. Many groups, shops, classes and exhibitions were organised and maintained by women who were either American-born Australian residents, or by Australian women who had spent time in North America.⁷² Supplies and patterns, magazines and tools were imported directly from the United States. One of the legacies of this American connection is the resolute adherence of Australian quilters to the imperial measurements which American quilters use, but which are otherwise obsolete in Australia. The quarter inch remains the basic unit of seam allowance in almost all quilt patterns, influencing all

⁷⁰ This debate is covered in more detail in Chapter Five below.

⁷¹ Green-Armytage, M., "A decade of Quilting", in *Craftwest* 5, Nov. 1986 pp.13-14.

⁷² There is a fascinating parallel here with the similar seeding of second-wave feminism itself, from the United States. Where some Australian women who had lived in the United States in the late 60s and early 70s came home and started consciousness raising groups, others, in the late 1970s, came home and started quilting groups. Similarly, early second wave feminist texts were imported, by returning Australians, and pored over by Australian enthusiasts. For several different accounts of aspects of this US influence in feminism see Caine, B., et al. (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Feminism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, forthcoming.

other calculations for cutting and piecing. Even quilters who design or draft their own patterns use imperial measurements.⁷³

Many American women who came to Australia started local groups to further their craft here. Suzanne Dowsett, a quilter from Perth, was born in Mississippi, into a family with a strong tradition of quilting, and she has been an influential teacher and exhibitor since the early 1980s.⁷⁴ The founder of the Paradise Patchworkers in Sydney (described in detail in the next chapter), also an American, opened a quilt shop in Sydney's southern suburbs and ran quilting classes, the graduates of which went on to form the nucleus of the group.⁷⁵

Even more common however, are the examples of Australian women who discovered quilting while in the United States, and brought it home with them when they returned. Several eminent Australian quilters and collectors fall into this group. These women valued the friendships they formed in those American groups, and enjoyed the richness of quilt heritage around them in antique quilts, and the wide variety, even in the late 1970s, of books, magazines and fabrics in the United States. Suzann Bailey lived in Seattle, Washington during 1983-4 and started her quilting while there. Since returning to Australia, she has taught quilting, been chair of the West Australian Quilters Association and has quilts hanging in several West Australian churches.⁷⁶ Pam Tawton, a well-known Canberra quilter, first saw patchwork at Christmas 1977 in Maine, USA, when her hostess set the table with patchwork placemats. While living in Virginia she "set about to take lessons, do workshops and attend exhibitions with gusto". When she returned to Canberra in 1980 she became an active member of Canberra Quilters, and has taught quilting locally and interstate.⁷⁷

⁷³ Margaret Rolfe's recent attempt to produce a metric pattern book and a conversion system for Australia's metric system has not been a commercial success. While Rolfe fears that young women brought up with metric measurement will be put off quilting by needing to learn a system new to them, and one with calculations that are needlessly complex, Australia's current quilters use American patterns, rulers and templates, and find it hard to convert, despite using metric measurements in other areas of life. (Rolfe, personal communication July 1995). See also Rolfe's letter in *The Template* 14 (3) June 1996 p.4 where she again attempts to reassure quilters that metric measurements are not difficult.

⁷⁴ *Down Under Quilts* 1 (3) Sept 1988 p.16.

⁷⁵ I cannot be more specific here, in order to maintain the anonymity of the group.

⁷⁶ See *Down Under Quilts* 2(2) June 1989 p.5, and summer 1993-4 pp. 8-9.

⁷⁷ *Down Under Quilts* 5(3) Sept 1992 p. 33.

Another Canberra quilter, Lyn Inall, also found quilting while living in the United States. Her husband was working there, but as a magazine profile relates:

A decision by the US Department of Justice not to grant Lyn a 'Green Card' was a blessing in disguise for it provided her with the chance to become involved in American quilting ... Lyn arranged for local quilters to visit Coopers Town New York State Farmers Museum where they had access to many of the quilts in the Museum's collection, the quilters were so stimulated and enthralled they became much more aware of other collections and shows.⁷⁸

Inall has since taught and exhibited, and been the recipient of a number of prizes and awards, most recently the Quilter's Guild Scholarship for 1995.⁷⁹

Margaret Rolfe, Australia's pre-eminent quilt historian and a designer and teacher of some note, also first became interested in quilts in the United States. In 1975 she spent a summer in Los Angeles, where she was fascinated by the quilting of her hostess, and returned to Australia determined to learn. "[T]here were no classes, almost no books, and no help...The few books I could find all seemed to contradict each other. Most of my learning had to come from experience, good old fashioned trial and error."⁸⁰

A significant number of influential women, and also many 'ordinary' quilters were first exposed to quilting, as a practice and as a culture, in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s. Their transmission of the skills, aesthetics, organisational structures and other practices of quilting was quite crucial in the development of what was to become an independent subculture, developing the confidence and the economic ability to generate its own 'stars', techniques, designers, and innovations.

Momentum and professionalisation: the 1980s

By the early 1980s quilting in Australia was becoming organised. Distance and lack of communication between quilters in different states and cities led to the independent development of local guilds. The Victorian Quilters'

⁷⁸ *Down Under Quilts* 4(2) June 1991 p.12.

⁷⁹ *The Template* 14 (1) December 1995 p.4.

⁸⁰ *The Template*, 6 (5) April 1988 unpaginated. There are many such accounts.

Association was formed in 1979, after an exhibition and classes held by Megan Terry. By 1983 the group, unaware of other groups, had changed its name to the Australian Quilters' Association. It had 360 members and was running workshops, exhibitions, the newsletter *Quilters' Patch*, and a supply business.⁸¹

In New South Wales, The Quilters' Guild Inc. had its first meeting in 1982. Its exhibitions were well attended and by 1984 it had a membership of over 600 and strong connections with many local groups in Sydney and rural New South Wales.⁸² Other state groups followed. The Quilters' Guild of South Australia held their inaugural exhibition in mid 1985.⁸³ Many more informal local groups existed, some of which had grown out of classes held at colleges of technical education, or at the quilt shops which were beginning to appear to supply this growing craft. In 1988 an Australian Directory of Quilting Suppliers was published for distribution at the *Quilt Australia 88* exhibition. It listed 59 quilt shops around Australia, including twenty seven in New South Wales.⁸⁴

In 1985 the National Quilt Seminar was held in Victoria by the Ovens Valley Patchworkers and Quilters Group. Part of its rationale was "to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the state of Victoria", but participants came from all states except Queensland. The week-long seminar was the first of its type in Australia, and aroused great interest, though nothing more on the same scale was organised until 1988.⁸⁵

By the mid 1980s the basis existed for the explosion of quilting which was to take place in the later part of the decade. Even remote areas like Alice Springs had well-established quilt groups, and quilting was particularly strong in rural Queensland where great distances and a scattered population seemed no impediment to an active and innovative quilting community. However, other types of social division are significant: quilting was (and is) by no means a practice unmarked by ethnic and class distinctions. In

⁸¹ Terry, M. 'The Australian Quilters' Association' in *Fibre Forum* 2(2) 1983, p.35.

⁸² Outteridge, A., "The Quilters' Guild Exhibition 1984" in *Craft NSW* 159, Dec 1984, p.7.

⁸³ Gebhardt, M., "Quilters' Guild of SA Successful Inaugural Exhibition" in *SA Crafts News*, Sept/Oct 1985, p.7

⁸⁴ Quilters' Guild Inc. *The Australian Directory of Quilting Suppliers*, pamphlet 1988.

⁸⁵ Keating, S., "First National Australian Quilting Seminar", *Craft Victoria* 159, Sept 1985, p. 8.

perusing the quilt-related publications, it is impossible to ignore the evidence that quiltmakers in Australia are generally white and Anglo-Celtic, and that quilt groups seem to flourish more in middle-class suburbs in the cities, and in prosperous country towns. There are few black quiltmakers, and quilters of recent migrant background are also rare. There are exceptions of course.

In 1988, *Down Under Quilts* had a story on "Winmarra Wirrama", a quilt made as a practical measurement and calculation exercise by a groups of Aboriginal women doing a mathematics course at their local College of Technical and Further Education. The article is the only one on Aboriginal quilters in five years of *Down Under Quilts*.⁸⁶ Despite the well-developed quilting tradition in several countries from which Australia has sizeable communities of immigrants, these ethnic traditions have not mixed into the quilt revival culture. For example, Pacific Islanders have a long and important ceremonial quilting tradition⁸⁷ but this has not yet surfaced as a design influence or a substream within organised quilting in Australia, despite significant communities from Pacific Island nations in major cities.

Quilting in Australia and the 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations

The Bicentennial of 1988 contributed to the growth of quilting, providing new opportunities and incentives which may have taken years to develop otherwise.

In 1988 Australia marked the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the first English colonists in Australia. Up until that time this event had been widely described in Australian history as the beginning of a process of peaceful settlement. Due to the struggles of Aboriginal people, and the work of historians concerned to reveal the destructive consequences of colonisation upon the original inhabitants of the continent, this description has become contested.⁸⁸ Many people now view the arrival of the English as the beginning of an invasion, a view which makes any celebration of such an event at best complicated, at worst impossible. The Bicentennial of 1988

⁸⁶ *Down Under Quilts* 1(3) Sept 1988 p.10

⁸⁷ See Hammond J., *Tifaifai and Quilts of Polynesia*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1986.

⁸⁸ For examples of the kind of history writing which has remade Australians' understanding of the invasion and the Aboriginal resistance to it, see the work of Henry Reynolds, including *The Other Side of the Frontier* Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, and *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1990.

provoked protest and questioning by Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians. At the same time, the Bicentennial was marked by considerable nationalist and patriotic feeling, and for many Australians, the whole year was suffused with symbols of celebration and national pride.

The celebrations, while attended with controversy in relation to Aboriginal issues, were widespread and diverse. They ranged from large scale public events to very small local and personal initiatives. The Australian Bicentennial Authority, set up by the Federal Government to oversee the year's events, registered over 25,000 events and activities on its data base.⁸⁹ A large amount of funding was available to approved projects from local, state and national Bicentennial committees. One of the common activities undertaken in celebration of the Bicentennial was the making of quilts, mostly by groups, but also by individuals. Some of these projects gained partial government funding through local Bicentennial committees, but more were independently initiated and financed, resulting in quilts which were to be donated to local authorities, libraries, hospitals and similar institutions, and hung in public spaces. Many quilt exhibitions were dubbed "Bicentennial", and expressed the spirit of national celebration and self-congratulation so pervasive at that time. There were also some quiltmakers who attempted a more introspective and ambiguous searching after identity and meaning.⁹⁰

The Bicentennial had a major effect on Australian quiltmaking as a whole. Many local and community quilt-related projects started as a result of the Bicentennial or were accelerated or funded because of it. The Quilters' Guild's clippings files, which include most Australian local papers, show that there were at least twice as many quilt exhibitions advertised or reported in 1988 as in 1987 and 1986 put together.⁹¹ More than sixty specifically Bicentennial quilts were made by groups. Many more quilts were made upon the theme of the Bicentennial or national identity by individual quiltmakers. Some of

⁸⁹ Bonham, G., "Address to Opening of *Quilt Australia 88*", *The Template* 6(7), Aug 1988, p.8.

⁹⁰ Some of the quilts exhibited in the *Quilt Australia 88* exhibition were both subtle and sophisticated in their interpretations of the themes of the year. This subject is discussed further below.

⁹¹ The Quilters' Guild allowed me access to their extensive clippings files, and these figures are mine, based on those files. It is likely that they are a substantial understatement, as women's crafts and activities tend to be under-reported. The Guild itself kept no register of Bicentennial projects.

these individual quilts appeared in exhibitions, particularly in the national exhibition *Quilt Australia 88* held by the Quilters Guild Inc., which took "Australia" as its theme. It will be discussed further below. Many more such quilts will never be seen in public, but were made as private meditations upon the dominant cultural theme of the year.⁹²

Groups from all over Australia, but particularly from rural areas, made collective quilts, most of which were presented to local authorities or institutions for permanent public display. Geographical area was a basic principle in the conception of most of these quilts, and a large number of quilts were given to the municipal or shire council. The other basic structuring concept in most of the quilts was a consciousness of local history, generally a post-colonisation history of settlement and development. As a result of this, many now hang in local museums or historic houses. Almost all of the quilts portray a history in which conflict with and injustice to Aboriginal people are absent, although some contain references to the difficulties and hardships of the white pioneers. Where Aboriginal motifs do appear they are usually generic images, often inappropriate to the Aboriginal people of the particular area being portrayed. There is no evidence of particular Aboriginal groups or images being researched for quilts, despite the amount of information available on the Aboriginal presence in Australia. The Aboriginal flag, a well-known and graphically powerful symbol, does, however, appear on several individual Bicentennial quilts where it is an unsettling presence. Its colours of red, black and gold are used as signifiers of Aboriginality by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The flag and colours are modern politicised symbols, however, which cannot be used to signify timelessness, or prehistory, in the way that other appropriated symbols have been. This is one of the reasons the Aboriginal flag rarely appears on Bicentennial group quilts.

The vast majority of Bicentennial quilts were pictorial, attempting to depict in fabric local scenes both historical and contemporary, often with landscapes and historic buildings. Other recurring motifs included vignettes or symbols of local industries and agricultural products, coats of arms, flags and images of ideal or typical citizens undertaking local activities. Most quilts were made in variations of the multiple block style, with some superimposing pictorial

⁹² Many of my quilt group informants reported making "a quilt about Australia", "my own Bicentenary quilt", "Rhonda's Australia quilt", in 1988 or soon after, some of them inspired by the better known quilts which appeared in the exhibition.

blocks on to a landscape or other figurative background. This style of quilt requires less design confidence (if not less design skill) and is easier to divide between group members. Of the few quilts designed as pictorial maps, or complex collections of local features without a block structure, most were designed by individuals, even commissioned artists, and then carried out by groups.

Some quilts made by rural groups focussed completely on landscape, portraying one, usually idealised, scene, framed in local fauna or other motifs. In these quilts, historical consciousness is less evident, remaining only in the assumption of the timelessness of the landscape. Most such quilts show a cultivated agricultural landscape, a very recent phenomenon in the history of the Australian continent, and in most rural areas dating from much later than 1788. A good example of this is the quilt "And in the beginning", made by the Peel Cottage Quilters of Tamworth, New South Wales, which shows a settler's hut and cultivated fields.⁹³ Such a quilt could be read as revealing the way in which the Bicentennial actually obscured historical understanding, while promoting historical images.

The smallest group of Bicentennial group quilts are those with an abstract or thematic treatment of their area, perhaps indicating the difficulty of agreeing on any one such approach within a group. One quilt, from Coleraine, Queensland, simply and effectively depicted local wildflowers, eschewing any more sweeping or obviously meaningful statement, but this is an exception among group quilts.⁹⁴

Although the Bicentennial quilts are a very a diverse group the overall impression is one of great seriousness. While Australians were all called upon to celebrate, the Bicentennial tone allowed for little humour or levity, and the quilts reflect this. The consciousness of the quiltmakers that their quilts were intended to be displayed in public places, where seriousness is the usual mode of behaviour and frivolity and humour are discouraged, must also have contributed. Many groups were also conscious of their role in making the quilt as an historical document in itself,⁹⁵ and were determined

⁹³ See Quilters Guild Inc. *Quilt Australia*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1988, p.58, plate number 37.

⁹⁴ Pictured in *Down Under Quilts* 2(2) June 1989, p.35.

⁹⁵ This can be seen particularly in the care with which such quilts were labelled and documented, with photographs and records of all participants. See for example "The

to leave nothing out. Thus we see quilts incorporating scores of motifs symbolising every industry, historic site, and natural feature of whole districts. The Hunter's Hill quilt, a pictorial map of an historic Sydney suburb, grew to enormous size in this attempt, its finished size being two and a half metres by six metres.⁹⁶

The effects of the tremendous effort devoted to Bicentennial quilts were significant for quilting as a whole in Australia. First, the sheer numbers of women involved in quilting increased sharply. Some groups were especially formed for their commemorative project, and have continued after its completion. Many women introduced to quilting through a Bicentennial project for their local school or area have gone on to become accomplished quilters in the intervening years.⁹⁷ Many groups were enlarged due to the local interest in such projects.

The second significant effect was the increase in the public awareness of quilting. A great many Bicentennial quilt projects received coverage in local and state newspapers, bringing unprecedented publicity to quilting groups. In the intervening years, there has been a huge growth in public knowledge about quilting, and in the sheer physical presence of quilts in public places, as Bicentennial quilts hang in Council Chambers, Arts Centres, libraries, hospitals, schools and local galleries all over Australia. While quilting remains one of the lesser known forms of cultural production, 1988 produced a great surge in its public profile.

Third, the skills and organisational abilities of many existing groups were enhanced by the larger scale of the projects they took on. A large number of groups organised inaugural exhibitions, or exhibitions much bigger than their previous ones, as part of their presentation of their Bicentennial quilts, or as

Hunters Hill Bicentennial Quilt" which has all fifty seven makers' signatures embroidered on the back (*Down Under Quilts* 2 (2) June 1989, p.37).

⁹⁶ This quilt was widely reported in the local press, both during its construction and upon its presentation to the local council. See for example *Glebe and Western Weekly* (Sydney NSW), 25 May 1988, and *Gladesville Weekly Times* (Sydney NSW), 13 July 1988.

⁹⁷ An example is Alison Schwabe, an embroiderer, recruited to do some machine embroidery on a Bicentennial quilt in Western Australia. Now a quilter, living in the United States, she has since had quilts exhibited in *Visions*, San Diego, 1992, and other American shows. See story on the Kalgoorlie Bicentennial Banner, "A Jewel from the Goldfields" in *Down Under Quilts* 1 (1) Mar 1988, pp.16-17, and a letter from Schwabe in *Down Under Quilts* 5 (3) Sept 1992, p.3.

fundraisers for materials. In this way, quilt groups became more confident and competent in publicising, organising and presenting quilting to the public. Numerous groups also had their skills base enhanced by the necessity of developing the numerous skills needed in organising and executing a group quilt of the quality desired. Some of these groups have produced other public quilts in the years since 1988, such as the Melbourne University Quilt produced by the Hamilton Quilters of Victoria.⁹⁸

The Armidale Quilt Symposium and Quilt Australia 88

Two major quilt-related events in 1988 gave quilting national coverage and at the same time, brought quiltmakers from all over Australia together in new ways. They both broke new ground for Australian quilting. These events were the Armidale Quilt Symposium and Exhibition, a week-long residential symposium (which ran three times in successive weeks) with workshops, lectures and other activities, which involved over 900 quiltmakers, and the national exhibition, *Quilt Australia 88*, organised by the Quilters' Guild Inc. of New South Wales.

The Symposium, hosted and organised by the Quilters and Patchworkers of New England, was inspired by the National Quilt Seminar held by the Ovens Valley Patchworkers and Quilters in Victoria in 1985. This had, by participants' accounts, been a great success, and other residential workshops and conferences had been held in the intervening years, most notably the "Quilt Experience" series in central Queensland. None had, however, attempted a national profile as high as the Armidale Symposium. Held in April 1988, at the University of New England in northern New South Wales, it was well placed to attract quiltmakers from New South Wales and Queensland, but in fact women from all over the country, and from New Zealand attended. Eminent quiltmakers and teachers from the United States, Britain, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia gave workshops and lectures, and for all the participants, the Symposium was a major source of ideas and inspiration. After 1988 the Symposium was held annually until 1995, and its venue changed several times. It became a pre-eminent event for Australian quiltmakers, and an inspiration to the many smaller and cheaper weekend live-in events which now dominate the quilt workshop market.

⁹⁸ *Down Under Quilts* 2(2) June 1989, p.35. This quilt was also reported in the Melbourne newspaper, *Sun News Pictorial*, 20 February 1989.

In America, an event like this would not seem unusual, but in Australia it had a large impact, inspiring some participants to make stronger connections with others in Australia and overseas, and to organise other live-in events and workshops in their own areas. It provided a major infusion of new techniques, design ideas and possibilities and new influences to Australian quilting. Indeed, in subsequent exhibitions of quilts in several different cities, it was possible to see the effects of influential teachers and techniques on the quilts displayed in later years. A later Symposium is described in ethnographic detail in Chapter Three.

Only a few months later, in June 1988, the Quilters Guild held their long planned Bicentennial Exhibition, *Quilt Australia 88*. This was the result of five years work within the Guild, and long negotiations with the Australian Bicentennial Authority, and included three separate initiatives: a set of travelling exhibitions of small quilts, called *Quilts Covering Australia: the Suitcase Exhibitions*; a schools banner project, involving many schools throughout Australia; and the large Exhibition held in Sydney. This included a display of historic Australian quilts curated by Margaret Rolfe, as well as over a hundred contemporary quilts. It was a large undertaking, which substantially stretched Guild resources, but resulted in unparalleled exposure for the Guild, and for quilting in general. The travelling exhibitions toured the country for nearly five years, and the schools banner project introduced thousands of children to quilting skills. The Exhibition was accompanied by a full colour book funded by the Women's Programme of the Australian Bicentennial Authority. Described by the Guild President as "the only comprehensive collection of Australian quilts to be published",⁹⁹ it provided a record of the show for quilters who could not see it, and for quilters overseas unfamiliar with Australian work. This was a major departure from the ephemeral nature of previous Guild shows.

Very conscious of the exhibition's status as an official Bicentennial event, the Guild devised categories of entry within the general theme of Australia's Bicentennial, which were indicative of the special considerations of the time, and have not been repeated in Guild shows since. Quilts could be entered as "political", "natural", "personal", "patriotic" and "traditional". The Bicentennial theme of the show was so strong as to override the usual Guild show categories based on technique. In particular, the inclusion of the

⁹⁹ Finnegan, D., "President's Report", *The Template* 6 (5) April 1988, unpaginated.

category "political", which has never been repeated, reveals some of the ambivalence beginning to be felt in Australia about the Bicentennial and its implications. Quilts entered in this category were more likely to contain references to the struggle of Aboriginal people, and the winner in this category, "Aerodrome" by Jan Irvine, had the Aboriginal flag as a crucial central motif.¹⁰⁰

The selection for the exhibition was carried out very consciously as a showcasing of Australian quilting, for the historical record. There were many group projects, and specifically Bicentennial quilts included, but there was also an attempt to include other kinds of quilts which were representative of trends in Australian quilting. Probably no other show has taken itself so seriously as a measure of the quality of Australian quilting, nor seen itself in such self-consciously historical terms.

One event connected with the exhibition drew quilters together even more than usual. Seventeen quilts were destroyed in a fire at a photographer's studio while awaiting photographing for the book. The event made the newspapers around the country, especially the local papers of quilters whose work had been destroyed, and many expressions of sympathy, donations of fabric, and offers of help to replace or remake the quilts were received by the Guild. Some of the quilts were replicated and some were replaced with others by the same quilter for the show, but the burnt quilts remained a ghostly presence at the show, a modern reminder of all the quilts destroyed over the previous 200 years. The book includes a "Postscript": an account of the fire, pictures of some of the burnt fragments, and amateur photographs of the lost quilts. Guild President Diane Finnegan, whose own quilt was burnt, wrote: "The recurring reaction of those whose quilts had been burnt was an incredulous 'but my life was in that quilt'. Cherished fabric and associations, as well as the huge effort, sometimes hundreds of hours, had gone into the quilts ... Everyone shares in the loss".¹⁰¹

Since 1988, Australian quilting has continued to grow, in popularity, sophistication and world recognition. Australian quilters have begun to find their own distinctive imagery and style, yet continue to follow and learn from the best work being done in other countries, particularly in North

¹⁰⁰ *Quilt Australia*, p.52, plate number 31.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.111.

America. Current trends in quilts, towards freer, less formal work, and interest in Afro-American quilts, have also been manifest in Australia, sometimes as a result of a particularly influential book or teaching tour by an American quiltmaker. The importance to quiltmaking of the 1988 Bicentennial was in convincing Australian quiltmakers of the worth of their craft, of its ability to reflect their social, political and local concerns, and of its popularity and saleability. Without that national stimulus, and the media coverage and visibility it gave to quiltmaking, this may have been a far longer process. In the quilts made in that year, Australia has a significant record of the concerns, images and narratives of Australian quiltmakers of the time, in relation to their areas, their histories and their conceptions of themselves and their country.

Many of the innovations and forms of that year's events have gone on to become basic to quiltmaking culture in Australia. The Guild has greatly developed the idea of travelling exhibitions, and has for some years, run an annual challenge contest for members. Small quilts are made on a theme, and several carefully chosen sets of the winning quilts are made into suitcase exhibitions which may be borrowed from the Guild by groups, councils and other organisations for easy portable display. These "Suitcase Exhibitions" are greatly in demand and must now be booked years in advance. International touring exhibitions are the Guild's most recent development -- in 1995 *Australia Dreaming* went to the Sydney Fair in Nagoya, Japan,¹⁰² and *Colours of Australia* toured to the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas.¹⁰³

Commercialism and the 'art' debate: into the 1990s

If 1988 was a turning point in the public recognition of quiltmaking, the 1990s have seen its consolidation and professionalisation. The details of this will be discussed in the next chapter, as part of a description of contemporary quiltmaking culture. Far from the small, amateur groups of the early 1980s there are now considerable numbers of quilters who make their living teaching, writing, selling quilt supplies and designing fabric. Gradually, and without help from the subsidising bodies of Australian arts administration, quilters are gaining recognition as artists, and getting more exposure to the far

¹⁰² "Nagoya '95", *The Template* 13 (6) March 1996 p.11.

¹⁰³ "Houston Basks in a Rainbow of Colours" *The Template* 13 (6) March 1996 p.33.

stronger quilt-art subculture in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Australian quilt organisations have made strong links with Japanese quilters since the mid 1990s, with exhibitions touring in both directions.¹⁰⁵

One indication of the professionalisation and rising status of quilting in the 1990s is the push in several different quilting guilds to increase certification of quilt teachers, and to set standards of judging for quilt shows. These concerns have also led to the formation of a peak national council of quilt guilds, the Australian Council of Quilters.¹⁰⁶ Such processes have, of course, been carried much further in the United States.

The other indication of the consolidation of Australian quilting is the commercialisation which has taken place. Publishing companies like JB Fairfax and Express Publications now find it profitable to produce glossy quilt books and magazines with Australian content – a significant contrast to the situation in 1988, when the book of the Bicentennial Exhibition was only produced with a large government grant. Distributors of American fabric, batting, cotton, and other supplies are generous in their sponsorship of Australian quilt groups,¹⁰⁷ and there are many many quilt shops. Australian quilters no longer have to rely on slow mail order from the United States, although supplies here are more expensive than for American quilters. The increase in designs, kits, fabrics and magazines with an Australian focus is enormous. The market here has become big enough to support such enterprises.

¹⁰⁴ For an account of the art-quilt world, see Bernick, S., op. cit. Australian quilt artists who have recently studied, taught, travelled or exhibited quilts in the United States include: Cynthia Morgan, Judy Hooworth, Margaret Rolfe, Dianne Finnegan, Wendy Lugg – all reported in one issue of *The Template*, 14 (4) September 1996.

¹⁰⁵ The Quilters' Guild participated in the Sydney Fair in Nagoya, Japan in October 1995. The *Australia Dreaming* quilt exhibition which travelled to Nagoya is pictured and described in Quilters Guild Inc., *Australia Dreaming: Quilts to Nagoya*, JB Fairfax, Sydney, 1995. Interestingly, and not only because of the clear implications of the title, the quilts in this exhibition display far more awareness of, and sensitive use of, Aboriginal motifs old and new. It seems possible that these collections of quilt images could produce a particular account of self-descriptions by Australians over the last 20 years of this century.

¹⁰⁶ *The Template* 13 (6) March 1996, p.23.

¹⁰⁷ For example, the list of sponsors for the Quilters' Guild 1995 Show included fabric companies XLN Fabrics, Ray Toby Pty Ltd and Dayview Textiles; sewing machine and accessory companies Bernina Ltd and Horn; and thread companies Perivale-Gutermann and DMC Needlecraft (*The Template* 13 (4) September 1995 p.12).

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the history and historiography of quilting in Australia, concentrating on a few focal points, most notably the qualitative change that was wrought by the Bicentennial celebrations and their impact on quilting organisations and visibility. In the next chapter, I explore the detailed workings of various levels of the quilt subculture in the early 1990s, through an ethnographic account.

Chapter Two

Quilt Culture in Australia Today

This chapter sets out to describe quilting in Sydney in the early 1990s, as a "leisure world". This concept encompasses more than just the idea of "hobbies" or pastimes, and seems to come closest to the full and complex way in which quilters construct their milieu. Janice Radway claims:

Although leisure worlds are conceptualised as sites for the pursuit of what are still referred to as 'merely' hobbies or avocations, they are increasingly and ironically the very realms in which individuals invest most of their energy, money and time. For many individuals and sub groups, in fact, the conceptually subordinated leisure world is the primary site for the elaboration of what is taken to be meaningful identity.¹

Before an existing set of practices can be tested against such a claim, it must first be apprehended and described. This chapter draws upon five years of observation, participation and research among quilters.

The quilt world, like all subcultural forms, feels "ordinary" to its inhabitants, even though they are there only part of their time -- the particularity of its practices and forms are naturalised by habit, familiarity and understanding. In writing this chapter, I have attempted to render the specificity of the different social styles and contexts within quilting, and to make these concrete to readers who do not have that familiarity and understanding. The intimacy, informality and domesticity of the situations I have researched demands to be described in a language other than the formal distancing discursive style of the academic voice. As I will argue in the next chapter, when the central themes and analytical points of this descriptive chapter will be taken up at greater length, it is precisely the ability of the quilting subculture to produce a safe and semi-domestic space for women, which explains some of its power and popularity for enthusiasts. I want the reader of this chapter, as nearly as possible, to *experience* this warmth and conviviality in the telling.

¹ Radway, J., "Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects" in *Cultural Studies*, Oct 1988, pp.359-375, p.369.

The first section describes three groups in Sydney, in an attempt to evoke their atmosphere, typical meeting style, activities, and the personalities of some of their leading members. The groups are linked, overlapping in membership and geographical area, and the third one, the Quilters' Guild Inc., has an overarching position as the major guild in New South Wales. The two smaller groups are representative of two main types of quilt group – the local small group which meets in members' homes, and the larger group with a catchment of several suburbs which meets in a church hall or similar accommodation. Both these groups are affiliated to the Quilters Guild Inc., as are some 129 other groups in New South Wales.² The Quilters' Guild is an incorporated organisation, with a public profile, journal, audited records and public meetings. I have disguised the names of individuals within the Guild and its executive structure where necessary. The other two groups are not public organisations in the same way, and I have changed their names, disguised their location and given new names to their members, in order not to breach confidentiality agreements with the women involved.

The first section gives brief descriptions of the style, membership and day-to-day activities of these groups. The later sections describe the collective productions of exhibitions, magazines, classes and symposiums. These are less personal, and more ephemeral practices than those of the ongoing group, but are nevertheless part of the developing culture of quilting in Australia.

Three groups and their connections

(i)The Barronville Patchers³

Barronville is a leafy 1920s suburb, on high ground just outside Sydney's inner ring. Population densities are lower than in adjoining areas, and neat

² "Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Quilters' Guild", *The Template* 13 (1) December 1994 p.31. These 129 are about equally divided between metropolitan Sydney and rural areas. The Guild handles some hundreds of requests about local groups every year (140 from April to July 1994 is the number reported in the minutes of the 1994 AGM).

³ In addition to my own participation in the group, information for this section comes from two articles about the group in *The Template*, journal of the Quilters' Guild Inc., written by group members. In order not to identify the group, the full reference has not been cited.

detached liver-brick houses with white woodwork are set in well-maintained gardens. It is an ethnically mixed, but prosperous area, where evenings are quiet. Every Thursday night, in one of three Barronville houses, the Barronville Patchers meet for an evening of sewing, talking and laughter. In 1989, Janice and Nancy met at a quilters' retreat weekend in the Blue Mountains organised by another group, and with their friend Eve, decided to start their own quilt group. They talked to quilting friends, met some beginners in classes, and started up. In 1991, they had thirteen members, of which a floating group of about seven would attend meetings each week, but by 1993, when I joined them for the year, there were only six, all of whom came nearly every week. The group stayed in touch with members who were kept away by evening commitments or poor health, and some other members had a monthly daytime meeting at another house. Over the period from 1989 to 1993, the projects, membership and focus of the group had changed, although the general feel of the group continued to be dominated by two particular personalities.

Just at 7.30, cars pull up outside Eve's, Helen's or Noni's house. Nancy, at about 40, the youngest member of the group, often arranges to bring the women without cars to the meeting.⁴ Nancy has ambitions to be a professional quilting teacher when her small children go to school. Valerie is dropped at the gate by her husband, and gets a lift home from one of the others. The meeting house is always tidy, warm and well lit, with enough chairs for everyone to sit comfortably with their work. In the two larger houses we troop through the formal sitting rooms, perfect in their unused splendour of heavy polished wood furniture and cut glass in cabinets, into the comfortable, casual sunroom/family room at the back of the house. Here, there is a warm gas fire, and bright light to sew by. Nancy's house is a bit too far away for the members who don't drive, Valerie's isn't big enough (and besides her husband wouldn't like it) and so meetings rotate between the other three houses.⁵ Eve and Helen, both widows, live alone. Noni, whose children are grown and live in far suburbs, lives with her husband

⁴ I was actually the youngest member of the group at this time, but for the purposes of this discussion of the members I am excluding myself. My motivations for joining the group were dual, involving both my need to research for this thesis, and my enjoyment of quiltmaking, and are thus markedly different from those of the women normally involved. This issue has been discussed at more length in general terms in my Introduction.

⁵ My own house was never quite tidy enough, and so different from the others' that I never offered it for a meeting.

who is often at night meetings of his own. Sometimes someone can't come -- an illness, or a family dinner, visiting relatives -- but they always ring the hostess to let her know. Hellos are exchanged, and everyone sits down, and gets out their sewing. The hostess inquires whether we have enough light: should she get another lamp? New projects are admired, and progress in older ones applauded, with pieces of sewing being passed around for appraisal. If a quilt top is nearing completion, it is spread out on the floor, or held up to show everyone. Sometimes someone has brought a new quilt book, or magazine to share.

While everyone sews, the conversation meanders through family members and ongoing stories of house renovations, or holiday plans. Nancy and I discuss our children's schools and daycare, and the others reminisce about their days with little children, how much harder it was, but also how much more we "young ones" try and do now, with jobs and degrees as well. When that fails, the quilters concentrate harder, or talk about quilt exhibitions or workshops. We can be sure everyone is interested in quilt-related things, but sometimes there are also discussions of current events, movies, television shows, or innocuous social issues. Quite often, the older members of the group tell of their youth, or young married days, the clothes, jobs and amusements of the 1940s and 1950s. Eve, the oldest member of the group, and the most dominant in conversation, is an active, decided, emphatic woman in her 80s, and the mother of an eminent Sydney quiltmaker and antique quilt collector, a former president of the Quilters' Guild. As a result, the Guild, and its activities and plans, are often referred to by Eve, as is her daughter's latest work and exhibitions.

During the evening, Nancy usually has something to say about the group's latest charity project. Nancy has been the driving force behind the charitable endeavours the Barronville Patchers have taken on. A raffle quilt was made for her daughter's local preschool in 1992, and in 1993, the project was a larger and more serious one. Nancy's sister, a nurse in the neonatal intensive care ward in a large city hospital, had suggested something which some of the group thought a little macabre, and in which one member refused to be involved. The rest of the group, when I joined, were making tiny quilts to be used to wrap the bodies of the babies who died in the intensive care ward, when they were given to their parents in the hospital's newly created grieving space. A lot of the materials had been donated, especially from church groups with which members were involved, and the

quilts were conventional in design, in subdued pastel colours. Eve went through all the donated fabric, discarding any that had storks, babies, teddies or other such motifs, so the quilts "wouldn't upset the poor things even more". Some fifty quilts had been made by us and presented to the hospital before I left the group.

The dissenting member, Helen, thought the whole thing "morbid", and would have nothing to do with it. Eve, matriarch of the group, thought that it wasn't good for the mothers of these babies to "dwell on things", but participated because she liked to keep busy, and already had quilts on every bed in her house. Nancy, the most enthusiastic, kept everyone else up to the mark, and did a lot of work finishing the edges, machine quilting and sewing the labels on all the quilts, as well as piecing some little quilts herself.

By about 10 pm everyone has packed up their sewing, and the hostess for the evening is in the kitchen, preparing tea and supper. Old-fashioned matching cups and saucers and plates are produced, with hot tea, sandwiches, cakes and biscuits. Everyone has a cake fork and a paper napkin. We all admire the food, eat politely and sparingly, have a second cup of strong tea, and help to clear away: "See you next week, at Helen's/Eve's/Noni's". Everyone is gone by 10.45.

Introducing the group to the Quilters' Guild, in *The Template* in 1991, a member wrote

Each week an average of about six come together to work on our own particular masterpieces. Have you ever noticed how we can call on this wonderful filing system at will, expound on creative ideas at wondrous length - and forget where we keep the broom and duster?

To keep everyone in contact even if they can't get to the meetings we have a block of the month where we each make a selected block for a member. If any of us get to a workshop, we try and share our new talent with anyone interested, even if it doesn't always come out quite the same as we originally heard it.

We have plenty to keep us interested each week and anyone interested in coming along would be made very welcome. The night is spent in various ways, with show 'n tell (sort of), world problem solving (give a

gal the reins), good old Aussie yarning (not gossip), joke sharing and commiserating with whatever health problems are hovering.⁶

This account captures the characteristic mode of self-description of such groups in *The Template*, and other magazines. It is cheery and inclusive, and very aware of the different elements in quilters' lives, the different social contexts they move between, and the contrast between their 'creative ideas' and 'the broom and duster'. This perpetual quilters' theme will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Some Patchers are members of the Quilters' Guild, and all try to get to its annual Quilt Show, although only Nancy and I had ever exhibited a quilt there. Nancy, Eve, Janice and Noni had been to various quilters' retreats and live-in workshops (described in more detail below), but such attendance was not possible for other members of the group, because of health or financial difficulties.

Each member has a different relation to the group, and to the other individuals in it. Helen is not such a keen quilter as some of the others, and seems to look on the group more as a social one; she sometimes declared that she was sick of her sewing, and brought her knitting instead. Nancy, and I, who both work more often with a sewing machine, which is not possible at meetings, found ourselves starting new handsewing projects, in order to have something to do every Thursday night, and this may have been part of the rationale for Nancy's advocacy of the small quilts project. Nancy took on the role of teacher and adviser to the other quilters, often being consulted on matters of technique and design, and giving definite advice when asked. On several occasions, when meeting at Eve's house, we would arrive to find the floor of her formal living room covered with the completed blocks of her latest project, for Nancy's inspection and advice. "Come this way, Nancy, I've got a big mess in here for you to sort out". As we entered the room we'd see no mess, but thirty-six or more intricate handpieced blocks set out on the floor. Nancy would always change them around into some setting which pleased Eve more than her own attempts. The rest of us might venture opinions too, but Nancy's word prevailed.

⁶ *Template* article. In order not to identify the group, the full reference has not been cited.

Valerie, whose hands are disabled with arthritis, finds it very hard to sew using fine hand techniques, and had to use roundabout ways of getting her ideas into material form. Also a machine-sewer, it was particularly difficult for her to find handwork to do at meetings, and sometimes she just sat and talked, or looked through the magazines. She was not popular with the other members of the group, being from a different class and cultural background, and inclined to say things they found vulgar or in bad taste. For Valerie, though, the Thursday evenings were her only time with other women, due to her disability, and difficulties with her husband. She spent them talking mainly about her adult children by a former marriage, and her grandchildren, who lived in England, which she also couldn't do with her husband. The quilts she made were all sent off to England as soon as they were finished.

The atmosphere of the group was cheerful but refined, with a rather confining sense of what was proper. A few of the members had connections with each other through the local Uniting Church, and sometimes brought their sewing for the fundraising fete stall with them to the meeting. One evening this produced hilarity as Eve remonstrated with members hesitating over the prices of the aprons and sewing bags on offer: "God's watching you count those pennies!" she joked.

All the group members, except Nancy, make quilts from traditional patterns, but in different styles. Eve's work is "scrap-bag", very colourful and within a particular traditional aesthetic of the "scrap quilt". This kind of quilt uses many different fabrics in one quilt, sorting them by colour and value (that is, light, medium and dark) rather than buying matching or coordinating fabrics. Each block in such a quilt might use ten or twenty different fabrics, with some fabrics only appearing once in the whole quilt. Eve found non-traditional quilts difficult to appreciate. "I can't stand these arty things!" she'd say decidedly, especially after attending any exhibition⁷.

Noni, a marvellous embroiderer as well as a quilter, executed ambitiously difficult applique, in the Baltimore style, with silk thread and the finest stitching. In these quilts, every block is different, with vivid and lifelike

⁷ Once, when I showed her a picture of a contemporary quilt I liked, in bold bright colours and with embroidered embellishments, she commented "Well, I wouldn't like to have to *wash* that!".

representations of flowers and birds, using many different fabrics. Noni also made more traditional pieced quilts in coordinated colours, where every block is the same. Her major work during my time with the group was a large Double Wedding Ring pattern quilt in blues and browns, hand pieced and quilted for her married daughter. Its slow progress, especially through the hand-quilting stage, was a motif of meetings at Noni's house, as the quilt was too big to bring to other places. As Noni does not like to use a thimble, hand quilting was painful for her, leaving her with bleeding fingers⁸: "Oh, I haven't got too far. I had to stop last night, I was messing up the back of the quilt. Blood, you know."

Helen was slowly working on an English-style pieced hexagon quilt the whole time I attended the group.⁹ For her, the social aspect of the group seemed more important than the sewing, but it is possible that she couldn't find a way out of it, once she realised that quilting was not for her. The extreme closeness of the weekly contact, and the demands of politeness would make it difficult to exit in any case without compelling reasons of health, family commitment or moving away.

My own quilt work was seen by others in the group as rather innovative, surprising, even daring. Nancy, whose exposure to contemporary quilting is rather more extensive than some of the others, was not so surprised, but rather kindly praised my "strong" colour combinations, and "interesting" quilting patterns. The others took a polite lead from this, as the general tenor of comments on everyone's work within the group was kindly and polite at its strongest. My academic work, on the other hand, was seen as distant, and rather perplexing. Helen remarked: "I don't know why you'd want to be writing a book about quilting, dear, surely there are more important things?". It was hard to explain that it was not a purely historical work. But this was not a topic that came up very often, and I was far more

⁸ Only quilters who use two thimbles, one on each hand, entirely avoid this. Noni, using none, ended up with two bleeding hands, where I, for example, only end up with one, the hand underneath the quilt, which must feel the needle come through all three layers. After a few weeks of daily quilting, one develops hard calluses on these fingers, where the needle continually pricks. There is quite a long time of impaired sewing while one learns to use one or two thimbles, and it is harder to learn to use thimbles if you learned to sew without one – quilt gadget retailers are always coming up with new forms of thimble reputed to be easier to use or learn to use, in leather, plastic, or a variety of different shapes.

⁹ This kind of quilt has been discussed in more detail above in Chapter One.

often asked about my university teaching, a part-time occupation in a different subject area.

The group's weekly meetings made it an important part of each participant's life. Members sought each other out at Guild meetings, exhibitions and weekends away, and were a source of inspiration and encouragement to each other. When Eve spent a week or so in hospital at one stage, the group made special efforts to keep in touch, and to take her sewing to her there.

*The Paradise Patchworkers, Luxton*¹⁰

For twelve years, in a succession of church halls in Sydney's southern suburbs, the Paradise Patchworkers have been meeting. Organised by a group of women who had taken quilting classes at the first local quilt shop, "Patchwork Paradise", the group has a membership of about fifty, of whom some thirty or so come to each fortnightly morning meeting. The shop has long since changed hands and names, and its proprietor, an American woman who taught many of the early members has moved away. A number of the founding members remain active, and are crucial to the survival of the group, although at the time I joined, there were beginning to be murmurs about formalising the loose structure, in order to allow some control to pass to other members of the group.

At the time I joined, Valmai was the effective convenor of the group. She is a widow who lives alone and spends a lot of time organising this group, and a variety of church activities. She has a dry, amusing, sometimes abrasive manner, and regarded the group as her own creation before some other members were emboldened to organise a formal structure during 1993. The group holds a biannual exhibition, with proceeds going to a nominated charity, but has no ongoing charity project. This seems to suit the members, many of whom see their time at Paradise meetings as their own special indulgence. When a new charity project was suggested at one meeting, the oldest member of the group, Edith, said tartly "I've done all the charity work I'm going to do -- I've done my bit for 40 years. I'm quilting for myself!".

¹⁰ Information for this section comes from my participation in the group over a period of 18 months, 1992-4, and is from my fieldnotes, unless otherwise noted. I had many conversations with group members, at the meetings, and when I met them at other quilting events, and I also asked for their help with a small questionnaire.

Members start to arrive about half-past nine on the second and fourth Tuesdays of every month, and wander into the slightly dusty church hall, where Valmai, and her main helpers Hilda and Mary, with anyone else who feels like helping, would be setting up the tea urn in the kitchen, and moving tables into a square, open in the middle. Women bring their sewing in handmade bags, or baskets prettily lined with fabric, and put it down in their preferred places, before wandering around talking to other new arrivals. New work is admired, and progress in ongoing projects praised. This is a communal process, conducted jointly: "Janice!, come and see how much she's done since last time! Goodness, you must have been turbo-charged!" People tend to sit in the same places, with their particular friends or acquaintances, but to wander around at various times, and see what others are doing. From about 11.30, morning tea is ready, and everyone gets their own cup of tea from the urn, and gets out their sandwich or biscuit. Only on very special occasions, like the tenth anniversary meeting or the Christmas party, would there be a communal lunch: everyone is always too busy sewing. Meetings are quite noisy, with lots of talk and laughter, and everyone wears a pretty name badge, with their first name painted on in folk-art style by Noela, one of the members.

Sometimes, a member will have brought along a new quilt top, to be tacked together with the batting and backing, ready for quilting. Many members, living in small houses, or with families, have no space in their houses big enough to lay out a whole quilt top, flat and undisturbed, for long enough to do this. But with a couple of fellow members working on it too, a quilt can be tacked in an hour, and ready for the next stage of the process. Often, too, members would bring their piles of blocks and lay them out on the splintery floor, inviting others to comment and make suggestions on layout, sashing, backing fabric, and quilting designs. These comment sessions sometimes became large circles with twenty or more onlookers giving their opinions in the discussion, sometimes to the further confusion of the maker.

There is a raffle every meeting, with an informal rotation determining who will provide the small prize, wrapped nicely, at the beginning of the meeting. Hilda and Mary wander the tables selling the tickets, and Valmai draws it after her usual talk about exhibition plans, or workshop organisation. Before morning tea, Valmai will get up and call for "A bit of shoosh". Addressing us as "girls", she outlines preparations she has already made for the exhibition, gives out tasks such as duplicating flyers, or

contacting the Guild to book the quilt display frames, which it lends to local groups. Sometimes there's a bit of hilarity and ribbing, and sometimes Valmai takes it in good part, adopting a role somewhere between mother and schoolteacher, and shaking her finger, calling: "Now button your lips, girls, I've got something to tell you". This tone allows her to be quite forceful, but within a jokey atmosphere that enables people to take direction without losing face. Thus when tasks are allocated, the "volunteer" often makes a joke of appearing insubordinate: "Will I have to stand in the corner if I don't do it?" to which Valmai always responds as if she had the power to impose such sanctions. This is also a situation which is within the experience of all members of the group. All are mothers, many are grandmothers, and of course, all have been to school, mostly quite a long time ago. They tend to socialise with each other at meetings in the manner of "girls", assuming common womanly knowledge and with a level of laughter and banter which is quite familiarly "girlish". As the exhibition gets closer though, Valmai gets a bit overwrought and is less amused.

In fact, Valmai's level of anxiety became of concern to many members, and after the 1993 exhibition, moves were made to change the running style of the group. One member, Ngaire, found out that the executive of an unincorporated group was liable for accident or injury claims. This gave an impetus to the process already beginning, to formalise the group procedures and take the burden off Valmai. It was an interesting process to watch, because it was all done without any overt unpleasantness, with those members wanting change prepared to modify their demands considerably in order not to cause any pain to Valmai or her informal deputies. The formal incorporation, necessary for impersonal legal reasons, gave an excuse which allowed Valmai to step down with some grace. On the advice of the Quilters' Guild, the group adopted its general model constitution,¹¹ legally incorporated, and then had to elect office bearers and a committee. At the same time, changes were made to the focus of the Exhibition, away from its charity fundraising aspect, and towards a more self-celebratory aspect. Elaine said to me in a tea-time conversation: "If it's just going to be a teas and craft show then I'm not interested, but every time you say that someone goes and cries in the kitchen. I want a real quilt exhibition, for everyone. This group

¹¹ As a service to quilt groups like the Paradise Patchworkers the Guild has provided a model constitution for incorporation purposes, and advice on how to undertake the process of incorporation.

has got to decide if its a quilt group, or a general craft group, and I think we've reached a turning point".

She was right, but it didn't happen quite as planned. Valmai's instincts were rather better than anyone had realised, and she turned up to the next meeting saying loudly to all "There's going to be a revolution, and I'm going to start it!". Although she didn't relinquish her control all at once, it was clear that she felt it as something of a relief to have the running of the group off her shoulders, and proposed a more formal structure herself: "I'm a bit sick of doing it all myself, and I've got to make you lot help. I'd like to do a bit of quilting too, you know!". As it turned out, Valmai stayed on the new committee, and the transition was managed quite peacefully.

The group has always organised workshops and lessons with local teachers, paid for by each interested member, and held in the "off" weeks. This function will increase now that the new committee takes "the furthering of quilting skills" seriously as an objective. The group maintains a library with purchased and donated books and magazines which members can borrow. There is an enormous variety of work done by members, ranging from kit quilts and very traditional hand piecing work, to more adventurous applique and quick machine techniques. Quite a few members are active in their own smaller friendship groups, meeting in each others homes (groups like the Barronville Patchers, described above), and more are members of the Guild. There are no "quilt artists" among the group, although there are a couple of women who win prizes at Guild shows for their exquisitely executed traditional work.

This is an unexpected source of tension, and one which is denied and minimised by group members, and yet resurfaces time and time again. A sort of submerged competitiveness drives some members, and comes out as bitterness and mock-humorous raillery when a member is honoured. Interestingly, some members, some of the same ones, are also very proud of these achievements and claim them for the group, at Guild meetings. When Kay's traditional applique quilt, made for her mother, and a masterpiece of fine sewing and traditional design, won the first prize in its class at the Guild Show, the comments of group members at a previous meeting, when she had brought it in to show us, were thrown into sharp relief. The quilt was held up, to a chorus of exclamations. Kay stood by modestly. While everyone admired the quilt, there were also some

comments, only half-joking, such as "Doesn't she make you sick?". One woman put away her own work and wouldn't show it again, after Kay had shown her quilt. Someone, in a stage whisper, opined: "Well, membership will drop now!". Elaine, another powerful member of the group, a local quilt shop owner, and a great supporter of the group with gifts of fabric and such, was able to convert some of this sourness into real congratulation, pointing out that Kay had spent nineteen months on the quilting alone, and this made them feel better, as that kind of dedication is not seen necessarily as a virtue. Not everyone thinks it right to be so singleminded. Kay's quilt subsequently won the popular vote for "Viewer's Choice" at the Guild Show, probably with the support of her fellow group members all of whom attended.

At an earlier meeting, Valmai had told us about another quilter, winner of two prizes, and "Best Of Show" at the previous year's Guild Show. "You know her husband pays for a housekeeper, and she sews 18 hours a day, don't you?" was Valmai's reply to my comment about this quilter's amazing work. "Ooh, I'll ask for one of those for Christmas, will I?" said Lee, sitting next to me. But the other women in the conversation were rather scathing of such a full-time commitment. Yvonne remarked "It's just unhealthy. When would she get down and play with the kids? Quilting's meant to be fun, not an obsession. It wouldn't be very relaxing, would it?" This issue of competition and cooperation, and the ways in which the group manages to hold them in tension, will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

The Paradise Patchworkers pride themselves on being open to all, in strong contrast with another nearby group which, according to talk amongst Paradise Patchworkers and in the Guild, conducts proficiency tests for aspiring members.¹² Prospective members of the Paradise Patchworkers, who usually make contact after the biannual exhibition, or through the Guild's listing of local groups and their contact numbers, can turn up to a meeting at any time during the year. Valmai (and now the current president, Ngaire) introduces new members during her talk, and a membership fee is not demanded until they have "come to a few meetings

¹² I have never been able to discover whether this is actually true; it is certainly widely believed, in the Paradise group, and in the Guild. The informal leader of this other group is a very skilled but rather rigidly traditional quiltmaker who has taught a great deal, so it is possible.

to see if they like us". But as Paul Hoggett and Jeff Bishop point out in their study of a variety of self-organised leisure groups in Britain, recruitment is a complex process: "This process is as much about the sustenance of a particular group and its identity than about exclusion and avoidance. ... In most cases, quite complex vetting procedures lie behind such phrases as 'we are open to anybody, regardless of ability'."¹³ In Paradise Patchworkers and groups like them, the vetting procedures work both ways, and ongoing members self-select as much as being selected by the group.

One of the issues that worried Paradise Patchworkers was the age difference between the (few) younger members of the group, and the overwhelming majority, in their fifties, sixties and seventies. "I don't know why you young ones'd want to sit around with us old girls," Jean H. said to Kate on at least two occasions. Jean P., agreeing with her, made a joke of it: "Well, you're a spring chicken yourself, Jean, nearly two years younger than I am!" Both women are in their mid-to-late sixties.

Another recruitment issue, dealt with in the most roundabout way, was the level of skill, or innovation of the new recruit. As shown above, even long established members of the group could upset their acceptance by too impressive a show of skill, or by winning a Guild prize. In fact, after the ambiguous reception of her masterpiece quilt, Kay didn't attend the group for some time, and deputed Elaine to let it be known to the others that she was offended by their lack of graciousness about her prize. My own work, rather different in style from that of most members of the group, attracted some comments which implied I was rather out of step with the rest of the group. I felt this strongly enough to bring my most traditional work to the next meeting. On the other hand, one prospective member who came only once to Paradise Patchers, was actually after quilting tuition, and was told by Valmai: "Oh, we don't do lessons, dear, you need to go to a shop for that".

For some members, the social contact of the Paradise Patchworkers is as important as the time spent quilting at meetings. Members repeatedly stressed the social aspect, when asked what they most liked about quilting. There is a common generalisation which is often repeated,

¹³ Bishop, J., and Hoggett, P., *Organising Around Enthusiasms: Mutual Aid in Leisure*, Comedia, London, 1986, pp.111-112

both in groups and in more fleeting encounters between quilters, such as a cup of tea at an exhibition, or a workshop at a symposium or retreat: "I meet such lovely people -- quilters are all nice people." ¹⁴ For others, it has to do with the experience of common interest, and something interesting, indeed enthralling, to talk about. Other quilters understand the passionate interest which the most arcane aspects of the craft inspire. One Paradise Patchworker told me: "I enjoy having a subject with which I can talk at length to others on the same wavelength". Another's main reason for coming to the group was: "meeting other people with the same interest ."¹⁵ Some quilters see their group as a way of extending their friendship networks beyond family or age cohort, within a structure that provides a weekly or fortnightly reason to meet. This regular but informal contact was cited by several quilters as their favourite things about the group. Jean wrote: "The friendships made over the years, with people of the same interest and not always the same age. This factor is wonderful."¹⁶ Hilda's words were: "It has helped me make some good friends and I enjoy our regular meetings."¹⁷ That the meetings were out of their homes, that any cleaning up or preparation was communally done, and that no one had to take hostessing responsibility (with the possible exception of Valmai) were all things that made the meetings more enjoyable for the women who attended regularly.

For Paradise Patchworkers, the group seems to function in counterpoint to their family situations. While family and home are often topics of conversation, there is also another register available -- the mild, or humorous complaint about family, and the strong feeling of individual affirmation that quilters seek to get from their group encounters: "This is something that's just for me -- not the kids, or Derek, or anyone else. They like what I make for them, but that's not why I make it. I'm making something for myself." ¹⁸ At least one third of the Paradise Patchworkers were regular members of at least one other quilt group.¹⁹

¹⁴ Susan, from questionnaire.

¹⁵ Lee, from questionnaire, Doris, from questionnaire.

¹⁶ Jean, from questionnaire.

¹⁷ Hilda from questionnaire.

¹⁸ Shirley, from a conversation, Paradise Patchworkers meeting, May 1993. This idea came up so often in slightly different phrasing, that I took this quote for my title.

¹⁹ Information from questionnaires.

Paradise Patchworkers clearly enjoyed the ways in which their group meetings were different from their domestic situations, and yet, as the constitutional episode showed, they became uncomfortable when the formal structures and difficulties of the public world obtruded into it, making it less like a family. In Chapter Three I will argue that quilting culture has produced a complex blend of the public and private, and examine in greater detail how this is significant for ideas of women's culture more generally.

The Quilters' Guild Inc.

At the other end of the scale from the tiny and informal groups is The Quilters' Guild Inc., which is the biggest and most ambitious quilt guild in Australia. Its progress from a small group of enthusiasts to a large body with a public profile was described in the previous chapter. The Guild has a set of explicit aims reiterated in all Guild publications:

The Quilters Guild aims to:

- Promote the art and craft of patchwork and quilting
- Bring quilters together and encourage the establishment of quilt groups
- Encourage and maintain high standards of workmanship and design in both traditional and contemporary quilting
- Foster interest in the history of patchwork and quilting
- Organise selective exhibitions ²⁰

As an organisation the Guild has always had aspirations to pre-eminence and formal recognition, and has thus adopted structural forms and procedural practices that remain both unfamiliar and uncongenial to many of its members. While recognising the necessity for such structures, it is clear from lack of interest at meetings many members still find them alienating, or tedious.

Quilters' Guild general meetings are held bi-monthly. Meeting places vary. For some years, they were held in the YWCA premises in the city but these rooms became too expensive, with restrictive conditions on the preparation of the regular afternoon teas, and from 1995 meetings were held in a

²⁰ This appears in the front of all issues of *The Template*, and all exhibition catalogues. Quoted here from *The Template* 13 (3) June 1995, p.2. The use of "workmanship" reveals, I believe, a lack of self-conscious feminism, rather than an anti-feminist outlook.

community hall in the inner western Sydney suburb of Burwood.²¹ The Guild realised in the early 1990s that many members were reluctant to travel into the city, and since then some suburban and country meetings have also been held. Well-attended meetings have been held in Newcastle, Wollongong, and Lawson in the Blue Mountains²², outside Sydney, and at Hurstville and Gordon, in Sydney's southern and northern suburbs.²³ Each meeting is under the auspices of a "hostess" group, which provides the afternoon tea, and whose members get first turn at the "Show and Tell". In distant locations their local knowledge is used to hire premises and transport members to the meeting from the station. As one approaches a Guild meeting, one can begin to recognise the other quilters walking the same way, by their interesting quilted bags or jackets. Groups of two or three coalesce as they get closer to the hall. There are helpful signs along the way, put up by Committee members earlier in the day. Inside, the library table is set up with piles of books and magazines, and early members are already browsing. The greeting table holds the membership book, and while signing, members pick up Lucky Door Prize tickets, and hand over the quilt blocks they have made for the "Block of the Quarter" draw. Members attending their first ever meeting are given a red spot sticker for their name badge. These are so that other members can identify them, introduce themselves, and be friendly.

Once the hall is full, and the members getting out their sewing, the meetings start right on time, and move briskly through the official business towards the later parts, which everyone looks forward to. After greeting of new members, the meetings follow a pattern: a series of reports from office holders, reports about Guild projects such as the Annual Exhibition, and the Teacher Accreditation Programme, and then a guest speaker. This is usually a well-known quiltmaker, a fabric expert or quilt collector. After the speaker, there is generally a "Show and Tell" session, started off by members of the the group "hostessing" the meeting, and then involving all Guild members who wish to show something. The Lucky Door Prizes are drawn,

²¹ In late 1996, the Guild announced that it was looking for premises to lease in the city, in order to house the library and other administrative records. This is another step in the consolidation of the Guild's institutional presence. See *The Template* 14 (4) September 1996, p.5.

²² Newcastle meeting 13 Jun 1992, Lawson meeting 13 Feb 1993, Wollongong meeting 12 Feb 1994.

²³ Hurstville meeting 12 June 1993; Gordon meeting 8 Oct 1994.

the winner congratulated, and the prize, usually a bundle of fabric donated by a major fabric wholesaler, taken back to the winner's seat in triumph, to be examined by everyone within reaching distance. Finally there is an afternoon tea, provided by the hostess group, and by those other members who have brought a plate. Members mill around, discuss the talk, admire at closer range the quilts which have been shown, and catch up with friends and acquaintances. Chairs are turned around to enable groups to gather, and the noise rises steadily.

There are considerable differences between the way the formal part of the meeting is managed and responded to, the way the speaker is received, and atmosphere in which the "Show and Tell" is conducted. Members often seem to be waiting for the end of the formal meeting, which is frequently rather repetitive, and can be tedious. The office bearers are usually unused to public speaking, and tend to adopt a more informal chatty style, but are sometimes very nervous. There are a number of standing jokes, and the President for 1992-3, Karen Fail, was particularly good at making her report warmly informal and amusing, often eliciting laughter from her audience. But there are rarely questions from the floor, and almost never dissent from the proposals, arrangements or ideas of the Committee. Members at a guild meeting are prepared to do what is asked of them, in the way of formal ratification of reports and proposals, but they rarely interfere with the Committee's plans, or initiate business from the floor.

By contrast, the guest speaker section of the meeting is far more lively, with members feeling able to respond loudly, even call out, and to ask questions relating to the talk, or to their own experience. Usually the guest speaker is someone with quilts to show. Guest speakers have included Annette Gero, a quilt collector and researcher, Narelle Grieve, a past president of the Guild showing her antique quilt collection, and Jennie Kants, a Blue Mountains quilter, who addressed the Blue Mountains meeting, showing her work and talking about it in detail. Eminent professional quilters such as Fiona Gavens and Judy Hooworth also speak regularly to the Guild.²⁴ The speaker usually has quilts to show, and sometimes slides as well (this is particularly so for professional quilters, whose quilts are sold). Several members of the Committee, or the front row of the audience volunteer to

²⁴ Announcements for the meetings featuring these speakers can be found in *The Template*.

hold up the quilts, and can often be seen examining them in minute detail while the speaker goes on to the next. When quilts are shown there is often audible response, people exclaiming and discussing the quilt with their neighbours, but also intervening in the display, with suggestions or requests: "Don't put it down yet!", "Can we see the back, please?", "Upside down, ladies!". In this section of the meeting, members feel that they have expertise to comment and contribute, in stark contrast to the earlier formal part of the meeting. Attention is focussed on the front, and people put their sewing down, and watch carefully. For some who have been stitching away through the formal part of the meeting, it is the first time they have raised their heads.²⁵

The "Show and Tell" section of the meeting is different again, with a similar lively feeling, and comment and response going on, but with a perceptible component also of solidarity and support. People who show quilts are *all* to be congratulated, and so there is little criticism of the quilts. Antique quilts which have been abstracted from their conditions of making, can be discussed more robustly, as the person who made them is not present to be upset. This also seems to apply when a well-known maker is guest speaker, and shows a large number of her quilts. There it is possible to like some and not others, and to voice audible, though usually polite, criticism: "Well, she's certainly moved on from *that* phase!" "I don't know how she can go on with these endless *series* – it'd bore me rigid!". In the case of particularly prolific quiltmakers, like the amateur quiltmaker who spoke at one meeting, there is sometimes rather envious comment. After an impressive list of achievements, including running a business, raising children and making a large number of beautiful quilts, one of my neighbours remarked drily: "You could really go off someone like that."

In the "Show and Tell", where the maker is standing holding one quilt proudly for all to see, sometimes visibly nervous and shaky, and sometimes unable to describe the quilt on the microphone (one of the Committee

²⁵ The importance of *listening*, for a quilter who spends a lot of time sewing is examined again in Chapter Three, below. The quilters I have talked to are unanimous in their dislike of SBS, the multicultural television channel, "because you can't quilt and read subtitles at the same time" (Jean P., Paradise Patchworkers). There is also much criticism of programmes and films with much silence in them as, "You need something where they are always talking so that you can follow the story without looking up" (Lee, Paradise Patchworkers).

members stands by for such cases), the inclusive, supportive atmosphere of the group tends to dampen all criticism. Those who do criticise these quilts do so very quietly and gently to their immediate neighbour. All members have a strong awareness of the amount of work that goes into any finished quilt. However much one may dislike a particular quilt, the ethos of the Guild meeting demands recognition of the work and effort put into it. This requires that all members attempt to see the quilt as the maker herself sees it, from her point of view, rather than their own. The quilts are not aesthetic objects isolated from their makers' views of them, but seen as intimately bound up with the self-image of the maker. In this circumstance, appreciating all the quilts is not just politeness, but a deeper form of expressing support for fellow quiltmakers.²⁶ In "Show and Tell", an embodied and contextualised form of quilt display is achieved. Makers tell the story of their quilt, whom it is for, why they made it, maybe including the problems they had in achieving their intention, or in finding just the right fabric for the border. Presentations vary from the briefest tongue-tied naming of the quilt: "This is my, um, first big quilt. It's a Double Wedding Ring -- well, you all know that" [laugh], to long and self-assured narrations of family stories, pattern variations, and the trials and tribulations of the quiltmaker. This range of levels of confidence, and the supportive atmosphere which allows it, is another aspect of the semi-public, semi-private space that quilting culture has produced, discussed further in Chapter Three.

Guild meetings are "hosted" by a different group each time, who volunteer to provide the afternoon tea, and to help arrange the hall. They begin the "Show and Tell", and have the opportunity to sell tickets for their raffle quilt, or publicise their upcoming exhibition at the meeting. As a result, one sometimes gets a strong indication of the specific atmosphere and orientation of particular groups: their joint projects, their camaraderie, and their degree of comfort with the larger meetings of the Guild. Sometimes -- as when the Cowpasture Quilters, with fewer than ten members, hosted a Guild meeting in April 1992 -- even a tiny group can bring together enough confidence and enough work to provide the basis of a "Show and Tell". The

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of "Show and Tell" as performance in quilt groups in Maine, USA, see Langellier, K., "Show and Tell in Contemporary Quilting Culture" in *Uncoverings* 13, 1992, pp.127-147. This article will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

speaker from this group remarked: "What do you need for a quilt group? Two people interested in quilting, and a cup of coffee."²⁷

The host group's "Show and Tell" is followed by a general call for other people with something to show. Often a woman will stand up with a Guild-related quilt: that is, a quilt made from one of the Guild's quilt block exchanges, or begun at one of the Guild's workshops. Sometimes, just the exuberance of having finished something is enough to encourage a speaker to show it. Quilts of all kinds, from king-size masterpieces to miniatures, are held up for the audience's approbation. Women who are too nervous to speak on the microphone themselves, are sometimes spoken for by a Guild Committee member, or opt to show their quilt with a minimum of talk. Friendship and group-made quilts are particularly likely to be shown at this stage in the meeting. A proud but bashful queue forms down the side of the hall, and there are exclamations among the members: "Go on, Rae, you haven't brought it all this way for nothing have you?", "You've got something in that bag, haven't you?" and "Well, if you don't get up and show off, I'll do it for you!".

The Guild holds another form of meeting as well. These are the Night Meetings, which are held on the second Wednesday night in some of the off-months, in a community centre in Chatswood, in Sydney's affluent northern suburbs, where there are many thriving local quilt groups. These meetings have neither extreme of formality or informality -- no business section, and no Show and Tell -- and they concentrate on the guest speaker, who generally shows slides, or quilts, or both. There is sometimes a stall set up by one of the many quilt shops on the north shore, which sells the latest fabrics and books. These meetings are more relaxed, and provide a Guild contact for those quilters unable to attend the Saturday meetings, or the daytime charitable activities of the Guild, such as the monthly Community Quilts meetings (where quilts are made for hospitals or nursing homes). The north shore venue is a long drive for quilters from the western or southern suburbs,²⁸ and as a result, the night meetings attract a particularly

²⁷ Spokeswoman, Cowpasture Quilters, at Quilters' Guild Inc. meeting, YWCA Rooms, Sydney, April 11 1992.

²⁸ When I spoke about my work to a night meeting in March 1994, several members of my group, the Paradise Patchworkers, drove all the way there to support me. It was the first night meeting any of them had attended.

well-off subset of Guild members, a subset which has also been disproportionately influential on Guild Committees.

The Guild attracts over a hundred members to an average meeting, but reaches its 1,200 members around Australia most consistently through its publication *The Template*.²⁹ This is discussed in more detail in the section on quilt publishing, below.

Politically, the Guild has been a very harmonious organisation for some years. In the aftermath of the 1988 exhibition, there was a contested election for President, and some ongoing conflict over the control and use of moneys from that exhibition, but in recent years, there has not been an election for a Committee position, and indeed it is sometimes difficult to find women to fill all positions at the Annual General Meeting. The Committee makes regular attempts to encourage members to think about joining the Committee before the AGM comes up, publishing items in *The Template* such as "5 Reasons to Join the Guild Committee". Reason four reads in part: "How many friends do you have?...Well, joining the Committee is a good opportunity to make new friends. We all know what captivating people quilters always are, so you are off to a good start!!!"³⁰

The members are remarkably placid about political matters within the Guild. In February 1992, an important constitutional change was to be decided, one which was to allow the current president to stand again for the job, despite pre-existing constitutional limits on the amount of time members can spend on the Committee. This change was foreshadowed in *The Template*,³¹ as it had to be under the rules, and was spoken to by the president (whose continued presence on the Committee it was designed to enable) in some detail. She was very careful to avoid all appearance of ambition, and her report, later in the same meeting, was particularly informal and humorous. Despite the importance of the change, there was

29 In October 1994, exact financial membership was reported as 1,258. "Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Quilters' Guild", *The Template* 13 (1) December 1994 p.31. The Guild however, has an ongoing problem with members forgetting to renew membership, and counts its membership, financial and unfinancial, at about 1,600.

30 Fisher, M., "5 Reasons to Join the Guild Committee", *The Template* (10) 3, June 1992, pp.24-25, punctuation original.

31 See "Proposed Amendment to Guild Constitution", *The Template* 10 (92) March 1992, p.5; and Grieve, N., "Annual General Meeting, President's Report", *The Template* 10 (1) December 1991, pp.4-5 for details.

no discussion, and no dissent. In fact, at the meeting there was no apparent interest in the matter, or in constitutional matters generally. There was general assent to the comments of one Committee member: "All this only became necessary when we incorporated". Everyone seemed glad when it was over with.

The Guild's recent activities have been marked by an increasing confidence in itself as the premier Guild in Australia, and by a growing interest in producing a "professional" context for quilting. In August 1991, the Guild organised and chaired a meeting of delegates from all the quilting guilds in Australia. Reporting on the conference, an Committee member wrote: "The aim of the conference was to begin an overall valuation system for quilts and to help other Guilds set up their own systems by offering information."³² This reveals the Guild executive's view of its pre-eminence among the other Guilds. The second national conference was held in November 1992 in Melbourne (it has since become an annual event, at which the agenda had expanded to include judging of quilts, teacher accreditation and the establishment of an ongoing national organisation. This conference too, only confirmed the Guild Committee's views: "Canberra and NSW proved to have the most to share, having well developed systems of valuation and teacher accreditation ... We came away feeling pleased with what the Quilters' Guild achieves and as a committee value highly the tremendous support we have from our membership."³³

Since 1992, the Guild has offered an Annual Scholarship "to provide the financial support of a Guild member to achieve and/or develop his/her goals within the sphere of patchwork and quilting". The four winners to 1996 were all professional quilters, "quilt artists", who used the money to attend the prestigious American Quilt Surface Design Symposium (Wendy Lugg, 1993 winner who also attended classes in Japan, and Judy Hooworth 1994 winner), or to prepare for gallery exhibitions (Greg Sommerville 1992 winner and Lyn Inall 1995 winner).³⁴ The scholarship is typical of the

³² *The Template* 10 (1) Dec 1991 has several reports of this conference. The quote comes from Brodie, T., "Valuation Conference Report" pp.11-12.

³³ Fail, K., "Report on National Conference", *The Template* 11 (2) Mar 1993, p.15.

³⁴ For reports on these winners, and their experiences, see Wright, M., "Scholarship 1992 Report", and "Meet the Member", *The Template* 11 (10) Dec 1992, pp.12 & 20; Wright, M., "Scholarship 1993 Report", *The Template* 12 (1) Dec 1993 p.10; "Wendy Lugg", *The Template* 12 (2) Mar 1994 pp.34-35; Lugg, W., "The Japanese Connection",

Guild's self-reliant attitude -- using its own moneys instead of advocating that members apply for government arts grants -- but it indicates that quilting is also beginning to produce an artistic elite, skilled in applying for grants, as well as in quilting. Although the scholarship criteria do not specify professional status as a factor in selection, it seems likely that amateur quilters do not apply.³⁵

The Teacher Accreditation Programme, running since 1991³⁶, also indicates the increasing professionalisation of the field. The Guild has stepped in to certify those teachers who meet its technical proficiency standards in a limited but growing range of techniques. Here, it might be seen to be following the training emphasis of the Embroiderers' Guild, which has taught certified courses for many decades, but in confining its interest to *teachers of quilters*, the Guild employs a rhetoric of maintaining standards and differentiating, on behalf of local groups with fewer resources, between the qualified and the unqualified: "The Guild is regularly approached to recommend teachers and would like to maintain a list of accredited teachers which would be supplied on request. Only teachers with proven skills to the required level would be recommended."³⁷

By June 1993, there were eight accredited teachers³⁸, and the report from the committee member responsible indicates that the programme was not as popular as the committee had thought it might be: "There may be some confusion about who is eligible to apply for teacher accreditation ... let me explain. Both new teachers and those with many years experience, teaching any and all types of patchwork are eligible to apply for the Certificate of Basic Patchwork and Quilting."³⁹

The Template 13 (3) Jun 1995 pp.22-24; and Hooworth, J., "Scholarly Pursuits", *The Template* 13 (3) June 1995 p.13.

35 The notice inviting applications for the 1996 scholarship specifies only that "The Scholarship will be awarded to a Guild member of proven patchwork and quilting experience with clearly stated goals and whose work shows originality and creativity from either a traditional or a contemporary perspective". *The Template* 14 (3) June 1996 p.8.

36 First reported in *The Template* 9 (4) June 1991, p.6

37 *ibid.*

38 *The Template* 11 (3) June 1993, p.7.

39 Eight teachers accredited out of the much larger number of teachers actually working at that time seems to indicate that the Guild's teacher accreditation plans were fairly unsuccessful as at mid 1993, especially as most of those accredited at this point were current or former Guild Committee members. One might estimate the

The Quilters' Guild Inc. has been a powerful force in setting the agenda for quilters in New South Wales, and in Australia, and its current push towards professionalisation, standardisation and certification is sure to have wide-reaching effects. It remains, however, an organisation which attempts to bridge the gaps between the amateur and the professional quilter, and between the domestic and the public sphere. This aspect of quilting culture is the focus of Chapter Three. There are other collective enterprises though, in which quilters produce cultural meaning, to which this chapter now turns.

The exhibition as a cultural production

Exhibitions are a crucial element in the maintenance of the quilting subculture, and are important sites for recruitment, reinforcement, social contact, charity work, and all the elements of quilting self-definition. This discussion will focus on the Quilters' Guild Annual Show, as it has developed over the last few years, since the groundbreaking exhibition *Quilt Australia 88*, which permanently changed the Guild's image of itself⁴⁰. Local groups also have exhibitions, and these are important to the identities of those groups, but they have less influence on the overall profile and self-image of quilting in New South Wales than the Guild Show, which in recent years has become the centrepiece of the Guild's *Sydney Quilt Festival*, a multi-event "happening".⁴¹

number of teachers working at that time by assuming there was one teacher employed part time at each of the 39 NSW quilting shops listed in the back of *Down Under Quilts*, Winter 1993 – which doesn't include those teachers employed by groups, guilds, and unlisted shops, and severely underestimates the number employed at some of the larger shops, such as Anne's Glory Box in Newcastle, which ran a full calendar of courses, with several teachers

⁴⁰ I have discussed this Exhibition in detail elsewhere: see Chapter One, and also Grahame, E., "Quilting in Australia and the 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations", *Uncoverings* 14, 1993, pp.169-187.

⁴¹ A recent *Sydney Quilt Festival*, in July 1996 is reported in detail in *The Template* 14 (4) Sept 1996. It included *The Quilt Show*, with 251 quilts, a visiting exhibition of Japanese quilts, an exhibition of 'Australian heritage quilts', a Gala Dinner with speakers, a two day workshop series, Quiltskills '96, an exhibition of *Art to Wear*, a seminar by the newly formed Quilt Study Group of Australia titled "Quilt Perspectives", *Making Their Mark*, an exhibition of contemporary (art) quilts, and numerous events, and sales at local quilt shops and galleries.

There is no time during the year when the Guild is not, one way or another, working on the Exhibition. Exhibition Secretary is one of the busiest and most important posts on the Guild Committee, co-ordinating the activities of a ten person Quilt Show Sub-Committee.⁴² *The Template*, each issue, carries developing details of the forthcoming Exhibition, or post mortems, and pictures of the last one. The Guild has held an annual Exhibition since 1982, as well as sponsoring a number of other kinds of exhibitions: travelling collections of small quilts, a series of exhibitions of art quilts at the Manly Art Gallery, and numerous others.

The Annual Show is a members' exhibition, and every member who enters has at least one quilt hung. This gives the exhibition an inclusiveness which is valued by the members and others who make the trip to view the quilts. Of recent years, this inclusive policy has meant that there have been over 250 quilts in each exhibition, making the Show an exhausting all-day excursion for anyone seriously interested in detailed viewing. Aware of this, the Guild's entry charge arrangements allow people to leave the exhibition to browse the quiltshop stalls of the Merchants Mall, or to have lunch or coffee before returning to see more quilts. There are also special rates for multi-day entry.

There are a number of significant differences between the Show and an art exhibition of a more usual type, which this description will highlight. The Quilt Show is, in quilting parlance, a "judged show"⁴³, meaning that prizes are given in a number of categories. Quilters can opt to have their quilt excluded from the judging, but this is rare, and most welcome the brief evaluative comments they receive with their quilt after the show is taken down. The categories have varied from time to time, and the *Quilt Australia '88* show, discussed in detail in Chapter One, had a particularly unusual set of categories. At present, in response to demands from the non-professional membership of the Guild, the judging differentiates between amateur and professional makers, with some categories open to both.

⁴² See for example, the Quilt Show Sub-Committee cited on p.1 of the Quilters' Guild Inc. *Quilt Show '94* Catalogue. It includes Co-ordinator, Merchants Mall co-ordinator, Show Assistant, Exhibition Designer, Graphic Designer, Clerical Assistant, Photographer and three people working on Publicity, all of whom were Guild members.

⁴³ Quilters would recognise this as in opposition to "a juried show", where quilts are selected for entry from slides. The Manly Art Gallery exhibition, held each year to showcase Guild members "contemporary" quilts, is a juried show, and selection in the exhibition itself is the only prize given.

Amateur quiltmakers compete for first, second and third prizes in the following categories: traditional quilts, traditional applique quilts, predominantly machine made quilts, and non-traditional/innovative quilts. There is also a beginner quiltmaker category which offers a special prize.

Professional quiltmakers, after some controversy within the Guild, have their own categories of traditional, and non-traditional/innovative. Categories where professionals compete against amateurs include: other techniques, small quilts traditional, small quilts non-traditional/innovative, the theme category for the show (this changes year to year), and a new category of miniature quilts, which has arisen as very small quilts have become a popular genre for quiltmakers.

Most prestigious of all, is the "Best of Show" award, for which the prize is a Bernina sewing machine⁴⁴. This is a quilt chosen by the judges from the prizewinners in the other categories, but the choice almost always causes some dissent and murmurs among viewers, who disagree with the judges' decision. At times, this spills over into the pages of the *Template*, with judges attempting to justify their decisions in the face of popular criticism.⁴⁵ There is, however, another mechanism for popular judgement of quilts. The Viewers' Choice quilt, chosen by popular vote of the people attending the exhibition over the four days, is announced in the September *Template*. It is rarely an innovative quilt, but always magnificently executed, with technical perfection being highly valued by the very knowledgeable viewers of the Show.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, winning "Best Of Show" means a quiltmaker is automatically considered a professional for the next Show. The seemingly self-evident categories of amateur and professional are interestingly fluid in the textile arts generally, as I have discussed elsewhere (Grahame, E., "Pondering Professionalism, Playing the Critic and Plying Your Craft", in *Textile Fibre Forum* 37, 1993 pp.22-23, continued in *Textile Fibre Forum* 38 1993 pp.37 & 59). The issue of professionalism and amateurism is further analysed in Chapter Three.

⁴⁵ See for example, "An Article on Judging From Karen Fail" *The Template*, 12 (1) December 1993 p.26 where two of the judges from the 1993 Quilt Show expound their justifications for judging decisions. The 1993 Best of Show prize was a particularly controversial award, as it was given to a very non-traditional quilt which many Guild member felt lacked requisite technical skills.

Of recent years, as the Show has relied more heavily on corporate sponsorship, there have been a number of special sponsors awards. Examples include the 1993 Australian Country Craft Award for the Best Country Quilt, where "country" stands not as a geographical term, but as an aesthetic marker, loosely defined. In 1994, the American quilting supply company Mountain Mist sponsored a special award through their Australian distributors. The Guild has never had any government assistance in the mounting of these large displays, and has actively sought corporate sponsorship, while retaining a large degree of control over the format and direction of the Show. Prizes are donated by sponsors in return for precisely targetted access to their keenest market.⁴⁶

The Show is entirely staffed by volunteers and runs for four days, in a central location in Sydney's tourist area. For some years it was held at the Overseas Passenger Terminal Building at Sydney's Circular Quay; before that at the Sydney Lower Town Hall; and in 1995, for the first time, at the Exhibition Hall at Darling Harbour. These spaces are public, but have none of the hush and gravity of a dedicated artspace. This is intentional, for Quilt Shows are anything but hushed. Crowded with eager women, sketching designs, and inspecting stitching with their noses virtually touching the fabric, the space is both colourful and noisy. A meandering path leads the viewers through the quilts, pausing before each one, inspecting those with blue, red or gold ribbons and certificates attached. Quilters' Guild volunteers, known as "white glove girls" wander around, talking to people. They also prevent viewers from touching the quilts, handling them themselves, on request, with gloved hands. This role involves turning quilts back to show the stitching or backing, drawing attention to interesting or innovative features, and chatting to people about the contrasts and connections between different quilts, and the interesting patterns and designs which abound. In 1993 there were over 200 volunteers working at the Guild Show over the four days⁴⁷, each provided with cups of coffee and tea on their breaks, and later thanked by a personal letter from the

⁴⁶ Fabric manufacturers and distributors are prominent sponsors of the Guild, with Ray Toby Pty Ltd, importer of a large range of popular American quilting fabrics, providing 85m of fabric in prizes, and a packet of fabric sample square to each exhibitor. Sponsors, including quilt shops, equipment manufacturers and publishers, as well as the fabric distributors also provide the lucky door prizes at Guild meetings.

⁴⁷ See "President's Jottings", *The Template* 11 (4) Sept 1993 p.4. I volunteered as a white glove girl, and sold raffle tickets at that Show.

Exhibition Secretary. Such work is both exhausting, and fun, enabling the volunteers to spend a lot longer among the quilts than would otherwise be feasible, as well as enabling the Guild Show.

Busloads of women from the country and outer suburbs draw up outside the Show, the passengers leaving the purchases they have made at quilt shops along the way on their seats, and filing into the Show. Some come from even further afield. A letter in *The Template* recorded the impressions of a New Zealand quilter, at the 1994 show, claiming that:

This time the number of Auckland quilters crossing the Tasman was a dozen or more -- some with husbands in tow. A major part of the appeal of going to Sydney for this Show is to visit and enjoy several other quilt-related activities ... I loved the friendliness of Sydney quilters, in particular the organising committee who went out of their way to make us feel welcome. It was altogether a most enriching and stimulating quilt experience that I am keen to repeat next year.⁴⁸

Half an hour after opening time, a noisy laughing queue of women has developed at the entrance to the exhibition. The volunteers selling tickets and handing out catalogues, wearing the Quilters' Guild red waistcoat over their clothes, are working as quickly as they can. Women pour into the exhibition⁴⁹, bunching up in front of particularly breathtaking quilts, exclaiming, examining, enjoying. Their catalogues, included in the entry price, contain a brief paragraph from each quilter about her quilt, placing it in her life, or her progress as a quilter, or acknowledging its inspiration or design source. Viewers walking round the exhibition, look at each quilt, look down to read the entry for it, look back at the quilt, in a nodding motion which ties together the maker's account of the quilt, with the quilt as an aesthetic object. Some of these descriptions are very personal: "Made to celebrate my 20th wedding anniversary. Although a December wedding, autumn colours are my favourite. Green, the colour of my bridesmaids,

⁴⁸ Weston, S., quoted in a letter from Judy McDermott, *The Template* 13 (3) June 1995, p.4.

⁴⁹ The 1995 exhibition, held at the new venue of the Sydney Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour, attracted over nine thousand visitors over the four days. The 1993 show attracted well over ten thousand (the 10,000 mark was passed on the last day about lunchtime, while I was a volunteer. It raised a cheer). Similar figures were achieved at the 1994 Show, but the committee later described these as "not as high as we would have liked", in *The Template*, 12 (4) Sept 1994, p.12.

with the 20 rings for the years."⁵⁰ and "Memories of tiled verandahs and lovely Persian rugs on floors in the home of family friends where I lived for a very special year at the age of 6. The original design for the stylised bowl of "fruit on the sideboard" defines my strong recollections of that year."⁵¹

Others privilege the technical achievement of the quilt, revealing that quilters know they are writing these comments for a highly informed audience to read. One quilter wrote, "Made for my son, the centre was pieced quickly but it took nine months to "fit" the seminole border! Owen chose his fabrics and the log cabin pattern after seeing "Good Night Alaska II" in QNM."⁵² Some read almost as specifications. Quilters are *very* interested in fabric.

After making numerous quilts and other projects from recycled denim clothing, a traditional crazy quilt seemed a good way of using some of the scraps. The blocks are machine-pieced onto a calico base, the filling is a woollen blanket, the backing is linen curtain fabric, and the binding is new light-weight denim fabric.⁵³

Outside the exhibition proper, but within the space of the hall or building is the "Merchant's Mall". This is an American term, better suited to the enormous collections of retailers who gather at big American quilt events than to the more modest Australian shows.⁵⁴ Quilters' Guild Shows attract perhaps ten retailers, mostly from Sydney, but sometimes including country quilt supply shops, who bring their newest and best fabrics, magazines, books, gadgets and samples to the Show, for the four days. Large amounts of

50 Entry for quilt no 31 "20 Autumn Rings" by Sandra Laird, Quilters' Guild Inc. *Quilt Show '94 Catalogue*, p.12

51 Entry for quilt no 82 "Cheltenham" by Rhonda Taylor, Quilters' Guild Inc. *1993 Quilt Show Catalogue*, p. 15

52 Entry for quilt no 144 "Starlight, Starbright", by Roslyn Cooper, Quilters' Guild Inc. *Quilt Show '94 Catalogue*, p.219 QNM is Quilters' Newsletter Magazine, the pre-eminent American quilt magazine.

53 Entry for quilt no 132 "True Blue Crazy" by Lyn Inall, Quilters' Guild Inc. *Quilt Show 1992 Catalogue*, p.23

54 For example, the Pacific International Quilt Festival, held in South San Francisco, September/October 1993, which I attended, had over 70 stalls in its Merchants Mall, set up in the ballroom of the luxury hotel where the Festival was held. Barbara Meredith's report of the 1993 Houston Quilt Festival reported "It can be somewhat confusing and that also applies to the shops -- I counted about 660 shops in the Quilt Market", ("Message From Houston", *Australasian Quilters '94 Symposium Newsletter* No. 1, Dec 1993, pp.1-2).

fabric and supplies are sold, and the buzz and crush in the retail area is as great as in the Exhibition itself. Many quilters sign up for workshops, mailing lists, mail order material and other such, meaning that the Exhibition is a big boost for the shops which attend. Each stall has large flat boxes with small pieces (quarter yards, the "fat quarter" or "quilters' quarter"⁵⁵) of hundreds of different printed cotton fabrics in a myriad of colours. Some shops specialise in particular styles or fashions— in flower prints, or plaid fabrics for example – while others bring a selection of their entire stock. The backs of the stalls are brightly decorated with quilts, dolls, fabrics, posters; each recreating in miniature the look and feel of the shop. The retail area is a drawcard for the Show, and is recognised as such by the Guild:

Congratulations and thank you ... to the merchants who showed their wares and contributed to the carnival atmosphere ... The Merchants' Mall was bigger this year with five new stands, adding to the overall excitement of the show and providing an excellent opportunity for our country visitors to see the latest in fabric and accessories.⁵⁶

There is also usually some evidence of the Guild's other activities, for example, a display of recent charity quilts, or of childrens' quilts, or of one of the travelling Suitcase Exhibitions, with which the Guild has proselytised quilting in rural areas all over Australia since 1988. New travelling exhibitions are made out of the Guild's annual small quilt Challenge. There is always a raffle quilt too, made by one of the groups affiliated with the Guild as a further fundraiser.

Exhibitions are the highlight of the year for the Guild, and for smaller groups, and are greatly anticipated beforehand, and much discussed afterwards. The Guild Show, in particular, provides a way of taking stock of the current trends in quiltmaking, and outstanding quilts influence other quiltmakers' subsequent work. The blend of commercial and volunteer activity, the coexistence of an inclusive hanging policy and a competitive

⁵⁵ This is an American measure – a yard of fabric, thirty six inches wide, as most quilting fabrics are, is divided into four with two perpendicular cuts, giving four pieces of 18 inches square. Were one to buy a quarter yard off the bolt, it would be cut horizontally, resulting in a piece of fabric thirty six inches wide, and nine inches long. The eighteen inch square is a more useful shape.

⁵⁶ McTavish, A., "The Guild Show 1993 'The Charm of Quilts'", *The Template* 11 (4) Sept 1993, p.5.

judging system, and the way in which quilters feel inspired by the Show to go home and make more quilts: all these aspects combine to make Guild Shows a most unusual form of art display. All of these elements will be analysed in detail in Chapter Three.

Australasian Quilters Quilt Symposium and Exhibition '92

Quilters also meet at classes, workshops and residential weeks or weekends where social activities, learning, networking and hilarity are mixed. This section describes the atmosphere at one such residential week: the 1992 Australasian Quilters Symposium, held in Canberra in October 1992. ⁵⁷

A short account of the development and demise of Australasian Quilters Inc., and its Quilt Symposiums, held from 1988 to 1994, was given in Chapter One. This section attempts to describe in more detail the atmosphere and dynamics of the 1992 Symposium, in the manner of the other descriptions of quilters' groups above. It will be seen that many of the conventional forms and procedures of quilt groups are echoed in arrangements for the Symposiums, but also that the intensity and camaraderie of the week-long live-in Symposium created its own pleasures and tensions.

By 1992 the arrangements and rhythm of the Symposiums were more or less fixed, with newsletters arriving at the homes of "Associates" or women who had "expressed interest" (by forwarding a cheque for \$20) from a month after the last Symposium. Barbara Meredith (one of the chief organisers in 1988, when the first Symposium was run by a quilt group, the New England Patchworkers, in Armidale) had taken it up as a business. In 1992 there were two Symposium weeks, with teachers repeating their classes, lectures and workshops for a completely new group of quilters in the second week. Symposiums always included some well-known American quiltmakers,

⁵⁷ I attended this Symposium, and information about it is from my field notes unless otherwise indicated. I also attended the 1989 Australasian Quilters Symposium in Armidale, and the 1993, and 1994 Hawkesbury Quilt Camp. There are a range of other such residential activities held around Australia. The Guild also holds an annual retreat, where there are no classes, and quilters come and finish their own projects, and an "allnighter" where quilters sew through the night, amid great hilarity. For recent descriptions of these, see "Ranelagh Quiltaway Weekend 1994" in *The Template* 13 (1) Dec 1994 p.8 and Davies, D., "Mystery Overnight Workshop" in *The Template* 12 (4) Sept 1994, p.7.

and in the early years, before Australian quiltmakers were as well-publicised, this was one of their great attractions.

The program of activities was a gruelling one with classes all day, lectures in the evenings, and the exhibition, market and displays to be seen.

Preparations for the workshops are extensive, with each teacher providing a detailed list of the tools and the colours and types of fabric required.

Participants gathered fabrics, tools and supplies for weeks in advance, leaving only a few essentials to be bought at the Market. Quilters staggered into the foyer of Bruce Hall at the Australian National University loaded down with bags of fabric, their sewing machine, overnight bag, cutting board, and numerous other bags containing supplies: a bottle of sherry, a tin of home-made biscuits, a quilt to sleep under. Each quilter had four days of intensive workshops, each with its own requirements and supplies. There was far more quilting equipment than clothes or toiletries.

Once registered, amid the exclamations of delight, catching up with quilting friends, and enquiries about what classes they were doing, another bag was added to the pile. Each quilter received a printed calico bag containing samples of fabric, needles, thread supplied by sponsors, flyers, advertisements and special offers, as well as room keys, meal tickets, and a name badge. The Symposium staff, some of them working part of the time and attending free the other part, were known as "white collar girls" for the identifying white broderie anglaise shawl collars they wore over their shoulders. After unpacking, and an indifferent Bruce Hall dinner, served institutionally early at 6 pm,⁵⁸ the assembled quilters wandered in groups down to the lecture hall, as we were to do most nights of the Symposium, to be entertained by the American teachers whose repertoire always includes at least one slide-illustrated lecture of great polish and practised ease. The first night, however, all the teachers introduced themselves and their work, and quilters wandered home through the dark to prepare their supplies for the next day's workshop, wondering whether they had chosen wisely or not.

Once the Symposium proper started, the pace was energetic. Classes ran from 8.30 am to 12.30, and 1.30 to 4.30, with a lecture from 7.30 to 9 every

⁵⁸ The uninteresting food is rarely a problem for women at such gatherings – one often hears variations on the comment made by Beryl that night at my table: "You won't hear *me* complaining. I like *anything* I haven't had to cook, and I don't have to wash up after!".

night, and the Exhibition, market and displays open for viewing all day. As well as sewing, and designing very intensively in their own workshops, many quilters made time to walk around the other classrooms, learning as much as possible about the workshop's content from the participants, and admiring the work of their friends. After the lectures, many quilters sewed late into the night in their rooms⁵⁹, hoping to finish their day's project, and revelling in the freedom of only pleasing themselves. Others talked in groups in their rooms, compared teachers and their work, admired friends' efforts or purchases from the Market, and tried to puzzle out how some intricate new pattern works.

The workshops varied in tone, pace and content, with some very focussed on a product; a completed, or near-completed quilt top by the end of the day; and others on a particular technique or design principle for later translation into a quilt by the students. There is a particular informal pedagogical style found at quilt workshops, based on an inclusive you-can-do-it approach, which, particularly in design workshops, works hard to overcome quilters' feelings of inadequacy at drawing, or mathematics, or colour theory. One American teacher, Margaret Miller, underlined this in her lecture: "Use the talents you possess. If only the best birds sang, the woods would be silent".⁶⁰ Wherever possible, design and drafting classes use fabrics, and well-known patterns rather than drawing, and abstract problems, allowing quilters to tackle complex ideas in a familiar way. Intuitive, playful ways of working are respected.⁶¹

Symposium classes were large, especially those of the American teachers.⁶² A room containing some twenty five quilters, with buzzing sewing

59 For the 1994 Symposium a sewing room "for 24 hour quilting" was set aside, as the noise from whirring machines in bedrooms kept too many other participants awake. See Australasian Quilters Quilt Symposium and Exhibition '94 *Newsletter* No 1 Dec 1993, p.5 .

60 This kind of aphoristic sentimental folk-wisdom style of address is absolutely typical of popular quilting culture in the United States, and can be seen in any American quilt magazine. Australian quilters tend to be rather less flowery, but the attraction of this kind of thinking is also strong, with American sayings and texts about quilting being widely reproduced in Australian contexts. This will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

61 These issues of pedagogical practice and learning style are analysed in more detail in Chapter Three.

62 I suspect this is because of a combination of high demand for the "name" teachers, and the organiser's attempts to recoup the high costs of bringing them out to Australia.

machines, irons and cutting boards to be shared, and a complex pattern to be cut and sewn, can be both noisy and crowded. From the minute the class started to assemble, setting up their power packs and extension cords, plugging in sewing machines and threading them up, the atmosphere was expectant. In 1992, workshops were held in Australian National University science labs, with the luxury of double power points on every bench, and lots of room for laying out pieces, and setting up ironing boards. Everyone agreed on how suitable these rooms were, with their plain white walls and good lighting.⁶³ There was always a range of abilities and experience amongst workshop participants, and some were faster sewers than others, grasping the pattern and forging ahead, finishing by the end of the day. Often this led to some niggling envy, and talk of "over-achievers", but the skilful teachers kept this to a minimum. Sometimes a member of the class brought fabrics, or flair that made her piece stand out among the others, drawing the teacher's and the other students' attention and admiration. In Marianne Fons' class "Tesselated Stars" at the 1992 Symposium, Judy McDermott, now a well-known Sydney art quilter, brought brilliant yellow, black and white fabrics, and added a further piece to the pattern, so that what for the rest of the students was a workshop exercise, to be used for practice and maybe the production of a cushion, became in her hands an exciting development of the teacher's original concept. This did not appear to be appreciated by the teacher, but some in the class were encouraged by Judy's innovative interpretation.

At the Symposium, everything focusses on quilts. Women revel in the ability to discuss quilts at every moment of the day. Mealtimes become exchanges of information about the Exhibition, the Market, what has been learnt during the day, or what is about to begin in the next workshop: "I'm doing "Waves, Wings and Other Curved Things" with Judy Dale today. I've never done curved piecing before, so it could be a bit sad!".

Lucky number prizes (donated by the Symposium sponsors) which are given out at each meal, deliver quilt books, fabrics, tools and notions to most tables, to be passed around and examined: "I've got that book, it's

⁶³ This can be compared with, for example, 1992 Quilters' Guild Quiltskills workshops held at the Menzies Hotel in Sydney, where the irons blew the fuses, and the lighting was so low that it was hard to match colours (from my fieldnotes of two workshops held August 1992, Sydney).

wonderful. Near the end, somewhere, there's a lovely old fashioned Ohio Star that I'm going to make someday".

Quilters who make garments wear their patchwork jackets, knowing they will be admired by an expert audience. Walking back to one's room from the bathroom, the open doors of other rooms reveal today's work pinned up on the board, or laid out on the floor, and yesterday's finished quilt top already on the bed, inviting inspection and congratulation. Even the free afternoon is an opportunity to get some quilting inspiration. In 1992 the Canberra Symposium coincided with the Canberra Floriade floral festival, and on the free Wednesday afternoon the gardens in Commonwealth Park were full of quilters taking photographs and absorbing the colours, discussing their intended pansy quilt, or how one might make a red and yellow quilt inspired by the tulips.

For a whole week, quilters live in a world inhabited entirely by women. The few male students of the college, who have not gone home for the university vacation, huddle at a table in the corner of the dining hall, looking over their shoulders at this roomful of mostly middle-aged women, just like their mothers. The rooms are full of laughter and the free talk of women on their own. One quilter, attending her 4th Symposium in 1992, remarked to me: "I'd never have gone, in '88, if it had been anything mixed. I didn't know anyone, and I'd have been too nervous to go up and speak to men I didn't know. But women, quilters, well, you know you've got something in common." Quilt culture's events are effectively women-only, and this is a significant part of their powerful appeal. Chapter Three examines this homosociality in more detail.

Quilt publishing in Australia

The first continuing publications of Australia's quilt revival were the newsletters of the various Guilds, of which *The Template*, journal of the Quilters' Guild, is the best known. Over the years, *The Template* has changed its appearance, from a simple newsletter in 1982, informing members of Guild activities, exhibitions, classes, and meetings towards a magazine-style format, including articles about members, items of general interest to quilters such as articles on the origins of patterns, or equipment, and photographs of quilts from Guild shows. After some variation in its frequency, *The Template* has settled into a quarterly. Some early

experiments with colour printing paid off in increased member interest, and since 1995 *The Template* has been printed entirely in colour, and has changed its layout and raised its level of advertising. As more Australian commercial quilting magazines come onto the market⁶⁴, and the Quilters' Guild begins to lose its uniqueness as a source of information for quilters, it has attempted to make *The Template* much more attractive to readers. It still retains its friendly and informal style, and elements of the newsletter as well. Writers tend to use a personal voice in their articles. The President closes her report thus: "Have a great time at the Quilt Festival. Enjoy your quilting! Carolyn", these last words printed in her handwriting⁶⁵. Photographs, too, reveal its genesis as a newsletter. There are many examples of the humourous candid shot, of interest to friends or colleagues, but not to unknown magazine readers. In a recent issue, there was a photo of Quilters' Guild members moving a fallen tree out of the way of their bus, returning from a trip to a Canberra quilt exhibition⁶⁶. An article by the Quilters Guild Scholarship winner, in the same issue, closes: "It was stimulating just thinking about it. And I filled in the forms and crossed my fingers ... So here I am, about to embark on this adventure -- setting off to refuel my soul. Will I be a better quilter and teacher as a result? I hope so! I will keep you posted."⁶⁷ At present, *The Template* tries to combine the functions of a chatty newsletter, and an informative magazine, in an uneasy balance, but one which is quite evocative of the transition the Guild itself is undergoing, as it takes on more sponsorship, larger projects, and semi-institutional status.

64 From 1988, *Down Under Quilts* was published in Brisbane. There have been a number of special one off commercial magazine-style publications such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *The Joy of Patchwork*, published by Murdoch books in 1992. During 1994, a new commercial glossy magazine, *Australian Patchwork and Quilting*, has appeared, using a great deal of Guild expertise, with a very populist address to the reader, including easy patterns, profiles of quilters, and material on exhibitions, shops and techniques. It indicates the perceptions of commercial publishers that quilting is now a big money making pastime for them to tap into. These magazines are discussed in more detail below.

65 Sullivan, C., "The President Reports", *The Template* 13 (3) June 1995, p.3.

66 *The Template* 13 (2) Mar 1995 p.9. Other such examples include the candid shots of the all-night quilt workshop held annually by the Guild (see for example *The Template* 12 (4) Sept 1994 ,p.7)

67 Hooworth, J., "Scholarly Pursuits" *The Template* 13 (3) June 1995, p.13.

Quilters Guild books

The Guild's other publishing ventures have varied in their success. *Quilt Australia*, the record of the 1988 exhibition,⁶⁸ was the first, published with Bicentennial funding, in association with Bay Books. It sold well, and is now virtually unobtainable and still widely admired. As discussed in Chapter One, it reproduced the quilts from the exhibition, as well as containing short articles about the quilts, and the fire which destroyed many of them prior to the exhibition. The Guild's next venture was not so successful: a companion booklet to the Manly *New Quilt* Exhibition of 1992. It did not sell to expectations, and was eventually distributed free to Guild members. Since then, the Guild's glossy paperback publication *Colours of Australia*,⁶⁹ documenting its travelling "suitcase" exhibition, has been produced, containing a long essay by Diane Finnegan, on the development of Australian quilting. In an introduction to the Exhibition, the then President of the Guild, Margaret Wright, tied the tour and publication to the Guild's aims:

This tour is directed at fostering a number of the Guild's aims: promoting the art and craft of quilting, encouraging good design and technique in either traditional or contemporary work, and providing opportunities for quilters to reach a wider audience through both the tour and accompanying book.⁷⁰

Both the competition which inspired the exhibition, and the presentation of the book itself were very concerned to identify what might be distinctive about Australian quilts. A photograph of a pile of quilts in front of Australian scenery, underlines the main essay's thesis that

Compared to the colours in quilts from other countries, there is clearly a focus on colour here. The adventurous combinations, the saturation of hues and the emphasis on this element in the design of the quilts is

68 The Quilters' Guild, *Quilt Australia*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1988.

69 The Quilters' Guild, *Colours of Australia: Directions in Quilting*, JB Fairfax Press, Sydney, 1995

70 *ibid.*, p.35.

not limited to this collection. It is a feature of Australian quilting.⁷¹

OZQuilt and publications from other Guilds

Other Guilds and state quilt groups in Australia also publish newsletters, but although none have the status or extended format of *The Template* they are similar in tone and approach. One other non-commercial quilt publication will be dealt with in this chapter, because of its different aims and emphasis. This is the *OZQuilt Network Newsletter*, published in Melbourne by eminent quilt artist, Barbara Macey. Macey's interest is in providing information and opportunities for debate to a group of potential subscribers she describes as "serious quilters".⁷² Her subscribers include a large number of Australia's well-known and professional quilters⁷³, and discussion in the newsletter tends to centre on issues of exhibition, commissions, teaching and other professional concerns. Macey's own interests in promoting quilting as public art also dominate the newsletter's concerns. It also carries a lot of information about upcoming awards, exhibitions and competitions to be entered. But generally, through numerous letters and contributions, *OZQuilt* serves as a forum for discussion among the self-defined elite of Australian quilting, who experience themselves as "serious". It also occasionally reproduces short articles on general craft and art issues,⁷⁴ hoping to widen the terms of debate. Most of the contributors and subscribers to *OZQuilt Network Newsletter* are active in their Guilds, and in the commercial quilt press as well, at a different level of abstraction. Their involvement in *OZQuilt Network Newsletter* may indicate the need for a level of debate not seen in

71 Finnegan, D., "Showing the Colours", in *The Quilters' Guild, Colours of Australia: Directions in Quilting*, JB Fairfax Press, Sydney 1995, pp.7-33, p.32. The photograph appears on p.34.

72 From the epigram to *OZQuilt Network Newsletter* 7, Mar 1993 which reads in full: "OZQuilt Network Newsletter is a non-profit publication intended to help serious quilters to keep in touch with one another".

73 See *OZQuilt Network Newsletter* 12, June 1994, pp.7-8 for a list of subscribers as at that time, or *OZQuilt Network Newsletter* 16, June 1995 for the most recent list. Both include most of the (semi) professional elite quilters, and judges, in Australia, and particularly the art-school trained practitioners.

74 See Holtom, R., "The point of amateur painting", *OZQuilt Network Newsletter* 13, Sept 1994, p.4, and Cohn, S., "Dabblers, Cronies and Designer-Makers", *OZQuilt Network Newsletter*, 10 Dec 1993, pp.4-6.

the Guild or commercial publications, especially for professional quiltmakers.

Down Under Quilts

In March 1988 the first issue of *Down Under Quilts* appeared: the first commercial quilting magazine to be published in Australia. Australian quilters were very familiar with the major American magazines to which many subscribed, individually, or through their groups and guilds. Produced by two women inexperienced in publishing and layout, *Down Under Quilts* was very well received despite, or perhaps because of, its less polished production and approach, and by the third issue was selling four thousand copies, almost half of those by subscription.⁷⁵ Perhaps because it seemed more accessible and less intimidating than the very professional and remote American publications, it quickly gained a large amount of reader input and featured many pictures of and letters about local quilts, many of them Bicentennial projects.

More recent editions carry a mix of profiles of quilters, stories on textiles, techniques, and articles about general issues. Often these are by well-known quilters, the same ones who are writing for each other in *Ozquilt Network Newsletter*.⁷⁶ Regular features include a "readers' quilts" section, a "kids' quilts" section, letters and exhibition reviews, as well as a number of regular columns. The magazine solicits contributions from readers, and these maintain the informal "Show and Tell" feeling it has tried to establish. The "Patchpourri" section of readers' comments reveal that there is some support for the magazine *because* it is Australian: "I really enjoy DUQ. Being an Australian magazine makes it more interesting than the overseas ones, as all the articles and advertising is [sic] relevant to us. L.P. Qld" Some readers prefer it because it is produced by a small company: "I am very impressed to find out that this is not a "big corporation" type magazine. 100% for you. Good luck and keep up the good work. B.H. Vic." ⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Nutt, C., "Editorial", *Down Under Quilts* 1 (4) Dec 1988, p.2.

⁷⁶ Fiona Gavens, Margaret Rolfe, Carol Heath, Barbara Macey, Mary O Roberts and others appear regularly in the pages of both *Down Under Quilts* and *OZQuilt Network Newsletter*.

⁷⁷ Both quotes from "Patchpourri", *Down Under Quilts* summer 1993-4, p.4.

The editorial in *Down Under Quilts* is very personal, often apologising for delays in production, and telling stories of the editor's family commitments, even replying to readers' responses to previous editorials:

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to so many of you dear readers who wrote in to give me moral support and well wishes for my continued success after my little "confession" in the last issue. It was wonderful to open the mail and receive so many lovely compliments from all my friends out there. Thank you, thank you I appreciate and cherish every single one of them.⁷⁸

Down Under Quilts continues to provide an Australian counterpart to the widely read American magazines. It is distributed mainly through subscription and through quilt and craft shops, and its availability in newsagents is limited. It tends therefore to be delivered to an already converted audience.⁷⁹ Mass distribution of the new glossies, on the shelves at every newsagent in the country, may cause *Down Under Quilts* serious problems, if it cannot find a market which wants a different "look and feel". This remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to give some impression of the pattern and texture of the quilting subculture as it has developed in Australia. It is necessarily schematic, and there are aspects of quilting, such as the quilt shop, the commercial quilt press, the influence of American magazines and models, that have only been touched upon here. The next chapter concentrates on analysing the particular kinds of sociability that quilting culture seems to have produced, and their effects on the women who take part in them. These, it will be argued, are crucial to a fully feminist understanding of women's cultures, one which I argue in succeeding chapters, has never been achieved.

In an insightful analysis of the three strands of quilt culture in the United States, Susan Bernick has also argued this, in a more perfunctory way. She describes the relationship between these three cultures:

⁷⁸ Rein, Y., "Editorial" *Down Under Quiltsummer* 1993-4, p.2.

⁷⁹ *Down Under Quilt* carries a list of shop outlets in the back of every issue.

...the traditional quilt culture is the trunk from which the other quilt culture branches (art-quilt and feminist-quilt) grew. The traditional quilt culture has a branch of its own however, it is not merely an ancestral or stock culture. The art quilt and feminist quilt cultures ... attend to the quilters of the trunk, but they generally ignore, when they do not actively denigrate, the traditional quilters in the branch of the tree growing alongside their own.⁸⁰

In Chapters One and Two I have shown the depth and complexity of the quilt subculture in Australia, which here, partly because of its smaller size, includes those art-quilters and feminist-influenced quilters at its fringes rather than on separate branches. In the following chapters I will show how feminist artists, critics and theorists have failed to examine the women's culture that exists around them, joining with more conservative and patriarchal commentators in finding it trivial if they see it at all, but more commonly assuming, like Bernick's art and feminist quilt worlds discussed above, that female cultures are extinct or dying, only to be revived by feminist art appropriation, or theoretical excavation.

Before moving on to this in Chapters Four to Seven, more focussed analysis in Chapter Three will examine the ways in which the homosocial and convivial cultural forms of Australian quilting are constructed and reconstructed, and what possibilities they offer the women who make them.

⁸⁰ Bernick, S.E., "A Quilt is an Art Object When it Stands Up Like A Man" in Elsley and Torsney, eds, op.cit., pp. 134-150, p.136.

Chapter Three

Sewing and Listening: the semi-public space of quilting

Chapters One and Two described the development, dimensions and details of the quilting subculture in Australia and indicated some of the complexity of the activities, structures, practices and organisations that give it form. In this chapter, I want to analyse, in more depth, some of the ideas and themes which underlie the 'structures of feeling'¹ in which quilters operate. Some of these run more generally through women's cultural forms and practices, but find a particular articulation in the leisure world of quilting. Some are relatively specific to quilting's international practices and have been heavily influenced by American quilt culture. All of the constellations of ideas discussed below come directly from my fieldwork with quilters, and from my knowledge of the published and collectively produced artefacts of quilt culture: the books, magazines, exhibitions and groups discussed in preceding chapters. This chapter explores the questions of why women choose this particular, gender-specific pastime, how it comes to be followed so passionately and with such dedication, and what it is feminist cultural critique can learn from the choices of these women, who actively make themselves into producers of cultural meaning, for themselves, for their families and for the wider society.

There are many different ways in which the cultural forms of quilting could be addressed. Readings of particular quilts or groups of quilts are common in the American literature, as are debates about the lineage and influences of particular styles or images. Such approaches concentrate on the 'texts' quilting produces: the material objects that are quilts, and attempt to read back from them into the minds of the quilters.² In this chapter I focus on the kind of setting that quilting subcultures produce for their participants and activities. Using the three groups described in detail in Chapter Two, this chapter will argue that what I have described above as a quilting subculture produces a series of semi-public/semi-domestic

¹ Raymond Williams' term is here used in relation to women's culture, a subject to which he paid little attention. However, his idea that culture consisted of "structures of feeling -- the meanings and values which are lived in words and relationships" is a productive one. Williams, R., *The Long Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1965, p.319.

² Some examples of this will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

spaces, ranging from the almost-domestic space of the local group (such as the Barronville Patchers) through the strangely contradictory private-public space of the larger group (such as the Paradise Patchworkers) to the almost-but-not-quite-public space of the Quilters' Guild. These spaces, which are particularly congenial to women who have not had public careers (or even paid work, many of them) and which enable types of social interaction which mixed, or truly public spaces would inhibit, are produced through complex interactions of practices and ideas. Like any collective production, they are not without contradictions and difficulties, at times approaching irresolvable differences. But what results is a kind of women's public sphere which surmounts ordinary divisions between the public and private in significant ways, and which integrates the professional and the amateur, the market and the domestic, the commercial and the cooperative and a number of other such oppositions. This can only be seen by a detailed and empirically-based look at such forms of women's culture.

Feminist theory and philosophy, and feminist research and writing in a number of other disciplines, has examined the question of public and private, and the articulation of this crucial distinction to basic structures of our society, such as law, politics, work, and intellectual life.³ Much of this work has been ground-breaking in its analysis of the factors which keep women and the idea of women out of the public sphere as it has been constructed historically and as it is currently configured. From early debates within the suffrage movement about the propriety of women standing for elective office, to the demands of late twentieth century feminism for affordable childcare and equality in the workplace, the barriers between public life and the private realm of home and family have been a major feminist concern. This has surfaced in all the major feminist debates, on domestic violence, equality of opportunity, sexual harassment, political representation: it is difficult to locate any feminist demand which does not address the public/private issue.

³ Important feminist work in this area includes Lloyd, G. *The Man of Reason 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, Routledge 2nd ed 1993, (first published Methuen London 1984); Elshtain, J.B. *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, Robertson, Oxford, 1981; Pateman, C., *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1989; Thornton, M., (ed), *Public and Private: Feminist Legal Debates*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995; Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, Polity, Cambridge, 1991.

Feminist writers as diverse as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Elshtain, Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens, and Carol Pateman have argued that, since the eighteenth century at least, women have been principally identified with the private, domestic and family realms, and have been socialised and trained to accept these as their portion. In attempting to produce more permeable barriers between the private and the public though, feminist activism has not always been so clearly focussed on the necessity to change the configuration of these two areas. Forcing an "escape route" from the private sphere entails changing the public sphere so that it is more congenial to women. As the careers of some prominent non-feminist women have shown, succeeding in the public world entails more than just escaping the private. The 'glass ceiling', the 'double shift', and the 'superwoman syndrome' are all indications that while women may now be allowed into the public spheres of work and politics, it is still very much on men's terms. They must be 'like men' at work, and still 'like women' at home.

Quite without theoretical intent, some kinds of women's organisation reveal ways of producing alternative ways of 'being public'. What I argue lies in the culture of quilting is one such mechanism. In collectively producing a different kind of semi-public space, quiltmakers have allowed, at least in the limited freedom permitted by their mutual organisation, the development of a new kind of sociability -- one which is not tied to the specific skills and markers which bound the male territory of the public sphere. It is a space where different qualities are valued, different skills required, taught and shared, and one where alternative forms of public speaking, non-competitive methods of skill display, and different kinds of public interaction are acceptable, indeed encouraged.

This is not to say that quilting provides a model of sisterly solidarity with no contradictions or difficulties for the feminist observer. There are a number of disquieting aspects to quilting subcultures, when seen from a feminist perspective. The most obvious is the complete and unexamined assumption of heterosexuality. In all my years of fieldwork, I never spoke to a quilter who mentioned that there were any other possibilities. While the homosociality of quilting subcultures may provide an alternative to the relentless presence of men in the homes and lives of most quilters most of the time, there appears to be no larger questioning of the basic orientation of suburban Australian life towards the heterosexual nuclear family. The convivial homosocial events of a quiltmaker's calendar may indeed provide a safety

valve which makes that suburban life more comfortable.⁴ Quilters are, in the main, conservative women, and many do not question their role as homemakers, mothers, wives and supporters of the other members of their family. Still less, in my experience, do they question sexual orientation, or the general social pressure to have children. Readers should keep in mind that in arguing for the general interest to feminists of the alternative sociability of quilting, I am not offering it as any kind of a model of women's emancipation. Rather I am arguing for detailed attention to women's cultures in general, as a way of beginning to understand why it is that women do what they do, and what can be learned from those choices.

Chapter 2 described the modes of operation of several types of quilt group, and also the atmosphere at quilt events such as Symposiums and workshop weekends. It should be clear that these events do not have the same atmosphere or forms of interaction which are common at, say, academic conferences or political meetings. The following section will examine in detail how the semi-public, semi-domestic space of the quilt event is set up and maintained, the themes, structures and ideas which feed into and enable it, and the contradictions and difficulties it produces. But first I want to describe the scene that set my thinking about quilting upon this path.

In 1993 I visited a quilting group on Sydney's North Shore, attending their evening meeting in a primary school hall. The night meeting indicated, perhaps, a larger proportion of women who worked outside the home, and the women present were generally more prosperous than those in my own group, the Paradise Patchworkers. I talked very briefly about my work, and asked if anyone would be interested to talk to me about quilting. There were polite smiles, and later some of the women came up to me and gave me their phone numbers. I sat down and took up my sewing, to listen to the next speaker. The main speaker for the meeting was the chief doctor at a local hospital. The group had chosen the children's ward of this hospital as their new charity. They had delivered a number of beautifully made quilts to go on the children's beds, and were busy planning fundraising and further quilting activities. The doctor had come along to the group meeting, to tell the group

⁴ Because of the nature of my interaction with the quiltmakers I studied, I did not confront them on this issue, and it never came up in any of my discussions with them. If it had, and I had expressed my views about compulsory heterosexuality and the institution of marriage, my judgement is that such revelations would have made any further information gathering or participant observation impossible.

about the ward and its work and to thank them for their efforts. He was an eminent doctor, dressed in an elegant suit, with a formal manner; obviously used to being listened to respectfully, he was accustomed to command. He had clearly given such speeches many times before, and spoke confidently, without notes. But as he moved into his speech I could see that he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. He wasn't getting the response he expected. I looked around, following his worried eyes, and suddenly I could see why. *Everyone* was sewing. Listening attentively, but with their eyes on their work; piecing, or quilting, or embroidering embellishments, quietly choosing fabric and cutting a new piece, smoothing a finished seam, or just looking at a finished block, eyes half shut to get the effect of the different tones of fabric, as they would appear from a distance. He couldn't find a single eye to make even fleeting contact with. His voice grew louder and a bit anxious. Weren't they listening? How could he reach them? I could tell that all his listeners *were* paying attention, but he could find no sign of it, being used to the undivided attention of audiences with nothing in their hands.

When he finished speaking there was applause, but it was fractionally delayed as everyone put their sewing carefully down so as not to lose needles, thimbles or scissors onto the floor. The doctor smiled, but he looked perplexed, and he left soon after. For me, his inability to read his audience, his discomfort at their apparent inattention, indicated that this was quite a different sort of public space than that he was used to. What the quilters did, though, was entirely usual and natural to them: it is what they do at Guild meetings, and at night in front of the television, and in the car on long journeys. The motif of sewing-and-listening, listening-and-sewing, seems to me to stand for the sidestep of the public-private divide that quilters have enabled for each other. The rest of this chapter elaborates on this theme.

The semi-domestic -- sewing while listening

The most obvious aspect of any quilting gathering, is that it is made up, almost always, entirely of women. This is invariably remarked upon, made much of, and generally marvelled at by the men who occasionally come into contact with quilt groups as caretakers of buildings, exhibition space staff, or managers of hotels or colleges where quilt workshops are held. For quiltmakers, as for feminist scholars in their own meetings and conferences, this seems entirely natural, and indeed pleasant and restful. It is a crucial aspect of the production of what I have called the semi-domestic space of

quiltmaking. Although articulated in entirely different terms to those which might be used by feminists about their spaces and meetings, the homosociality of quiltmaking is one of the things which enables women to speak, act and interact as they do, as quiltmakers. To take an extreme example: "We're all girls here" said one quiltmaker and teacher at a Hawkesbury quilt workshop weekend opening. "I can tell you about my hysterectomy quilt".⁵ There is a feeling of shared experience and of shared understandings of the world, which while it may be partial, or even illusory, enables a different kind of interaction between quiltmaking women than is possible in other, mixed groups in which they may be involved, at church, or schools or workplaces. In this world inhabited, owned and understood best by women, men are seen as interlopers, nervous, ignorant, and irrelevant, at least while the "quilt space" lasts. It is a world in which women are in charge, knowledgeable and in control.⁶ The tone of *The Template's* account of the help of various quilters' husbands and a security guard, in hanging the *Quilt Show 1993*, gives the flavour of such reports:

Every year, on both 'hanging' day and when we take down the quilts after the Quilt Show, we are indebted to the men in our lives. They are there to help with the heavy work and those large quilts ARE heavy when you are trying to hand them three metres up and you are on a step ladder! Thankyou to Messrs Lancashire, Grieve, Fail, McTavish, Price, Gibson, Shayler, Taylor and Greg Sommerville. (Apologies to anyone not mentioned) ... and for the third year in a row the security firm which the Guild hires has sent along the same guard to be on duty and Paul has been 'caught' helping.⁷

One of the ways in which the particular texture of this homosociality can be felt is by comparison with the changes that come over a group of quilters when an assertive man enters the space. At one Symposium the husband

⁵ Fieldnotes, Hawkesbury Quilt Camp, 1993.

⁶ The only exception to this is the male professional quilt artist. In New South Wales Greg Sommerville fills this role. He was the first winner of the Guild's Scholarship, in 1992, and has won prizes at the Guild Show in addition to selling and exhibiting his work as a 'textile artist'. Interestingly, he is extremely humble and careful about reiterating his admiration for traditional quilters' skills and creativity. See "Meet the Members", *The Template* 11 (1) Dec 1992, p.20.

⁷ *The Template* 11 (4) Sept 1993, p.27. Photographs on this page show Paul the security guard perplexedly studying a Show plan, captioned "Let's see now, this quilt goes here I think", and a wide shot of the hanging process, captioned "and the quilts are placed on sheets, not the floor..."

(and business partner) of one of the Australian quilt teachers attended, and behaved as though he insisted on being made the centre of attention. He used sexual innuendo when making announcements, drew attention to his stall in the merchant's mall where he was selling an new American-designed quilting frame, and generally assumed an air of command. Subtly, but perceptibly the atmosphere changed, and a number of women, who could not, in their ordinary lives, be further from being separatist feminists, began to murmur "Why can't he just keep out – he's not even a *quilter*." They meant of course that he wasn't a woman.⁸ Others seemed to switch to a different kind of girlishness than that noted above. This particular man seemed to need to be noticed by the assembled women, and may have provoked more extreme reactions than other men might have done, but there was clearly some resentment of the feeling that defences had to be in place at all. Quilters are accustomed to having a space free from *male* double entendre, to laugh at their own jokes without having to submit to those imposed by a man. As I noted above in the introduction to this chapter, a great many quilters are conservative women, with very conventional ideas of womanliness and proper relations to men. A male presence can change the whole feeling of a gathering, because quilters have been very effectively socialised to look after and defer to men. By the end of the week, though, this particular man was subjected to some quite hostile reactions.

A number of things follow from, or are linked to, the world of women that quilting conjures up. These too are important in the production of that semi-domestic space. Discussed in some detail here are: first, family-talk and its extension into the discourse and pedagogy of quilting; and second, the importance of practice and intuition, of doing-as-learning, which undercuts pomposity and enables the skilled but inarticulate quilter to interact, in a way she would not be able to in a more formal public space.

There is complete acceptance of family-talk among quilters. Where in mixed, or 'work' spaces women are often reminded that their families are their own private affair, in quilting spaces, families are the major topic of conversation. Most quilts are made for family members. The stories that go with quilts, either completed or in process, are family stories. Mothers, daughters, sisters, husbands and sons are (usually in that order) referred to, asked after and discussed. Quilts are planned for family members, and

⁸ Fieldnotes for 1992 Australasian Quilters Symposium, Canberra.

worked on, sometimes collectively. The huge investment of time, effort and creative energy in quilts for relations is not a matter for question. Academic feminist understandings of this kind of kinship maintenance have been varied, often finding it difficult to distinguish between the agency and control inherent in such 'kinwork' and the unpaid undervalued work and stress it can create for women. Micaela Di Leonardo has developed a boundary-crossing concept of 'kinwork', by which she means "the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties", noting that "it is kinship contact *across households*, as much as women's work within them, that fulfills our cultural expectation of satisfying family life".⁹ She establishes that kinwork *is* work, and that it is overwhelmingly done by women, but also shows that, in her group of Italian-American informants at least, it also functions to give these women opportunities "to gain human satisfactions -- and power -- not available in the labor market".¹⁰ Di Leonardo's work has given feminist analysis a non-dualistic way of examining the aspects of self-interest and altruism which jointly structure the roles of women in family maintenance in the West, and which, as she argues, are closely related in women's actions, both in the family and in the workplace. What her analysis does not bring into focus though, is the way in which women who do this kinwork analyse and understand it themselves, in a constant process of enquiry and support for each other *across* kin lines, as women, or in this case, *as quilters*.

This is of course a huge contrast with the studious avoidance of family-talk in the other all-women gatherings I have observed -- feminist groups, classes and conferences -- or in the individualised, masculinised world of academic work. Most of the quiltmakers I met live in conventional heterosexual marriages, had children, and many have not always (or ever) worked outside the home. Their family *is* their professional life, and quilting circles recognise that. Just as many female anthropologists have recognised that their children gave them more credibility with women in family based societies, I found that discussing my own children, and being seen with my quiltmaker mother (and aunt) at quilting gatherings helped to give me an entry into quilting circles that my professional interest, feminist credentials and academic pursuits would only have hindered.

⁹ Di Leonardo, M., "The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families and the Work of Kinship", *Signs* 12 (3) Spring 1987, pp.440-453, p.442-3 emphasis in original.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 451.

Female family connections are often actually present at quilting events. Many quilters have mothers, sisters, daughters, sisters-in-law who are also quilters, and often work or travel together to particular events. Quilting is sometimes specifically seen as a pastime which bonds female family members together. Happy and harmonious relations between mothers, daughters and granddaughters, and between adult sisters, are thought to be promoted by joint quilting.¹¹ As the revival enters its third decade, the teaching of quilting to one's children (especially daughters) is increasingly promoted by the magazines, and by kits and teaching materials advertised by commercial mail-order houses¹². *Down Under Quilts* has a regular "Kids Corner" page, where readers provide photos and accounts of children's quilting activities. Quilters encountering my mother, my aunt and me, together, at quilt workshop weekends sometimes expressed regret that their own daughters/mothers did not share their interest.

The genres and forms of spoken (and written) communication in quilt circles, reinforce the semi-domesticity of these spaces. Even famous quilters' slide illustrated lectures about their careers have a folksy "I'm just ordinary" form to the narrative, which refuses to elevate the anecdotal beyond a conversational level.¹³ One of the attractions at the 1992 Symposium was a lecture by American quilter and writer Marianne Fons, which included

¹¹ There are many examples of this as quilting magazines particularly like profiles of quilters within the same extended family. See for example, "Meet the Members" *The Template* 10 (4) Sept 1992, p.21 where 13 year old Bidli McDermott writes about herself and her mother Judy McDermott. The 1995-6 president of the Guild, Carolyn Sullivan, has a mother, sister and daughter who are all quilters and active members of the Guild. This is a particularly good example of extended family quilting connections, and has caught the attention of the wider craft world. See Aiken, S., "Living with Craft" in *Australian Country Craft and Decorating*, 3 (4) 1994 Annual, pp.106-7.

¹² These are mostly American at present (due, I suspect, to the sheer size of the market there, and their worldwide availability by mail order). A heavily advertised, and extremely well thought out kids' teaching kit is Smith, N. and Milligan, L., *Step into Patchwork*, Possibilities, Denver CO, 1994, marketed through the Quilts and Other Comforts mail order company. In the United States, there are children's quilt contests as well -- one such was the "America Through My Eyes" contest sponsored by the Piecemakers Country Store in California, in 1992. See *Quilting Today* 32, Oct 1992, p.31.

¹³ There is a literature which focusses on the analysis of such genres of speech. For an example of a feminist discussion of women's storytelling within the discipline of performance studies and communications, see Langellier, K. and Peterson, E. "Spinstorying: An Analysis of Women Storytelling" in Fine, E. and Speer, J., (eds), *Performance, Culture and Identity*, Praeger, Westport CN, 1992, pp.157-179.

slides and descriptions of the workrooms and studios of other famous American quiltmakers in the usual messy, disordered, chaotic states. Fons continually set the expectations of the listeners -- that these famous quiltmakers would be 'artistic', organised, neat and tidy; somehow *different* -- against her contention that, in reality, they were "just like us". The lecture, although it was a prepared talk in a formal lecture theatre, emphasised the commonality between the work methods, surroundings and quilting enthusiasm of the well-known quiltmakers, and those of the amateur and obscure listeners.¹⁴

This "folksiness" of quilt talk is one of the areas where American influences, texts and modes of speech have been most enthusiastically taken up in Australia. The famous quoted phrases of American quilting -- which are reproduced on t-shirts, bumper stickers, cups, bags, quilt patterns, and in books, diaries, magazines and embroidered samplers -- have also expressed useful concepts for Australian quiltmakers and are enduringly popular here too.

Quilters use a lot of stories, jokes and what could be called 'mottoes' to reinforce an image of quilting which emphasises its caring, homely, unthreatening but powerful place in women's lives. Such stories fall into a number of types. There are the stories of ruses by which money, time, space or permission to expand an already large fabric collection were gained¹⁵. Quite a lot of these emphasise the secrecy of quilting: secrecy from men. This is interestingly double-edged. One story, that I have heard told several times, is of the woman who kept her fabric collection in the boot of her car, knowing that her husband would never look there. This story is told in rueful recognition of the impossibility of finding such a private place in the house. Another is of the woman who, having gone to a quilting weekend a short distance from home, realises with dismay that she has left an important tool at home. She agonises about ringing her husband and asking him to find the implement and bring it to her at her quilt class. Doing this will mean he goes into her quilting room, and will see her fabric collection, the extent of which he has no idea. Eventually, frustrated by not being able to take part, she calls

¹⁴ fieldnotes from 1992 Symposium.

¹⁵One of the handouts at the 1997 Hawkesbury Quilt Camp is entitled "10 Good Reasons to Buy Fabric!" and includes the following: "It keeps the economy moving...It keeps without refrigeration...Buy it now, before your husband retires and goes with you on all your shopping expeditions".

him, and while waiting for him to turn up, worries about his reaction when he realises how much fabric she has. Then he arrives, and as he is leaving having delivered the item, he remarks "You've got quite a fabric collection, dear. There must be a hundred dollars worth there".

In both these examples, secrecy is ensured by men's *own* lack of cunning and knowledge; their lack of interest in women's space, and lack of knowledge of true values, such as the price of fabric (any significant fabric collection would, in fact, be worth thousands of dollars). In both, the secrecy is part of quilting's allure -- reluctance to ask the husband to go into the quilting room is about being found to *have* territory, as much as about being found to have spent money. These stories, and the many like them that circulate among quilters, mark quilting as belonging to women, in the same way that stories of men's domestic incompetence mark the kitchen, and the home in general, when women tell them to each other. 16

Finally, and most importantly in relation to the pedagogy of quiltmaking, there is the value placed on intuitive, playful or otherwise non-intellectual ways of working and relating, ways which seem much more closely related to the intuitive learning of domestic situations than the more conscious and structured spaces of the classroom or the workplace. Here, we see a parallel with older folk forms of learning too. Although a large proportion of quilting meetings and gatherings include some form of learning or teaching, it is very rarely couched in abstract or theoretical terms. As described in the section on the Symposiums in Chapter Two, there is a great deal of emphasis on play, on practical ways of overcoming lack of theoretical knowledge and a paradoxical confidence in the intuitive ability of quilters to see "what is right for the quilt". Requirements for classes often ask for many times more fabrics than will be needed for the actual quilt to be made, so that there is "enough to play with".¹⁷ Teachers often use the form of words: "Just play with [the pattern/colour mix/ layout/border etc] until it looks right" or "the quilt will tell you what it needs"¹⁸ Such a formulation allows for a modest refusal of agency, of individualistic artistic decision-making *at the level of discourse*, but allows enormous scope for innovation or self-validation *at the level of*

¹⁶ Jokes and anecdotes will be discussed again in Chapter 4 below.

¹⁷ Workshop requirements sheet, 1992 Australasian Quilters Quilt Symposium. This is commonly found in workshop requirements.

¹⁸ Numerous examples of this kind of instructions can be found in my fieldnotes from Symposia and other workshops.

action. There is a subterranean narrative of cooperating with the quilt, bringing out its best, rather than heroically forcing materials into shape. This kind of teaching and doing is entirely in harmony with many of these women's experience as nurturers and parents. They are definitely uncomfortable with stories of the artist-hero. Quilts, although complex and creative undertakings, demand no such stories.¹⁹

Another aspect of the semi-domestic pedagogy of quilting is the way in which the *practice* of doing the sewing is respected as a form of knowledge in itself, different and separate from the ways in which it might be written down. In complex hands-on workshops the instructions on the printed handouts are generally understood as merely a way of jogging the memory afterwards. The real learning is done by *doing*. Or trying to do. A teacher will interrupt a hard-sewing group of women to get them to "come and look" as she executes a particularly difficult join, or uses a new piece of equipment, demonstrating, and then supervising the pupils' execution, as they try to fix the skill in their hands as well as in their minds.²⁰ Quilting's teaching methods emphasise its reality as an *embodied* skill, unable entirely to be taught by books or by words, an intuitive skill where practitioners are not always, or even often, able to rationalise or account for their decisions in an intellectual way. "The quilt *wanted* a wider border/a black binding/ that wild leopard print". "You do it like this, see, under there -- here, feel how that sits right? And then ... there ... snip the threads ... beautiful!"²¹ The pre-conceived work, completely predicted by studies, swatches, sketches and so forth, is not given the pre-eminence it is in art school or fashion training. This kind of pre-planning, in fact, is seen as a little sterile, a bit rigid, and unlike the best kind of intuitive quilting. It is one of the reasons that "artist-quilters" are treated with a little distance or caution by many. Like the inspired domestic cook, the fine quilter is recognised as one who can use what she has to make something wonderful, or who can allow the mix to "tell" her what else to put with it, rather than a slavish follower of recipes or patterns. This valuation of the inarticulable and intuitive seems to me one of

¹⁹ This is interesting taken in conjunction with Christine Battersby's discussion of the notion of the artist-genius, in *Gender and Genius*, 1995, discussed further in Chapter Four below. It would seem that quilters, at least, reject the notion of genius as much as it rejects them.

²⁰ Some of the folklore work discussed below in Chapter 7 concentrates on this embodied skill in quilting and other pursuits. See in particular, Hindman, J., "Quilt talk: verbal performance among a group of African-American quilters" in *Uncoverings* 1992, pp.85-108.

²¹ These quotes come from workshop fieldnotes.

the most interesting aspects of the semi-domesticity of quilting culture, and one which continues to differentiate it from the world of the artist-craftsperson. There is a mutual distrust between these two groups, engendered by their different practices. The lack of documented forethought (sketches, swatches, studies) about many quilts makes trained artists discount them as art -- they become just lucky flukes. The rigidity of sketches and swatches makes the quiltmaker see the artist's work as somewhat mechanical, lacking in that serendipitous quality and often a little pompous.²² This mutual distrust and misunderstanding is further discussed in Chapter Five.

In these ways, and others, quilting produces a semi-private space. Quilting's organisation doesn't devalue or trivialise the exercise of women's traditional skills and talents, but integrates them into other forms of organisation and understandings. Remembering the story of the eminent speaker at the quilt group meeting, it enables quiltmakers to listen *while* they are sewing.

The semi-public -- sewing while listening

How is this quilting cultural space to be differentiated from a purely private space then? What are the elements that make it semi-public as well, a halfway station between the world of home and family and the mixed space of the public sphere? There a number of crucial aspects to be examined.

Firstly, there is the charity and service ethos so assiduously cultivated by quilt groups. From the Quilters' Guild down, almost no quilt group exists that does not tie its exhibition and other public activities to a fundraising effort for some group other than itself. The Paradise Patchworkers, for example, raised money at their exhibition for a local hostel for intellectually disabled adults. There had once been a connection between a relative of a group member and the hostel, but the group's work on behalf of the hostel was not undertaken because of that connection. Other charities had been the objects of their

²² This can be seen in the markedly more formal work photographed and described in the pages of *Textile Fibre Forum*, the journal of the Australian Forum for the Textile Arts, a semi-professional textile artists' body, which while eschewing the po-faced formality of some art societies, still takes itself relatively seriously compared to quilters groups. The work produced at AFTA's annual live-in workshop differs greatly in 'seriousness', or perhaps in the level to which its makers take themselves seriously, from the quilts produced at a symposium or workshop. Fieldnotes from 1993 Textile Fibre Forum, Mittagong New South Wales.

energies in the past. I have described some of the Barronville Patchers' charity work in Chapter Two. The Guild, as well as raising money through raffling a quilt at its annual Show, also provides labour, design expertise and materials for "Community Quilts" which are given to children's hospitals and other medical charities. The quilts are produced by working bees at monthly community quilt days, and sometimes use the blocks left over from various competitions. During 1995 for example, the Guild's community quilters made quilts for the Salvation Army, Jacaranda Lodge, and Sunshine Homes, using blocks made by the Chatelaine, Wentworthville, and Mirrabooka quilt groups, and also blocks produced at the Guild's annual Retreat at Ranelagh Guest House.²³

Obviously there are strong connections between this ubiquitous charity activity and the other organisations to which these women belong, notably church and school groups. Almost all quilters have been involved in fundraising for various causes before they come to quilting. But the impetus to charity is more than just familiarity. It serves as a kind of "alibi", a way to justify enjoying the self-development that quilting enables.²⁴ There are very few quilters who take the view of Edith, quoted in Chapter Two.²⁵ In order to allow themselves to enjoy their quilting, many quilters take on an ideology of "giving something back" and undertake quilting projects which interest them less than their own work, in order to feel better about the enjoyment their own work gives them, and the fun they have with other women while doing it²⁶. Along with the recognition that

²³ From Ruth Carter's Community Quilts Report, Minutes of the AGM of the Quilters Guild Inc., 7th Oct 1995, author's collection.

²⁴ I do not use the word 'alibi' to denote a false story being told. Quilt groups do contribute to charitable work, often in quite interesting and innovative ways. I detect no duplicity in the work quilters do for charity, just a real doubling of their motivations – for useful good work, on the one hand and for enjoyment and display of skills on the other. I have no doubt that other forms of charitable work also display this double character.

²⁵ Edith, who said she'd done enough for charity and was quilting only for herself, pointed out to me in conversation how "all of these women have worked in the tuckshop, and sold raffle tickets. They don't know how to stop doing it". In part it was Edith's great age that enabled her to say this.

²⁶ There many examples in *The Template* about the talk, laughter and fun at these charity quilting events, as well as the productive feeling of getting things finished, and the eventual money raised. See for example "Community Quilts -- who cares?" in *The Template* 12 (1) Dec 1993, pp.10-11 'I really enjoy making quilts for someone else', Ruth said, 'It gives me a great thrill to know that I've put together a quilt from donated blocks and fabric'. See also "Quilts for AIDS Day – a day to remember" in *Down Under Quilts* summer 1993-4, pp. 12-13, as another example of the mixed altruism and enjoyment which such charity efforts entail.

quiltmaking allows them to make something for themselves, and to take the time and resources to do it, comes a feeling of obligation also to make something for someone else.

This is particularly true in relation to group exhibitions. Without their charitable fundraising alibi, these exhibitions would be pure display -- quiltmakers demanding public attention for the beautiful things they make. I know of no group which does this without providing themselves with a charitable cause for which the exhibition can be passed off as a fundraising endeavour. With this particular combination of public functions, the group can encourage some muted forms of public display -- as a group with a noble purpose, without guilt or unseemly self-promotion. It can be seen as a neat way around the restrictions imposed by women's expected selflessness and nurturing role.

Keeping the charity alibi in mind for real public display, the quiltmaking subculture also serves as a semi-public sphere for quilters in its encouragement of the display of quilts and projects within the groups themselves. This can be seen particularly clearly in the Show and Tell sessions which are held at all Quilters' Guild meetings (described in Chapter Two) and in the Show and Share, Bring and Brag and other such sessions held at workshop weekends and Symposiums. As has been outlined above, many quilters are initially so nervous that they can not describe their own quilts, or have to be prodded and pushed to get to the microphone. For most of these women, who have never held public positions, or undertaken political activism, or done anything else that requires public speaking or even standing in front of a large group it is a frightening prospect.²⁷ There is reduced pressure in the supportive atmosphere of a quilt meeting, but also, as in domestic situations, this produces restrictions on what can be said. Topics which are known to be likely to disrupt the good feeling of the group must be avoided. My fieldwork revealed several examples of the "policing" of that kind of talk. At one Hawkesbury Quilt Camp, held soon after the 1993 Federal election, one of the teachers, Glenys Mann, mentioned the re elected Labor government disparagingly in her introductory talk, assuming (possibly correctly) that the majority of her listeners would not be Labor voters.

²⁷ I described the usual course of Show and Tell above in Chapter Two. Some American work on Show and Tell exists. See Langellier, K., "Show and Tell in Contemporary Quiltmaking Culture" in *Uncoverings* 13, 1992, pp.127-147 further discussed in Chapter Seven.

Regardless of individual agreement or disagreement, it was widely seen as inappropriate and unseemly, likely to divide quilting friends over politics. Maintenance of the supportive atmosphere requires sticking to the safe areas.²⁸

The self-education that quiltmakers seek and provide collectively for each other is also an influence on this semi-public aspect. From the earliest years of the revival, quilt groups organised classes and workshops for themselves, and before the Symposiums and their importation of well-known American and overseas teachers this often meant one of the group taking it upon herself to share a technique or pattern, probably learned from a book. Most of the women who now make a living as professional quilting teachers are self-taught, both as quilters and as teachers. Providing classes to their friends and peers made possible a professional trajectory that more recognised training and career paths had not. The increasing push for professionalisation, accreditation and copyright in teaching has now changed this pathway, with both positive and negative results. Even taking this into account, quilting expertise has become a pathway to a new career for some women. The number of recent books published by Australian quiltmakers shows how quilting is beginning to find a commercial and public presence.²⁹ Designing projects for the new glossy magazines, writing profiles and interviews with other quilters, teaching, retailing, designing fabric ranges³⁰, machine quilting for others³¹, leading quilt tours to America, are all now commercially viable options.³²

²⁸ Another example, rather less clear cut, occurred at the 1992 Quilt Symposium, where a teacher told a story of teaching in Western Queensland, which included racist anecdotes about Aboriginal women. Several quilters were offended, because they did not approve of racism. More were annoyed that the teacher was "getting people upset".

²⁹ See for example Brearley, D., *Quilts from the Garden*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1996, Cleland, L., *Quilting Makes the Quilt*, Ascot Lane, Sydney 1995, Fail, K., *Between Friends: Quilts to Share*, JB Fairfax, Sydney, 1996, Scouler, L., *Back to Front*, JB Fairfax, Sydney 1996. These are all recent Australian publications by well known local quilters.

³⁰ Queensland quilter and teacher Ruth Stoneley, has designed a range of fabric for M&S Textiles depicting Australian wildflowers. See *Australian Patchwork and Quilting*, 2 (1) 1995, pp.56-68.

³¹ Advertisements for machine quilting of quilt tops completed by others appear in all the commercial quilt magazines, and in *The Template*.

³² A glance through any issue of *Australian Patchwork and Quilting* gives many such examples. See for instance Aiken, S., "Robyn Ginn" *Australian Patchwork and Quilting* 1 (1) pp. 51-3; Welch, L., "Lessa Siegele" *Australian Patchwork and Quilting* 1 (4) pp.36-38. Narelle Grieve is a Sydney quilter currently leading quilters' tours to the US, as reported scornfully in the article "Patchy Service" *Sydney Morning Herald*, Jun

Perhaps more important than the professional opportunities, however, is the setting up of a large network of self-education opportunities. Ranging from small self-run workshops to week-long, live-in intensive learning camps, quilters have produced a whole culture of co-operative and self-organised learning. The market for local and imported "how-to" books is large and growing, and every magazine has instructions for new techniques and projects. There is even an emerging type of sampler quilt, which rather than being made to learn a specific set of classic techniques, as in the traditional kind, is made to use up the greatly varied samples and first attempts at techniques undertaken at workshops. National and international teaching circuits exist, so that people can take more advanced classes from the same teachers. One such teacher, Lessa Siegele, described this in an interview as one of her major pleasures as a teacher:

She gets particular satisfaction from going back to teach in the same places over a period of years. "It's like going home and I am able to see all they have done in the year."

Some of her students have been with her for over ten years and the classes have taken on a life of their own. So much so, that when she is away for a few weeks, they carry on without her. ³³

Over the years of my involvement in the quilting subculture it has been very noticeable that the general skill level has risen enormously, due to such self-managed teaching and education. Workshops now take more for granted in the way of basic skills, use of tools, and confidence with colour and design, and often, at residential quilt events, such previously outlandish activities as fabric printing and dyeing, fancy embellishment and machine embroidery, painting, drawing and colour theory are being taught, alongside more applied and practical skills. These enable quilters to move beyond commercially available fabrics, traditional finishes, and well-known patterns, but they are always focussed on quilters' needs. Because quiltmakers control and develop these teaching practices, they have remained outside the influence of art school extremes, and relatively immune from the condescension of the

21 1997, p.2 of the travel section. The journalist remarked, "As I have said before, there is no known human activity that someone hasn't organised a tour around."

³³ Welch, op. cit.p.38.

studio crafts, able to develop in self-confidence and practical utility, within a 'quilterly' tradition currently being developed all over the world.

One of the most interesting and salient forms of expression that this semi-public space has fostered is the civic or social quilt. Numerous quilt groups took on this civic role during the Bicentennial celebrations as has been described above in Chapter One and in more detail elsewhere³⁴, but since that time too, many civic, and community quilts have been made. Here quilt groups seize the power to represent their communities, to show, in a quilt, what they consider to be the points of interest, the issues, the beautiful things. Groups make quilts to describe themselves,³⁵ their suburb or town,³⁶ their city,³⁷ their country³⁸ and important or inspiring events such as the award of the 2000 Olympics to Sydney, or a local anniversary or historical occasion³⁹. The Quilters' Guild has been particularly assiduous recently in encouraging such endeavour and a number of exhibitions have been arranged, with this purpose in mind. The 1995 Sydney Fair in Nagoya, Japan included an exhibition of small quilts made by Australian quiltmakers, called "Australia Dreaming". The productive contradictions involved in this enterprise are captured in the Guild President's introduction to the book *Australia Dreaming*,

[Q]uilmakers were challenged to create a new art quilt, reflecting images of Australia. ...Quilmakers make quilts because they provide an artistic

³⁴ Grahame, E., "Quiltmaking in Australia and the 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations", in *Uncoverings* 14, 1993 pp.169-187.

³⁵ For many examples of quilts symbolising friendship and quilting groups, see Fail, K. op cit. passim.

³⁶ Examples (with pictures) include: the quilt made by the Patches on the Plains, Balaklava SA, for presentation to the Mayor of Monalans, Texas, as part of a sister-town arrangement in 1990 (*Down Under Quilts* June 1991, p.30); the wall quilt hanging in the Mout Gambier District Council Chambers, made by the Pine Tree Quilters (*Down Under Quilts* Sept 1990, p. 35); the "Broome Quilt", made by local patchworkers in Broome, WA (*Down Under Quilts* Sept 1992, p.29).

³⁷ See Fillery, M., "Broken Hill -- On the Map and On the Wall" in *The Template* 13 (2) Mar 1995, p. 22 for a description of the making of a quilt made by the Silver City Quilters, Broken Hill, New South Wales in 1994, which now hangs in the regional art gallery.

³⁸ Numerous Quilters Guild challenges have had this theme, and it was of course a common theme in many Bicentennial quilts. See Grahame, "Quiltmaking in Australia" op. cit.

³⁹ See for example Wheeler, L., "A Quilt Which Remembers" in *The Template* 13 (2) Mar 1995, p.25, which describes a quilt made by the Camden Country Quilters Guild, New South Wales, for the bicentennial of Camden in 1995. It depicts local industries, local flora and fauna, and well-known buildings.

outlet using a medium that is soft, decorative and functional. Only a few quiltmakers consider themselves artistic, yet all produce beautiful art works which they use to decorate their homes, share with family and friends, and, on occasion, exhibit. ...It is the decision-making, effort and love which makes every quilt special. ...Many of the quiltmakers participating in Australia Dreaming willingly share their emotions about Australia through their quilts. Concern for the environment, despair over the drought, patriotism, as well as a quiet reflection on the beauty of our country, provide some of the themes.⁴⁰

The tension between domestic values, and public (in this case 'artistic') values is clearly seen here. Sullivan's references to softness, decoration, love and emotions, contrast very clearly with the comments on the exhibition made in the same book by the General Manager of the Crafts Council of New South Wales. He focuses on the 'universality' of the quilts, noting that they "consider in a very serious way, some of the key issues challenging Australians", and claiming "they have a cultural significance that allows them a very special and often critical role". His distance from the subculture is shown in his statement: "Quilts have a capacity to touch the heart. We feel comfortable looking at them and we are then often surprised to discover that they deal with personal or socially provocative information."⁴¹ No quiltmaker would be so surprised, and many hundreds of quilts have been made with the specific purpose of representing some social, civic or national idea, or community. Now many of these hang in public places around the country.⁴² But their domestic associations, noted by Sullivan above, of softness, comfort, and so forth, are *part* of their strength as public significations, rather than being in contradiction to it. In choosing a traditional set of women's skills and materials, quiltmakers make public their own complex relations to the public life of their community, often quite explicitly.⁴³

⁴⁰ Sullivan, C., "Introduction", Quilters' Guild Inc., *Australia Dreaming: Quilts to Nagoya*, JB Fairfax Press, 1995, p.6

⁴¹ Frankham, N., in Quilters' Guild Inc., *Australia Dreaming: Quilts to Nagoya*, JB Fairfax Press, 1995, pp.12-13.

⁴² OZQUILT is attempting to maintain records of such quilts. See "Survey of Quilts in Public Places in Australia" OZQUILT 14, Dec 1994, pp. 9-10. This reports on a number of quilts, in municipal libraries and health centres, universities, civic centres, churches, primary schools, and company headquarters.

⁴³ Example Margaret Maccioni's "Monday, at Work on the Willoughby Bicentennial Banners" which is a pictorial representation of the women sewing on a Bicentennial quilt project to make banners for the municipality of Willoughby for the Bicentennial.

In the semi-public space of quilting organisations, women are empowered to sew while they are listening. Rather than withdrawing from the skills and potentials of public signification, women can take public actions and gain the experience of public work, but using methods, vocabularies and modes of interaction which are still linked to domestic and private cultures, women's cultures. Holding this juxtaposition in place produces results which delight quiltmakers and speak to other viewers, although they may surprise and perplex arts administrators.

Contradictions and difficulties

If, as I have argued, the organisations built by the quilting subculture span public and domestic spaces in this productive way, there must be considerable tension and difficulty involved in such an enterprise. I want to look at two specific examples of such tension, drawing on my fieldwork. These are: first, the complex balance to be struck between cooperation and competition, especially within an institutional framework which emphasises prize winning and which is rapidly professionalising; and second, the ongoing tension between these women's other duties, their families, their housework and such, and their quilting. These two tensions are played out within quilting culture in very different ways, but both of them indicate, by their various incarnations, the difficult balance that the semi-private semi-public sphere demands and produces.

Competition and co-operation

The story in Chapter Two of Kay's prize winning quilt and the reaction to it among the Paradise Patchworkers is one example of how a tension between cooperation and competition exists within the supportive atmosphere of quilting. The institutions of the judged show, commercial sponsorship, prizes and certificates, etc, have grown out of early elements of women's competition in American county fairs, and Australia's own tradition of agricultural shows. At the Guild show, a certificate, and fabric or cash prize is seen as a fitting reward for excellent work. American work on this

The quiltmaker writes: "For week after week I sat at the same spot and the image of the room and the women at work, became fixed in my mind. This is a tribute to Yvonne Line and her helpers in that huge project, and to the interest it has generated in the community." Quilters Guild Inc. *Quilt Australia*, Bay Books Sydney 1988, p.82.

competitive tradition notes how different it is from the approach of conventional (or unconventional) artists -- where selling the painting is the reward. Different relations of intellectual property pertain.⁴⁴ But unlike the Sydney Royal Easter Show craft competitions, where only a subset of entrants' work, mostly that of the prize winners, is displayed, the Guild quilt show takes all comers. Prize winners are so marked, but all quilts are shown, and lively debate always takes place about the decisions of the judges, their prejudices, faults and failings. Prizes are clearly marked in sections so that as nearly as possible competition is based on parity, but on the walls art quilt masterpieces jostle with first quilts, traditional patterns with original contemporary ones, and 'theme' quilts with works arising from long series of abstract investigations of colour and form by the quiltmaker.⁴⁵ Quilts are rarely for sale. The amount of reassurance that goes on in quilting magazines and Guild publications about the acceptance of beginner quilts, the importance of inclusiveness, the range of skills and abilities within quilting shows how hard quiltmakers work to hold this contradiction in balance. Co-operation, volunteering, working together, and helping out remain paramount values, alongside the competitive structures⁴⁶. How important this conjunction is to quilting can be seen when, for example, an event moves into the 'art' sphere and such complexities are effaced.

The Quilter's Guild has for some years sponsored and organised an annual exhibition of art quilts at the Manly Art Gallery in Sydney. This is a 'juried' show. Entrants are selected from the quilts submitted, and no prizes are given. Being selected for the show is considered its own reward, bringing respect or notice from a different group of people, perhaps, than the cheerfully rowdy quilters sketching at the Quilt Show. Though many of the same women attend, the atmosphere is quite different: quiet and reverent as

⁴⁴ Przybysz, J., "Competing Cultural Values at the Great American Quilt Festival" in *Uncoverings* 8 1987, pp.106-127. Przybysz, describing the prizes and rules of this commercially sponsored national quilt competition, notes: '... it would seem that the Museum of American Folk Art and 3M Company were seeking to attract quilters -- the vast majority of whom are women -- who wanted to think of themselves as artists, but were "artists" who didn't mind being told what to make their art about, "artists" who didn't mind being told how to make their art, "artists" who were willing to purchase and use certain products to have their work considered art, "artists" who would allow their work to be Scotchgarded, (something no reputable conservator would allow), and "artists" who -- unconcerned with the reality of needing to earn a living -- would happily sign away rights to their designs and let the Museum and 3M use their art -- free of charge -- for a minimum of three years.' (p.110).

⁴⁵ The Guild Show usually has a theme (in 1997 "no place like home") which is a judging category of its own, and calls forth particular quilts addressing the theme.

⁴⁶ See the annual Exhibition report in *The Template*, where this is usually very clear.

is often found in an art gallery. The quilts too, are more self-consciously "arty" for the most part -- innovative in materials and techniques, "contemporary" in style. Often, these come much closer to the kind of women's or feminist art discussed in Chapter Five, with its didacticism, commentary and clear ideological content. A higher proportion of the quilts are for sale, and for higher prices. There is a distinct difference between the quilts in the Manly shows and most of the quilts in the Guild Show. Prizes, of course, are less appropriate where 'art' is concerned, especially the multiple varied prizes of the Guild Show. And the language used to call for, describe and appreciate the quilts in these exhibitions is quite different from that used about Guild show quilts. In 1993 the director of the Manly Art Gallery noted:

Through these exhibitions the critical issues of quilting practice and aesthetics have been explored with candour and vigour ... The explosion in contemporary fabric design allows for poetic and symphonic opportunities to emerge in the new quilt...Already artists have explored the 'musicality' of quilting. The structures necessarily imposed by design, in conjunction with the colour, texture and novelty of the pieces is clearly a musical concept.⁴⁷

In fact, as the next chapter will show, such temporally sequential artforms as writing and music are singularly inappropriate metaphors for quilts.

With such difference emerging, it is not surprising therefore that it is art quilters who have complained about the 'mediocrity' of mainstream quilt culture, and lamented the lack of innovation, often blaming the very kind of robust competitiveness which Guild Shows foster, for such an outcome. This has been true in the United States.⁴⁸, but also in Australia. Macey's *OZQUILT Newsletter* has several examples of art quilters claiming they need a more discerning culture, as they do not recognise or appreciate the kind of discernment involved in the prize giving (and the dissent from it) of Guild shows.⁴⁹ One of the interesting differences between the American judging of quilts and the Australian is that Australian judges rely far more on intuitive

⁴⁷ Pursche M., "Guild + Gallery = Quilts" in *The Template*, 12 (1) Dec 1993 p.6

⁴⁸ *American Quilter*, journal of the American Quilter's Society, Paducah, KY, which takes itself rather more seriously, artistically, than most of the other commercially available quilt magazines, carries such articles. More rarely, these issues arise in *Quilters' Newsletter Magazine*.

⁴⁹ *OZQUILT* carried an ongoing discussion on judging, throughout most of 1993 and 1994 with participation from some of Australia's most distinguished professional quilters.

and aesthetic judgment, rather than the strict scoresheets for technical proficiency that are favoured in American quilt shows.⁵⁰

Within groups the tension between co-operation and competition is kept in check at least partly by the mode of interaction which prevails. There is a general culture of admiration, described in Chapter Two, where modest self-deprecation by the quilter co-exists with proud display of work, and where praise by group members is generous.⁵¹ But in relation to larger events, where direct face to face competition is not involved, other responses are possible. Some group members will explicitly distance themselves from any competition "Oh, I'm just a fiddler, not one of you clever ones."⁵² "I don't go in for those big exhibitions: I like to see them, you get a few tips that way, but I wouldn't like everyone looking at my quilt."⁵³ Others will admit to a twinge of competitiveness, in the abstract (and the absence of the person): "That Freda? She's incredible. She had *three* in this year! Makes you sick!"⁵⁴ or to a discouraged feeling: "Oh, I don't know. You go to the Guild Show and when you come home, you're full of ideas, and all your old things look a bit dull, really."⁵⁵

There is an ongoing and constantly produced tension here. My argument is that this is a result and an indication of the complex ways in which quilting produces a space which is private and public at the same time. In that space, tensions arise which would not arise in any space which was clearly either one or the other. How they are managed, at the level of daily practice, is an achievement.

Housework and family, and quilting

Another enduring tension is between quilting time, and other time, between the joys and hard work of quilting, and the hard work, and the joys, of family and home life. It is a constant and recurrent theme of quilters' talk

⁵⁰ Gavens, F., "On judging" in *OZQUILT* 8, June 1993, pp.2-3, and Oliver, J., "Further Thoughts on Judging" in *OZQUILT* 9, Sept 1993, pp. 5-6.

⁵¹ Thus Eve, looking at my rather untraditional work, would call it "so colourful" and "rather brave", although she didn't really like it, and it certainly wasn't her style of quilting.

⁵² Noni, from Barronville Patchers, meeting December 1993.

⁵³ Valmai from Paradise Patchworkers, meeting September 1993.

⁵⁴ Nancy, from Barronville Patchers, meeting August 1993.

⁵⁵ Lee from Paradise Patchworkers, meeting August 1993.

at all levels, and is to be found reflected in lectures, books, magazines, classes, and group chat. There are even quilts about it. A fertile source of jokes and puns for quilters is to be found here too. At the 1989 Symposium, an American teacher, the eminent and highly regarded quiltmaker Caryl Bryer Fallert, showed slides as part of her lecture. Most were of quilts, but a few were of other parts of her life. One, of an overgrown grassy yard, she described as "my vegetable garden, after I took up quilting". When someone asked her how she made time to create her elaborate quilts, she replied, "Well, I used to cook and shop, you know? Now I find I can last much longer on oatmeal and tunafish than my husband can".⁵⁶ It received a very big laugh. But eminent international stars aside, many quilters feel strongly about the importance of a balance, between their quilting work and their family responsibilities. Chapter Two reports the comments of Paradise Patchworkers about the 18-hours-a-day quilter, and this kind of comment seems to be something quilters try to avoid. Many profiles of quilters are careful to emphasise the other things a quilter does with her time. Diann Johnston of Nambour, Qld, a prize winner at many Guild Shows, was described in *The Template* as follows: "caring for family, farming, the development of a tropical fruit farm ... floristry, and the regular tutoring of patchworkers at all stages of development, both in her own gallery and at out of town workshops."⁵⁷

At the same time there are always humorous hints about tricking husbands and families into doing more domestic and caring work themselves, about taking shortcuts with housework in order to quilt. This is as strong in the Australian magazines as it is in the American ones. And the luxury of escaping into a brief weekend of full-time quilting is the major attraction of the workshop weekends, quilting retreats, symposiums and other live-in quilting events, where housework jokes abound. Such is the size of this need, that several hotels and guesthouses now advertise in *The Template*, and the commercial magazines. "Quilters are our Favorite Guests" [sic] announces the Links House hotel in Bowral, New South Wales. "And to celebrate this we have patchworked a special price together for groups wanting a 'quilt-a-way together'".⁵⁸ For those who cannot get away even for a weekend, the Guild has organised for some years an "allnighter" where women stay up all night, working in a community hall away from home, and with much coffee,

⁵⁶ Fieldnotes, 1989 Symposium Armidale New South Wales.

⁵⁷ "Meet the Members", *The Template* 9 (5) September 1991, p.19.

⁵⁸ Advertisement, *The Template*, 14 (4) September 1996, p.6

chocolate and hilarity, finish a quilt top in one go.⁵⁹ The 1995 Quilters' Guild Annual Retreat, at Ranelagh Guest House in the southern highlands of New South Wales was reported thus: "The retreat to Ranelagh this year I feel was a great success as we had the full run of the house to ourselves and could therefore comfortably accommodate 84 quilters. We dropped threads all over their lovely blue carpet and I believe some threads were even found in the toilet".⁶⁰

This kind of comment reveals how much quilters appreciate the break from the day-to-day housekeeping which is usually their responsibility. Apart from dropping threads, however, they do not suddenly become desensitised to the domestic work which enables their workshops. During several Hawkesbury quilt camps, catering staff remarked on how helpful quilters are, and how enjoyable it is to work with them.⁶¹ Quilters clear up after themselves, which still feels like a holiday, due to their usual responsibility for others as well.

Quilting is a domestic art, and many women take it up because it can be done at home (unlike, say, fishing), with relatively simple and widely available materials (unlike, say, stained glass), without extensive preparation or time imperatives (unlike, say, a ceramics kiln which must be fired and cleared at certain times), it is clean and easily interruptable. Or so they think. At any level of dedication however, quilting produces large objects, which must be created in at least some disorder, which take up space and the process of making them is inimical to neat housekeeping. Quilters understand and even enjoy this contradiction to their usual role. In the final chapter I will raise the questions of whether or not this kind of suspended contradiction can be seen as a subversive possibility, an opening for change in women's lives, or whether it works more like a safety valve, releasing pressure sufficiently to allow women to return from these moments of freedom and creative obsession, to their usual lives, refreshed. For the moment however, the contradiction should be seen as one which is present to quilters, even cultivated, rather than as an unforeseen or unnoticed consequence of a keenly pursued hobby. They actively enjoy making a mess

⁵⁹ See for example "LetterBox" *The Template*, 14 (4) September 1996, p.4, where one such is described, Lorraine Scouler's "May Mystery Madness All Nighter".

⁶⁰ Cook, Lois, Ranelagh Report, Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Quilters' Guild Inc., Sunday 7th October 1995 p.5, author's collection.

⁶¹ Field notes, Hawkesbury quilt camps 1993, 1995.

in pursuit of the perfect quilt, inhabiting the persona of the creative genius, even if only for a few hours.

Professional and amateur

I started this chapter by asserting that the institutional and organisational spaces of quilting allowed the integration in interesting ways of a number of dualities long worried at by feminists. It can be seen how a public/private distinction is blurred by the ways in which quiltmakers interact together, and by the cultural forms and practices they have developed. But this is not the only one such duality which quilting seems to sidestep. I want, briefly, to touch on two more which have also been exhaustively treated by feminists in different contexts.

The first is the way in which quilting circles accept, integrate and deconstruct the notions of professional and amateur which have so bedevilled the art and craft world. This intersects with feminist debates on work, paid and unpaid, but avoids the pitfalls of either flatly reversing the dominant hierarchy between the terms, or accepting the dominant valuation of the paid/professional over the unpaid/amateur. Quiltmakers inhabit a continuum from the entirely amateur quilter who has never sold a quilt, to the well known professional quilters, who take commissions, or sell their work to major companies and galleries. So far these people seem to interact successfully without producing distinctions like those between, for example, successful painters, and Sunday watercolourists, or between professional sportspeople, and an over 40s Wednesday night netball team. There are indications that a gap may be appearing in the United States, with professionals better organised and much more numerous, but that does not seem to be happening in Australia.

There is enormous resistance to attempts by non-quilters, or craft critics, to hierarchise amateur and professional work. In "Dabblers, Drones and Designer-Makers" published in *Craft Victoria* in 1993, and reprinted in *OZQUILT*, Susan Cohn, for example, eulogised the professional designer-maker, at the cutting edge, as 'craftsperson and proud of it'.⁶² In a subsequent issue of *OZQUILT*, it brought this reaction from a quilter

⁶²Cohn, S., "Dabblers, Drones and Designer-Makers: The Categorisation Game", *Craft Victoria* 23, Dec/Jan 1993-94, reprinted in *OZQUILT* 10, Dec 1993, pp.4-6.

I have been designing and making quilts for some years and I do this because I *must*. It is not a hobby but a passion and yet it is not the way I make my living, nor may never be. I take my creative work very seriously in that I invest great amounts of time, money and 'self' -- *particularly self*. My quilting sustains, confronts, exasperates and exhilarates me and is central to my life -- and so is my paid profession -- which in turn enables me to continue the essential exploration and expression that is quilting. It is neither dabbling nor recreational -- although through it I receive some of the benefits that recreation also affords -- eg change, stimulus, expression, company of others equally passionate -- to name a few.⁶³

As described above, it seems likely that professional opportunities for quilt-related activities are increasing, and being taken up by an increasing number of quilters. There is, however, a real limitation to the development of professional quilting, while quilts are not regarded as art, or otherwise enabled to sell for comparable prices. Megan Terry gives an explanation:

I worked on one quilt eight hours a day, six days a week for twelve months. It's a masterpiece. Somebody asked me how much to buy it. I said \$20 000 and they fell about laughing. People want to pay \$500 ... so families inherit them.⁶⁴

Where in the studio crafts, the issue of professionalism is a burning one, and the ignominy of having to earn a living by teaching or selling cheaper production lines at markets is keenly felt, in quilting cultures this causes little friction. How the discourses of quilting make this possible could indicate other directions for a feminist analysis in more well-known areas. The presence of highly regarded innovative *amateur* quilters, and the presence of highly regarded innovative *professional* quilters, in the same subculture, shows that in this group at least, making a living at one's art is not necessarily either a good or a bad thing. Megan Terry's view above, that quilts become family property partly because they cannot be sold at anything near a realistic monetary value, shows that relations to the market in general are quite different from those of the art world. Many quilters would not sell their quilts, because of the meanings they are imbued with, meanings which make them too precious to sell at any price.

⁶³ Letter from Gillian Hand, *OZQUILT* 12, June 1994, p.4. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Ford, C., "Stitched on Art", *Melbourne Weekend Herald*, 7th May 1994. Megan Terry was mentioned above in Chapter One, and was the founding president of the Australian Quilters' Association. Ellipsis in original.

Market vs Volunteer

This brings me to the second duality which quilting appears to destabilise, in complex and interesting ways. This is the distinction, between market oriented practices, such as commissions, sales and merchandising, and non-market cooperative practices, such as gifts, prizes, and swaps. In quilting these do not form separate and distinct areas, and quilting groups and cultures rely on both, often at the same time. At the Hawkesbury quilt camps for example, there are sponsors' lucky badge prizes at all mealtimes, with badge numbers being read out and quilt-related gifts being distributed, usually in such a way that everyone wins one by the end of the weekend. Recipients are strongly encouraged by the organisers to write a personal note of thanks to the sponsor who donated the prize. In some cases these are local quilt shops, owned and run by well-known quilters. But in other cases they are American corporations, or Swiss sewing machine companies. A complex interaction of commercial marketing practice with the conventions of domestic gift-giving is being forged.

Because of the ways in which quilting is organised, the same individuals move between the voluntary and the commercial sector, and back again. Karen Fail, author and teacher, who writes commercially for the JB Fairfax quilt publications, edits *The Template* as a Guild volunteer. The subculture relies on a complex and shifting mixture of the commercial and the charitable, the voluntary and the professional, and finds ways to do this which, again, productively mix the conventional practices and behaviours of the private and domestic sphere with the realities of market considerations.

This chapter has begun to map out the mixture of public and private that quilting culture produces for its practitioners. I will argue in succeeding chapters that feminist enquiry could benefit from further such detailed and empirical studies of women's culture.

Chapter Four

Quilted Metaphors

The previous chapter outlined the ways in which the institutions, practices, jokes, methods and mannerisms of the homosocial, collectively produced women's culture of quilting creates a kind of semi-public, semi-private space for the women involved. In this hybrid space, some of the disabling conventions of public utterance and action are bypassed, and some of the supportive, and enabling aspects of women's private sphere interactions with each other move out of their restricted orbit. As a result, women find new ways of speaking, creating and organising within the subculture of quilting, and men, as a rule, are excluded by the conventions of a semi-public space they do not understand and are unable to interpret or control.

This chapter looks at one important way in which the idea of the quilt has made its way into the public sphere proper, in a number of settings: as *metaphor*. Quilting has provided a large number of powerful metaphors to different groups, including quilters themselves, novelists, poets, social analysts and philosophers, literary critics and activists in a number of causes. There are a number of works analysing this phenomenon in relation to literary works,¹ and in the particularly visible case of the American AIDS memorial quilt². In this chapter I want to explore the ways in which feminist theorists, social scientists, critics and writers have used the images of textile arts. The ways in which feminist critics use metaphors from traditional women's cultures are often, it will be suggested, stereotyped and indicative of

¹ Torsney, C., and Elsley, J., *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia MI, 1994. See also Showalter, E., "Common Threads" in *Sisters' Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 145-195, and "Piecing and Writing" in Miller, N. (ed) *The Poetics of Gender*, Columbia University Press, NY, 1986, both further discussed below.

² Some of the more recent contributions to this burgeoning literature include: Krouse, M., "The AIDS Memorial Quilt as Cultural Resistance for Gay Communities" in *Critical Sociology*, 20 (3), 1994, pp. 65-80; Mueller, M. "Significant Symbols, Symbolic Boundaries and Quilts in the Time of AIDS" in *Research in the Sociology of Health Care* 12, 1995, pp.3-23; Elsley, J., "The Rhetoric of the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt: Reading the Text(ile)" in Nelson, E. (ed) *AIDS: The Literary Response*, Twayne, NY, 1992; Hawkins, P., "The Art of Memory and the NAMES Quilt" in *Critical Inquiry*, 19, 1993, pp.752-79, and Howe, L., "A Text of the Times: The NAMES Project" in *Uncoverings* 12, 1992, pp. 11-31. The cover of this issue of *Uncoverings* shows two details from the AIDS quilt panel commemorating Michael Kile (1947-1991), an eminent quilt collector, curator and publisher of many quilt books as director of Quilt Digest Press, San Francisco.

the lack of understanding of such cultures, despite the intentions of such feminist writers.

Some feminist theorists have used the metaphor of the quilt as a fresh means of describing the eclectic process of building a feminist philosophy out of the androcentric ideas of the past. Others, discussed below, have tried to find a set of images which centre on women's concerns and try to avoid misogynistic overtones. Some of these uses of quilting and sewing metaphors reveal, however, the lack of knowledge of the workings of the cultures in which *sewing as a real process* is carried out, one of which has been described in detail in previous chapters. As a result, sometimes the metaphor is unsuccessful in its own terms as well as working to reinforce some aspects of the stereotyping of women and women's traditional pursuits. Because of lack of knowledge, the ways in which the metaphor of quilting has been pursued have worked to obscure the real interest for feminists of the kinds of sociability that such cultures have preserved and developed. Women's traditional culture has been used as a source of fascinating metaphors, but its real interest as an alternative form of sociability, as an example of practical "workarounds" for some of feminism's most challenging practical and intellectual problems, has been overlooked. The conclusion to this chapter suggests some reasons why this might be so.

Quilt metaphors and motifs have also been used by poets, novelists, and scholarly writers of other types. In looking at some examples, I want to examine the 'appropriation' of such motifs, and explore the ways in which they are similar to or different from the kinds of re-interpretation and appropriation that are examined in relation to feminist visual art in Chapter Five. How can the feminist use of this kind of traditional work as a metaphor be expanded to encompass an understanding of the *process* being invoked, rather than the disembodied product of an undervalued and under-imagined culture? This thesis argues that only an ethnographic attention to detail, and a respectful understanding of the seriousness of the culture will produce this effect.

To begin with, let us look at an example from literature, where the quilts as objects are not metaphorical, but where the making, ownership and most importantly *use* of the quilts, is the metaphor for the survival of black women's culture and history. In 1973, American writer Alice Walker

published "Everyday Use".³ In this short story, many of the issues of this chapter are raised, in a fictional way which is both memorable and powerful. The story has inspired a great deal of critical commentary.⁴ What is useful about the story, for our purpose here, is the way in which the quilts, as objects, are so much less important than the meanings they carry and the skills involved in their making. The "everyday use" of the title is a phrase which implies that culture is meaningless, lost, even stolen, while it is not in everyday use.

In the story, Dee, the educated, sophisticated daughter of a poor Southern black family, comes home to visit, with a new name "Wangero", a new style of dress inspired by neo-African fashion, a new partner who is a black Muslim, and a sudden new interest in the tools, and the quilts, made, cherished and used by her mother and sister. She wants some of what she calls her "heritage", but not all of it. When her mother asks her what became of her name she answers: "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me." Her mother answers:

"You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie," I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her "Big Dee" after Dee was born.

"But who was *she* named after?" asked Wangero.

"I guess after Grandma Dee." I said.⁵

She takes the top of the churn, which her mother still uses, to be "a centrepiece for the alcove table", and when she gets to the quilts, pieced by her grandmother and quilted by her mother and aunt, exclaims:

"She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine!" She held the quilts securely in her arms, stroking them.

"Some of the pieces, like those lavender ones, come from old clothes her mother handed down to her," I said, moving up to touch the quilts. Dee (Wangero) moved back just enough so that I couldn't reach the quilts. They already belonged to her.

³ Walker, A., "Everyday Use", first published in *In Love And Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, NY, 1973.

⁴ See for example a recent compilation: Christian, B., (ed), '*Everyday Use*': Alice Walker, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1994.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.29.

But Dee's mother is determined to give the quilts to her other daughter Maggie, the one scarred by a house fire, who stayed at home. Dee is scandalised :

"She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."

"I reckon she would". I said. "God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!" I didn't want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told me they were old -fashioned, out of style.

"But they're *priceless!*" she was saying now, furiously...."Maggie would put them on the bed in and five years they'd be in rags. Less than that."

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt". Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, *these* quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would you do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.⁶

Maggie, meek and cowed by her sister, says "She can have them, Mama ... I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts", but the mother grabs the quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie. Dee leaves, convinced that her mother and sister just don't understand their heritage. She tells them: "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it."⁷

The story is a powerful intervention on the side of the living tradition, not the fashion-driven and insincere recuperations of a later, deskilled, and condescending group. Dee valued her community's skills only *as heritage*, only as objects to be admired on walls, and not as a living and continuing process, a set of skills, a vital connection to the past. Maggie, the scarred and inarticulate stay-at-home sister, doesn't need the actual objects (although it is important to the story's hopeful resolution that she gets them) because she is able to make more: she can remember her grandmother too, without the 'authentic' objects as a mnemonic, because "It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp.34-5.

who taught her how to quilt herself".⁸ Her connection with the women of her family is one formed in shared time, skill, aesthetics and creativity, not the notional and intellectual one of "heritage". For Dee, "making something of yourself" means moving away from making something *for* yourself, and it is only once she is far enough away not to be dragged back by it, that she can even begin to appreciate the products of her family's labour as "authentic" aesthetic objects.

The use of the quilt as metaphor, as motif in feminist art and criticism, and sometimes in feminist writing more generally, is more like Dee/Wangero's interest in her mother's quilts, than Maggie's. Use of the metaphors of women's traditional culture has become, for some feminist writers and artists, a kind of marker of their distance from traditional cultures -- just as it is only once Dee is firmly ensconced in the North, in the middle class, and far away from her origins, that she wants the quilts. They will hang on her wall, a marker of where she has come from, but irrelevant to her daily life. Those to whom they are still part of everyday life become the ones who 'just don't understand their heritage'. It is the manoeuvre of abstraction, decontextualisation, aestheticisation, which gives these metaphors the power that they have in intellectual discussion. Otherwise, they represent just 'women's work', even to feminists.

Using quilt metaphors and examples in this way, is of course, not the same as Dee's attempt to take the quilts away. Traditional women's cultures survive, mutate and flourish regardless of feminist philosophy and the opinions of the feminist art world. But until they are taken seriously by feminist critics and researchers, as more than sources of metaphor, the insights they offer into the ways women have related, socialised, organised, comforted and compensated themselves in an unequal world will not be available. Feminists and non-feminists will remain mutually incomprehensible.

The importance of metaphor

'Metaphor' has become a much discussed and analysed concept in a number of fields of academic inquiry. In anthropology, it has inspired enormously creative and fertile work on the relations between culture and language,⁹ and

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹ See for instance, the important early collection Sapir, J.D., and Crocker, J.C., (eds) *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric*, University of

inspired others in related disciplines to examine important cultural metaphors and metaphorical structures in the world around us. In linguistics, discussion of the use of metaphor in language has attempted to develop an account of the ways in which bodily experience of the physical world produces basic metaphorical "image-schemas" which structure, underlie and indeed, constitute understanding.¹⁰ While this work is generally rather ahistorical, and does not confront major cultural differences,¹¹ it is perhaps the most complete example of the important position that the concept of metaphor holds in language-oriented social scientific disciplines now.

In quite another philosophical tradition, the work of Paul Ricoeur has focussed interest on metaphor (and other tropes) as an effect of the so-called "linguistic turn" with its emphasis on the theory of language and the influence of psychoanalytic ideas.¹² The development of discourse theory, and the turn to poststructuralist ideas and postmodernist understandings in almost every discipline has enabled a much closer attention to the use of metaphors and language more generally in all academic writing.

1. *Quilts in philosophy*

The feminist theorist may be viewed as a kind of patchwork-quilter, taking bits and pieces from here and there in an attempt to offer an account of women's social and political being that would be adequate to basic feminist principles.¹³

Feminist philosophy is a burgeoning area, encompassing a vast diversity of political, social and moral positions. Like the artists, art critics, cultural theorists and historians examined in later chapters, feminist theorists

Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia PA, 1977, and the more recent survey of the field, Fernandez, J., *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1991.

¹⁰ See for example, Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M., *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 1980; Lakoff, G., *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 1987, and Johnson, M., *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 1987.

¹¹ For an interesting and telling critique see Quirn, N., "The Cultural Basis of Metaphor" in Fernandez, op. cit., pp.56-93.

¹² Ricoeur, P., *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, translated by R. Czerny, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978.

¹³ Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, Polity, Cambridge, 1991, p.1.

repeatedly use metaphors and tropes from women's traditional cultures. The textile crafts of sewing, knitting, weaving, and embroidery provide philosophers with allegories, imagery and ideas that they use in different and interesting ways. These images and examples provide a way of reading feminist theory, and of examining some feminist theory and philosophy against the account of women's culture given in previous chapters. Despite their crucial position illustrating and bearing their author's arguments, textile images are rarely indexed.¹⁴

Moira Gatens has argued that: "Creating other modes of conceptualising human culture that do not involve the passivity or invisibility of women is obviously of the greatest importance."¹⁵ Gatens envisages a much more far-reaching theoretical project than is possible here. However, this chapter explores some of the ways in which images from traditional women's cultures are used by feminist philosophers and theorists, and indicates another area where passivity, invisibility and indeed chaos, "harlequin" and "hodge-podge", are taken for granted as feminine qualities, whether they are derided or lauded. What feminist work over a number of disciplines has not addressed is the way in which some traditional women-only practices and sub-cultures may have produced different immanent understandings and practical "workarounds" for those complex dualisms: public-private, mind-body, individual-group, work-leisure and art-craft. Part of the reason for this lies in the faulty assumptions made about the kind of women, the kind of work, the kind of thinking that pertains in these groups. And these assumptions are revealed when textile metaphors are used.

In many cases, the ways in which philosophers use images of traditional female culture and crafts reveal why their work is hard to connect with an attempt to understand or theorise the continued power, relevance and liveliness of women's traditional cultures, such as quilting. It may be argued (although not, as I will show, by the philosophers themselves) that these images are only throwaway comparisons, or respites for the reader from the relentless abstract diction of philosophical writing. But the lack of understanding of women's cultures found in such images may reveal some of the reasons why feminist intellectuals have found it difficult to come to terms with traditional cultures of women. These reasons include the very

¹⁴ It is an entirely absorbing project, once one has noticed it, to discover which images are indexed and which are not, and worthy of a feminist critique in itself.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.58.

seductions and attractions of such cultures, the rebellious turning from them which, for many, becoming a feminist intellectual has seemed to require, and the *external* way in which even feminists seem to understand the processes and products of female labour in traditional cultures.

In the words quoted at the head of this section Gatens sees herself, the feminist philosopher, as a 'patchwork-quilter'. A quilt is, as has been shown, an aesthetic artefact within its own complex tradition of meanings and influences, but in this quote, Gatens appears to see it as virtually random, an exemplar of eclectic making-do. What she fails to imagine is what it might mean to be a *quilter*: a skilled and creative maker choosing the fabrics, and the techniques to carry out her design. This is not an isolated example. As the images of quilts as both random and chaotic build up, it is important to ask: *what* quilts or other textiles could these writers possibly have seen? If these highly patterned textiles signify random chaos, what could be the cause of such a misapprehension? More importantly, perhaps, what is the effect of this mistake on perceptions of women, and women's art?

The chapter's *pattern* then, is an examination of the kinds of thinking about women's traditional cultures that are revealed in the anecdotes, metaphors and images of a variety of types of feminist writing. This kind of critical strategy is, itself, a special contribution of feminist philosophy, which drew attention to the ways in which philosophical images constructed ideas of men and women. In response to criticism of feminist philosophy as 'merely anecdotal', Gatens has argued that:

First, whether we care to acknowledge it or not, we are historical beings whose language, stock of images and social practices constitute an unconscious dimension of our cultural heritage ... These are embodied habits, the origins of which have been long forgotten and which have now become second nature. ... Secondly, philosophy itself has much to answer for in relation to the character of the images and representations which dominate the everyday consciousness ... philosophers [should] begin to accept responsibility for the particular passions and imaginings that characterise their particular philosophies.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gatens, M., *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.xi-xii.

Quoting Bourdieu,¹⁷ Gatens observes that this kind of habit is a factor in the ways in which social institutions and practices are resistant to change. Gatens' own attempts to find the "social imaginary" through the governing images of society and the sexes, the "body politic" and so forth, show how productive such a minutely critical approach can be. By extension, however, it can also be applied to feminist philosophers and the ways in which feminist theory has imagined the traditional culture of women and appropriated images and metaphors from it.

Genevieve Lloyd has also touched upon the crucial role of metaphor in philosophy. In her Preface to the Second Edition of *The Man of Reason*, Lloyd observes:

If I were now to articulate the central claims of the book, I would give much more prominence to metaphorical aspects of the male-female distinction as it occurs in philosophical texts. To have presented the maleness of reason as a metaphorical construct would have been, at the time, to risk trivialising the issue -- as if what were at stake were nothing more than a quaint, peripheral, literary dimension of philosophical writing.¹⁸

In response to Derrida and Ricoeur and the work on the operations of philosophical metaphor inspired by them, Lloyd remarks

The metaphor of maleness is deeply embedded in philosophical articulations of ideas and ideals of reason. It has been constitutive of ways of thinking of reason which have deep repercussions in ways of thinking of ourselves as male or female. Metaphorical though it may be, maleness has been no mere embellishment of reason.¹⁹

I suggest that the images and metaphors of women's traditional culture which some feminist philosophers have tried to use, have also been constitutive of their arguments, in ways which may even obscure an understanding of the world views of non-feminist women. Lloyd seems to share a related concern. She is sceptical about the "affirmation of the feminine" which some

¹⁷ "[E]mbodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history -- is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" Gatens quotes more than this, from Bourdieu, P., *The Logic of Practice*, transl. R. Nice, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1990, p.56.

¹⁸ Lloyd, G., *The Man of Reason 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, Routledge, 2nd ed 1993, (first published Methuen London 1984) p. viii.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

deconstructive philosophical strategies have attempted, remarking: "My concern is that feminists may, in the name of deconstructive strategies, be perpetuating a symbolic use of sexual difference which it would be better to expose and leave behind."²⁰

This seems particularly likely if, as I argue, the images they use in order to remake "the symbolic content of *woman*" are themselves hazy, often unresearched, and in short, *stereotypical*. Why might this be so? As Margaret Yocom found in relation to her folklore research in Maine (discussed in Chapter Seven), feminist intellectuals have often had to distance themselves from traditional women's culture. As another example, Christine Battersby, in her study of feminist aesthetics, *Gender and Genius*, recalls:

Like most other scholarly women in our culture, I had grown used to blanking out questions of gender while reading books ... A woman who reads a lot has to learn a process of not noticing sexual difference ... By the time I was a Ph.D student I treated myself not ^{as} a woman-academic; but as *either* an academic *or* a woman, as *either* a neutered reader *or* a woman. Never both at once.²¹

In explaining why it took her so long to come to the conclusions she reached in the book, she relates stories of her alienation from herself-as-woman. Such alienation, in its effect of allowing her to identify with male characters in fiction, and with male examples in her philosophical reading, made possible her work as a philosopher, but also obscured from her the deep misogyny of those same works. Far from being an attainment of a privileged objectivity, this internal contradiction made understanding impossible except within traditional paradigms.²²

It is remarkable how similar Battersby's account of this process of distancing herself from 'women' is to other scholars' experiences. Reflecting upon patchwork quilts and the hierarchy of art and craft, Roszika Parker and

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.ix.

²¹ Battersby, C., *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989 (also published by Women's Press, London,) p.7. Emphasis in original.

²² I would argue that it still marks Battersby's argument in this book, which is that the term *genius*, despite its long and dishonourable misogynist history, must be reclaimed and used by feminists in relation to women and feminist artists. Because of her understanding that the word/concept is pernicious in any number of ways, her insistence on its reclamation seems to indicate at best an incomplete immunity to the lure of powerful (male) categories.

Griselda Pollock remark that "any association with the traditions and practices of needlework and domestic art can be dangerous for an artist, especially when that artist is a woman."²³

What we can see, however, in some of the uses of images from women's traditional cultures, in philosophy, in novels, and in criticism, is that an easy reversal from danger and devaluation, to valorisation and celebration, can leave intact the very categories it seeks to reverse.

Lloyd's conclusions follow chapters of detailed explication and comparison of the work of thinkers influential in ideas of reason over many centuries. In those chapters she uses and analyses their metaphors, though, as pointed out above, not to the extent to which she would do it today. But Lloyd, quite carefully, uses no metaphors of her own. She avoids setting out how or where feminist philosophy could go beyond the critique of philosophical ideals of reason, other than saying that the wholesale abandonment of Reason as a concept or ideal is inadvisable. Determined to meet the male philosophers on their own ground, and not to lose the use of an unsexed Reason as an ideal, she avoids what she sees as the error of feminist irrationalism.

Gatens, the most careful and accessible of feminist philosophers, has used the patchwork image, as quoted earlier. This reveals Gatens' view of the quilter as a collector and arranger of 'bits and pieces' although by the end of the sentence, the image has evaporated, and it seems unlikely that "be[ing] adequate to basic feminist principles" could equate to the pattern, vision or concept of a quilt before completion. For Gatens' argument, it is the bits, and the shapes they come in, that are the important part of the image, rather than any vision either of the pattern of the quilt, or the skill and discrimination of the quiltmaker, or the social processes by which these might come together.

Gatens' argument is that pieces of prior philosophies are not just neutral intellectual apparatuses that can be reassembled into a feminist theory, but that they bring with them the marks of the uses to which they have previously been put. In a detailed critique of the existentialism of Simone de Beauvoir, and the essentialism of other feminist thinkers, she shows how almost any theory of human action can be used to maintain the inferior status

²³ Parker, R. and Pollock, G., *Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p.78.

of women. From her detailed explications it is clear that feminist interrogation of seemingly neutral philosophical theories, tools, areas and categories has revealed the deep prejudices of philosophy. She argues that it is not possible to create feminist theories about the world, without first seeing what traces and marks of misogyny are left on all the pieces of earlier philosophy.

How, then, does this relate to her powerful opening use of that patchwork image? Gatens' argument actually relies on the bits and pieces of philosophy that she examines being far more rigid and unchangeable than the cloth of patchwork. Her argument is that some of the concepts of philosophy just *cannot* be used to produce an emancipating feminist analysis: "[F]eminists and non-feminists alike who make use of these theories are, quite independently of their intentions, predisposing their studies of society and politics toward conclusions that are prejudicial to women."²⁴

Gatens is talking about something perhaps more analogous to building a drystone wall with found rocks, for example, rather than the process of selection, cutting, shaping, easing, and correction which governs the joining of fabric pieces in a quilt. Nothing could be less like the process of making a quilt than what Gatens appears to have in mind. The archetypal scrap quilt, the idea of which Gatens seems to be invoking, has its value precisely in the way the quilter's desired pattern, her conscious design, is maintained despite unpromising materials, the way in which equivalences of value, hue and tone, dark, medium and light, warm or cool colours, are manipulated to produce the design, despite not having more than a few pieces of any one fabric.²⁵

What is interesting in Gatens' use of this image is the almost self-deprecating employment of the ambiguity of the patchwork quilt metaphor. It is a slightly comic image, like the quilter found in cartoons and legends who cuts the ends off men's ties and pieces out of the backs of other people's skirts in her search for the perfect piece of appropriately coloured fabric. (Even this implies more of a plan, and endview of the finished quilt than Gatens' "bits and pieces from here and there"). Where does the easy availability of such an image of comic

²⁴ Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, op. cit., p.2.

²⁵ See Appendix for some pictures of scrap quilts, which show how cleverly a multitude of different patterned fabrics might be controlled to form a pleasing multicoloured formal pattern.

bower-bird collection come from in our culture? I suggest that it comes from *precisely* the same mechanism of devaluation that Gatens describes so well in relation to de Beauvoir and others. Feminine culture, like female biology, is a given, which can either be avoided and eschewed, or elevated and (seemingly) celebrated, as in its use as a metaphor. The metaphor may come from a sighting of a quilt as an object, read and interpreted according to ^aless than adequate understanding of the processes of its making and the conditions of its cultural possibility. Or it may come from a more general cultural image of patchwork as a humble and homely pursuit, with none of the status (or the "chutzpah") of painting, writing, or philosophising.

In another philosophical tradition, one can find even more striking versions of the problem. Morwenna Griffiths' *Feminisms and the Self: the Web of Identity*, published in 1995, is from within the tradition of Anglo-analytic philosophy, although attempting a feminist and alternative view. Griffiths uses non-traditional source material and methods, using autobiography, and poetry as illustrations of her ideas. She seeks to find an explanation for identity which deals with belonging and exclusion, authenticity and change, by asking: "what does a politics of the self mean for a politics of liberation?" While aware and even in agreement with the post-structuralist view that the self is fragmented and contradictory, Griffiths argues for an ongoing "embodied self" which is physically unitary but composed of "pieces, strands, streaks and patches", and which can remake both itself and society. This is in itself an interesting and valuable argument. Griffiths argues that the sociability of women's group interactions offer a possible model for a kind of collective action which might produce different kinds of selves. Throughout the book, she uses images of women's traditional cultures and their products: sewing, knitting, weaving. However, these images in fact work to obscure the real examples of women's sociability that one might have thought they would serve to highlight, examples such as the women's subculture of quilting that I have described in detail in the first three chapters of this thesis.

From the beginning of *Feminisms and the Self*, the tropes of sewing and women's culture dominate. Griffiths signals this at the start:

A central metaphor is the web ... [W]omen have traditionally made webs: knitting, tapestry, crochet and lace. Their creations are constrained by the circumstances of their making but they bear the mark of the maker. They can, like Penelope in the *Odyssey*, untangle the webs they have made for their own reasons and to suit their own purposes. Many webs

can be seen as wholes or as a conglomeration of parts ... [T]he abstract noun, 'web', refers to something which is complex. It is intricate, involved, interlaced, with each part entangled with the rest and dependent on it.²⁶

The problems with the way these metaphors are used in the book are already suggested here. The use of the words 'untangle' and 'entangled' reveal how little Griffiths is paying attention to either the realities of "knitting, tapestry, crochet and lace" or the legendary shroud-weaving of Penelope. No skilled textile worker would describe her finished product as a tangle of any kind, and 'unravelling' is much closer to a description of what Penelope was said to have done to avoid having to marry again after Odysseus' disappearance. A 'tangle' is in fact a concept which is *antithetical* to knitting, crocheting, weaving or lacemaking, a wasteful and destructive misuse of materials, something to be avoided. The use of the word reveals how much of an outsider's view Griffiths is taking of this image, the view of someone who cannot read the pattern, to whom the intricate process of making lace or knitting is just a more-or-less organised 'tangling'.

Griffiths returns to the imagery of needlework in her discussion of 'becoming' and 'agency' in her chapter 'Changing Selves: Personal and Collective Change'. Talking about some mid-point to be struck between the liberal view that *we* speak language, freely, on the one hand, and the poststructuralist view that it speaks *us*, utterly, on the other, Griffiths posits that "the form of expression and the act of communication can continue to shape and re-shape each other until a satisfactory result is achieved." Her discussion is worth quoting at length for the imagery it contains:

The tensions within the issues of spontaneity and long-term construction can be resolved in terms of the ideas of *becoming* and *agency* - and of the way each affects the other. These ideas underpin the arguments about changing selves and the creation of a web of identity. The metaphor of a web is useful in understanding both 'becoming' and 'agency' (with 'web' understood here as tapestry, weaving, crochet and lace, rather than as a spider's web). At first sight, needlewomen seem free to create whatever web they fancy. A longer look shows that this impression is misleading. Webs are always made in a temporal and

²⁶ Griffiths, M., *Feminisms and the Self: the Web of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1995, p.2. One can only assume that Griffiths had largely completed the book before the Web metaphor was completely appropriated by computer usage, in relation to the now ubiquitous World Wide Web. The interesting misapprehensions in the use of that metaphor in that forum are the material for another thesis altogether.

social context, and they get their meanings from that context. There are only some patterns available. Still, a needlewoman does have room for manoeuvre. The design of the finished article is not fixed prior to its making. New webs are invented using the old ones as motifs. Consider the Bayeux tapestry again, first mentioned in Chapter 1, and compare it to the tapestries made in medieval times of the late twentieth century, in Europe or elsewhere. It would not have been possible for the makers of the Bayeux tapestry to create medieval tapestries - and vice versa. The context of the assumptions about tapestries from which they drew was only partly visible to them. We of the twentieth century cannot create a Norman tapestry either, because our context is also different. A modern copy of a Norman tapestry is just that: a copy. Divergence from conventions would be a mistake for the modern copy; for the Normans, it would have been creativity.²⁷

Griffiths' point is a historical and social one, about the possibilities for innovation, but it reveals rather a whiggish narrative of aesthetic progress; one which virtually denies the existence of living folk cultures having continuity over time. The metaphor functions more as an example, giving the paragraph a kind of virtual empirical force, which, on examination, fails to persuade, because of the many misapprehensions and doubtful interpretations which it includes.

Leaving aside the fact that the different forms of women's textile work ('web-making') that Griffiths cites have quite different conventions and very different types of latitude or agency in design, execution and so on, this 'metaphor' clearly includes a view of 'tapestry' as a cumulative and progressive long-term art form, with a narratable history exactly like that which has been developed for painting or sculpture. Such a history inevitably leads up to the present with its enlightened view of the past. In this view, the assumptions of the artists of the past are ^{by} definition only 'partly visible' to those who hold them. Although Griffiths appears to illustrate a notion of context (or structure) and agency with a metaphor from women's culture, in fact she does not. Griffiths has confused several art forms here, creating an entirely fictional 'tradition': the Bayeux tapestry is actually an embroidery. For a long time thought to be sewn by needlewomen under the guidance of Queen Mathilda, wife of William the Conqueror, of Normandy, it is now accepted as the work of a professional English embroidery workshop.²⁸ It is not clear what she means by medieval tapestry, but she could be referring

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.178.

²⁸ Parker and Pollock, *The Subversive Stitch*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

either to embroidered hangings and carpets or to woven textiles. Modern tapestry (strictly understood, a kind of weaving) is, interestingly, the only textile art form routinely used by mainstream artists, mostly painters. It no longer has any folk or traditional life. The design, in twentieth century tapestry, is completely fixed prior to its making, usually designed by an artist, to be produced by professional tapestry weavers in a large workshop. There are weavers but no needlewomen involved in the making. The kind of popular embroidery known as tapestry, and done by women at home, is more correctly 'canvaswork' and bears no simple relation either to the Bayeux tapestry, or to the art-tapestries woven from artist's designs.

What Griffiths is trying to get at here is the dynamic dialectic between long-term structures and innovation, but her metaphor/example, and her ignorance of women's traditional cultures, lets her down. In fact, a textile art, with a folk life, such as quilting, is a far better example of the kind of interdependence between context, pattern and innovation that she is talking about. However, in a living folk craft, there is no such thing as a copy, in the sense she seems to be using it. A contemporary quilt is a contemporary quilt. Though it may be using a traditional pattern, it cannot be a copy or replica of a nineteenth century quilt, because the materials are no longer available. *Every* interpretation of a traditional pattern incorporates some degree of innovation and agency, and some degree of restriction and structure, and both these elements can vary from extremely small, to extremely large factors in the final product. The needlewoman is far more aware than Griffiths allows, both of the restrictions, many of which she chooses herself, and of the freedoms which are open to her. What is strange, for a feminist understanding, however, is Griffiths' implicit devaluation of the 'web', be it the Bayeux tapestry or Aunt's crochet, as a virtually unconscious utterance, like an ordinary sentence in language, rather than as a constructed artistic creative whole, analogous to a poem or a novel.²⁹ A modern copy of the Bayeux tapestry is a meaningless image: the thing is a hand embroidered chronicle 270 feet long, a history book for a largely pre-literate society. To take a more meaningful example, a modern quilt in the traditional pattern "Kaleidoscope" or of the traditional type "Log Cabin", is a modern creative work, not a "copy" of an old one -- just as a modern sonnet is not a 'copy' of a Shakespearean sonnet. It is a new example of an old but living art form.

²⁹ Griffiths' other illustration of the tension she is trying to get across is "the everyday phrases, 'saying what I mean, meaning what I say'"(Griffiths, op. cit., p.178.)

Griffith's reliance on 'web' as a unifying concept for a number of very different and rather meagrely understood traditional skills leads her into difficulty. Despite her assurance that web is *not* to be understood as a "spider's web" in this passage, she ends by invoking just the inarticulate instinctive lack of self-awareness of the spider for the women in her example.

These are not isolated examples. In another chapter, during her discussion of Rawls' discussion of "groups and communities" in relation to the formation of self esteem, she says that Rawls

apparently fails to notice that these groups are more complex than he seems to think. It is even more puzzling that he does not seem to notice that groups stand in political relations to each other. He uses the words 'communities and associations', so possibly he is thinking of face-to-face groups, or of organisations with relatively small numbers, like golf clubs, the Freemasons, or sewing circles, though he may be thinking of something larger and more nebulous like 'philosophers' or 'American philosophers'. Once the complexity of groups is noticed, the full extent of their political significance can be seen. It is no accident that sewing circles are not a source of influence in the same way that golf clubs or the Masons are.³⁰

Griffiths goes on to reiterate her argument that "self-identity is created and constituted by social groups personally unknown to the individual. Self-esteem is dependent on this part of self-identity as well as on the parts formed through individual contact". This seems highly likely. But Griffiths has herself fallen into the same analytical trap. While it is indubitable that sewing circles are not influential in the same way as the Masons, what this critique shows is that even Griffiths is judging 'influence' by the categories of the Masons, and not the sewing circle. In fact her use of 'sewing circle' as an example of a small group is there *because* of its dissonance with the very idea of political significance, a dissonance that Griffiths uses to make a point against Rawls, but fails herself to analyse in any way. The politically significant sewing circle is as ludicrous an idea to Griffiths as it is to Rawls, or any other political philosopher.³¹ Looking, then, for the political significance, if any, of a sewing circle, is not likely to occur to her.

Griffiths' concerns are, importantly, directed at finding ways for women to achieve selfhood and autonomy, without sacrificing the virtues and joys of

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.120.

³¹ Unless, of course, the sewing circle is in Soweto, or Santiago. See Chapter Five.

connectedness with, and care for, others. She, like Battersby, discussed above, is aware of the dangers of trying to find such a balance. Her most successful example of the difficulties of balancing such issues is not her web metaphor, but a poem by Erica Jong. It is more directly about the competition between housework and writing, but it captures precisely the kind of simultaneous seduction and repulsion that many feminist intellectuals seem to feel for traditional women's activities.

Woman Enough

Because my grandmother's hours
 were apple cakes baking,
 dust motes gathering,
 linens yellowing
 & seams and hems
 inevitably unravelling -
 I almost never keep house -
 though really I *like* houses
 & wish I had a clean one.

Because my mother's minutes
 were sucked into the roar
 of the vacuum cleaner,
 because she waltzed with the washer-dryer
 & tore her hair out waiting for repairmen -
 I send out my laundry
 & live in a dusty house,
 though really I *like* clean houses
 as well as anyone.

I am woman enough
 to love the kneading of bread
 as much as the feel of typewriter keys
 under my fingers -
 springy, springy.
 & the smell of clean laundry
 & simmering soup
 are almost as dear to me
 as the smell of paper and ink.
 I wish there were not a choice;
 I wish I could be two women.
 I wish the days could be longer
 But they are short.
 So I write while
 the dust piles up.

I sit at my typewriter
 remembering my grandmother

& all my mothers,
 & the minutes they lost
 loving houses better than themselves -
 & the man I love cleans up the kitchen
 grumbling only a little
 because he knows
 that after all these centuries
 it is easier for him
 than for me. ³²

The poem captures some of the seductions and pleasures of housework competently performed, and also the dangers of investing oneself in an achievement with no permanence, which will always need redoing, re-performing. What is striking about this poem, however, is the way it restates, in relation to writing, what quilters have long observed about quilting. Eliza Calvert Hall's "Aunt Jane of Kentucky", one of the fictional quilters perhaps most quoted everywhere, was the likely source of quilter's wisdom about the quilts being (semi-) permanent, a kind of women's work which did not "perish in the doin'", and which remained after the death of the quilter "to remember her by".³³

Jong's poem sees writing as valuing the self, and the individual lasting achievement, above the ephemeral seductions of a clean house and simmering soup. "Aunt Jane's" insight is that quilting produces an individual lasting achievement, more rewarding than, indeed, compensating for, the endless round of dishes and mending. They are not so different. Yet one wonders if Griffiths, for example, would be able to recognise the similar impulses behind her own intellectual constructions, and the 'web-weaving' which she seems to value as a metaphor, but not a reality. One of her conclusions about feminist politics, is, in fact, in agreement with what this thesis seeks to establish:

The politics of autonomy needs to ensure enrichment rather than debilitation, and also to leave space for previously debilitating interactions to be transformed into enrichment. In particular, there is a need for generous patterns of cultural and political life, and the reduction of fear. By 'generous patterns' I mean patterns which allow

³² Griffiths, op. cit., pp.48-9, quoted from Jong, E., *The Raving Beauties*, 1983, pp.119-120.

³³ Hall, E.C., *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, Little, Boston, 1907.

individuals room to take them on, move between them and transform them.³⁴

There are "previously debilitating interactions" between feminist thinking and traditional women's cultures, and these do need to be overcome. Respectful understanding of the intricacies of the seductive and threatening women's worlds which currently seem opaque to feminist enquiry is one possible method towards such an outcome, and in subsequent chapters I will be outlining a number of such interactions and the ways in which we may begin to overcome their aftermath. But all too often, feminist theorists such as Griffiths have only seen traditional women's culture when it is explicitly translated and transported into obviously feminist action. Griffiths, is, for example, most interested in the influence women's action has had on the changing boundaries of public and private:

Decisions about contraception, sexual harassment and child-care would be 'private' in the traditional sense. Against that tradition, women have shown that these issues may be personal, but they are also public ... Equally the deployment of nuclear weapons and the protection of the environment have been thought to be 'public' in the sense that solutions to issues should be found through public institutions. Equally, against that tradition, women have shown that these issues may be public, but they are also personal.³⁵

Her examples of such boundary-pushing are limited to: "They have pinned photographs of their grandchildren to the wire at the air base at Greenham Common ... Women have used argument in the traditional sense, but they have also used jokes, cartoons, demonstrations, slogans, novels, films, arts, street theatre." ³⁶ Here too, one can see that for Griffiths, what counts is still a fairly traditional view of "the public". As I will discuss in Chapter Five, the lexical art forms with obvious political content, such as the novels, films, street theatre, found in Griffiths' quote above, are easy to understand within such a theoretical framework. They may bring new subject matter into a previously constituted public space. They may even do this in innovative ways. They do not produce a public space in which women who have not already been politically radicalised are going to feel comfortable, or find their experience validated.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.143

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.150.

³⁶ *ibid.*

Griffiths' definition of public space is as follows:

Public space is any place where political, collective action can take place, be it cultural politics (including the literary and artistic), or the politics of practical discourse related to organisation around issues, or academic reflection intended to reflect on either or both of the first two.³⁷

This is a rather narrow definition, and what she appears to mean is something more like 'feminist public space'. It is an example of how feminist politics grows in the mind to occlude its opposite: so that politics comes to consist only of progressive politics, and women come to consist only of feminists. This means, necessarily, that from this viewpoint no contact can be made with women who are not (yet) feminists, for they do not, in such discourse, exist. Far from enabling an understanding of the non-feminist cultural politics and forms of women, this kind of rhetoric can annexe women's cultural forms as proto-feminist, dismiss them as counter-feminist, or use them as metaphors. Why does this manoeuvre look so familiar? Not one of these options enables a feminist critic to see the kind of alternative to traditional conceptions of the public and the private that I have described in Chapter Three.

Griffiths' conclusion perhaps illustrates best what I have tried to explore above and is worth quoting at length:³⁸

I started the book with a metaphor of webs. I end with an extension of that initial metaphor, a metaphor of patchwork. My argument about the construction of self shows that, like patchwork, making a self is relatively easy, though it always takes time and attention. However, again like patchwork, making a good one is very hard indeed. Understanding which pieces of old cloth will fit into the whole is a difficult and painstaking matter. Like patchwork, the construction of an authentic, autonomous self depends on the context of each fragment, and where it fits within the overall design. Like patchwork, it is hard to say how many makers there are and where all the pieces came from.

Trying to reduce all our complexities of self-identity to relatively simple designs and simple stories, of the kind that mainstream philosophy tells, has resulted in inappropriate stories about ways in which to deal with our personal and collective dilemma. It is a simplicity which has contributed to sameness and oppression. Infinitely preferable is the

³⁷ *ibid.*, p.189.

³⁸ This reference to patchwork is indexed.

variety, confusion, colour, hotchpotch, kaleidoscope, medley, motley, and harlequin of patchwork selves.³⁹

A clearer example of the 'outside-ness' of this view could hardly be found. It is only difficult to say how many makers of patchwork there are, and where all the pieces came from *if one did not make it or know the maker*. In fact, the maker of a patchwork can tell the willing listener precisely where every piece came from, and even in these days of buying fabric for quilting, a quilter can tell you what other quilts any particular fabric is included in, where it came from, its special significance and so forth. As discussed in preceding chapters, the *provenance* of the components of a quilt is one of the most important things happening in 'quilt-talk', whether it is in the catalogue notes of an exhibition, a show and tell session or a private chat about a particular quilt. Almost everything in these two paragraphs from Griffiths is inaccurate about quilting, not least her final list. "[C]onfusion, colour, hotchpotch, kaleidoscope, medley, motley, and harlequin" is a description of a quilt by someone entirely unable to read the codes and patterns which structure it. In using this metaphor, Griffiths reveals only that she values, and understands, a traditional women's cultural form quite as little as those who ignored it entirely.

As a more illustrative restatement of this point, imagine the theoretical difficulties posed, were a well-disposed anti-racist social critic to illustrate an argument for the tolerance and generosity needed in a multicultural society, with an image of an Aboriginal painting. In describing the work, this hypothetical critic asserts that the happy coincidence of meaningless, colourful, decorative dots and lines, arranged in pleasing disorder, is an apt metaphor for the productive confusion, melange, and hybridism of multiculturalism. That the deep and ancient stories which are embodied in Aboriginal art had been ignored and trivialised would be a major issue in the discussion of such a critic's work: because Aboriginal culture is, at last, receiving the respect that it deserves. Traditional women's cultural forms, on the other hand, rarely receive such respect, even, perhaps especially, from many feminist writers.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 191.

2. Quilts in literature

In recent years, particularly in North America, the quilt has become a popular literary metaphor and device, used in novels, poems, plays and films about women. A recent and celebrated example is Whitney Otto's novel (and the subsequent Hollywood film) *How To Make an American Quilt*,⁴⁰ where the individual blocks of an album quilt are linked to each woman's story, and the whole, with its stories, given to a younger woman as she becomes an adult. It becomes her wedding quilt, as she takes on the 'adult' responsibilities of marriage and monogamy. Carol Shields' *Happenstance*⁴¹ has a quilter at its centre, a character whose quilts become her life. These are not overtly feminist works, but the frequent recent appearance of quilts in popular cultural products speaks of the great visibility quilts now have in popular culture in the United States as a signifier, indicator, relic and enactment of women's culture.

In Australia this is not the case. In the course of research for this thesis, people often imagined my research was directed at historical American quilts, or the AIDS quilt, or quilts in American literature. I was given references to Derrida, to de Certeau, to Deleuze, and asked if I'd read Alice Walker, or Toni Morrison. It was never once thought, by someone who was not themselves a quilter, that I might be writing about a living, Australian, cultural practice. With the possible exception of the AIDS quilt in certain circles, quilting has inspired little intellectual, literary or metaphorical interest in Australia.⁴²

⁴⁰ Otto, W., *How To Make An American Quilt*, Pan Books, London, 1992 (first published by Random House, New York, 1991). I don't have space here to go into the odd misconceptions about quilting that Otto displays in the book, and which were even more clearly (because visually) displayed in the film, despite the citation of several books on quilting in the preface to Otto's novel, and the crediting of a well known quilter as consultant on the film.

⁴¹ Originally published as two novels, *Happenstance* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Canada, 1980) and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (Macmillan, Canada 1982), the novels were republished as one, titled *Happenstance*, in 1991 (Fourth Estate London) and reissued by Flamingo/Harper Collins, London 1994.

⁴² Among the cultural studies and feminist academics of my acquaintance, the only thing considered more unlikely than writing about quilting, was that I actually do it. When I gave a paper about this project, the reaction to one of my quilts, which was draped over the desk to give people an idea of what I was talking about, was very similar to Dee's in the story discussed above. "She did all this stitching by hand!. Imagine!". This is of course a larger phenomenon than just the distance between academic feminism and traditional women's cultures, and can partly be attributed to the gaping gulf between activities wholly of the mind, and those of the mind *and* hand, in our society, more generally.

The general availability of quilts as a cultural reference in American contexts may have a lot to do with the use of the metaphor by scholars. It is without exception used as a signifier of women, and interestingly, some of the same confusions described above in relation to philosophy, recur in popular cultural references. The country and western singer Mary Chapin Carpenter has the following chorus in a song about the family of a (male) lover:

Raised by the women who were stronger than you know,
A patchwork quilt of memory only women could have sewn.
The threads were stitched by family hands, protected from the moth,
By your mother, and her mother, the weavers of your cloth.⁴³

Here too, we see the same conflation of patchwork and weaving that is so clear in Griffiths' work. Carpenter's emphasis though, is on the strength and longevity of the memory-patchwork, and its importance to the life of the man who is the subject of the song, not on an assumed provisional, random and 'hotch-potch' nature of quilts. This is far more in tune with the ways in which quilters themselves use quilts as metaphors.⁴⁴

3. *The quilt as all-purpose scholarly metaphor*

Americans often utilise the imagery of the quilt in kinds of scholarly work other than philosophy. Sometimes this is a semi-playful conceit related to the kind of scholarship. The introduction to Cheryl Torsney's and Judy Elsley's volume of essays on quilt culture reads in part:

If this book were a quilt, an album quilt, for example, Judy would have scheduled the bee. ... The contributors responded by sending us their essays, that is their individual pieced or appliqued blocks ... Cheryl produced the sashing of the introduction, and the order of the essays and hung the frame up at her house because there was more room than at Judy's ... Finally in August 1993, Judy and Cheryl had the opportunity to

⁴³ Carpenter, M.C., "Family Hands" on *Hometown Girl*, Sony Music 1993. Songwriters are, of course, constrained by the difficulty of rhyme.

⁴⁴ A number of feminist poets have used quilts as powerful metaphors for women's experiences of different types, and a number of them seem to stress the legibility of quilts as cultural objects, and not their illegibility which is the quality most highlighted by academic and critical writings. I do not have the space here to discuss poetry at sufficient length.

quilt the collection, take it off the frame together in West Virginia, and admire the product of their labors.⁴⁵

In this quilt-book at least one article displays the use of a specific kind of quilt as metaphor, the African American quilt, as some craft critics and commentators currently define it. Margot Anne Kelley's "Sister's Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Women's Fiction" attempts to use a generalised account of African American aesthetics as supposedly revealed by quilts, to explain and illuminate the particular kinds of aesthetic and literary devices used in African American writing.⁴⁶ Her sweeping statements about African American quilts are debatable.

Afro-traditional quilts are also distinctive in their use of large-scale designs. While tiny, even stitches and myriad, precisely aligned patches are the hallmark of most high-caliber [sic] standard-traditional quilts, many African American quilts employ large, often abstract designs...⁴⁷

Color [sic] is coupled with design to produce both offbeat patterns and multiple rhythms. ... These are often bemoaned by standard-traditional quilters, who prefer more symmetric, balanced, "on the beat" designs.⁴⁸

But it soon becomes clear that Kelley's interest here is really literary, to the extent of occluding real quilts altogether. Disregarding the flourishing non-commercial quilt-culture, she states -- incorrectly -- that black women are not making these quilts any more because of commercial pressure, continuing: "Nevertheless, quilt images in noteworthy African American fiction keep the principles of this aesthetic alive, and enable us to ponder the correspondences between them and those evident in much post-modern literature."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Torsney, C.B., and Elsley, J., op cit.,. This kind of thing is of course more than slightly facetious, and rather fashionable just at present. An edited collection is very little like a quilt, and I'm sure these authors know it.

⁴⁶ Kelley, M.A., "Sister's Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Women's Fiction" in Torsney and Elsley, op. cit., pp.49-67.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 52. There are many kinds of quilts, including Amish, and Hawaiian/Polynesian which could fit this description. See Hammond J., *Tifaijai and Quilts of Polynesia*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1986.

⁴⁸ Kelley, M.A.. op. cit., p. 54. Kelley relies heavily on a description of one particular commercial quilting co-operative as her only source of information about African American quilts, and seems unaware of the rich scholarship which is available in the area (see fn 53 below).

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 55.

Throughout her lengthy analysis of the use of quilts as devices, images and motifs in a number of African American women's novels, Kelley makes distinctions between 'standard traditional' and African American quilts which are doubtful at best, and may indicate that she knows little about either quilts or quilting as a process and practice. There is an 'exoticising' impulse at work here. For this literary critic, African American quilts are interestingly different from 'ordinary' quilts and indeed they form an 'alternative aesthetic tradition':

This tradition, which can be traced back to Africa, is one that their foremothers perpetuated in the patching and stitching of threadbare, often roughly sewn bedcoverings that bear only a general resemblance to standard-traditional quilts ... Conscious of and valuing this heritage as both women and artists, these novelists incorporate images of quilts and quilting into their works. While arising from different cultural and material conditions, this inheritance enables the novelists to participate in the kind of radical questioning endemic to the postmodern era, and frees them to suggest some possible ways to resolve the queries that are so often now being raised.⁵⁰

In fact, quilt scholars have cast doubt on any such hard and fast typing of quilts.⁵¹ Kelley's work fits into a category known and criticised by eminent quilt historian and researcher Laurel Horton, who has remarked:

As so often happens with cultural matters that are not fully understood, the existence of African retentions in American quilts is now sometimes misused as a way of stereotyping black quiltmakers and exaggerating black and white differences. A set of aesthetic guidelines is being applied to African American quilts, and those which do not match the criteria risk being disregarded as 'impure' examples ... In an effort to recognise

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵¹ See Ramsey, B., "The Land of Cotton: Quiltmaking by African American Women in Three Southern States", in *Uncoverings* 9, 1988 pp.9-28, where, after interviewing African American quiltmakers and looking at their quilts she debunks the assumptions made by some of the very writers that Kelley relies on for her argument, notably Wahlman and Scully's "Aesthetic Principles of Afro-American Quilts" in Ferris, W., (ed) *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, GK Hall, Boston 1983, pp. 79-97. As she points out, citing an African American quilt studies expert, "as Cuesta Benberry often reiterates ... the black experience is as long and varied as the white experience. Many samplings of work by black quiltmakers in varied locations and economic levels are necessary to give a valid interpretation of the nature of African American quilts" (p. 21). Benberry's groundbreaking work has been published in *Uncoverings* over many years, and in *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, Kentucky Quilt Project, Louisville KY, 1992.

African American design traditions as a viable part of American culture, we are moving toward a polarisation.⁵²

It is noticeable in the passage quoted that Kelley's perceptions of the distance and difference of an African American tradition seem to make it more useful in the quest for a postmodern aesthetic. As with the Soweto embroideries and Chilean arpilleras discussed in Chapter Five, the perceived strangeness of one particular groups of quilts, real or notional, is important in making it available as a critical trope. It helps if such a tradition is distant (based in Africa), declining (or, better, disappearing), deplored by some (non-existent) standard-traditional quilter, and if its products are threadbare and roughly sewn.

There are a number of such attempts to find an equivalence between women's writing and women's traditional crafts.⁵³ More generally though, the patchwork quilt has been alleged to have come to represent even larger ideas, in American thinking. Elaine Showalter has gone so far as to say:

The patchwork quilt [has come] to replace the melting-pot as the central metaphor of American cultural identity. In a very unusual pattern, it transcended the stigma of its sources in women's culture and has been remade as a universal sign of American identity.⁵⁴

In the United States, where the metaphor of the quilt even makes appearances in political speeches, it seems possible that this is likely. Showalter quotes Jesse Jackson addressing the Democrat Convention of 1988 thus:

America is not a blanket woven from one thread, one color, one cloth. When I was a child growing up in Greenville, South Carolina and grandmomma could not afford a blanket ... she took pieces of old cloth --

⁵² Horton, L., lecture, Southern Quilt Symposium, Chattanooga, TS, March 1988, quoted by Ramsey, op. cit., p.23

⁵³ See for example: Falling-rain, S., "A Literary Patchwork Crazy Quilt: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *Uncoverings* 15, 1994, pp.111-140; Baker, H.A. and Pierce-Baker, C., "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'", in *The Southern Review* 21 summer 1985, pp. 706-720; Peppers, C., "Fabricating a Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a Quilt of Memory and Identity", in Torsney and Elsley, op. cit., pp. 84-95 and several others in that volume; Hedges, E., "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work", in Howe, F., (ed) *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, 1991, pp.338-64, and "The Nineteenth Century Diarist and Her Quilts" in *Feminist Studies* 8 summer 1982; St Armand, B., *Emily Dickinson and her Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp.9-10.

⁵⁴ Showalter, E., *Sister's Choice*, op. cit., p. 169.

patches -- wool, silk, gaberdien, crockersack -- only patches barely good enough to wipe off your shoes with. But they didn't stay that way very long. With sturdy hands and strong cord she sewed them together into a quilt, a thing of beauty and power and culture. Now, Democrats, we must build such a quilt.⁵⁵

Quilt promoters and merchants in the US have certainly exploited the ways in which quilts can be linked to "American-ness" to their great financial benefit.⁵⁶ But this kind of appropriation, as with so many other national metaphors, can be difficult for those who know the metaphorical process as a reality. Showalter's own article relays and gives credence to a number of quilt-related myths and fallacies, long debunked by quilt scholars, who have much less influence and standing than Showalter herself.⁵⁷

The quilt metaphor has been used in both conservative and progressive causes, and as with Griffith's use above, has come to signify the chaos, fragile order and also the changeability of American society. American academics have used it, within this general cultural availability, to signify a number of different things. Elsa Barkley Brown uses it as "a framework for conceptualising and teaching African-American women's history".⁵⁸ Barkley Brown quotes Maude Wahlman and John Scully, as Kelley did⁵⁹, about the freedom and rhythm of black women's quilts and makes the same connections between African American quilts and black musical and

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ For a subtly argued dissection of this process, see Pryzybysz, J., "Competing Cultural Values at the Great American Quilt Festival", in *Uncoverings* 8, 1987, pp.107-128. Examples can be found in any American quilting magazine. One series of quilt conventions held in various locations every year is called "Quilts Across America" and features a logo of a map of the United States draped in a quilt. *Quilting Today* magazine, Feb 1994, p.65, and *Quilters' Newsletter Magazine*, April 1994, p. 47, show examples of the advertisements for "Quilts Across America/South" to be held in Atlanta, Georgia, and "Quilts Across America/Heartland" to be held in Peoria, IL.

⁵⁷ There is considerable discussion on this within quilt studies, which I don't propose to cover in detail here. See for example: Gunn, V., "From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship" in *Uncoverings* 13, 1992, pp.192-206; Elsley, J., "Making Critical Connections in Quilt Scholarship" in *Uncoverings* 16, 1995, pp.229-244 (which is highly critical of Showalter's article for slightly different reasons than my own); Weidlich, L., "Quilt Scholarship: The Quilt World and the Academic World", in *The Quilt Journal*, 3 (2) 1994, pp. 1-3; Hedges, E., "The Cultural Construction of Quilts in the 1990s" in *The Quilt Journal* 3 (2) 1994, pp.5-7.

⁵⁸ Barkley Brown, E., "African-American women's quilting: a framework for conceptualising and teaching African -American women's history", in *Signs* 14 (4), summer 1989, pp. 921-929.

⁵⁹ Brown comes to the same discredited distinction between European American quilts and African American quilts, now discarded in quilt scholarship outside the recyclings of museum catalogues. See above.

linguistic forms: that it is improvisation which unites African American aesthetics. At this point in the article, the quilts are discarded, and a theory of teaching and learning explicated, taking improvisation, group responsibility, and self assessment as its bases. When Barkley Brown returns to the quilt image, it is almost unrecognisable:

What in fact we get by the end of the semester is a serious improvisation ... in which people are empowered by their own authority and their right to expect things from others ... They stand alone, like the contrasting strips of the quilt, and at the same time remain part of the group.

The class is a quilt. It is precisely the contrast which organizes the whole and holds it together ... It is only when each individual contributes her talents at the same time as all the others that the collective can work, and only through the collective that each individual talent takes meaning.⁶⁰

Barkley Brown takes as "the essential lessons of the quilt: that people and actions do move in multiple directions at once".⁶¹ Here, it is clear that quilts, real or metaphorical, have almost nothing to do with whatever it is that the writer is discussing. The quilt, specifically the African American quilt as defined and celebrated by particular folk-art experts⁶², is merely a validated and therefore validating aesthetic object, which Barkley Brown appropriates for her own rhetorical purposes.

Another American writer, cultural critic Janice Radway, uses the quilt as an optimistic image, offering a way out of the bind of ideology. She imagines a collaborative enterprise of piecing new fabric into a quilt, changing its patterns and colours gradually and collectively. In her article "Identifying ideological seams",⁶³ Radway uses the imagery of patchwork as a way of imagining the possible common ground where feminists and non-feminist women might find ways to change their society. Radway's work on popular romance fiction led her to a similar difficulty to my own: the disdain with which feminists viewed the lineage and effects of the cultural form she was examining was at odds with the interest, liveliness and depth with which the devotees she

⁶⁰ Barkley Brown, op. cit., p.928.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 929.

⁶² In this case Wahlman M.S., and Scully, J. .op. cit, and Vlach, J., *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland OH, 1978. Ramsay's critique of this work is cited in fn 53 above.

⁶³ Radway, J., "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass culture, analytical method, and political practice" in *Communication*, 9,1986, pp.93-123.

interviewed discussed and analysed it.⁶⁴ As a reconsideration of some of the issues of her book on romance fiction readers, *Reading the Romance*,⁶⁵ Radway's article ponders the ways in which the insights of feminist and Marxist analyses of culture might be, or be made to be, persuasive or convincing to the people whose cultural practices and understandings are the subject of it. Refusing monolithic accounts of ideology, she writes:

The world ideology produces, therefore, cannot be compared to the completed canvas created by a single, heroic artist in control of all aspects of creation. Rather, that world is much more like a complicated, collaboratively produced patchwork quilt, where small, separately (but also collectively) worked patterns are stitched together over time by a variety of seamstresses. Because no single one of these seamstresses has a view of the developing fabric as a whole, or can alter the nature of what has been fabricated before, each particular pattern must be added to the larger piece in one of a number of previously set ways without a sense of how it will transform the whole or interact with the patterns with which it connects ... At the same time, the quilt's strength as a single fabric is entirely dependent on the quality of the stitching that unites the disparate parts. If any particular seam is weak, unravelling may occur. In that case, the threads can be restitched later or deliberately pulled apart even further. The quilt can be changed then, reworked into new patterns, as it were, but only slowly and in piecemeal fashion.⁶⁶

No quilt could ever have been made, or even mended, in this way. Radway herself realises the weakness of this metaphor, remarking in a footnote, "It is difficult, for instance, to account for the fact of determination analogically in the process of quilting"⁶⁷. But she goes on to assert that 'with a little imagination' her image is useful, mostly because of the use she makes of 'the ideological seam' as a strategic image for progressive social theorists. How weak does an image need to be before it becomes merely a device? Here, in this paragraph, an unrecognisable thing is asserted to be a quilt -- undesigned, its patterns unconscious and randomly joined, its seams weak and ravelling, its makers alone and inarticulate. It is never finished, never quilted, open to restitching and seam-ripping at any time.

⁶⁴ Radway's influence on my work was discussed at greater length in the Introduction.

⁶⁵ Radway, J., *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984.

⁶⁶ Radway, J., "Identifying Ideological Seams..." op. cit., p. 109.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, fn 8. Really stretching it in the footnote, Radway writes: "if we also remember that in the past female quilters very often worked collectively to produce a quilt of some other woman's design, it is possible to see a rough parallel between this single designer and the absent cause of History which determines ideological structure".

It appears that (as with Griffiths' images analysed above) this fictional entity can be called a quilt precisely because, unlike other art forms of higher status, there is no cultural pressure to get it right. It is perhaps helpful to imagine here, what the effect would have been had Radway chosen a better known cultural artefact and subjected it to the same pulling and tugging. Imagine that the world of ideology is like a novel, written by unknown multiple authors, in books whose pages turned only to the left, unable to see or change what came before, and ignorant of the characters and plots of earlier contributors; a novel, the pages of which might be randomly ripped out bringing different parts into juxtaposition, which is reprinted periodically with pages in different orders, and which can always be written on by hand: then any reader in Radway's field would baulk. Such a construction is no longer recognisably a novel, and the image fails to be either useful or enlightening.

With the quilt, however, Radway is at liberty to wrench her image into the desired shape, until the "quilt-ness" of it is entirely obscured, leaving her only the useful trope of the seam. While this is a hopeful and optimistic image, which Radway uses to inspire hope for the utility and progressive nature of academic/political work, it is only by a devaluation of the quilt and quiltmakers, and their particular skills, structures and features, that such use becomes possible. Despite the enormous contribution of Radway's work to the revaluing of women's popular culture, here we see a clear example of how the quilt-as-metaphor merely reinforces stereotypical images of women. This happens *even as* Radway's article struggles to argue for the active, functional agency of her romance readers (a similarly stigmatised group). While asserting (and she has shown elsewhere) that romantic novels "enable these women to free themselves from their position as family nurse and therapist in order to pursue their own individual pleasure",⁶⁸ Radway imagines quiltmakers as involuntary handmaidens of the absent cause of History, unconscious of the design, stitching with their eyes down on their work.

Sometimes the quilt metaphor is used as a way to structure an article, and this is perhaps its most interesting failure. JaneE [sic] Hindman published "Quilt Talk: Verbal Performance among a group of African-American Quilters" in *Uncoverings*, in 1992. Her abstract describes her research methods,

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 112.

concentrating on her use of the verbal rather than the material culture of a quilt group, then continues:

A narrative account saturated with the dialogue of the African-American women, the essay is organised like a quilt itself: a few scraps of talk are grouped into four blocks, each one representing a particular speaker and a specific type of quilt-talk performance, and then quilted together with the folkloristic and sociolinguistic theory that reveals the patterns not only in these performances but also in their relationship to those in other African-American communities and other quilting environments.⁶⁹

Hindman tells us that the blocks of her article correspond to the blocks of the real quilt she made while researching it. Each metaphorical block has a colour ("Lilac, Virgiree Jordan"), and a description:

the tone and construction, the feel of the lilac block seem to suit the 'Miss Jordan' that I've constructed: its colors are subtle, soft, subdued, even elegant. Of all the blocks of my first quilt, this has the fewest number of mistakes. Likewise, Miss Jordan herself is the most quiet, precise, perhaps even refined of the quilt talkers in the sewing group.⁷⁰

Each block has characteristics which remind the author of one of her informants: Marion Stevens Turner is brought to mind by the "stretchiness of [the] work-shirt blue material" of the blue block. When we get to the subheading "The Quilting", the reader knows that the denouement will be quite as contrived as the setup. Her conclusion that African American quilting and quilt-talk is all about re-centring, re-appropriation and recycling, seems postmodern and commonplace enough, but it is dressed up in protective rhetoric:

If and when 'getting it right' and individual style complete for prominence among the values of these African-American quilters, style seems to take precedence. Witness Mrs. Summers' comments on the places in my first quilt where I got it wrong. "They're what makes it yours ... Someday you'll look back at this block in your quilt and remember important things about those mistakes."

⁶⁹ Hindman, J., "Quilt Talk: Verbal Performance among a group of African-American Quilters" in *Uncoverings* 13, 1992, pp.85-108. Interestingly, the work she describes the African American quilters as doing, and teaching her to do, displays few of the "African American" characteristics so noted by some of the academics discussed above.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p.87.

I only hope readers are as generous with the flaws in my quilt essay ... For now, I must satisfy myself with Mrs Summers' judgment of my second finished quilt: "I'll tell you one thing she learned: You can make something beautiful out of just scraps".⁷¹

There are two interesting things about this essay. First, we see the impossibility of the use of a material, visual, tactile form as a structuring metaphor in this way. For a quilt is a visual thing, delivered in one visual impulse, all at once. While the quilt as object can be analysed, an important part of its quilt-ness is the overall visual impression. An article is a temporal sequence, which is built up in the course of the writing and in the course of the reading. The *process* of making the quilt could well be a successful way of metaphorising scholarship or literary production. Indeed the process of making all the chapters of this thesis fit together has reminded me of nothing so much as the process of discarding and resizing, remaking and arranging the blocks for a quilt, a process that comes only at the end when the whole is to be stitched together. Hindman's description of her individual blocks, and the mechanics and frustrations of making them, is at least graspable in the context of an article. But they never become, never *can* become, a quilt, with a design and a secondary pattern, simultaneous light and dark, complementary colours. While Hindman's own consciousness of what she is trying to do never quite realises this, there remains a significant disjunction between her hopes and her achievements.⁷²

Secondly and more importantly, there is a different tone in this article to the exteriority of the quilting metaphors discussed above. The tentative and self-protective rhetoric of the conclusion is much closer to a quilter's shy deprecation of her own work, as described in Chapter Two, than an academic defence of an intellectual position. In this sense, perhaps Hindman has learnt more "quilt-talk" than she herself realises. She has imagined herself (not entirely successfully) into the position of the *quiltmaker* rather than the quilt owner, or viewer, and this is the reason for any success that her metaphorical structure achieves.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.107.

⁷² It seems altogether possible that one could, for instance, structure an article or book around a different kind of artistic artefact, but it would have to be one which unfolded in the same kind of temporality. This is beginning to happen with music: see for example, Manderson, D., *Songs Without Music: Aesthetic Dimensions of Law and Justice*, 1998 (forthcoming).

Quilters and metaphors of quilts

This discussion by no means exhausts the possibilities of the quilt-as-metaphor. Quilters, and the writers on quilts whose work is read by quilters, make extensive use of the metaphor. Perhaps because less ambitious, and perhaps because more knowledgeable, such metaphorical uses of quilts are different again. Quilters use quilting terms, stories and metaphors as ways of describing life: telling stories of their families, and lives in terms of quilt patterns, sewing techniques, and so forth. Similarly, though less obviously, the use of particular named patterns in quilts for specific people, or occasions, is a kind of submerged metaphorical device. Some of this was discussed in preceding chapters.

This chapter, however, serves to indicate the direction that the argument of the succeeding chapters will take. Here, in a number of metaphorical examples, we have seen how feminist work of a number of different kinds, uses quilts and other images of traditional women's cultures, most often in ways which tend to underline and emphasise their perceived qualities of randomness, eclecticism, inarticulateness, instinctive behaviour, lack of direction, and so forth. Even when attempting to argue that women are active agents, in using these tropes many feminist writers seem unable to resist the cultural forces which manoeuvre them back into the opposite position. My account of quilting culture and history in Australia has attempted to show that these are not the main features of quilting, or, I would argue, of women's traditional culture in general. We go on to see, in more detail, how feminist art and craft criticism, the study of leisure and its history, and the emerging field of feminist folklore and cultural studies has enabled this misapprehension to come about.

Chapter Five

Feminism, Art and Craft

Chapter Three raised the issue of how a subculture such as quilting might demonstrate the ways in which women's culture has produced 'work-arounds' for some of the resilient divisions and dualisms which feminism has sought to analyse and to change. That chapter discussed the public/private distinction, and some related aspects. This chapter examines the way in which feminist critics have thought about the divisions and hierarchies which structure the relations between art, and craft, and their respective practitioners. I will argue that quiltmakers understand this division in a different and productive way, while not unaware of the general devaluation of their skills and practice in the society at large. Again, an empirical study of a women's cultural practice can provide feminist thinkers with some different terms and evidence with which to address the art/craft debate.

Debate about the difference or lack of difference between craft and art, and about the 'proper' relations between them, is as old as the divergence between the concepts themselves.¹ This debate took on a new cast when feminist critics started to point out that the two terms were themselves coded according to gender, with craft, the lesser term being coded female. An influential statement of this appeared in Roszika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*:

There is an important connection between the hierarchy of the arts and the sexual categories male/female. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft ... The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant.²

¹ Raymond Williams notes that 'artist' and 'artisan' were used identically till the late 16th century, but he dates the emergence of a fully "abstract capitalised Art" from the 19th century. The constellation of terms which surrounds Art and its others, such as craft, were very fluid until then. See Williams, R., *Keywords*, Fontana, 2nd ed., London, 1983, pp.40-42.

² Parker, R., *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Women's Press, London, 1984. Parker goes on in this chapter to define embroidery as "art" rather than "craft", because it "fails to comply with the utilitarian imperative that defines craft" (p.6), a position which is neither useful nor tenable, as I shall show below.

Parker here inserts the art/craft dualism into the lists of such pairings so comprehensively deconstructed by feminist philosophy over many years.³ A statement of this can be found in Pateman's *The Disorder of Women*:

In popular (and academic) consciousness the duality of female and male often serves to encapsulate or represent the series (or circle) of liberal separations and oppositions: female, or -- nature, personal, emotional, love, private, intuition, morality, ascription, particular, subjection: male, or -- culture, political, reason, justice, public, philosophy, power, achievement, universal, freedom. The most fundamental and general of these oppositions associates women with nature and men with culture and several contemporary feminists have framed their critiques in these terms.⁴

This chapter will show the various twists and turns feminist (and other) theory and analysis have attempted, in order to deal with this distinction. It will argue that such manoeuvres have not yet been successful in deconstructing, surmounting or sidestepping the difficulties that the distinction presents, leading to a complex and difficult relationship between women who are artists, women who are art critics, and women who make things. After a brief discussion of the underpinnings of the debate, its nineteenth century history, and its mid-twentieth century revival, the various approaches of feminist art and craft critics to the question of women's traditional crafts will be discussed in detail.

Feminist and community arts practice has sometimes appropriated traditional craft practices for non-traditional purposes, sometimes working with traditional practitioners, but rarely with regard for women's own understandings of what they are doing when they make things. More often, traditional skills and the people who have them have been placed at the disposal of 'real' artists.⁵ Feminist appreciation of the *objects* produced by

³This is such a commonplace now, that it is difficult to find a single originator.

⁴ Pateman, C., *The Disorder of Women*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 1989, p.124-5

⁵ A number of examples of this will be discussed below. The most famous international examples include the embroiderers, china painters, sewers and others who worked for Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* project under quite difficult conditions. For an Australian comment on this see Moore, C., "Visual Arts and Crafts" in Caine, B., et al, (eds), op. cit., who says "Sydney W[omen's] A[rt] M[ovement] members Frances Budden (Phoenix) and Marie McMahon [travelled] to the U.S. (at their own expense) to join the all-women workshops constructing Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979). They returned, dismayed at the sweat-shop conditions and Chicago's autocratic style. McMahon was so incensed at the undemocratic character of North American Goddess Worship that she embroidered the words 'No Goddesses No Mistresses' on a handkerchief, and stitched it into one of the project's exquisite table-runners. It is probably still

traditional women's cultures – the d'oyleys, quilts or preserves – has emerged only once the women who made them, and the cultures within which they were produced were safely out of sight. What feminist criticism and writing on the crafts has rarely done is focus on the *practice* and *process* of women's craftmaking as an important part of living women's cultures.⁶ This chapter posits quiltmaking as a case study of a women's cultural practice which crosses the art/craft divide in a number of interesting ways, indicating possibilities for sidestepping art/craft dualities and taking the debate beyond the questions of amateur and professional on the one hand, and the discussion of products and objects on the other, into a real understanding of making as cultural process.

A brief historical background to the art/craft debate in Australia

Ideas about craft and its relationships with art in Australia over the last two hundred years, owe much, of necessity, to the much longer history of ideas about the arts and crafts in Europe and later in America, which preceded Australia's entry into the "western" world. Since then, periodic waves of artistic and intellectual influence have further shaped Australian formulations of the art/craft debate, although these influences have generally been assimilated in locally specific ways. This section will sketch the influence of various important ideas and structures of feeling from the 'old world' upon the shape of ideas of art and craft in Australia providing a context for the following discussion of local feminist debate.

Edward Lucie-Smith, among others, has identified three basic historical stages in the story of craft; the first, when everything made was a handcrafted object, and so no separate classification of 'craft' was necessary; the second, when Renaissance ideas in Europe created a separation between fine art and craft, positioning art as superior; and the third, when the machines of the Industrial Revolution necessitated a distinction between the hand made, and the

there.". A quilt related project in the US was Charlotte Robinson's *The Artist and the Quilt* (1982) where women artists were paired with quilters who 'translated' their designs.

⁶There are some honourable exceptions to this. Jennifer Isaacs' book *The Gentle Arts*, op. cit., was discussed in Chapter One. Some anthropological work has also taken this approach. See for example Losche, D., "Tangled identities: anthropological discourse and craft", in N. Ioannou, (ed), *Craft in Society*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1992, pp.50-62, and Chalmers, L., "Understanding handcraft activities in Australia: the relevance of anthropological approaches and cross cultural studies" in the same volume, pp.63-78. These are discussed further below.

machine made, between craft, and industry.⁷ As he points out, none of these changes was sudden or complete; tendencies towards the division of labour, and the use of machines in manufacturing, intensified from the middle ages onwards, and only found full expression in the so-called Industrial Revolution. He isolates the 17th and 18th centuries as the important time for both the successful separation of art from craft, and the establishment of the hierarchical relations between them, exemplifying this dual process with an account of the contrast between the new "gentleman artists" of England, and the successful but still lower status craft tradesmen such as furniture makers.⁸ The process begun in the Renaissance, of identifying artists with their work, but maintaining anonymity in the crafts, and of romanticising and elevating the role of the individual artist, while downgrading the role of the craftsperson, was completed. By the time Australia was settled at the end of the 18th century, the 'high' and individualised arts of painting and sculpture were well and truly differentiated from the skilled but anonymous crafts of furniture making, textile design and weaving, stonemasonry, pottery, and other pursuits. As Roszika Parker points out, also by this time, some formerly professional crafts, such as embroidery, had become almost purely feminine, domestic and unpaid.⁹

By the 1850s in England, industrialisation was widespread and permanently changing the social relations and the skills of the population. The ideas of two men, John Ruskin and William Morris, were crucial in forming one important interpretation of this phenomenon and what was to be done about it. Ruskin (1819-1900) was an Oxford graduate, who became a critic and writer and from 1886 the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. Hugely influential in late 19th century England and America, he argued that aesthetics and ethics were integrally connected, and that art was both a reflection and a cause of the moral temper of a society. Ruskin regretted the loss of a system of cultural symbolism, such as the religious certainty which had existed in Gothic times, where meaningful ornament adorned all the things necessary to life. His elevation of the Gothic style as the best expression of humanity was influential in British (and Australian) architecture mid-century, and important in the concerns of the pre-Raphaelites, with whom William Morris was associated. Ruskin's concerns also included the work

⁷ Lucie Smith, E., *The Story of Craft: the craftsman's role in society*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1981, p.11.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp.165-185.

⁹ Parker, *op cit.*, chapter 4 *passim*.

processes which produced the things necessary to life, including art and architecture: he believed that the division of labour destroyed the wholeness of the labourer, alienating workers and thereby producing inferior products. Combining mental and manual labour became his goal, and a crucial ideal for the Arts and Crafts movement he inspired.

William Morris (1834-1896) developed some of Ruskin's ideas further, and in his long career as a writer, craftsman and patternmaker, and later as a socialist agitator and ideologue, he spread his views widely. He became interested in reviving the artisan culture he saw disappearing around him, and in reforming what he saw as the deadening and dehumanising conditions of contemporary work. Art, as he saw it, was the answer to both these problems. Interpreting 'art' to include all of the decorative arts (furniture making, weaving, embroidery, metalwork and so forth) and design work, such as architecture, Morris envisaged a world where there was a minimum of shared routine necessary labour, and people worked on rewarding artistic pursuits. In his ideal world, beautiful everyday objects, and surroundings enriched their users, and also enriched their makers. As Morris wrote:

To give people pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office of decoration: to give pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is the other use of it.¹⁰

This idea that the making of beautiful things was a pursuit both useful and rewarding in itself has persisted through the various phases of the crafts movement since. "Joy in labour" was a key concept in Morris's thought: his criticism of capitalism was not primarily political or economic (although it was also that), but was aesthetically based, deploring the destruction of the joyous, pleasurable or imaginative aspects of human work that he believed had been characteristic of the pre-industrial period.¹¹

Exceptionally talented as a craftsman, Morris's own work, and that of his company, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., was influential in creating the

¹⁰ Quoted in Boris, E., *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1986, p.14. It is most interesting that this idea is also important to quiltmakers, in precisely this form, though, to my knowledge, they don't often read Morris. Readers will recognise the resonance between this statement and the quotes from quilters in Chapters One, Two, and Three.

¹¹ Fuller, P., "William Morris; a conservationist radical", in *Images of God: the Consolations of Lost Illusions*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1985, pp.284-290.

decorative style of the movement. He and his close associates produced a large body of decorative art, which was sold, to his disappointment, mainly to rich clients. This remained a problem for the movement, especially for those members with socialist opinions. In later years, C. R. Ashbee, a founder of the Guild of Handicraft, and an influential member of the movement, wrote that they had made "of a great social movement a narrow and tiresome aristocracy working with high skill for the very rich".¹²

But the Arts and Crafts movement had more to offer than a nostalgic reconstruction of a past era, or the creation of beautiful interiors for the rich, as its subsequent flourishing in America and Australia demonstrated. Its many and varied manifestations included communal settlements and workshop projects, the exhibitions and influence of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Societies, the influential work of Morris and his company in designing furnishings, books and patterns, and many versions of Morris's utopian and optimistic socialist philosophy. The importance of women in the movement, and the suitability of craftwork for genteel but impoverished women precluded by the dictates of Victorian class structure from taking other work, meant it had a role to play in changing ideas of women's place.¹³

From beginnings in the 1880s, the English movement grew in size and importance until a decline began in the 1900s. From the mid-1890s craftsmen and designers moved into the new government art schools as teachers, training a new generation of craftsmen idealists, some of whom subsequently came to Australia, and taught.¹⁴ But conditions in Europe were changing, and the beginning of the First World War ended many older trends in the decorative arts and the fine arts. The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society's 1916 London exhibition was the last, and marked the end of the movement in England. In America, although the influence of the movement lasted longer in provincial areas, modernism arrived in New York with the opening of the Armoury Show in 1916, and the advent of abstract art.¹⁵ Decoration,

¹² Quoted in Anscombe, I., *A Woman's Touch: Women in Design From 1860 to the Present Day*, Virago, London, 1984, p.63.

¹³ For a discussion of this see Callen, A. "Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement" in Attfield J., and Kirkham, P., (eds) *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, Women's Press, London, 1989 pp.148-162.

¹⁴ Cochrane, G., op. cit., passim.

¹⁵ Lambourne, L., *Utopian Craftsmen: the Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago*, Astragal Books, London, 1980, p.162, as well as Boris, op. cit.

historical reference, and ornamentation were rejected in favour of functional aesthetics, rational simple forms, and a determined internationalism.

The Arts and Crafts Movement arrived in Australia after its heyday in England, and maintained its influence here well into the twentieth century.¹⁶ The Arts and Crafts Societies of the various states were formed in the early 1900s, reaching the height of their powers at the start of the First World War. Largely, although not entirely amateur, the societies held exhibitions and sales, and influenced interior decoration, furniture, textile and clothing and jewellery design. Craftspeople and designers sought Australian flora and fauna as decorative motifs, and tried to make their work expressive of, and organically linked to their own country. Elements of the decorative style of the movement, and of another European trend, Art Nouveau, were also incorporated into the industrially produced building materials and other products of the time, and are important in the Federation style of architecture so common in Sydney and other Australian cities (under different names). But while the style of the movement was influential, its ideas were not so strong, and the connection made in England between labour and art was never firmly established. Nor was Arts and Crafts style associated with the left, as it had been in Britain: increasingly the new artistic style of Modernism was linked to leftwing attitudes, and older trends seen as conservative and provincial.¹⁷

Arts and Crafts style continued to influence craftspeople and artists in Australia until at least the mid-twenties (and much longer for individual craftspeople),¹⁸ and maintained a strong institutional presence in craft and technical education. The societies themselves declined in importance after the War. Miley suggests the reason for this was the Societies' increasing involvement in "the kinds of crafts that came to be considered typically feminine ... the evidence suggests that the Societies were degenerating into hobby groups",¹⁹ although this hardly seems an adequate explanation.

¹⁶ McPhee, J., *Australian Decorative Arts in the Twentieth Century*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1988.

¹⁷ See Cochrane, *op. cit.*, *passim*. See also Smith, B., *Place, Taste and Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1979.

¹⁸ For instance, the jeweller, Rhoda Wager (1875-1953), trained in the Glasgow Style, who worked in the style until her retirement in 1948, and her niece Dorothy Judge, who still works in the Arts and Crafts style taught her by her aunt. See Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p.52, and personal communication from Alice Whish, jeweller.

¹⁹ Miley, C., *Beautiful and Useful: the Arts and Crafts Movement in Tasmania*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1986, p.26. The language Miley uses to describe this

The artistic movement of Modernism began to be felt among artists in Australia in the twenties, but it was not strong until long after its advent in Europe and America during the first world war. In architecture and design, the geometrics and streamlining of Art Deco replaced the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau, and this influenced the decorative strategies of Australian craftspeople. Interest in Aboriginal motifs in the 1930s also confirmed the move from flowing curves to abstraction and geometrics in decoration.²⁰

Arriving suddenly in the 1930s, Modernism inspired local artists and architects to sweep away the decorative work of the arts and crafts influenced craftsmen and women, and move towards a more functional and machine inspired style. In the 1920s, nationalist concerns about the Australianness of art had discouraged adoption of Modernism, now Modernist art became associated with progress, and with radicalism and the left. But craft itself remained various and diverse, with little sense of a crafts movement, as such, until the 1960s. Public galleries showed little interest in the decorative arts.

After the Second World War, the debates in the fine arts between nostalgic nationalism, and international modernism intensified. Many artists left Australia, or stayed away after the war, to avoid the perceived parochialism of the Australian cultural scene. By the 1950s however, a new prosperity, and an influx of artists and architects in the waves of post-war immigration began to change the art scene in Australia, establishing Modernism firmly. In architecture particularly, the effects on the old craft trade skills were substantial and damaging, as architects avoided all decoration, designing functionalist, undecorated buildings, and increasingly, skyscrapers. Some craft skills, such as stained glass making, or specialist surface painting, became commercially unviable, only surviving as recreational crafts ("hobbies"). It was here in the amateur realm of enthusiasm that many such skills were preserved and taught, until the passion for modernism in architecture was replaced by the fad for restoration in the 1970s and 80s, creating new professional opportunities for skilled craftworkers.

change of register is itself a fine example of the linkage between the feminine, the non-professional and the second-rate, in so much art and craft history and criticism, as well as in the professional world of art and craft practice.

²⁰ Cochrane, op. cit., pp.37,45.

Abstract Expressionism, the new avant garde art practice in the United States from the late 1940s, influenced ideas about the point of artistic practice generally, and enabled a new rationale for some elite crafts practice. Studio craftspeople, like artists in higher status media, sought personal expression, and became interested in the investigation of the possibilities of materials, without reference to the use-value of their products, or the traditions of form and shape. By the 1960s, particularly in ceramics and textiles, work was being made within a purely 'art' framework, yet because of its media (clay and fibre, rather than bronze or marble), treated as craft, rather than sculpture. First made in America and in Eastern Europe, this kind of work was influential in Australia in the 1970s. Craft work made in this mould was exhibited for the first time in galleries,²¹ which was seen by some as an advance for craft, both in status and in market value. In reality, however, few craftspeople could make their work collectable as art, and most continued to make useful things.

Aspirations to 'art' status meant the development of a renewed debate in craft circles about the meanings and relations between the two terms 'art' and 'craft'. While some argued that craft was different from art, and should remain so, providing a different kind of cultural meaning and practice, others advocated a dissolution of the differences and the hierarchies, and demanded that the expressive qualities of craft practice be taken as seriously as those of the fine arts. To some extent, an argument that craft and art should be equally valued became distorted into an argument that they were the same. As will be seen below, this slippage is also a feature of feminist writing on the subject.

As Modernism developed through the 1960s, all this was made more difficult by the theoretical dictums of the powerful critic-advocates of international modernism, which stated that craftwork was essentially different from and inferior to modern art. For such critics, craftwork was characterised by a nostalgia for the pre-industrial, and by mindless manual qualities.²² The rise

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 200-201, and 215-219. In 1973 *Clay +Fibre*, an exhibition by potter Marea Gazzard and weaver Mona Hessing upset preconceived notions of the form and function of ceramics and weaving altogether. One hostile critic noted, "They are not craft in the simple and important sense of being useful things well-made, and neither are they art in the sense of belonging formally historically or conceptually to a coherent family...so...they are essentially conversation pieces for cultivated middleclass households". (Brook, D., *Nation Review* 2 Aug 1973, quoted in Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p.210). This echoes Ashbee's comments quoted above, in some interesting ways. One wonders though, exactly how 'art' objects (belonging formally, and etc) differ from these 'conversation pieces'.

²² For a discussion of this particular strand of high art disdain for the manual see Rowley, S., "Mind Over Matter: Reading the Art/Craft Debate" in *West: An Interdisciplinary Magazine* 1 (1) ,1989, pp.3-7.

of conceptual and performance art explicitly devalued some of the concerns of crafts practice, associating intellectual content, originality and expressive force with lack of traditional skills, impermanence and spontaneity. This association could not be assimilated by craft without loss. Some crafts practitioners, caught up in the atmosphere of a disdain for painstakingly acquired practical manual skills, began to make work which tended to deny their craft's traditions, histories and purposes, but usually without gaining the benefits of being recognised as artists by the modernist establishment. New words denoting both the functionless craft objects made in this vein and their makers, were coined, leading to an explosion of job and object descriptions: artist-craftsman, designer-maker, textile- (or fibre-) artist, ceramicist and artist-potter; hanging, ceramic sculpture, installation and exhibition piece.²³

From the late 1970s the dominance of formalist modernism in the fine arts began to decrease. In any case craft could not follow the fine arts down the road of conceptual and performance art, and remain 'craft' in any recognisable form. In the 1980s new theoretical directions in social theory and in arts criticism opened up new interest and opportunities in the functional crafts, emphasising the social and cultural meaning, rather than the expressive intent, or disembodied objectness, of the crafted object. While the art/craft debate is still powerful as an organising principle at the level of commonsense discussion, craft critics, keen to find a new basis for discussing craft, and aware of the damaging impact of the art/craft dualism upon craft, have repeatedly attempted to avoid it.²⁴

Feminism thinks art and craft in Australia and overseas 1970-1990

Women's traditional craft activities had long been associated with conservative or traditional women's groups such as the CWA, as shown in Chapter Two. These groups taught and fostered such activity, and in the social groups of which they were part, traditional skills were a source of validation and pride, as well as creative expression.²⁵ Among feminists, this was not always the case. Even in the 1920s, some left wing feminists in Australia had regarded handcraft as part of domestic drudgery, or even as an instrument of ruling class exploitation of working women, and welcomed the

²³ Cochrane, op.cit., pp.104-5.

²⁴ See for example, some of the alternative approaches influenced by post modernist thought, in Rowley, S., (ed) *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1997.

²⁵ See Isaacs, J., op cit. for many examples.

development of machines which would do such jobs more efficiently and cheaply, along with communal laundry, cooking and childminding. Commenting on a news item about a scheme in England where unemployed women made and sold traditional Durham quilts for a living, *The Woman Worker* editorialised:

Rich "ladies", parasites of society with nothing to do, look down from their aristocratic splendor [sic] upon the squalor [sic] of the unemployed families and resuscitate a dead and useless fashion in order to provide temporary work for a few workers' wives. In an age when machines can make thousands of beautifully patterned quilts in a single day, with very little labor from the workers, and at a very low cost, women have got to turn back the clock to a past age when machines were hardly known and materials were scarce and precious.²⁶

After the Second World War, feminist organisations such as the Union of Australian Women, and the International Women's Day Committees used handcraft displays and other cultural events to publicise their causes and make their events attractive to a wide spectrum of women.²⁷ In women's groups across the political spectrum, the assumed homosociality of many women's lives was unproblematic and was assumed in their creative practices as in other areas – to isolate women's crafts as special areas of interest because they were done only by women would have seemed outlandish. But interwar and immediate post-war feminists were concerned with formal and economic equality for the most part. It is tempting to speculate that they did not have to worry about retrieving or remaking women's culture, because they were still, to some extent, living in it. What is striking about a great deal of feminist activism, organisation and methods from the pre-Women's Liberation period is its commonality with women's activities across the political and social scale. The *cultural* divide which was later to emerge between feminist and non-feminist women had not yet arrived.²⁸

²⁶ "Ladies and Women", *The Woman Worker*, (Militant Women's Movement, Sydney) 1 (8) 7th June 1929, p.1.

²⁷ For a discussion of this at greater length, see Grahame, E., "Cultural Politics" in Caine, B., et al, (eds) op. cit., forthcoming.

²⁸ It is interesting that the destruction of women's homosocial spaces took place in the 1950s and 60s, just before the blossoming of 'second-wave' feminism. As an example, the women's hospitals, women's colleges, and women's unions of most older universities were 'desegregated' during this time. The enforcement of the ideal of companionate marriage during the 1950s undermined a lot of older homosocial structures and habits, producing a generation of young 'baby boomer' women by the late 1960s who had never experienced it. See Caine, B., et al, (eds) op. cit., passim.

Before the 1970s feminists were not interested in the cultural sphere in general to nearly the same extent that post Women's Liberation feminists became. The post-1968 focus upon a cultural revolution, which would transform family, personal, domestic, and aesthetic life, was a novel departure, stemming from the discovery that the personal (and the aesthetic) was political. For feminist artists, this opened up a whole new area of subject matter and of political and cultural ambition. In 1976, the Australian feminist art journal *Lip* stated in its first editorial:

Lip is a collective of feminists who represent a wide range of political, social and cultural stances ... Lip's fundamental concern is with the cultural conditions and lives of Australian women, in order to define and shape our national identity. We shall be responsive to and in contact with the international feminist community ... In opposing the prevailing bias of patriarchal art, in dismantling the myth of individual genius, and in breaking down the barriers between the fine and decorative arts...²⁹

It took years for the implications of this new interest in culture, defined in the widest possible way, to become clear, and feminism's engagement with the arts and crafts has been a complex, contradictory and uncomfortable one. Some early women's liberation activists certainly had a dismissive attitude to what they perceived as traditional women's culture. Editorialising on the creation of a new women's culture, the *Vashti's Voice* collective stated: "Previously, our culture consisted of being able to turn out a roast dinner, fill a clothes line with wet nappies, clean a house and love a man ..."³⁰ In 1977, writing about another "guilty" pleasure – reading women's magazines – Bev Kingston pointed out that:

Among the thousand and one ideological problems confronting recent feminists have been a myriad of questions concerning daily behaviour, questions not only of theoretical significance, but of symbolic import. Should a feminist knit? Should a feminist knit in public or only in private? Should a feminist knit among other feminists?³¹

The relationship between feminism and the domestic crafts has continued to be complicated and fraught with distrust on both sides. As Catriona Moore points out in the Introduction to her collection on Australian feminism and

²⁹ Lip Collective, "Editorial", *Lip* 1, 1976 p.1

³⁰ Vashti Collective, "Editorial", *Vashti's Voice* 11, winter 1975, p.2.

³¹ Kingston, B., "Rediscovering Old Women's Magazines", *Lip* 2/3, 1977, pp.27-33.

the arts, there has been no neat teleological progression within feminist thinking.³² This is particularly true in relation to feminist understandings of craft and Art.

There have been a number of tendencies, and Moore admits to the attraction of a neat and whiggish story: "The first temptation is to describe the progression from a rough-and-ready 'seventies' theory to more nuanced work inflected by psycho-analytic, semiotic and deconstructivist models."³³

No such account is possible in reality, although some international discussions of the topic have succumbed to just such a temptation. A recent textbook views feminist discussions of culture in general as a classic dialectic, with 'equality' feminism meeting 'difference' feminism, and finding a third term and resolution in 'deconstructive' feminism.³⁴ This over-schematising illuminates little. In fact Australian and international examples can be found which illustrate a number of tendencies and arguments, practices and contributions throughout the period from 1970 to the present, overlapping, augmenting and cancelling each other. They appeared in diverse places and in all registers from the highest of high art theory, to the vernacular of the lively feminist activist press, to the popular criticism of the craft movement and textile-arts magazines.

The following discussion attempts to avoid teleological progression stories, and to outline these various tendencies fairly, using a selection of Australian and influential overseas texts. It is my aim to show the problems generated within feminist art criticism, and feminist 'common sense' over the issue of feminine culture, and traditional arts, and to suggest ways in which they may be transcended. It is by attention to *process*, and to the collaborative nature of many of the 'traditional' arts of feminine culture that their potential as women's creative pursuits can be seen, deconstructing the very traditional art world split between the maker and the looker, the artist-genius and the admiring viewer.

³² Moore, C., (ed), *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-90*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1995, pp.1-3.

³³ *ibid.*, p.1.

³⁴ Buikema R., and Smelik, A., *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction*, Zed Books, 1995. For the baldest statement of this 'dialectic' see the introduction, but the tripartite structure of argument is maintained throughout the book. I shall discuss the chapter specifically dealing with art history below.

Old Mistresses

An early impulse in feminist art history was, as in other feminist history, the recuperative project of finding the women who had been "hidden from history" in Sheila Rowbotham's famous phrase. During the early 1970s, exhibitions, scholarly surveys, and monographs on hitherto little-known, or forgotten women artists were the most frequent type of feminist art history scholarship.³⁵ This was seen as a necessary task but one which, without further analysis of the ways in which artistic "greatness" is itself constructed in art-historical narratives, would fail to deconstruct the assumptions underlying art history as a discipline. Numerous writers have discussed the "Old Mistresses" tendency.³⁶ It was, in those early years, often a rather defensive critical practice, as evidenced by the title of Linda Nochlin's founding 1971 article: "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"³⁷

It should be emphasised however, that this is not merely an early tendency now superseded by more enlightened practices. The incorporation of deserving women artists into an artistic lineage the shape of which is *augmented*, rather than greatly changed, has been a continually popular kind of feminist scholarship, and one which has considerable consequences for the kind of cultural evaluation which other kinds of cultural production by women receive. This runs in both directions. In 1995, a large exhibition at the Australian National Gallery celebrated the publication of Joan Kerr's encyclopaedic *Heritage*, a biographical dictionary of Australia's own old mistresses.³⁸ Kerr did include women who worked in the decorative arts, and the crafts, arguing: "merely to drop more women artists (whether white or black) into a conventional art-historical frame is not enough. We have to paint a new canvas and carve a new frame to fit it."³⁹ But this brought criticism of the book for being too inclusive, too free with the label 'artist', and thereby discrediting some of the 'real' artists in the volume. The

³⁵ For example see Tufts, E., *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists*, London 1974; and Nochlin, L., and Sutherland Harris, A., *Women Artists 1550-1950*, Los Angeles 1976. An Australian example is Burke, J. *Australian Women Artists, 1840-1940* Greenhouse, Richmond, 1980.

³⁶ See for example: Parker, R., and Pollock, G., *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, RKP, London, 1981 pp.1-50.

³⁷ Nochlin, L., "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", reprinted in Baker, E., and Hess, T., (eds) *Art and Sexual Politics*, New York, 1973, but originally published in *Art News* 1971.

³⁸ Kerr, J. (ed) *Heritage. The National Women's Art Book*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.xiii.

accompanying exhibition, showing the work by women in the National Gallery Collection, perforce concentrated on the high arts of painting and sculpture, and was in any case closed early by the Gallery.

On the other hand, the discovery and elevation of hitherto unknown women painters and sculptors tends to make it more difficult for other forms of women's art to gain recognition, unless such work can be made or perceived as more 'painting-like'. A 1997 exhibition of American Amish quilts at the National Gallery of Victoria received media and critical attention never given to the quilt exhibitions of contemporary Victorian quilters: their quilts are not distant enough in time, aesthetic sensibility or cultural exoticism. Here again the distancing mechanisms described in Chapter Four come into play.

The revaluation of the feminine, and the female

Another important current in feminist thinking about the creative arts has been an attempted revaluation of those arts considered 'feminine' and also of 'the female' as a concept and subject in art. These also are not exhausted trends, but continue to interest feminist artists and critics.

In a reaction to the devaluation of those kinds of art most practiced by women, many feminist historians and critics attempted an assertion of the artistic merit of women's other cultural practices. Where Parker and Pollock, for example, have established that the devaluation of pastel portraiture and of flower and still life painting is in great part *because* they were largely done by women,⁴⁰ Patricia Mainardi looked for the female arts which had remained largely *unevaluated* by art history because they were entirely female. As she has noted, needlework arts have developed in the context of a female audience:

[N]eedlework arts ... exist in a fantastic variety wherever there are women, and ... in fact are a universal female art form transcending race, class and national borders. Needlework is the one art in which women controlled the education of their daughters and the production of art, and were also the critics and audience.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Parker, and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*., op. cit., pp.28-32 and 51-58.

⁴¹ Mainardi, P., "Quilts: The Great American Art", *Feminist Art Journal*, winter 1973, p.1.

At almost the same time, however, quilts *were* being seen as art, but not in their own terms. They were seen as abstract art, hung on gallery walls in Jonathon Holstein's famous exhibition of Amish and other antique quilts, celebrated for their abstract graphical qualities and strength of colour.⁴² This process of turning needlework into "Art" had the effect of effacing the specificities of its production, and interpreting it within a framework quite different from the one in which it was produced. Distanced, as an exotic or antique practice, the quilts were interesting precisely because they were meaningless, divorced from their interpretive community, in a similar manner to the way in which African or Pre-Colombian art has been interesting to Western artists at various times. Holstein himself, although claiming the credit for starting the American revival of interest in quilts, has attracted scathing criticism from feminist critics for his role in this cultural transplantation. Susan Bernick, quoting Holstein, writes:

If the labels on the quilts in the catalog of the exhibit and in his 1973 book are any indication, the only data he collected on any quilt he bought were the state in which it was purchased and the approximate date it was made....[H]e acknowledged in 1986, "as the quilt collecting craze gathered force during the 1970s it became apparent that many textiles were leaving the social matrix in which they had been embedded since they were made. As a result much valuable information was being lost". "*Were leaving the social matrix*" he said, not "*were being taken*", as if the quilts ran away from home, yearning to be free of the "baggage" of their social matrix, namely women's traditional quilt culture.⁴³

But some feminist criticism has done similar things. *The Subversive Stitch* can be seen as a rather more sophisticated version of this tendency: attempting to celebrate a women's creative practice both as 'art' in itself, and as a sign and practice of women's subordination and exclusion from the arts of higher status. It is not clear that the two things can be convincingly argued together. If embroidery is a worthy art form within the definitions Parker accepts, then why would one assume that women would have chosen to paint or write instead, had they been given the chance? The comparisons with 'real art' on the one hand, which lingers like an echo behind the text, and with meaningless decoration on the other, which is a culturally powerful metaphorical use of 'embroidery', are always present. Although this

⁴² Holstein, J., *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition*, Little Brown, Greenwich, CN, 1973.

⁴³ Bernick, S. "A Quilt is an Art Object when It Stands Up Like a Man" in Torsney and Elsley, op. cit., p.137. Emphasis in original, footnote omitted.

contradiction is held in uneasy balance with considerable scholarship and erudition, it is never resolved.

The second tendency was the search for new ways to celebrate and romanticise the *female*, in subject matter and imagery. This happened both in feminist art practice and in feminist art theory, and still continues in both today.

"Central core imagery" became the phrase used for an American trend in feminist art criticism, to attempt to isolate different motifs in the work of women artists, whether feminist or not. A well known example is the reinterpretation of the flower paintings of Georgia O'Keefe as genital images, an interpretation she strenuously denied. At the same time, some feminist artists were investigating new forms and images which would celebrate women's bodies without objectification. Circles, breast and vulva shapes, ovoids of all kinds were 'recognised' as feminine motifs, forming a separate and distinct source of female artistic vocabulary. In the United States, Judy Chicago's work, both her own drawings and paintings and the larger collaborative works she directed, (such as *The Dinner Party*), utilised vaginal imagery in an explicit attempt to reclaim female sexuality for a woman-centred art, taking it back from the objectification seen in mainstream art, and in popular culture.

This caused considerable comment and some emulation in Australia. The first number of the feminist art journal *Lip* included a painstakingly hand-folded, and rather witty 'centrefold' made of paper d'oyleys and pink 'pinked' paper in an unmistakably genital shape: a work called "Soft Aggression" by artist Frances Budden. Later issues included lively discussion of "central core imagery" in feminist art.⁴⁴ The feminist journal *Refractory Girl* devoted its eighth number to Women and Art, including an article on central core imagery, and a cover that depicted a vagina. But despite some witty and interestingly playful examples, Australian feminist artists did not make so much of the 'central core' theme.⁴⁵

Feminist critics of this tendency in feminist art questioned its ability to transcend the already existing identification of women by and with their sexuality and/or sexual function, with nature and biology. They argued that a

⁴⁴ Budden, F., and McMahon, M., "The Fancywork of the Great Goddess" in *Lip* 2/3 1977 pp.63-71.

⁴⁵ Moore, (ed), *Dissonance*, op. cit., p.9, and see also Moore, "Visual Arts and Craft" op. cit.

mere valorisation of this identification was open to easy misunderstanding, retrieval and recuperation by mainstream patriarchal culture.

The same argument was used against both the reevaluation of the feminine and the female. The traditional arts too, could be seen as easily recuperated into dominant images of the proper work for women, antithetical to "art". In feminist discussion of Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which included embroidery, weaving and ceramics in its ensemble, the two arguments overlapped. The conscious use of domestic skills, of the image of a dinner party, and of vaginal imagery in the decorated place settings made the piece as a whole resonate uncomfortably with traditional feminine associations, and with explicitly feminist content at the same time.⁴⁶ In Australia, quilts shown as part of the larger *Women's Show* in Adelaide in 1977 attracted angry criticism from some feminists, who saw it as unquestioningly celebrating 'oppressive practices'.⁴⁷

Feminist ambivalence about traditional women's arts was, of course, nowhere near the extreme hostility and dismissal they inspired from mainstream critics, and a wish to be taken seriously by such critics must be seen as a partial explanation of the feminist reaction. What one can see in some of the feminist artwork inspired by traditional crafts, is an attempt at *overdetermination*, an inability to let the work speak for itself, lest it be taken for the inarticulate decoration of embroidery after all. Thus the exhibition catalogue essay for the 1979 *D'oyley Show*, was quite defensive in the way it sought to justify its display of d'oyleys and other women's work. Though this Sydney exhibition was one of the more successful and confident examples of this kind of work, the collective still felt they had to establish its 'seriousness' with historical accounts of sweated labour, machine made lace, outwork and the lot of migrant women, much of which information was only very indirectly relevant to the work on display.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ For Australian artists' reactions to *The Dinner Party* see *Lip 5*, 1980, pp.46-50. Some of their hostility relates to the hierarchical relations of production used by Chicago in the production of this massive work.

⁴⁷ These sentiments appear in some of the documents in *The Women's Show Adelaide 1977*, WAM, Adelaide, 1978. The Women's Show is further discussed in Kent, J., (ed), *Setting the Pace: The Women's Art Movement 1980-1983*, WAM, Adelaide, 1984, and Marsh, A., *Difference: A Radical Approach to Women and Art*, WAM, Adelaide, 1985.

⁴⁸ Women's Domestic Needlework Group, Catalogue Essay, 1979, reprinted, condensed in Moore (ed) *Dissonance*, op. cit., pp.57-70.

Women's agency and constraints on creativity

Another focus of feminist interest in art has been the question of constraints and restrictions. There were attempts in the early 1970s to try to explain Linda Nochlin's question above ("Why have there been no great women artists?"), and later, attempts at discovering the reasons why women chose the forms they did. There are of course a great number of factors which have limited women's participation in the fine arts over many generations, and feminist research has found these and pointed them out. But apart from *The Subversive Stitch*, very little feminist attention has focussed on the positive reasons why women did (and do) the things they did. Parker and Pollock, in criticising the sociologically-based accounts of difficulties and restrictions on women artists, argue that,

Since there have always been women artists, the issue is rather how they worked despite these restraints. Furthermore, in many cases women have produced really interesting work as much because of as despite their different relation to the structures that officially excluded them ... Women have made their own interventions in the forms and languages of art because they are necessarily part of their society and culture. But because of the economic, social and ideological effects of sexual difference in a western patriarchal culture, women have spoken and acted from a different place within that society and culture.⁴⁹

This is a succinct and useful addition to the constraints focus of much feminist work, but needs to be taken further. The "different places" women have spoken and acted from include "places" outside the purview of the high arts themselves, and "places" which are not understandable or recoverable within the paradigm of "art", or even "craft" as that term is currently used by feminist critics. My argument is that a lot of that "really interesting work" is unseen even by feminist critics because they cannot understand it as "art", and they do not see "art" as merely a powerful and elite subset of a much larger field of cultural practice.

Susan Bernick has recently taken this further step, suggesting that many women actively reject the label 'artist'. Discussing Judy Chicago's characterisation of the china-painters she worked with as suffering from 'a lack of self-esteem', Bernick says

⁴⁹ Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, op. cit., p.49.

Chicago is herself trained in the high-art tradition of the isolated and private artist. She felt that tradition oppressed her as a woman; surely one response to the oppressiveness of the artworld, which the china-painters have undoubtedly also felt, is to choose not to identify oneself as an artist at all.⁵⁰

This certainly tallies with my experience of quilters -- and the reasons for their refusal of the term artist, in many cases, are similar. But many of the feminist art-critics who try to explain women's use of non-high-art media remain, themselves, firmly within the high-art tradition. Like Chicago, they also equate 'identifying oneself as an artist' with 'self-esteem'. In so doing, a real destabilisation of the categories of art and craft, and a less *a priori* view of the wider field of women's cultural production, is made far more difficult.

Gendered hierarchies

Given the general identification of women with some areas of the crafts, notably textiles, it is not surprising that a fertile field for feminist critics has been in the area of craft criticism. This is a rapidly developing field, fuelled by the expansion of postmodernist understandings into art school curricula, at the same time as the institutionalisation of studio craft training. The critics discussed below show varying allegiances to the positions mapped out above, as well as to the habitual disdain of the artworld in general towards the 'hobby crafts'. Feminist criticism has been far from immune to this kind of snobbery.

In 1973, Toni Robertson, then a student, published an article on women artists in *Arena*, the Macquarie University student newspaper, with the result that she was invited to the founding meeting of the Women's Art Movement in Sydney.⁵¹ Her discussion of how women "are encouraged to play at art as a diversion" shows how, despite her awareness of the male qualities of the archetypal 'artist', she still saw real artistic seriousness as only manifest in the self-conscious and *full time* production of Art. Writing of the accomplishments of the nineteenth century 'lady' and then going on to discuss modern women, she argues:

In the nineteenth century ... drawing and painting kept her mind occupied and so prevented her from brooding on herself. These

⁵⁰ Bernick, op. cit. p.143.

⁵¹ Robertson, T., "Towards a feminist art [1973]" in Moore, C., *Dissonance*, op cit., p.12.

'accomplishments' had about the same value as crochet or embroidered samplers, with little if any relationship to serious work, let alone art.

... None of these women have devoted themselves to the full time production of art.

Even the modern day suburban housewife is encouraged to attend her evening college classes in enamelling, art, woodwork, lapidary, pottery, or to belong to a municipal art society. These things offer her an interest outside the home. Refreshed by a few hours of creative work, the woman can return to her home and her 'real' work.⁵²

Robertson went on to become interested in community and domestic arts, and perhaps would not espouse such a position today. But a number of feminist critics still do. They, like other craft critics, have taken the *professional* craftworkers as their subject, ignoring the vastly greater number of craft practitioners who are not making their living by their craft work.

This can be clearly seen in two recent Australian collections of crafts criticism.⁵³ Several articles in each collection take a feminist stance, but each privileges full time professional or market-oriented crafts practice, as if this were the only kind, or the only kind worth writing about. Diane Losche's article pleads for anthropological approaches to craft, but discusses only two actual persons. Despite her view that "it is precisely because the cultural categories of craft, of women, of the marginalised are so unknown and without cultural representation that they present the possibilities for the future."⁵⁴ both of her examples are well-known professional artists: Narelle Jubelin and Toni Warburton. It is hard to see how two such well-known and successful artists could be seen as marginal -- Losche even gives the name of the major gallery that represents them. In fact, what she likes about their work is their use of craft methods or media in entirely 'artistic' ways. Although Losche uses the craftwork of ordinary people in her anthropological examples (she mentions the craftwork of the Cuna Indians of Panama, and of various peoples in Melanesia) it does not seem to occur to her that examining the *local equivalents* -- those craft practitioners who are not represented by galleries and who keep or sell their own work at prices which do not include

⁵² *ibid.* p.17.

⁵³ Ioannou, N. (ed) *Craft in Society: an Anthology of Perspectives*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1992; and Rowley, S., (ed) *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997.

⁵⁴ Losche, D., "Tangled Identities: Anthropological Discourse and Craft" in Ioannou, *op.cit.* pp.50-62, p.60.

high-art premiums, but are more connected to the cost of materials -- might be instructive at all.⁵⁵

The work of Sue Rowley has been important in establishing an identifiably feminist voice in craft criticism. Her interventions in the craft/art debate⁵⁶, her calls for more theoretical writing on the crafts⁵⁷, and her work on stories and narratives in craft,⁵⁸ have been prolific and influential. A sometime quiltmaker herself,⁵⁹ Rowley has recently begun to mention domestic craft, albeit with many disclaimers and qualifications:

One implication ... is that professional and domestic crafts are part of the same world in spite of the fact that many craftspractitioners regard this distinction as qualitative and absolute. To speak of domestic and professional craft as inhabiting the same cultural space does not mean that they are the same as each other or are continuous and contiguous with each other. But it does draw our attention to the complex relationships of identity and differentiation between them. An analogy might be a working-class family in which, or rather from which, one member 'makes' it. The cost of social mobility is frequently registered in terms of family estrangement, but the complex range of attitudes to other family members, from ironic acknowledgment to vehement disavowal, are still framed by kinship.⁶⁰

Rowley's analogy is telling. The members of the family left 'behind' have no opinions worth recording. The one who has 'made it' can only acknowledge the other ironically, at best.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Another article in the book, by another anthropologist is an even more egregious example of this. See Chalmers, L., "Understanding Handcraft Activities in Australia: the Relevance of Anthropological Approaches and Cross-Cultural Studies" in Ioannou, op.cit. pp. 63-78. I have not discussed this article here, because Chalmers does not make any feminist position clear in her text.

⁵⁶ Rowley, S. "Mind Over Matter" op. cit., pp. 3-7.

⁵⁷ See her articles in Ioannou N. op.cit., and Rowley, S., (ed), *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, op. cit., and also "Parables of Criticism" in *Artlink* 12 (3) winter 1992 pp. 6-8.

⁵⁸ See in particular "'There once lived...': craft and narrative traditions" in Rowley S., *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, op. cit., pp. 76-84.

⁵⁹ Rowley exhibited a quilt in the Quilt Australia 1988 exhibition, titled "But I Like A Happy Ending", pictured in Quilters' Guild Inc. *Quilt Australia*, op. cit., p.35.

⁶⁰ Rowley, S., "There once lived..." op. cit., pp.82-3.

⁶¹ At worst, she is right about vehement disavowal from professionals, although this seems to differ in the different media. In my experience in the textile crafts there is mutual respect between "professionals" and "amateurs". See Grahame, E., in *Textile Fibre Forum* op. cit., This may be, of course, because the lines between professionals and amateurs are fuzzier, and because almost no one is actually *making* what could be construed as a living.

Rowley has previously acknowledged the feminist neglect of crafts practice, and vice versa, noting that "the feminist valorisation of women's domestic craft traditions ran counter to the notion of 'excellence' in the crafts. Feminist artists could claim an identification with domestic traditions from a far more secure position than could crafts practitioners." ⁶² Despite such insights, however, feminist craft theorists have continued to concentrate entirely on so called studio craft, worrying away at problems and exclusions which disappear entirely when looked at from within another set of framing assumptions. A familiar multi-level hierarchy is seen dimly behind the work of these writers, who criticise the hierarchies of value surrounding art and craft, yet do not notice the art/craft dualism as it appears, disguised, between studio craft, and popular or hobby craft. The preoccupation with quality, training and professionalism which is to be seen among the leading practitioners, teachers, curators and arts administrators of the studio crafts movement can be interpreted as part of the constant attempts of studio craft to differentiate itself from its dark twin, leisure and hobby craft. Non-professional craft remains invisible, undiscussed, but present: just as foundational to the studio crafts' self image and identity as the studio crafts' presence is alleged to be basic to the identity of the fine arts. This dualism has yet to be systematically deconstructed.

Rowley's 1997 collection on the crafts, *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, reveals the way in which craft theorists look upon their subject. Feminist influence is present in almost every essay, in the acknowledgement of the widespread identification of women with craft skills and craft's subordination to art, but the essays almost never touch on the everyday importance of craft skills of a number of different kinds in women's lives.⁶³

One writer, artist Elizabeth Gertsakis, has done so, from her particular standpoint as a Greek-Macedonian Australian woman, with a heritage of embroidery. In "Words of love -- folk heterotopias", she describes and

⁶² Rowley, S., "Warping the Loom: Theoretical Frameworks for Craft Writing" in Ioannou, op cit., pp. 173-4.

⁶³ There are, for instance, essays on representations of craftwork in literature, (Jones, D. "The floating web"); on representation of craftwork in film, (Blonski, A., "Mechanical toys and metaphor: the representation of craft and craft makers in the cinema"); an account of a performance art project in New York City, involving a sewing machine, (Graham, A. "Sweat: performance, New York, 1994"); and most peculiar of all an essay comparing the painter Imants Tillers with various ideas from Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*, (Juers, E., "The golden bowl: Imants Tillers and the suspension of disbelief"). All in Rowley, S., *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin 1997.

analyses the changes to, and meanings of, folk embroidery in her mother's life, from a reading of an embroidered rug made in a northern Greek town. Gertsakis points out the changes in cultural meaning undergone by embroidery in a rapidly Westernising and modernising culture, where dowry embroidery went, in one generation, from ancient traditional geometric motifs and patterns signifying fertility and mythology, to pictorial images of romantic love. But her analysis of her mother's embroidered picture, which relies heavily on the theoretical insights of Roland Barthes and Luce Irigaray, the story of Penelope and Odysseus, and ideas of the power of the text (Gertsakis' reading of the embroidery centres on the two words included on it) appears to be missing one crucial element. Nowhere does she say anything about how her mother, the embroiderer, understands, or understood her own work. Where professional craftworkers are expected to be able to articulate the meanings of their work in detail, amateurs are expected to be incapable of this. Just as Jonathan Holstein did not ask the Amish women from whom he bought his quilts what they thought about their art form, so a feminist critic like Gertsakis also assumes that her interpretation will not benefit from the understandings of the cultural producer whose work she is analysing.

Gertsakis' notion of 'cultural persistence' is an interesting one, and needs more development. In her mother's embroidery of an image redolent with Classical allusions and the narrative of romantic love, Gertsakis detects resistances which hark back to premodern Macedonian structures of feeling. She gestures towards the idea that more may be going on in cultural production of this sort than critics know, saying: "So little of the work of our critics, historians and theorists goes into perceiving the new and hybrid configurations which have no predetermined means for becoming named in the act of cultural persistence".⁶⁴ But she agrees, if regretfully, that "Embroidery as a traditional craft or formal process is described by textile historians as doomed once the ritual and social purpose of the particular society has gone"⁶⁵. Her own response to her mother's embroidery is to scan the image into a computer, returning "to geometries, this time the use of computer pixillation".⁶⁶ Gertsakis, like the other writers in the collection, seems quite unaware of the craft traditions which still flourish around them, where the ritual and social purposes of making things are still strong, and

⁶⁴ Gertsakis, E., "Words of love -- folk heterotopias" in Rowley, S., (ed), *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, op cit., pp.65-75, p. 75.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 74.

where new and hybrid configurations are currently emerging. Quilting, as I have shown, is one such.

Feminist art and domestic craft.

If it is true that feminist artists have been more open to identification with domestic craftmakers than professional craftworkers, it is also true that this has not been an unproblematic relationship. The heyday of interest by feminist artists in women's material culture was the 1970s, and early 1980s, before the wholesale questioning of the categories of 'woman' and 'experience' made this more difficult.⁶⁷ In what follows, I am trying to delineate the problems that arise from the clash of very nearly incompatible ideas of what craft and art are *for*: a clash in which the more culturally powerful idea of Art gains the ascendancy. The effect is that the domestic craftwork of non-artist women becomes raw material -- exoticised and decontextualised as some non-Western art and craft has also been -- for the creation of works which articulate quite different ideas. This creates a challenging problem for an inclusive feminism, which attempts to take the world views of women seriously.

Mother's Memories, Other's Memories

Vivienne Binns' early account of the 1981 *Mother's Memories, Other's Memories* project is a fascinating and revealing document, which shows exactly how far the paradigm of 'feminist art' is removed from the self-understandings of domestic or hobby craftswomen, and the condescension that results from this, despite the best intentions. The project aimed to collect items of craftwork and stories about them from the participants' mothers. Complete openness and objectivity were assumed as part of the working method of the project, and the practical impossibility of this when participants were dealing with family histories and relationships was seen as a problem -- leading to "compromises and solutions which were sometimes disappointing and lacking in bite".⁶⁸ The participants' concerns about 'romanticising' their mothers' work, reveal how distant they were from the kind of milieu which quilting produces, an alternative sphere of valuation and family-positive support. Some had trouble finding the words to tell their mothers that their

⁶⁷ See Moore, C., in Caine, B., et al, op. cit., passim.

⁶⁸ Binns, V., "Mother's Memories, Other's Memories" reprinted in Moore, C. (ed) *Dissonance*, op cit., pp. 71-79.

work was valued, perhaps because their own sense of its value was ambivalent: "Helen: And how do you say that what they've done is valuable in a culture which doesn't value what they've done in ways that other things are valued?"⁶⁹ As Binns' account and her report of participants' remarks show, the original project was the product of a group of people fairly alienated from their families and their mother's forms of expression to begin with. The idea originated, as Binns recalled, when "... a friend and I had the idea of swapping mothers for a day. Instead of doing *our duty call* on our own mother, we'd visit the other's mother."⁷⁰

The participants were quite amazed to find positive aspects or strength in their mothers' lives or work:

The main thing I got out of it was a surprised reaction that there was so much good in that family setting ... Tremendous creativity and great strength in the relationships between us women. That's the really good thing I found out about it apart from feeling very humble towards my mother, which I hadn't felt for at least twenty years.⁷¹

The *Mother's Memories, Other's Memories* project description indicates something else about feminist use of traditional cultural forms of women -- the necessity of *text*, or other ways of directing the viewer to differentiate the feminist from the feminine. One of the criticisms made by participants in Binns' project was that some exhibits were not 'clear' enough -- Binns herself states as a problem the fact that "many people saw the exhibition as a support of family life rather than an analysis or a simple review."⁷² This is a common problem for artists with political viewpoints using media with set cultural connotations, and also for critics or writers about folk arts. Politically committed work, whether feminist or otherwise, demands readability, and a lack of ambiguity, and because it tends to be focussed on the object, not the practice, only specific kinds of *textual* political effects are sufficiently unambiguous.⁷³ This seems to me one explanation for the amount of text incorporated into much feminist art, and the ways in which political art in

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 73. My emphasis.

⁷¹ *ibid.* p. 74

⁷² *ibid.* p. 76.

⁷³ This is discussed further below in Chapter 7 in relation to Chilean arpilleras and the AIDS quilt -- but it applies also to feminist work.

general privileges particular forms, eschewing the geometric, the ambiguous, and the mute.

Feminists, art, craft and quilting

If my analysis of quilting subculture is correct, there is a way of constructing a feminist understanding of the political and social effects of women's art or craft which is not in itself discernibly feminist, and that is to analyse the culture and practices out of which they emerge, in the manner I have done above. First, however, feminist criticism must notice that there *are* such living subcultures of women.

If theorised as *a set of social and aesthetic practices*, which is collaborative, social, and diverse, analysis of a subculture such as quilting enables a feminist political reading of even the most formal, geometric objects. As discussed in chapter two, within the subculture, quilters are able to read personal, social and cultural meanings in quilts, and quilt practices, without didactic text, but with the shared interpretive devices built up during their exposure to the wide range of influences that quilt culture produces.

Feminist craft critics still appear to see professional studio practice as the only thing worth their attention, with all the rest being mere housewife hobbyists.⁷⁴ Professional quilters, or art quilters, more often see their professional practice as the visible pinnacle of a much larger articulated structure of craft practice: a structure which provides them with potential colleagues and critics, as well. Quilting can only emerge into 'high cultural space' at that point *because* of its larger subcultural presence.

Feminist analyses of art, craft and art history have attempted several strategies to deal with the various ways in which art has been constructed and defined as a male preserve on the one hand, and the forms of cultural production that women have actually used over time have been defined as non-art -- as craft, as accomplishment, as domestic work -- on the other. These strategies have included 'recuperation' -- where craft is asserted to *be* art, made by people who were prevented by social constraints from using the high status media and technologies of their time. Another strategy has been a type of elitism --

⁷⁴ A particularly egregious example of feminist disdain for the imbecilic deskilled 'housewife' can be seen in Dalton, P., "Housewives, Leisure Crafts and Ideology: Deskilling in consumer craft", in Elinor, G., et al (eds) *Women and Craft*, Virago, London, 1987, pp. 31-37.

where feminist criticism has looked only at the elite group of their chosen form of art/craft practitioners -- the "shown" artist, the studio craftswoman -- thereby failing to interact with the structures that validate some forms of cultural production over others. A third strategy has been appropriation: where feminist community artists or feminist artists of other kinds have used traditional skills and forms, and the skills of traditional practitioners in their own artistic work. Such work often has an ironic, or even a celebratory intent, but it exists at one remove from the self-understandings of traditional practice. This strategy, while it has produced some interesting works, involves little interest in the existing women's cultures from which the inspiration and skills are drawn, and displays no interest in the meanings the work has for traditional practitioners themselves.

Meanwhile, women continue to make things, which have meaning for themselves and their families and constitute a significant mode of expression, creativity and cultural production, both individually and collectively. In the next chapter I shall discuss the way in which feminist historians and sociologists of leisure have attempted to come to terms with this enduring set of practices.

Chapter Six

Leisure, Pleasure, and Feminism

If feminist understandings of art and craft are unable to explain the particularities of women's subcultural creativity in quilting, there are other lines of enquiry. Non-professional quilting, the structures and culture of which I have described and analysed above, is experienced by its adherents as 'a leisure activity', but only in the broadest sense: that is to say, something at which they do not earn their living. Paradoxically at first glance, quilting requires the painstaking acquisition of skills, long hours of repetitive action, frustrating trial and error and sometimes, as with Noni's bleeding fingers, considerable physical pain. But it also, as shown in earlier chapters, inspires enthusiasm, pleasure and camaraderie, of a type associated more with the pleasureable activities of leisure, than the more constrained activities of work. This chapter, noting that quilting displays aspects of both leisure and work, will examine the feminist (and some other) analyses of these concepts, to discover their utility in trying to understand a subcultural formation such as quilting.

Leisure has been an increasingly popular area for scholarly inquiry in the last few decades, with work on leisure proceeding in several different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, although women's leisure remains understudied. Feminist scholarship has had an important part to play in the remaking of leisure studies, first in Britain and more recently in the United States. While feminist and feminist influenced work has been done in Australia as well, there has been little of it, and the smaller size of the field is evident in the amount of research available.

Although feminist input has been important in changing the way women's leisure has been studied, there are still crucial problems with the way the leisure of women has been conceptualised and researched, and with the purposes for which the research has been done. In particular, feminist research has been tentative on the issue of pleasure and enthusiasm. Leisure choices have largely been explained in terms of constraints, rather than pleasures. Where there is a focus on pleasure in feminist writing, this has

been principally in relation to *sexual* pleasure.¹ Quiltmaking, as has been shown above, involves, for many women, the intense pleasures of creativity, homosocial interaction, freedom from caring responsibilities and pleasure in the work itself. Emphases on sexual pleasure, or on constraints in women's leisure leave the positive reasons for women's traditional leisure choices vastly under-theorised. The last section of this chapter attempts indicate the ways in which empirical research into the many flourishing women's subcultures might remedy this.

A Brief Histor(iograph)y of Women's Leisure

Putting to one side, for the moment, the vexed question of definition of the term 'leisure', it is clear from the literature that the historical development of women's particular leisure pursuits is still unknown in any detail. The question of *why* such practices as quiltmaking are conducted so overwhelmingly by women remains unanswerable so long as constructing an historical or an historiographical account of women's leisure is a task of assembling the scattered oblique references to women's leisure from the histories of leisure which have been written by social historians. It also involves gathering insights from a range of other kinds of sources which indicate what women's leisure may actually have been like in the past.

Reasons for the gender blindness of much historical research into leisure can be found in the genealogy of leisure history, which links it to labour history on the one hand, emphasising the relationship between paid work and leisure, and the leisure of the worker (conceptualised, explicitly or not, as 'a man in a blue collar'); and to the social history of popular culture on the other hand, often emphasising the commercialisation of leisure and its use as an agent of social control under capitalism. The different relations of women to the world of paid work, and therefore to the nexus between such work and "free time", and their historically different access to commercialised or public leisure are at best only gestured at and at worst completely ignored in mainstream leisure history. This is still true despite the fact that leisure

¹ This is true in a number of strands of feminist writing, many of the more recent of which deal with "transgressive" pleasures, of queer, lesbian, or s/m sex. See for example, Grosz, E. and Probyn, E. (eds) *Sexy Bodies: the Strange Carnalities of Feminism* Routledge, London 1995. A rare example of feminist examination of women's pleasure in heterosexuality is Segal, L., *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1994.

historians have themselves acknowledged for over a decade that they ignore women's experience. As P. Bailey pointed out in 1987, "the question of gender in leisure [is a]lways on the agenda, but nowhere apparently in hand".²

One attempt to write a social history of women's leisure in Britain is to be found: a short chapter in *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?*, an interdisciplinary book on women's leisure.³ This account is severely limited by the scope of the project and the lack of secondary sources, and it comes to the conclusion that only two indisputable facts can be gleaned from the available material: "first, women's opportunities for leisure have been much more restricted than men's; and second, women's leisure needs have rarely been understood or met".⁴ Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron and Diana Woodward's work does indicate that historical evidence about women's leisure can be found in autobiographical and oral material, and perhaps even fiction, and that this kind of source may have to be used to combat the oft-lamented lack of conventional historical source material on women's leisure. These are the kinds of sources used in my account of the history of quiltmaking in Chapter One: other, more evanescent or private, leisure activities undertaken mainly by women (knitting, gardening or cooking for example) may require an even wider range of imaginative research.⁵

In Australia, unlike Britain, there are no general histories of leisure, and references to leisure must be picked out of histories of sport, and social and cultural history articles on various related themes. Australian social and cultural histories tend to concentrate on the artefacts and products of culture rather than the processes, which makes leisure, or the use of time generally,

² Bailey, P., *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, 2nd ed, Methuen, London, 1987, p.18. For examples of the usual disclaimer see Walton, J.K. & Walvin, J., (eds), *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983, p.4-5, or for an even briefer version see Jones, S.G., *Workers at Play, A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-1939*, RKP, London, 1986, p.4, where the author says "In a volume of this kind there will inevitably be a number of gaps. For instance some...may point out that gender differences or sectional divisions within the working class are not given due emphasis."

³ Green, E., Hebron, S. and Woodward, D., *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?*, Macmillan, London, 1990, chapter 3 "A social history of women's leisure", pp.38-56.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.55-56.

⁵ Some attempts have been made in the United States to begin to construct a social history of some kinds of women's leisure using the methods of oral history and more of this kind of work needs to be done in Australia too. See Henderson, K.A., "An oral life history perspective on the containers in which American farm women experienced leisure", in *Leisure Studies*, 9, 1990, pp.121-133, and "Farm women and the meaning of work and leisure: an oral history perspective" in *Leisure Sciences*, 10, 1988, pp.41-50.

an invisible concept⁶. There has also been an overwhelming concentration on the processes of formation of 'national identity' or cultural projections of 'Australianness', using the press, literature and more recently 'material culture' as indicators (both source material and exemplars) of Australian cultural production. Thus histories of individual cultural products and institutions, such as cinema, have been written, but with less analysis of the people who used and consumed these products; when, where and under what conditions. Research has concentrated rather on the changes and developments in the institutions themselves and their products, in histories of the cinema, and the ABC.⁷ This approach tends to exacerbate gender blindness: where the people themselves are invisible, the gender (or class) makeup of the group is even less visible.⁸

Gender is foregrounded in Marian Stell's work on women in sport, *Half the Race*,⁹ and in this book much can be found about changes in the restrictions, both formal and, more powerfully, informal, on women in relation to sport. What has not appeared yet (and is beyond the scope of this thesis) is a study of domestic or self-organised leisure that uses gender as an analytical tool, in the manner of recent feminist histories,¹⁰ and analyses, imaginatively, the pleasures, practices and choices, that have influenced the leisure activities of today's women through the passing down of oral and family culture.¹¹

⁶ Davison, G., *The Unforgiving Minute: How Australians Learned to Tell the Time*, OUP, Melbourne, 1993.

⁷ For example, see D. Collins, "The Movie Octopus", in P. Spearritt and D. Walker, (eds), *Australian Popular Culture*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1979, pp.102-12; recent publications of the Cinema Study Group of NSW and the work of Ken Inglis on the ABC.

⁸ For example see C. Fox, "In search of a fair bet", in J. Lee and V. Burgmann, (eds) *Constructing a Culture*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1988, where women only appear as wowsers. There is some speculation as to why women did not take part in these cultures but it is neither historically specific, nor detailed enough to be useful.

⁹ Stell, M., *Half the Race; A History of Women in Sport*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1991. Because of the importance of competition and excellence in competitive sport, this history tends to take a "great women of history" approach. Stell avoids any quantification of the changes she records, and it is hard to judge the weight of her use of "many women" or "some women" in assessing how widespread sport was and is as an aspect of women's leisure generally

¹⁰ Most notable among these is perhaps Joy Damousi's *Depraved and Disorderly*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 1997, where the lives of convict women are examined with an understanding of the specific tools and practices of resistance and choice they had available. See also Grimshaw, P., Lake, M., McGrath, A., and Quartly, M., *Creating a Nation*, McPhee Gribble Penguin, Ringwood, 1994.

¹¹ More specific feminist histories such as Holmes, K., *Spaces in Her Day: Australian Women's Diaries of the 1920s and 1930s*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1995, have begun this task in relation to some other "private" activities such as the keeping of diaries, and the creation of family cultures.

As leisure has not been used as a category of analysis in history, so it has also been absent from the organising principles of the "women's lives" books which have appeared in the last few years. Diane Bell and Ponch Hawkes' *Generations*,¹² Patricia Clarke and Dale Spender's *Lifelines*,¹³ and the numerous Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women's autobiographies recently published¹⁴ must be read 'against the grain' to extract information and impressions about leisure. References found in this way are rare not only because women's leisure is itself rare, or because the concept of leisure is problematical for women, although both these things are true, but also because the editors' and authors' shaping frameworks have placed higher priorities on work, or sex or family relations.¹⁵

The same is true of the many books of feminist analysis and history published since the mid 1970s in Australia. The early ones¹⁶ concentrated on women's work to an great extent, overlooking the concept of leisure altogether. There are clear reasons for this in the context and conditions of production of this scholarship in the first part of the feminist resurgence of the 1970s. Rights to work, equal pay, and the enormous changes in society linked to the mass entry of women into lifelong paid work were the salient issues. Equality of opportunity in work, and to a lesser extent, rearrangement of both the workplace and the home to make this possible, were the strategic priorities. But however understandable, the concentration on work functioned to obliterate consciousness of a pre-existing women's culture, which was domestically based, having an ambiguous relationship to work, and to leisure (as experienced by men). This domestic culture, its skills and pleasures, had always been (and still is) virtually invisible to many men, and it is arguable that it was also invisible to the cohort of young university trained feminists

¹² Bell, D. and Hawkes, P., *Generations: Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne 1987.

¹³ Clarke, P. and Spender, D., *Lifelines: Australian women's letters and diaries 1788-1840*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992.

¹⁴ Recent Aboriginal women's life writing includes for example, the work of Ruby Langford Ginibi, and Glenyse Ward.

¹⁵ See for example, the chapter headings in Clarke and Spender, *op cit.*, which concentrate overwhelmingly on work and hardship, or Bell and Hawkes, *op. cit.* which concentrate on work, both paid and domestic, and on family relations.

¹⁶ Including Summers, A., *Damned Whores and Gods Police: the Colonization of Women in Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975; Kingston, B., *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975; Mercer, J., *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975; Ryan, E. and Conlon, A., *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work*, Nelson, Melbourne 1975; and many others.

who were the 'hyper-activists' of early 1970s feminism.¹⁷ Many 1970s feminists, for good strategic reasons, decided to concentrate on issues of economic power, leading to the view that work (whether paid or unpaid) was more important than 'non-work', making leisure a mere residual of non-work time, and rendering women's leisure cultures invisible. It can be argued, however, that the constraints, exclusions and oppressions, as well as the invisibility, of women's leisure mirror and complement those of the economic and political spheres, making it just as politically crucial for feminists to examine leisure as any other part of women's lives.

Australian feminist scholarship has not developed a speciality of leisure history as found in Britain, and has had a persistent tendency for leisure, as a category of experience and as a historically changing set of processes, to be overlooked. This, coupled with the difficulties of writing women's history especially where it pertains to the domestic, makes the task of constructing a social history of women's leisure especially difficult. This important work remains to be done. What I have attempted in the following section is a sketch, drawing on both British and Australian research, of some of the important concepts, changes and distinctive Australian factors which would have to be included in such work.

Modern ideas of leisure, work and the relations between them are ideas shaped crucially by the industrial revolution: "the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents".¹⁸ Social historians in general, and leisure historians in particular, have agreed that pre-industrial Britain worked on different patterns of time and space, though they differ on how quickly and evenly the transition was made.¹⁹ Work and leisure were not rigidly divided and labour

¹⁷ The expression "hyper-activists" was used by Liz Jacka at "The Return of the Repressed" conference, Sydney University, November 1996, in describing her feminist comrades in the battle to achieve a feminist philosophy course at the University of Sydney in 1973. For a historical elaboration of the cultural differences between this cohort of feminists and previous ones see Grahame, E., "Cultural Politics" in Caine et al (eds) *Oxford Companion to Australian Feminism*, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Hobsbawm, E., *Industry and Empire*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, p.13.

¹⁹ Cunningham would emphasise the continuities of cultural practices even under the duress applied after the industrial revolution, while Rojek sees medieval practices as crucial to our understanding of leisure structures now. Cunningham, H., *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, c1780-c1880*, Croom Helm, London, 1980; and Rojek, C., *Capitalism and Leisure Theory*, Tavistock, London, 1985. See also his articles in Rojek, C., (ed) *Leisure for Leisure*, Macmillan, London, 1989.

was bound by seasonal necessity and social custom, and generously sprinkled with festivals and holidays.²⁰

In Australia at this time, in the very early period of white occupation, culture must have been very different, with a militarised, largely male culture lacking the cohesive village structure still prevalent in England, and without the robust and varied life of the large towns. For the so-called 'pioneers' of the early period of white invasion, the establishment of agriculture and habitable dwellings was very hard work, and the different seasons, weather and vegetation would have made continuity with British cultural traditions difficult and strange. The mix of immigrants, free and convict, from many different parts of Britain, must have minimised possibilities for the maintenance of locally diverse traditions, which were already under pressure in Britain.

The Industrial Revolution and the beginnings of leisure

In Britain, the industrial revolution brought increasing division between home and work, gradually and unevenly wiping out the artisan's workshop structure of production. It also divided work and leisure, changing cultural norms of sociable work practices and variable pace of work, and enforcing a labour discipline which both reduced the quantity of leisure time,²¹ and changed the nature of popular pursuits.²² Customary holidays were reduced from seventeen in the 1750s to four in 1834.²³ Legislation and local initiatives by the ruling class and the newly evangelical churches gradually suppressed or drove underground the popular, rowdy and sometimes brutal pastimes of animal baiting, cockfighting, and street games. The activities of roving musicians, entertainers and salesmen were curtailed by the Poor Laws, which allowed such practitioners to be declared vagrants and returned to their home parishes; and by the loss of their audiences as men, women and children moved into the six day, seventy hour week of the new factories. By the 1830s and 1840s the British state and its newly created police force were

²⁰ For a reconstruction of this period see Malcolmson, R., *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973.

²¹ Thompson, E.P., "Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism", in *Past and Present*, 38, 1967, pp.56-97.

²² Bailey, P., op. cit.; Cunningham, H., op. cit.; and see also Clarke, J. and Critcher, C., *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Society*, Macmillan, London, 1985.

²³ *ibid.* p. 56.

deeply involved in the policing and regulation of the customary amusements of the people, and the fostering of new ones.²⁴

There was of course resistance to these processes; they proceeded unevenly and were often bitterly contested. As John Clarke and Chas Critcher point out, "Friendly Societies, the Co-operative movement, Chartism, and Owenite socialism hardly indicate a working class shorn of initiative."²⁵ Women experienced these changes differently from men and class and regional differences must also have been great. Sheila Rowbotham's account of the changes to the lives of women of the emerging middle classes emphasises the role of their new 'leisure' (that is, freedom from work) as status symbol for their husbands and fathers.²⁶ Where artisans' and traders' wives had been crucial to the running of the family workshop and business, the women of the new middle classes withdrew from work outside or inside the home, and in this period we see the beginning of the Victorian ideology of the home as haven, tended by a woman. Middle class girls began to be trained in the ornamental skills of genteel leisure.²⁷ Roszika Parker's history of embroidery reveals the deep ideological roots of this, as she traces the changes in embroidery from a saleable craft skill for men and women in the Middle Ages, to a domestic accomplishment and marker of gentility and femininity in the 19th century.²⁸

In Australia, the economic and ideological changes which accompanied the industrial revolution were occurring too, although inflected by local histories and conditions. Most women were absorbed for most of their adult lives in child bearing and rearing, as well as hard work, paid or unpaid, often as part of a family agricultural unit. Sol Encel, Norman Mackenzie and M. Tebbutt point out that the very small number of women with either leisure or education were strictly confined to the norms of acceptable behaviour for the daughters and wives of the middle class.²⁹ Ann Summers has argued that

²⁴ Thompson, E.P., *op. cit.*; and see Clarke and Critcher, *op. cit.*, pp.51-9.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.57.

²⁶ Rowbotham, S., *Hidden from History*, Pluto Press, London, 1973.

²⁷ Green, et al, *op. cit.*, p. 41. For another account of the early modern roots of embroidery as an ideological control mechanism see Crawford, P., "'The only ornament in a woman': needlework in early modern England", in Women and Labour Publications Collective, *All Her Labours Two: Embroidering the Framework*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, pp.7-20.

²⁸ Parker, R., *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Women's Press, London, 1984.

²⁹ Encel, S., Mackenzie, N. and Tebbutt, M., *Women and Society: an Australian Study*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1974, p.30.

these norms were all the stricter in Australia, because of the particular history of relations between men and women in white Australia.³⁰ There are material indications, for example, in the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century quilts which have come to light in Australia, that needlework was just as acceptable here as in Britain, as a creative and useful pastime for women.³¹

The nineteenth century -- little time for leisure

While British historians agree that recognisably modern possibilities for leisure emerged during the middle decades of the 19th century,³² it is important to remember just how little time for leisure most workers had, with punishing hours for those in paid work, and minimal provision for recreational space in the quickly expanding cities of urbanising Britain. Women workers, responsible for household tasks as well as their work, with little help from male family members, would have been doubly deprived. D.A. Reid points out that "Saint Monday", the practice of taking Monday as an additional 'holiday', was more prevalent among women, who needed the extra day to do their household work.³³

Accounts of the second half of the 19th century and leisure concentrate on the new technologies, holidays and social changes which produced a huge increase in leisure opportunities, most ignoring or merely gesturing at the differential access to these available to men and women. Bailey describes the mid-century middle-class leisure pursuits of reading, music (using the new sheet music and moderately priced pianos), theatricals, quizzes and games, gardening, entertaining, travelling and sport, and the realignment of cultural values that this new recreation made necessary.³⁴ In so far as some of these activities were home based, middle class women may have partaken also, although their recreation or other activities while the master of the house

³⁰ Summers, A., op. cit., passim

³¹ Rolfe, M., *Patchwork Quilts*, op. cit., passim.

³² Bailey, P., op. cit.; Cunningham, H., op. cit., and see Bailey, P., "Leisure, culture and the historian: reviewing the first generation of leisure historiography in Britain", in *Leisure Studies*, 8, 1989, pp107-127, especially p.108.

³³ Reid, D. A., "The decline of Saint Monday 1766-1876" in Thane, P, and Sutcliffe, A., (eds), *Essays in Social History*, vol. 2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, p.109.

³⁴ Bailey, P., op. cit., pp.68--87. He describes the difficulty for many of the new industrialists, raised in the strictly anti-leisure culture of the early 19th century, in dealing with socially acceptable leisure, and how they attempted to do it without allowing the workers to feel that they had rights to leisure too.

was out remain opaque. Literature, diaries and autobiographies may well be the best source for this information.³⁵

In Australia by the latter half of the nineteenth century, commentators were remarking on the more practical skills and accomplishments of the Australian-born middle class woman, compared to her English counterpart. In 1883, Richard Twopenny pointed out that languages and other accomplishments were neglected, but that colonial girls could cook and sew well. In the 1890s, Victoria Buxton, the wife of the Governor of South Australia, was surprised at the abilities of the women in her charitable organisations to make elaborate cakes for fund raising.³⁶ Some Australian writing touches on the great extent of piano ownership and on contemporary remarks on the prevalence of piano playing in the colony (as well as its poor quality).³⁷ As an example of the gender blindness of historical work on leisure, it is interesting to note that Humphrey McQueen's short chapter "Pianists" in *A New Britannia*, fails to mention that the pianists were mostly women. For his purposes, cultural significance lay only in the ownership of pianos as a status symbol for men.

For workers in both Britain and Australia, the second half of the nineteenth century saw huge gains as a result of struggles to reduce hours of work, leading to an increase in possible leisure time for the employed, although again, this may not have benefitted women workers to nearly the same extent as men, as they were beginning to experience a new ideological pressure to raise domestic standards.³⁸ Increasingly the work year took on something approaching a modern rhythm, with growing numbers of workers gaining first unpaid, then paid holidays. Workers and their families took advantage of railway technology for excursions and even seaside holidays,³⁹ although as Stephen Jones acknowledges in his study of twentieth-century leisure,

³⁵ See Stanley, L., "Historical sources for studying work and leisure in women's lives", in Wimbush, E. and Talbot, M., *Relative Freedoms: Women and Leisure*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1988, pp.18-32. Liz Stanley discusses the use of such sources in depth, in relation to the diaries of Hannah Cullwick, and Virginia Woolf, and those collected for the Mass Observation Project in Britain, 1937-49.

³⁶ Both quoted in Kingston, B., "The lady and the Australian girl: some thoughts on nationalism and class", in Grieve, N. and Burns, A., *Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp.27-41, p.35.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p.40. See also McQueen, H., *A New Britannia*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, revised ed., 1975, pp.117-119.

³⁸ Clarke and Critcher, *op. cit.*, p.64; Green et al, *op. cit.*, p.44.

³⁹ Cunningham, H., "Leisure", in Benson, J., (ed), *The Working Class In England 1875-1914*, Croom Helm, London, 1985, pp.133-164, p.147.

women's leisure on holidays, particularly unpaid holidays, might only amount to doing the same work in a different location.⁴⁰ In Australian cities, where the pleasures of beach or countryside were closer, and more accessible, and where the climate was far more favourable to outdoor pursuits for more of the year, day trips and holidays also became more common for workers.

In the indisputable changes taking place in commercial, collective and state sponsored leisure in Britain and Australia during the last quarter of the 19th century, it is easy to lose perspective on the ways in which these changes were mediated through class and gender structures. Detailed historical work remains to be done on this, recognising the role of leisure in "realising", "celebrating", and "rehearsing" gender differences.⁴¹ While it seems clear that the compartmentalising of life which separated leisure from work temporally and spatially was complete for men in the late nineteenth century,⁴² Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron and Diana Woodward point out that this can have had little meaning for many if not most women. The new commercial leisure pursuits of gambling, music hall, sport and mass literature, among others, required time and money to which working class, and even middle class women did not have access, and many other leisure pursuits were barred to (respectable) women by social custom, perceived dangers or direct regulation, including the Working Men's Clubs, public houses and many outdoor, and nighttime activities.⁴³

Australian work on the history of gambling and drinking does little more than gesture at the exclusion of women from these bastions of male working class culture. Fox speculates on time and money constraints on women's gambling,⁴⁴ but this work, like Dunstan's on drinking,⁴⁵ does not examine the specificity or precise mechanisms of women's exclusion from these core leisure and bonding aspects of male culture. It has widely been recognised that women's groups, mostly, but not all middle class, were in the vanguard of opposition to, and struggles for state regulation of, these pastimes, through the temperance movement. However, the cultural significance of the

⁴⁰ Jones, S. G., op. cit., p.60. This of course is still true.

⁴¹ For further discussion of this see Clarke and Critcher, op. cit., p.161 and passim, and Bailey, P., "Leisure, culture and the historian", op. cit., p.119.

⁴² See Cunningham, H., "Leisure", op. cit., passim, and Bailey, P., *Leisure and Class*, op. cit., passim for examples of this argument.

⁴³ Green, et al, op. cit., pp.45-46.

⁴⁴ Fox, op. cit., passim.

⁴⁵ Dunstan, D., "Boozers and wowsers" in Lee and Burgmann, op.cit., p.103.

identification of women with wowseryism in Australia, has rarely been subjected to any analysis.

Twentieth century leisure: a new world for women?

Mainstream British leisure history sees the modern British leisure world as fully established by the late 19th century. Cunningham goes so far as to say: "There is nothing in the leisure of today which was not visible in 1880"⁴⁶. This is clearly inaccurate if women's leisure is taken into account. The changes in women's work and relations to leisure wrought by the World Wars were enormous.⁴⁷ The advent of new leisure products, technologies and institutions which were accessible to women without compromising their respectability, such as the cinema, women's magazine publishing and later radio and television, further transformed some women's leisure.

In the 1920s and 1930s, British cinema audiences were predominantly female,⁴⁸ and the products of the industry were "the first form of entertainment to appeal to, and come to be designed for, the leisure needs of women."⁴⁹ However, while young, single, employed women may have gone to the pictures once or twice a week, a 1930s survey of working class wives quoted by Green, Hebron and Woodward indicated that for wives and mothers, the cinema was too expensive, and "many women said they had never been to the pictures".⁵⁰ This is a rare piece of evidence for the often-mentioned but rarely examined claim that married women and mothers had the least leisure of all, a proposition with great intuitive force, but which still needs to be historically investigated. Australian work on the movies indicates that Australian movie houses were also mostly patronised by women. Collins claims that at first the pictures were mainly entertainment for the working class, and only in the 1920s and 1930s with the advent of lavish picture palaces, became a middle class cultural pursuit, with suitable refinement and elevation of tone.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, op. cit., p.246.

⁴⁷ Green, et al, op. cit., pp.47-49.

⁴⁸ See Jones, S.G., op. cit., p. 60 and Green et al, op. cit., pp.48-49.

⁴⁹ Clarke and Critcher, op. cit., p.72.

⁵⁰ Spring Rice, M., *Working Class Wives*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1939, quoted in Green, et al, op. cit., p.50.

⁵¹ Collins, D., op. cit., p.103. Interestingly, Collins' research shows that with this middle class interest in the movies came the policing attitudes seen so often in middle class women's relations to other people's leisure.

Cunningham's work on the early part of the 20th century in Britain indicates that age and life cycle were important in the take-up of leisure opportunity, and concurs that the sharpest curtailment of women's leisure came with marriage and motherhood. He quotes a 1909 source: "There are no pleasures for poor married women independently of their children", although adding the pleasures of talking to neighbours, reading and attending mothers' meetings.⁵² By the 1930s the situation had changed little. In Margery Spring Rice's 1930s study of working class wives, her informants had little leisure and almost none outside the home. For them leisure was "sewing and doing other household jobs, slightly different from the ordinary work of cooking and house cleaning."⁵³

Here a crucial question arises about the nature of women's leisure. The leisure status of that sewing undertaken by Spring Rice's hard working women consisted in the meaning attached to it by the sewer. As in recreational gardening, recreational cooking and even quilting, much of women's leisure, today and in the past, has depended on the *meaning* of the activity, as much if not more than in the type of the activity itself. All these activities, in slightly different inflections, are work also, and done by the same women in the same places. But as the quilters' accounts discussed in Chapters Two and Three showed, the difference is very clear to them, clear enough to make jokes about. Popular t-shirts sold to quilters carry such slogans as: "I'm a quilter: my house is in pieces" or "I'm a quilter: don't ask me to sew on a button". This crucial difference of meaning has been greatly overlooked: between the pleasure of cooking special cakes for an afternoon tea, and the drudgery of cooking routine meals for a large family; between the pleasure of the flower or herb garden, and the work of growing vegetables for the table; between the pleasure of stitching a quilt, and the work of mending, or making curtains. ⁵⁴

⁵² Loane, M., *An Englishman's Castle*, 1909, quoted in Cunningham, "Leisure", op. cit., p.147.

⁵³ Spring Rice, M., quoted in Green, et al, op. cit., p.50.

⁵⁴ This can be taken further, into housework itself. It is obvious that there are some kinds of housework which are in themselves, and by tradition, pleasurable in a number of ways. The sensual and olfactory pleasure of clean washing, the rewarding sparkle of clean glass or silver spring to mind. This is not to romanticise housework, but to examine it critically. It seems quite arguable to me that the popular revivals in other forms of old fashioned skill – breadmaking, preserving and brewing for example – for which a large amount of hobby equipment and information are available – take part in a greater nostalgia for domestic production. Cooking, in particular, seems to be a hugely under-theorised area of cultural activity. One can also speculate that the

Even for feminists, women's leisure can be hard to see, especially, as outlined above, when their emphasis is on the hard daily work done by almost all women. R. McKibbin's work on (men's) hobbies in Britain shows how complex the relationship between paid work and hobbies has been.⁵⁵ How much more subtle must be the relations between unpaid work done in an ideological environment of caring and nurturing of family members, and the apparently identical activities which often take on, for women, the self-fulfilment and expression role of hobbies? This is a clear argument for further examination of the processes of leisure activities, their role in the elaboration of identity, and their relations with the family caring almost all women also undertake. In the case of quilting in Australia, the first three chapters of this thesis attempt such an examination.

There is some recognition in British leisure history that women's leisure has taken invisible, untraceable forms. Friendships, visiting, family networks are recognised as having continuing importance by several writers.⁵⁶ Green, Hebron and Woodward see these pursuits as "the persistence of some elements of traditional working class culture", rather than the remaking and production of an ongoing women's culture, and this is a telling indication of the constraints-based approach they take.⁵⁷ They assume that the dominant factor in the shaping of women's leisure pursuits is their *lack* of access to time and facilities. Such an assumption reduces the evidence of ongoing pleasurable but *different* women's cultures, to merely the residual remnants of older practices. This description, and the other references cited, tell us nothing of the experience of the women involved, and indeed, this is a

recent fashion for high maintenance natural fibres such as linen could indicate the possibility of a widespread, though furtive, pleasure in ironing.

⁵⁵ McKibbin, R., "Work and hobbies in Britain 1880-1950", in Winter, J., (ed), *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp.127-146. He shows the correlations between certain types of work and certain hobbies such as pigeon-keeping, among working men.

⁵⁶ Green, et al, op. cit., p.46, Jones, S.G., op. cit., pp. 59, 219, Cunningham, H., "Leisure", op. cit., p.147.

⁵⁷ Green, et al, op. cit., p.46. This kind of tone, smoothing the pillow of dying traditional cultures, is by no means confined to scholarly treatments of women's culture. As an example, in a recent radio piece on cake decoration (The Comfort Zone, ABC Radio National, Saturday 6th December 1997), an interviewer, having elicited detailed analysis of cake decoration styles since World War Two from an avid practitioner, remarked in a mournfully sympathetic tone "So, is this a dying art?" and seemed quite taken aback by the sharp response of her interviewee, who replied that in fact, cake decoration was booming, and that all the skills were being passed on to keen young devotees of the art.

recognised weakness of leisure history in general: "for all the insistent appeal from experience in history writing, our rendering of experience in leisure, its quality, dynamics and meaning is still elementary."⁵⁸

Leisure history for the post-war period is almost non-existent, both in Britain and Australia, the field having been vacated to the sociologists of 'leisure studies' whose work will be examined in the next section. However, historians sometimes gesture, in prefaces or introductions, at the growth in home-based leisure in the 20th century, seeing it as part of the suburbanisation and consumerism of the post-war West. It would seem obvious that this involves more of a change for men than for women, much of whose leisure has always been home or family based. Green, Hebron and Woodward point out that historical accounts of this tend not to show the continuing gender segregation of home-based leisure, and the extra domestic labour such activities generally require from women.⁵⁹ From my research with quilters, active in the post war period, oral evidence suggests the biggest single influence on home-based leisure time has been the semi-automatic and then the automatic washing machine, which saved hours every week of backbreaking labour.⁶⁰

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that the substantive work of writing histories of women's leisure in Australia (and elsewhere) remains to be done. While such writing would have to deal rigorously with issues of race, class and regionality, a feminist approach which concentrated on leisure and its relations to the rest of women's lives could tell us far more about how particular types of leisure products and practices have been used by people than the fragmented histories of movies, sport and other elements have so far done.⁶¹ But in order to deal adequately with questions of meaning and the role of leisure in forming and maintaining identity, historical accounts will have to appropriate some of the

⁵⁸ Bailey, P., *Leisure and Class*, op. cit., p.18.

⁵⁹ Green, et al, op. cit., pp.49-50.

⁶⁰ Work is beginning to appear which looks at the differences in domestic cultures during the century. See for example, Grahame, R. "A tale of two kitchens", *Public History Review* 4, 1995, pp.89-103.

⁶¹ One American account has attempted this sort of enterprise, using a wide range of sources to chronicle the leisure of working women in New York at the turn of the century. See Peiss, K., *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1986.

insights of cultural studies as well as feminism, in the way that the feminist sociology of leisure is beginning to do.

Feminism, Cultural Studies and the Sociology of Leisure

The sociology of leisure, perhaps even more than the history of leisure, has developed into a full sub-discipline with its own sub-specialities and internal debates. This section will examine the field, and in particular the strong critique of the theories and methods of the originators of leisure sociology, which has emanated from feminist and cultural studies scholars in Britain and from feminist and symbolic interactionist sociologists in North America.⁶²

Sociology is the most important contributor to what is known in Britain as "leisure studies" and which also draws upon other disciplines, including geography, physical education, and increasingly, psychology. In the United States and Canada, 'recreation studies', which concentrates on outdoor activities and which is closely tied to the concerns and research needs of providers of national parks, camping and other recreational facilities, has developed alongside leisure sociology, and yet remains separate from it. The sociology of leisure itself is a strong and growing specialisation with academic respectability and institutional presence. Roberts has noted that "in quantitative terms America has no rival to world leadership in leisure research", citing its scores of college departments, thousands of students, hundreds of scholars and dozens of specialist texts.⁶³ There are several refereed journals, including *Leisure Studies* (UK), *Leisure Sciences* and *Journal of Leisure Research* (United States), and *Loisir et Societe* (Canada) among others. There are national and international academic associations, conferences and publications.

In Britain, where local authorities have considerable responsibility for leisure provision and policy making, a professional association of leisure planners and bureaucrats exists, and there are similar organisations in North America. As Alan Tomlinson has pointed out, in Britain the interests and concerns of

⁶² I can only deal with leisure studies in English speaking countries: although there are thriving groups of leisure scholars in many other countries, not enough of their recent work has been translated for a monolingual researcher to be able to comment upon it.

⁶³ Roberts, K., "Leisure and sociological theory in Britain", in *Loisir et Societe (Society and Leisure)*, 13(1) spring 1990, pp.105-127, p.107.

the academics and researchers on the one hand, and the providers and professionals on the other, have diverged and even become opposed, as professionals turn from management and service provision to marketing and profit maximisation.⁶⁴ In the United States and Canada where the two groups (of academics and professionals) are both larger and perhaps more diverse, this does not seem to be a problem and professionally oriented research sits in the journals side by side with theoretical and academic articles without conflict erupting into print.

In Australia, despite several departments of leisure and tourism studies, and a presence within traditional sociology departments, leisure research remains a small area. It does not appear to have intervened in, or even reflected, debates overseas⁶⁵. The following discussion therefore relies mostly on the work being done in the UK and North America.

British and North American leisure sociology has developed very differently, with quite distinct intellectual trajectories and with surprisingly little contact, except in the relatively recent area of feminist work on women's leisure. From its beginnings in the 1950s, North American leisure sociology has been diverse in its concerns, and shown much more interest in questions of individual play, pleasure and development than its British counterpart. The two strands of interest in play, and in the relations between leisure and work have developed side by side and considerable "cross pollination" has taken place. What can be clearly seen now is the development of the play strand into an interest in the psychological and human developmental aspects of leisure, an interest which now exists in both the "mainstream" and the feminist influenced work in the field.

American (and European) work on play, beginning with Huizinga in the 1950s,⁶⁶ emphasised the role of play, open-ended, non-instrumental thinking and action, as the basis of leisure, and of human culture. It has continued

⁶⁴ Tomlinson, A., "Whose side are they on? Leisure studies and cultural studies in Britain", in *Leisure Studies*, 8, (1989), pp.97-106, p.98.

⁶⁵ Except perhaps for the work of Wearing, B. and Wearing, S., "All in a day's leisure; gender and the concept of leisure", in *Leisure Studies*, 7 (1988), pp.111-123, and Wearing, B., "Leisure and women's identity; conformity or individuality?", in *Society and Leisure*, 14 (2), Autumn, 1991, pp.575-586, or "Beyond the ideology of motherhood; leisure as resistance", in *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 26 (1), March 1990, pp36-58.

⁶⁶ Huizinga, J., *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Elements in Culture*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1949.

with North American philosophical and speculative work on the concept of leisure, and its philosophical underpinnings and histories.⁶⁷ The importance of leisure as a part of identity formation and social development has lingered in feminist thought on leisure which has otherwise criticised the lack of concern in these theories for the differences in women's experience, and their play (or lack of it).⁶⁸

Another strand of American research has developed, as in Britain, out of industrial sociology. This has been interested in the connections between leisure and work, often with the expectation of an anticipated change in the proportions of the two to be experienced in modern society: the coming of the "leisure society". In the United States, researchers separated leisure off into a discrete body of experience, hardly to be connected with other kinds of life experience, and announced the obsolescence of traditional work values.⁶⁹ In British leisure sociology, which, as a sub-discipline, grew in the late 1960s directly out of the sociology of work, a quite different move can be seen. The founders of leisure sociology in Britain, Stanley Parker, and Kenneth Roberts, both concentrated on the relations between leisure and work, defined quite explicitly as paid employment. Parker's *The Future of Work and Leisure*, published in 1972⁷⁰, defined leisure as against work, and outlined a model of possible relations between the two, depending on the engagement with, and quality of both the work and the leisure involved.⁷¹ In recent work with

⁶⁷ Goodale, T. and Godbey, B., *The Evolution of Leisure*, Venture Publishing, State College, PA, 1988. Chapter X cites a number of classic and contemporary works on play and leisure.

⁶⁸ See Henderson, K.A., Bialeschki, M.D., Shaw, C.D. and Freysinger, V.J., *A Leisure of One's Own; A Feminist Perspective on Women's Leisure*, Venture Publishing, State College, PA, 1989. Chapter 5 goes through the literature on leisure and development for women.

⁶⁹ Thus Neulinger, among others, has argued that work based value systems are obsolete, thereby withdrawing from the interesting questions about what outside leisure, including work, might structure leisure, leaving leisure with "not only an autonomous, but virtually an autarchic status". See Neulinger, J., *To Leisure: An Introduction*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1981, and *Eden After All*, Giordano Bruno, Culmborg, 1990. His work is based on a psychological approach and has coined such terms as "to leisure" (verb), and "leisure lack", for which the answer is counselling rather than social change. For the source of the quote above in this footnote, and a critical evaluation of this kind of research see Zuzanek, J., "Leisure research in North America; a critical retrospective", in *Society and Leisure*, 14 (2) Autumn 1991, pp.587-596, p.588.

⁷⁰ Parker, S., *The Future of Work and Leisure*, Paladin, London, 1972.

⁷¹ Thus leisure and work relations in any particular person's life may be characterised as relations of *extension*, where work and leisure are similar and not strictly divided from each other; relations of *opposition*, where work and leisure are clearly differentiated and divided from each other, and relations of *neutrality*, where work has little influence on leisure. This scheme has been revised to apply to conditions which have changed since the late 60s, and in the 1983 edition of the book, Parker, S., *Leisure and Work*, London 1983. Another attack on traditional British leisure sociology has come from a source claiming no overt political

Robert Paddick on Australia,⁷² Parker has adjusted and broadened his ideas about the relations of work and leisure without changing them in essence and certainly without responding to the criticism of them made during the 1980s.

Marxist cultural studies scholars, John Clarke and Chas Critcher, while applauding Parker's emphasis on the influence of work upon what they would term culture, have targeted Parker's work for what it leaves out, namely the leisure of those who do not work for money, and in particular the labour and leisure of women. Their contention is that consideration of gender roles and the reproduction of patriarchal gender relations is also crucial, and they see leisure as one of the key areas in which gender construction takes place.⁷³ This is, as will be clear, remarkably consonant with Roszika Parker's argument in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*.⁷⁴

Feminist criticism, taking in the whole of sociology itself,⁷⁵ and also directed specifically at Parker,⁷⁶ has also followed this line, seeing the concentration on paid work as a clear example of male-centred research, which conceptualises male experience as the norm and either ignores or trivialises departures from it. Feminist sociology, however, has not itself been entirely able to avoid this error.

commitment, and advocating only a move out of the intellectual isolation of "the contented community" of leisure studies. Moorhouse has criticised Parker, and other leisure writers, for the paucity of theoretical thought in their work, calling the model of work-leisure relations outlined by Parker "another way of saying there is *no* relation". Moorhouse, H.F., "Models of work, models of leisure", in Rojek, C., (ed), *Leisure for Leisure*, op. cit., pp.15-36, p.23, emphasis in original. For Moorhouse, the so-called theories of leisure, advanced in the works of the founders of British leisure studies, Parker and Roberts in particular, are not theories at all, but "typologies, ways-of-thinking about leisure", neither tested, nor testable. He criticises Parker (and others) for his moralistic opinions about work and leisure, and for the lack of any firm empirical evidence for his claims about work and leisure and their relations, all terms which he says have a chameleon-like quality in the writing. This criticism seems apt to me, and again, Parker neither addresses the issue nor cites the work in his recent book.

⁷² Parker, S. and Paddick, R., *Leisure in Australia: Themes and Issues*, Longman, Melbourne, 1990.

⁷³ Clarke and Critcher, op. cit., pp.16-22 for comments on Parker, and *passim*.

⁷⁴ Discussed above, in Chapter Five.

⁷⁵ See Ann Oakley's critique of sociology in her book, *The Sociology of Housework*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1974.

⁷⁶ See Green, E., et al., op. cit. For earlier interventions see Griffin, C., Hobson, D., McIntosh, S. and McCabe, T., "Women and Leisure", in Hargreaves, J., (ed), *Sport, Culture and Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982.

Leisure as a Positive Good

One finds, in American leisure sociology, a very strong view of leisure as a relatively uncomplicatedly good thing, of which more is necessarily better. In regarding leisure as freedom, choice and pleasure, as well as free time, non-obligated time and play, it becomes more difficult to question the kinds of pleasure afforded, or the political effects of a perceived increase in leisure or leisure freedom, but on the other hand, there are possibilities for analysis of that pleasure and play.⁷⁷ In Britain, this kind of positive value for leisure has always been more problematic, and the narrative of the attempted social control of working class leisure through 'rational recreation' has perhaps been more influential.⁷⁸

In both the American and British feminist work on leisure, leisure is seen as something to which everyone has a right, and which should be available to all. Karla Henderson has outlined three different feminist approaches to leisure,⁷⁹ two of which assume that leisure, even if only more of the same leisure as is available under a capitalist system, is necessarily a good thing. She identifies the three approaches as: 'liberal', as exemplified in her own work, suggesting that leisure is the right of all individuals; 'leftist socialist', as exemplified in the work of Rosemary Deem,⁸⁰ advocating a change to women's social position; and 'radical', exemplified by the work of Linda

⁷⁷ Roberts' description of American attitudes to leisure sums it up: "Enjoying leisure in the USA is a civil right and, it sometimes appears, a civic duty...working hard at one's leisure has become part of the American way of life." Roberts, K., op. cit, p.108.

⁷⁸ Clarke and Critcher have criticised British sociologists Young and Wilmott for their "principle of stratified diffusion" which states that the leisure of the middle and upper classes tends to become the leisure of the working classes, in a kind of trickle down effect. In a peculiarly British variation, this combines the view of leisure as a positive good with a judgemental view of "good" leisure as coming from the middle classes. See Clarke and Critcher, op. cit., pp.22-30. This moralistic class view is quite common in British leisure studies, although not always so clearly put. See Parker, S., *Leisure in Australia*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ Henderson, K. A., "The meaning of leisure for women; an integrative review of the research", in *Journal of Leisure Research*, 22 (3), 1990, pp.228-243. I would not place Deem's work, especially the earlier work, in a "leftist socialist" category, seeing it rather as part of a large volume of work on "constraints" to leisure, both feminist and non-feminist, which takes a social democratic view, advocating policy changes at the government level to rectify leisure provision to disadvantaged groups. Deem's later work, including that in Wimbush and Talbot, op. cit., seems to be more within a socialist feminist framework.

⁸⁰ Deem, R., *All Work and No Play: The Sociology of Women and Leisure*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986.

Bella,⁸¹ arguing that the concept of leisure is itself androcentric, and that new words and research techniques need to be taken to name and describe women's experience. I will return to this question later.

This schematisation fails to include the positions of Clarke and Critcher, who argue for a qualitative change to leisure (and society), and of Chris Rojek, who sees leisure as crucially implicated in power relations, with both repressive and liberating possibilities.⁸² The more subtle and critical perspectives put forward by these writers open up possibilities for seeing leisure as a much more mixed process or series of processes.

Leisure and the Family

Another pervasive, if more recent, tendency is the research being done into "family leisure" using empirical research and concepts like "life cycle" first developed in other areas of sociology. While family leisure research was the only place where the leisure of women appeared at all in the 1970s⁸³, it seems to have been less affected by feminist criticism than one might have expected and it is still possible to read articles on family leisure, particularly from the United States, which do not seem to recognise that "family leisure" might be rather different for women than for men.⁸⁴

Clarke and Critcher have comprehensively critiqued the 'family leisure' approach in the work of British sociologists Young and Wilmot. Young and Wilmott's view of an increasingly egalitarian 'symmetrical' middle class family structure trickling down to the masses by way of the 'principle of stratified diffusion', has been influential, especially in popular sociological writing, but is vulnerable to attack on many grounds, not least the accuracy of their conclusions about the gradual convergence of gender roles within the

⁸¹ She cites Bella's work from unpublished sources, and though it sounds fascinating I have been unable to find any published version of it. See Henderson, K.A., "The meaning of leisure", op.cit., bibliography.

⁸² See Rojek, C., *Capitalism and Leisure Theory*, op. cit., passim, as well as Rojek's own articles in his edited collection cited earlier.

⁸³ See Deem, R., "Feminism and leisure studies: opening up new directions", in Wimbush and Talbot, op. cit., pp.5-17, p.7.

⁸⁴ See for example, a long article which carefully avoids sexist language, but also avoids any analysis based on gender role difference of any kind, which surely is nowhere more obvious than in the family. Needless to say the bibliography is totally innocent of any feminist research or theory. Holman, T.B. and Epperson, A., "Family and leisure: a review of the literature with research recommendations, in *Journal of Leisure Research*, 16 (4), 1984, pp.277-294.

family. More recent research has shown the persistence of women's greater responsibility for domestic work and family caring.⁸⁵ As Clarke and Critcher note, this view is unable to deal with the social meanings of family life, and its internal power structures and dynamics.⁸⁶ By contrast, sociology influenced by feminism and cultural studies has been very concerned to analyse the actual workings of the family and the married couple, in relation to leisure, dealing with men's control over women's leisure,⁸⁷ the reliance of men's leisure and family leisure on the work of women,⁸⁸ and women's lower expectations of leisure within the ideology of the family and motherhood.⁸⁹ Some Australian work, feminist and feminist influenced, has also been done in this area: for example, Ken Dempsey's report on country town leisure, where men's leisure takes undisputed precedence,⁹⁰ and Wearing's outline of leisure and power for young mothers, and how they use the notion of a right to leisure to resist dominant stereotypes of the self-sacrificing mother.⁹¹

The work of Rhona and Robert Rapoport in *Leisure and the Family Life Cycle*,⁹² has been criticised by Clarke and Critcher for a kind of biological determinism, which assumes precisely the processes of gender and age role construction which should be explained or analysed. Much feminist work has been done on the construction of female identity through leisure, including Angela McRobbie's early work on working class girls,⁹³ Vivienne

⁸⁵ For a synoptic account of this, see Baxter, J., "Domestic Labour", in Caine, B., et al, (eds) op. cit., forthcoming.

⁸⁶ Clarke and Critcher, op. cit., pp. 22-29.

⁸⁷ There is a large amount of work on this. See for example: chapters by Green, E. and S. Hebron, Mason, J., and Woodward, D. and Green, E., in Wimbush and Talbot, op. cit.; and Dixey, R., "It's a great feeling when you win: women and bingo", in *Leisure Studies*, 6 (1987), pp.199-214.

⁸⁸ For example, Bella, L., "An exploration of the work women do to produce and reproduce family leisure: the example of Christmas", CRIAW conference paper, Winnipeg, Canada, 1987. I have only read about this paper as it is not available.

⁸⁹ See for example, Henderson, K.A. and Bialeschki, M. D., "A sense of entitlement to leisure as constraint and empowerment for women", in *Leisure Science*, 13, 1991, pp.51-65.

⁹⁰ Although Dempsey seems to think this is only a country phenomenon. Dempsey, K., "Women's life and leisure in an Australian rural community" in *Leisure Studies*, 9 (1990) pp.35-44.

⁹¹ Wearing, B., "Beyond the ideology of motherhood", op. cit.

⁹² Rapoport, R. and Rapoport, R., *Leisure and the Family Life Cycle*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

⁹³ McRobbie, A. and Garber, J., "Girls and subcultures: an exploration", in Hall, S. and Jefferson, T., (eds) *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post War Britain*, Hutchinson, London, 1976.

Griffiths' work focussed on young women's leisure⁹⁴ and that of Jennifer Mason, already cited, on older women. Griffin's work has been very critical of the Rapaports' work for separating 'life cycle' from the cultural and structural context of women's lives.⁹⁵ American feminist Karla Henderson's work uses the concept of life cycle rather more uncritically.⁹⁶

Leisure Sociology and Methodology

There are few sociological, ethnographic studies of 'leisure worlds' in the literature, and this can be explained by the differing cultures of research and analysis in the United States and Britain. Perhaps most important is the way in which practitioners of leisure sociology look upon their discipline. The extensive research reported upon in the journals, books and textbooks of leisure sociology is notable for its yearning towards scientific certainty, and the perception of a simple and straightforward connection between its reporting and reality. American sociology in particular appears to have avoided the epistemological soul searching of other disciplines which previously thought of themselves as scientific, such as history and anthropology.⁹⁷ The strength of this scientific paradigm of research is seen by the few attempts to use qualitative data, which are preceded by elaborate justifications for such use, and careful disavowals of generalisability.⁹⁸

In British leisure studies, especially when influenced by the powerful critique from cultural studies, the opposite is the case, and quantitative methods are those which are elaborately justified, usually on the purely instrumental grounds that they make the study more influential on the policies of government or some other agency. Feminist leisure sociologists Green, Hebron and Woodward signal their ambiguous relationship with concepts of scientific truth by claiming both "greater generalisation of the findings", of

⁹⁴ Griffiths, V., "From "playing out" to "dossing out": young women and leisure", and "Stepping out: the importance of dancing for young women", in Wimbush and Talbot, op. cit.

⁹⁵ Griffin, C., "Young women and leisure: the transition from school to work", in Tomlinson, A., *Leisure and Social Control*, Brighton Polytechnic, Brighton, 1981, pp.113-122.

⁹⁶ Henderson, K., et al, *A Leisure of One's Own*, op. cit., pp.84-87. It must be remembered that this is a textbook and so rather less political than some of Henderson's other work.

⁹⁷ The greater part of the journals devoted to leisure sociology (and to sociology in general in the United States) contains reports of carefully devised and tested research "instruments" carried out and analysed with great precision and care, and boasting statistical validity and high truth value.

⁹⁸ See for example, Scott, D. and Godbey, G., "Reorienting leisure research: the case for qualitative methods", in *Society and Leisure*, 13 (1), Spring 1990, pp.189-205

their social survey (as opposed to qualitative data), and "the political importance of the 'hard data' collected ... for influencing policy decisions".⁹⁹

There has been other criticism of the positivism of American approaches. American leisure researchers Scott and Godbey have argued for the kind of qualitative, ethnographic research that has been taking place in Britain, although in terms which display the still marginal quality of such opinions within the American academy.¹⁰⁰ They emphasise the 'unique understandings' of leisure behaviour which can be gained from qualitative data but without advocating the abandonment of quantitative methods. In analysing the barriers to wider use of qualitative methodology, they focus on the institutions and culture of the discipline: editorial policy, graduate supervision and funding, all of which militate against qualitative research.

Other methodological criticism has focussed on the separation between theoretical writing and empirical research (of any kind), pointing out that it is rare for the same writer to do both things, and that the majority of empirical research is unmarked by theoretical thinking, even, or perhaps in spite of, its methodological and statistical sophistication.¹⁰¹ Zuzanek's argument confuses a quasi-scientific method with rigour, and fails to see sociological success in any terms other than those of science, but it raises interesting questions about the state of American leisure sociology, and sociology in general. It certainly seems to be in very different situation from the sociology of leisure in Britain, which has since the early 1980s been under theoretical and methodological attack, producing a stream of oppositional approaches to the study of leisure and of women's leisure in particular, some of which are discussed below.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Green E., et al., op. cit., p.22. Note the quote marks around "hard data", which signal the authors' profound unease.

¹⁰⁰ Scott, D. and Godbey, G., op.cit.

¹⁰¹ Zuzanek, J., op. cit., p.592.

¹⁰² The American sociological literature also appears to be relatively innocent of political debate: while often aimed at influencing leisure provision policy, this does not seem to have inspired the political aspects of debate so obvious on the British scene. There is no discernible "left wing" in American leisure sociology, (with the possible exception of Karla Henderson), and while this may be a feature of the American academic culture as a whole (and a worthy subject for a cultural study in itself), it leads to a gentility in disagreement which is quite strange for a reader schooled in the polemics of British cultural studies. Karla Henderson is one of the very few American leisure writers with any overt reforming political agenda, such as is so common in British work.

Where intervention has been trenchantly critical, as in the cases of feminist and cultural studies work on leisure since 1980, little productive argument has ensued. Essentially two leisure studies have grown up, largely separate from each other.

Feminist and cultural studies approaches to leisure studies

Feminism and cultural studies have both mounted powerful critiques of leisure studies, with limited success in changing the work of older practitioners, and in North America with limited success in changing the terms of debate. However, a new approach, or more correctly, a new collection of approaches, has been launched, and its results can be seen in the growing body of feminist and cultural studies inspired research and theory.

In this section I will discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses in the feminist research, and suggest some further theoretical and methodological borrowings from cultural studies. The work on women's quilting subcultures that made up the first four chapters of this thesis attempts to combine feminist and cultural studies approaches in a new way, which avoids some of the difficulties discussed below.

There has already been a considerable amount of contact and helpful cross influence between feminist and cultural studies approaches to leisure studies. Clarke and Critcher's work is repeatedly cited by feminist researchers as the non-feminist work which most successfully deals with issues of gender in leisure. It is described as 'non-feminist' by Rosemary Deem because she considers that it privileges class over gender as the structuring inequality of society, although it is arguable that the relationship between class and gender in Clarke and Critcher's *The Devil Makes Work* is rather more complex than a straightforward privileging of one over the other.

Green, Hebron and Woodward place their work explicitly within the ambit of cultural studies,¹⁰³ although they also describe it as sociology influenced by cultural studies. However, cultural studies is a very varied collection of approaches, especially in the area of empirical research, as opposed to cultural criticism or philosophy, and can be invoked by many different kinds of project.

¹⁰³ Green E., et al., op. cit., p.ix.

Feminist work on women and leisure displays a number of problems and gaps which I have identified in the course of my research into quilting and women's leisure. First, in common with the traditional leisure research which it criticises, feminist research has failed to deal adequately with the questions of meaning, pleasure and choice in women's leisure. Susan Shaw's work has attempted to construct a scientific definition of leisure in terms of its meaning for women surveyed by questionnaire, but in such general terms that the exercise is quite unilluminating.¹⁰⁴ What needs to be addressed is the ways in which women make meaning and pleasure out of the particular leisure they have *in the context of a whole way of life*, something that can only be tackled by ethnographic research which allows the researcher to connect informants' experience of leisure with the rest of their lives. In my research with quiltmakers, my analysis of their enjoyment of a weeklong Symposium would have been impossible without knowledge of the more ordinary pleasures of the fortnightly group meeting, or indeed, the difficulty of trying to work out a new technique from a book alone, without a teacher. Understanding the conventions of the giving of quilts was necessary to making sense of Noni's pleasure, despite bleeding fingers, in the enormous labour of her Double Wedding Ring quilt, to be given to her daughter. Much feminist leisure research concentrates on leisure as an *escape* from responsibilities, paid and unpaid work, and duties of caring for others. Within this framework, the complexities of leisure activities like quilting, which are an escape from these things in one sense, but which also *produce* new responsibilities, work and duties, cannot be understood. Partly, in feminist research as in other leisure research, this has been overlooked because of the emphasis on *provision* of leisure facilities, and a theorisation of leisure as something which is provided to people, rather than something that they actively make, facilitate, organise and administer themselves. The proliferation of quilting groups, organisations, classes, conferences and teacher certification arrangements is one example of the kind of voluntary organisational activity which many people undertake in the service of their leisure pursuits, and which is hardly ever studied.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴Shaw, S.M., "The meaning of leisure in everyday life", in *Leisure Sciences*, 7 (1), 1985, pp.1-24.

¹⁰⁵ The honourable exception to this statement is the work of Bishop and Hoggett in *Organising Round Enthusiasms*, op.cit. studying a variety of leisure organisations in Britain. No such work exists in Australia.

The second major problem in feminist leisure research is an overconcentration on the idea of constraints on women's leisure, and on comparisons with men's leisure. While feminist researchers have been aware of this as a problem,¹⁰⁶ it has remained a subtext in much feminist research, which for the most part eschews detailed empirical research into what women actually *do*, in favour of delineating the things they *don't do*, and the reasons for this. Much feminist leisure research in this respect implies a lack of agency for women: implying that their leisure is decided only by the constraints on it, rather than seeking to look in detail at why women choose what they choose, and the reasons for that choice. Thus Margaret Talbot, writing on sport, says that women who do 'manage' to take part in sport despite the constraints, should be "presented as positive and visible examples of the ways in which women succeed in controlling aspects of their own lives, and of the potentially rich and varied rewards that sport can bring."¹⁰⁷ Succeeding in an area of leisure perceived as male-dominated appears to be valued more highly (even by feminist writers) than the creation and maintenance of women's traditional leisure cultures. Because patriarchal imperatives do not stop women from participating in quilting does not, ipso facto, make it less likely that such women will succeed in controlling aspects of their own lives. My research has attempted to show that potentially rich and varied rewards are also part of a traditional subculture like quilting, but such insights are rare, due to the dearth of research on women's traditional leisure pursuits.

There is surprisingly little research on the forms of leisure which in our culture are overwhelmingly female, such as the crafts, and other largely female home-based leisure pursuits such as cooking and gardening, although this has been seen as a gap in the research by feminist researchers since at least 1982.¹⁰⁸ Certainly, little work appears to address these forms as part of a female culture, actively created, although not within conditions of its own making.

This is, in part, a result of a third problem in feminist leisure studies, which is that research has all too often been designed in order to investigate 'leisure' as

¹⁰⁶ See Henderson, K.A., "Anatomy is not destiny: a feminist analysis of the scholarship on women's leisure, in *Leisure Sciences*, 12, 1990, pp.229-239.

¹⁰⁷ Talbot, M., "Beating them at our own game? Women's Sports Involvement" in Wimbush and Talbot op.cit. pp. 102-114, p.102.

¹⁰⁸ Glyptis, S. and Chambers, D., "No place like home", in *Leisure Studies*, 1 (1982), pp.247-262

an undifferentiated concept. Asking what 'leisure' means to women, whether it is an appropriate concept, how women's leisure is different from men's, militates against a nuanced understanding of the layers and degrees of 'leisureness'. While not denying the usefulness of some of this research, what it cannot enable is more subtle analysis of the kinds of pleasures, skills, enjoyments and relaxations, and other experiences which may be found in the *actual* forms of leisure activities that people undertake. This understanding is not available through doing a survey, or even qualitative interviews, if one is asking people what they understand by the word 'leisure'. The concept is too general. Some of the more sensitive, empirical studies have shown that some women do not label some of the very activities the researchers are interested in as 'leisure' at all.¹⁰⁹ This has led to a revival of the debate over definitions of leisure, without coming to useful conclusions. It seems far more productive to tackle it from the other end, by researching the actual things women enjoy doing and seeing if any useful generalisations can be made.

One example of a study which does this is Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*.¹¹⁰ Based on qualitative ethnographic research, it combined research into women's own understanding of their daily life activities -- in this case reading romance novels -- with interpretation and critique of that understanding from the standpoint of the theoretically informed researcher. Radway investigated romance reading as part of a constellation of social structures, cultures and practices, including publishing and bookselling, readers' time schedules and other jobs and activities, pleasure and aesthetic judgements and more. Her conclusions about the pleasures, subversions and political and psychological implications of romance reading as a leisure culture are theoretically and empirically richer and more interesting and complex than most leisure studies.

As Radway recognises, romance reading, like any other 'complicated polysemic event', can be understood in a variety of ways. None of these ways, alone, provides a full picture of the phenomenon: romance reading is both oppositional to patriarchal norms (in that women take time for themselves, and do something they enjoy despite the scorn with which it is viewed by

¹⁰⁹ This is the conclusion come to by Green E., et al., op. cit., for example, and also by Henderson, K.A., "A sense of entitlement", op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Radway, J., *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984.

others), and supportive of them (in that the narratives of romance reinforce the social practices and ideologies which uphold patriarchal norms).¹¹¹ Incorporating an ethnographic understanding of how romance readers themselves view their practices, with an examination of the popular texts themselves, and an analysis of the patterns and possible psychological explanations of their power enables Radway to see the "semantic richness and ideological density of the actual process known as romance reading and thus highlight once and for all the complicated nature of the connection between the romance and the culture that has given rise to it."¹¹² Such a view entails the deferral of an immediate feminist political goal for the research, because in order to understand the phenomenon, one must not go looking only for resistance, but also for the more complexly negotiated meanings of real contradictory human practice:

[W]hen viewed from the vantage point of a feminism that would like to see the women's oppositional impulse lead to real social change, romance reading can also be seen as an activity that could potentially disarm that impulse. It might do so because it supplied vicariously those very needs and requirements that might otherwise be formulated as demands in the real world and lead to the potential restructuring of sexual relations.¹¹³

Radway's conclusion is that the answer to this question (whether romance reading is, ultimately, oppositional or conservative, in feminist terms) remains unclear, until more research of this slow, and involved kind is done, into many different kinds of popular culture use and creation. She writes:

If we can learn, then, to look at the ways in which various groups appropriate and use the mass-produced art of our culture, I suspect we may well begin to understand that although the ideological power of contemporary cultural forms is enormous, indeed sometimes even frightening, that power is not yet all-pervasive, totally vigilant, or complete. Interstices still exist within the social fabric where opposition is carried on by people who are not satisfied by their place within it or by the restricted material and emotional rewards that accompany it.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp.209-210.

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 210.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 213.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.222.

This kind of work need not fall into the trap of what Richard Johnson has called the 'populist collapse'¹¹⁵. Just because many people enjoy something does not guarantee its aesthetic, moral or political value. But in order not to lapse into the a priori moralism of much traditional leisure research (and much left wing work on popular pleasure of all kinds)¹¹⁶ feminist research into the precise structures and pleasures of a particular women's leisure world needs to remain open to the possibilities that any cultural practice might be oppositional, conservative, or in fact, both at once, in different ways or registers. Johnson has called for leisure researchers in cultural studies to remain 'moralists in the last instance'. This means starting from a position which accepts the social reality of all practices and tastes, but being able to decide, after the research (in the final instance), whether any particular practice or set of practices is ultimately empowering or an entrapment for the people involved in it. For Johnson this attempt at evaluation is the '*defining activity of cultural study*'.¹¹⁷ My work on quilting, like Radway's on romance reading, attempts to show that the complexity and internal differentiation of all leisure worlds makes this kind of evaluation difficult. It must be complex, specific and take into account the relationship between any particular practice and a whole way of life. What this kind of research can tell us is how and why people become enthusiastic about something, often enthusiastic enough to change their lives, and how pleasure and reward can be found, not just in the products of the market, and the media, but in the skill and hard work of social organisation and, in the case of quilting, exacting and sophisticated design and manual work. This entails, however, taking into account the meanings, understandings and experiences of the participants themselves, and allowing for their agency, informed choice, and expertise. For feminists, involved in the study of leisure, this has been all too rare.

¹¹⁵ Johnson, R., "Leisure Studies as Cultural Studies: critical approaches", in Meijer, E., (ed), *Everyday Life: Leisure and Culture: Papers from a conference on recent developments in leisure and cultural studies*, Dutch Centre for Leisure Studies, University of Tilburg, The Netherlands, 1985, pp.207-219.

¹¹⁶ The influence of the elitism of the Frankfurt school is still to be seen in much left-influenced work on popular culture, which laments its anaesthetising effects on the oppressed classes. The opposite assumption, that what is popular is therefore necessarily interesting and/or good is more common with current postmodern commentators. See for example, the work of Catherine Lumby, *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the '90s*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997).

¹¹⁷ Johnson, R. , op. cit., p.210. Emphasis in original.

Chapter Seven

Folklore and Culture: Finding the Process

In examining feminist art and craft criticism, and feminist leisure studies, in Chapters Five and Six, I have argued that they are inadequate in helping to construct an understanding of a women's traditional cultural form such as quilting. Both sets of approaches have common difficulties with examining cultural production as *process*, or seeing sets of leisure practices in their contradictory entanglements. As previous chapters have shown, a concentration on the products, and more particularly on the discernible lexical content of such cultural products, handicaps the ability of feminist art criticism to see the wider effects of the processes of making, and the conditions of possibility of that making. In the case of leisure studies, overconcentration on what women do not choose, and a level of generality which occludes the specific pleasures, skills and duties of the leisure practices they do choose, prevent the researcher from gaining the detailed insights which might produce fruitful research directions. In both disciplines, it is hard to see the *cultural processes* which produce, in the case study presented in this thesis, both the quilt as cultural object *in its context*, and the *quilting culture*, itself an artefact of collaborative cultural production and constant reproduction.

This chapter will outline an alternative approach, that of folklore studies -- more specifically feminist folklore studies -- and will discuss its strengths and weaknesses. The great emphasis placed on process, meaning and context within feminist folklore studies provides a corrective to the approaches previously examined, although it should be noted that there is a tendency within this body of work, to minimise commercial, state and institutional pressures on folk cultures. Folklore studies generally does not attempt to explain differentials of power or influence within group cultures for example, or the mediation of commercial forces in modern folk cultures. The discipline of folklore studies as it is practiced in Australia is still closely tied to notions of the pure folk transmission of skills,¹ and has not yet produced

¹ See the journal *Australian Folklore*, which while richly eclectic, tends to take an approach closer to the antiquarian, amateur field-collector tradition of British folklore enthusiasts, rather than the American approach discussed below. Contributions on verbal, narrative and musical folklore are more common than on folk art or material culture.

published work of the kind attempted in Chapters One, Two and Three of this thesis.

Folklore studies and feminism

Folklore studies is a well established discipline in Europe and North America, dating from late last century, and linked to Romantic and nationalistic impulses² to discover, codify and define an indigenous national tradition and literature. Until the middle of this century, most folklorists concentrated on verbal and oral performance -- stories, tales, songs and poems, ballads -- and only since the 1960s has there been sustained interest in domestic and material culture as manifestations of folklore.³ Feminist interventions in American folklore studies started in earnest in the mid 1970s⁴, and have produced an impressive series of encounters between wonderfully varied empirical material, a strong ethnographic tradition, and a lively body of theory and analysis, often mediated by a strong consciousness of the embodied presence of the folklorist herself. Outside the discipline of folklore studies, however, this body of feminist work is little known, and almost never cited, especially in cultural studies work.

In what follows I will address the strengths and limitations of feminist folklore approaches to women's culture, and discuss the methodologies and theoretical insights that feminist folklore has developed, and is developing. Some of the concepts to be examined throw considerable light upon the empirical material discussed above in Chapters Two and Three, and indicate fruitful directions for feminist empirical work to take, in a broader context than the purely folkloric.

² This is discussed, and references to older debates on the subject given, in Stoeltje, B.J., "Introduction: Feminist Revisions" , *Journal of Folklore Research*, 25 (3) 1988 pp.141-153.

³ Leading to the use, by some scholars, of the term "folklife", as indicating a wider range of interests and activities than the strictly verbal "lore". This distinction is by no means uniform. For a succinct account of debates over the definition of "folklore" and attempts by scholars to systematise the field, see Davey, G. and Seal, G. "Introduction: What is Folklore" in Davey and Seal (eds) *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1993, pp.ix-xvii.

⁴ *Folklore Women's Communication* has been published since 1972. The American Folklore Society, publisher of the *Journal of American Folklore*, has had a women's section since the mid 1970s, after a panel discussion at the 1973 meeting, and a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* 88 (347) 1975, edited by Claire R. Farrer and titled "Women and Folklore: Images and Genres". This was later republished by Waveland Press NJ 1986. Another special issue of *Journal of American Folklore* , "Folklore and Feminism" 100 (389) Oct-Dec 1987, and "Feminist Revisions" a special issue of *Journal of Folklore Research*, 25 (3) 1988, will be discussed further below.

Folklorists tend to place their discipline somewhere between anthropology and literary studies, admitting to a somewhat chequered relationship with both these cognate disciplines.⁵ It is notable, however, that folklore studies is rarely mentioned by academic writers from anthropology or literary studies, with whom it seems to have very marginal status. Perhaps because of this marginality, folklore studies has allowed itself an extremely wide range of subject matter in recent decades, ranging from the traditional ballads and stories of verbal art -- a longtime pre-occupation of folklore studies -- to expressive cultural activities, practices and products of all kinds. Almost all definitions of the field end up trying to limit their leaking generality by giving examples, as with this 1985 UNESCO definition:

Folklore (in a broader sense, traditional and popular folk culture) is a group-oriented and tradition-based creation of groups or individuals reflecting the expectations of the community as an adequate expression of its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms include, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts.⁶

One can find detailed studies of the folklore of almost any urban or rural group in America, ethnic and class subcultures, localities, interest groups, even Internet users. Folklore studies has certainly outgrown its antiquarian and backward looking image⁷, and is now engaging with literary and postmodern theory⁸ as well as new subject matter. Interestingly, and unlike some other disciplines where an engagement with such theories has

⁵ See for example Jordan, R.A., and de Caro, F.A., "Women and the study of Folklore" in *Signs*, 11 (3) Spring 1986, p.500, where they say "Folkloristics is a field that tends to overlap with several other fields of study, most notably cultural anthropology and literary studies".

⁶ Quoted in Anderson, H., Davey, G., and McKenry, K., *Folklife: Our Living Heritage. Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra 1987, pp13-14.

⁷ See for example Neustadt, K., "The Folkloristics of Licking" in *Journal of American Folklore* 107 (423) 1994 pp.181-196. For an interesting account of fieldwork in gay subcultures see Goodwin, J.P., "Sex, sexuality, sexual orientation and fieldwork" in *Southern Folklore* 47 (1) 1990, pp.67-75.

⁸ See for example Langlois, J.L. "Folklore and semiotics: an introduction" in *Journal of Folklore Research* 22 (2/3) May-Dec 1985 pp.77-83, and Thomas, J.B., "Out of the frying pan and into the postmodern: folklore and contemporary literary theory" in *Southern Folklore* 51 (2) 1994 pp.107-120.

happened, so far folklore studies has retained its empirical focus and its informal and accessible style.⁹

Like anthropology, folklore studies of the classic type involve field research, detailed observation of and interaction with informants, and often the collection of the songs, texts, and other materials to be analysed. While monographs, collections and articles on the theory of folklore studies excite debate and comment, most work which appears in the field is extremely empirically detailed, and grounded in first hand experience and communication. Unlike sociology or anthropology, and indicative of its closeness to literary studies, folklore studies has apparently never had to disengage itself from a social scientific model, and has always included the interpretive capacity of the researcher as a vital component. Such interpretation has always had to take the self-understanding of the informants into account.

While these flexibilities and methods have undoubtedly made it easier for folklore than for some other disciplines (including anthropology) to accept the innovations of feminism, as well as of post structuralist and postmodernist thinking, feminist criticism has nonetheless been forthcoming. From the mid 1970s, and peaking in the mid 1980s, trenchant feminist critiques of the structures, methods, and subjects of folklore studies, and of the myths about its origins have appeared.

As has been the case in other disciplines, it was not just the experience of women which was ignored as subject matter, but the work of women folklorists as well, sometimes (although not always) because they chose to research women's culture. Rosan Jordan and F.A. de Caro noted in 1986 that: "The scholarship of previous generations of women folklorists has been largely forgotten, while in some cases inferior works on similar topics by male contemporaries are familiar to the current generation of folklorists".¹⁰ In "Autobiography of a Woman Folklorist", Ellen Stekert detailed the personal and institutional sexism that may have damaged her career as a researcher

⁹ This may well be because, unlike anthropologists or literary critics, folklorists have dealt for a long time with informants who can, and have, read and criticised folklorists' accounts of them. For a particularly interesting set of accounts of interactions between a folklorist and her collaborators see Lawless, E.J., "Women's life stories and reciprocal ethnography as feminist and emergent", in *Journal of Folklore Research* 28 (1) Jan-Apr 1991 pp.33-60.

¹⁰ Jordan and de Caro, "Women and the study of folklore", op. cit., p.501.

and academic in the field.¹¹ An account of the career of feminist folklorist Elsie Clews Parsons given by Barbara Babcock describes similar discouragement¹². Such stories are not rare in any academic discipline.

Recognising the biases of their discipline, feminist folklorists have begun to examine the subject matter of classic, and more recent folklore studies, and to analyse the ways in which it has been structured to exclude, trivialise and ignore women. As Rosan Jordan and Susan Kalcik point out, there are several ways in which this has happened: interest in the public, individual and competitive performance over the private, domestic, social or collaborative folk expressions of women; bias and sexist assumptions in fieldwork, and the influence of the gender of the fieldworker on the material collected; ignorance of folk genres which are particularly or predominantly female and so on.¹³ These themes have also been treated by other writers.¹⁴ More interestingly, recent feminist work has also begun to examine why many women, and many feminist folklorists, have themselves avoided women's culture as their subject matter.

Two articles in particular argue this in some detail, and in doing so outline much of the feminist critique of method in this discipline, which has much in common with feminist critiques of method in anthropology and also in social and cultural studies. Judith Levin's article "Why Folklorists Should Study Housework"¹⁵ points out that in the context of 1970s feminism:

feminist folklorists couldn't very well argue that housework was creative and traditional, because that argument was the very one used to argue that women's place was in the home...When I talk about housework now, many women folklorists find it a compelling topic...but some of them add that they feel guilty speaking about the subject with such

¹¹ Stekert, E. J., "Autobiography of a Woman Folklorist" in *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (398) Oct-Dec 1987, pp.579-585.

¹² Babcock, B., "Taking Liberties, Writing from the Margins and Doing It with a Difference", *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (398) Oct-Dec 1987, pp.390-411.

¹³ Jordan R.A., and Kalcik, S.J., "Introduction", *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1985, pp.ix-xiv.

¹⁴ For a particularly interesting examination of the different narratives of the same meetings by male folklorists and their female field singers, revealing the aggrandising myths of the marvellous, conquering collector, as opposed to the women's perceptions of pesky, ignorant, time-wasting boys, see Kodish, D., "Absent Gender, Silent Encounter" in Hollis, S.T., Pershing, L., and Young, M.J., (eds) *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1993, pp.41-51.

¹⁵ Levin, J., "Why Folklorists Should Study Housework", in Hollis, S.T., Pershing, L., and Young, M.J., op. cit., pp.285-296.

interest: professional women are not "supposed" to be interested in housework.¹⁶

As we have seen, similar factors were at work in the avoidance of women's traditional craft techniques by feminist artists, and in the treatment of women's traditional pastimes by leisure studies scholars. The feeling that housework, or the traditional skills and pastimes of women, are somehow dangerous for feminists, is also present in Jong's poem, discussed in Chapter Four.

In a self-reflexive article about her own fieldwork practices and difficulties, Margaret Yocom makes a similar point about women's culture as a whole. In her research on the small logging town of Rangeley, Maine, her original preference for working with the men in their hard physical world, and her discomfort with the women's indoor culture, made her examine her responses carefully, coming to the view that her intense feelings of discomfort were to be understood as the 'breakdown' of fieldwork. She describes this process:

When expectations are not met and something does not make sense, breakdown occurs. Then comes a dialectic of questions and answers that enables us, as fieldworkers, to alter our way of seeing and to understand what the phenomenon is ...

For women fieldworkers though, who study women's conventional tasks such as knitting, housekeeping, and childrearing, it is not really difference that causes the "breakdown" as it is a complex mix of similarity and difference.

It is not that we as women fieldworkers -- with professional careers and, often, nonconventional ways of structuring family responsibilities -- do not understand the traditions we see; it is that we often understand too much. It is like looking into a mirror, a wavy carnival mirror, and seeing the life that might have been. There is a knock of recognition that calls forth deep seated emotions -- often unresolved -- from our own life situations. ¹⁷

In her account of her interaction with women's activities in the town, Yocom notes her original avoidance of them and anger towards the women: her

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.288.

¹⁷ Yocom, M.R., "Fieldwork, Gender and Transformation: The Second Way of Knowing", in *Southern Folklore* 47 (1) 1990 pp.33-44, p.37, footnote omitted.

desire to "go up to the women and shout, 'Don't you see how you're being treated here?'" Working through that, she moved towards idealisation of the women's activities, an impulse to "bring ease to myself as a woman [working in such a male oriented community] by raising the women's activities to some higher level of good". Her final equal inclusion of women's cultural forms in her writings on Rangeley folk traditions involved analysing and accepting the feelings which she associated with the doll-making, knitting, laundry and rummage sales which were part of the women's lives she examined: "By investigating gender-related questions, especially in the context of a family or small group, I have often made very personal, sensitive discoveries".¹⁸ All this became part of, as well as a mechanism through which to collect, her fieldwork information, and finally to write about it.

It is perhaps in its personal and informal, but far from atheoretical discussions of methodology that feminist folklore is most interesting and challenging, in relation to the present study. Yocom's passionately argued "second way of knowing", where "the world of the unintentional" is allowed, and where "monitoring our own reactions and using them as guides" is as much part of the research as the formal methodologies of ethnography, provides a way of putting to use the difficulties and problems that women's culture presents to feminists. Yocom displays this in her subsequent articles, an intricate interpretation of dolls as women's expression in the town of Rangeley.¹⁹ Her imaginative engagement with the women of Rangeley and their doll making and dressing, does not preclude a critical analysis. Yocom has elsewhere discussed the contributions which she thinks folklorists can make to feminist theory:

It is in their persistent and careful focus on interrelationships within living contexts that folklorists have much to contribute to feminist theory. Folklorists' study of individual performances that are situated in specific historical moments and cultures provide forceful examples of positionality ... Another contribution that folklorists make to feminist scholarship lies in their continual refinement of fieldwork strategies as they work with women who are alive today ... these field experiences

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp37-39.

¹⁹ Yocom, M.R., "'Awful Real': Dolls and Development in Rangeley, Maine", in Radner, J.N., (ed) *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1993, pp.125-154.

offer other feminist scholars already-tested methods for working with both contemporary and historical texts. 20

The work of a number of American feminist folklorists over the last two decades has opened up a new subject matter for the discipline, and also enabled an openness to new methods and theories. The trajectory is a similar one to the movement of feminist art history and criticism described in Chapter Five. The earliest strategies of finding and describing women's genres and images in folklore²¹ lead to, but are not superseded by the application of feminist approaches producing rereadings of classic canonical material such as ballads and fairy tales²². Later work has involved the reclassification of "non-folklore" as folklore²³, and the sophisticated incorporation of insights from feminist theory in other fields. This chapter goes on to discuss two major approaches to the concepts and problems of women's culture in the feminist folklore literature, and then moves to the folkloric literature on quilts in particular, testing those insights against the empirical material of my ethnographic work with Australian quilters.

1. *Feminists searching for resistance.*

Some feminist folklore work actively searches for resistance, subversion, or covert message as a feature of women's cultural practices. A particularly clear example of this is seen in Joan Radner's book *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*. In their long introduction, Radner and Susan Lanser write:

we state as our first premise that in the creations and performances of dominated cultures, one can often find covert expression of ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings and attitudes that the dominant culture -- and perhaps even the dominated group -- would find disturbing or threatening if expressed in more overt forms. We further suggest that such coded messages may ultimately help to empower a community and

²⁰ Yocom, M.R., "Waking up the Dead: Old Texts and New Critical Directions", in Hollis, S.T., Pershing, L., and Young, M.J., (eds) *op. cit.*, pp.120-129.

²¹ See for example, work on quilts, women's storytelling, dolls, female rappers or girls' games in the edited collections cited in this chapter.

²² See for example Stewart, P., "Wishful Willful Wily Women: Verbal Strategies for Female Success in the Child Ballads", in Radner, J., (ed) *op. cit.*, pp. 54-75, or Stone, K.F., "The Misuses of Enchantment: Controversies on the Significance of Fairy Tales" in Jordan R.A., and Kalcik, S.J., (eds) *op. cit.*, pp.125-148.

²³ See for example the housework article cited above, or alternatively see Susan Lanser's account of incompetence as folklore "Burning Dinners: Feminist Subversions of Domesticity" in Radner, J.N., (ed) *op. cit.*, pp. 36-53.

hence to effect change ... The recognition of coding -- that is, the identification of messages whose feminism is not immediately evident -- is a crucial aspect of the reinterpretation of women's lives and cultures and hence of feminist critical consciousness.²⁴

Radner and Lanser go on to concentrate on "implicit" coding: that is, coding which must hide the fact of the code itself, as well as the content of the message. Thus no pre-arranged or well known key to the code exists, and a real ambiguity is present as to whether any coding strategy has taken place. They make a persuasive case for this in their discussion of the 1917 short story "A Jury of her Peers". In this story, a woman is arrested when her husband is found murdered. The sheriff and deputies can find no trace of a motive for the killing, but their wives, reading the accused woman's kitchen, can see a set of messages in the mess and disorder, the broken birdcage, and most of all in the quilt blocks on the top of the sewing basket. These are, unlike the skilful neat blocks beneath, badly sewn, chaotic, 'crazy'. In reading these clues about the woman's state of mind, the other women realise things about their own lives, and quietly, carefully restore order, even re-sewing the incriminating patches. The men, scornful of such tinkering at a time like this, never realise that their crucial clues are being effaced. Such 'coding' if it exists, clearly requires the 'reader' to have considerable imaginative capacity, but also to be a fellow member of the women's culture being spoken through. Radner and Lanser discuss and give examples (mostly from literary sources) of what they recognise as at least six different strategies for such coding.

Appropriation, where male cultural forms, or "androcentric images of the feminine" are taken over for feminist purposes, is, they argue, a kind of symbolic inversion. Among their examples is the case of women rap singers in the 1980s "imitating -- with significant adaptations -- the dress, voice timbre, and 'hard' performance mode of the male rappers of the time. Their 'male' behaviour established their competence and gained them commercial recordings and airtime; but they were able, at the same time, to inject into their raps significant rebuttal of the male rappers' attitudes towards women".²⁵

²⁴ Radner, J.N, and Lanser, S.S., "Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures", in Radner J.N., (ed) op. cit., pp.1-30, p.4.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 12.

Juxtaposition, where items or practices acquire ironic or ambiguous meanings in new or different contexts, is illustrated by Radner and Lanser with the account in Plath's *The Bell Jar*, of Mrs Willard plaiting a mat out of her husband's old suits, cut into strips, a mat which will be soiled and stepped on in her kitchen.

Distraction is the practice of creating some 'noise' or diversion to hide or mask the content of a message, such that only those who suspect it is there, or who are listening carefully will hear it. The most persuasive examples here are the several traditions of lullabies where the soothing tunes and rhythms mask words about death, separation, weariness and hunger.

Their fourth category, *indirection*, further subdivided into 'metaphor', 'impersonation' and 'hedging', involves practices designed to deliver a message but in a distanced, equivocal or elliptical way. For this strategy Radner and Lanser give a number of literary and folkloric examples, including women singers' impersonation of characters with particular grievances in traditional ballads, and Virginia Woolf's famous evasion of the first person in *A Room of One's Own*: "That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library".²⁶

Trivialisation is the use of a form considered innocuous or even meaningless by the dominant culture, hiding important content from unwanted attention. Here they cite "gossip", jokes, and children's stories, and make the point that humour in particular, can even ease the blackness of a message for the performer or speaker herself.

Finally, *incompetence*, or claims of it, which they see as a strategy often used to avoid blame or punishment that would be visited upon a refusal to do the same tasks, or alternatively, a way to avoid punishment for accomplishing a male task too well.

Recognising that all these separate strategies may be used in combination or complex interweaving, Radner and Lanser close their essay with a frankly political message.

We have been suggesting throughout this essay that coding may allow women to communicate feminist messages to other women of their

²⁶ *ibid*, quoted on p.18.

community; to refuse, subvert, or transform conventional expectations; and to criticise male dominance in the face of male power. At the same time, because ambiguity is a necessary feature of every coded act, any instance of coding risks reinforcing the very ideology it is designed to critique....For all the ingenious uses women, or any dominated peoples, may make of coding, then, the need for coding must always signify a freedom that is incomplete. By inscribing into the new context of feminism the evidence of coding by women for whom openly feminist messages would be impossible, taking care to respect the cultural and individual differences and human needs that coding signifies, feminist scholars may help to bring about a social order in which coding will no longer be necessary.²⁷

The essays chosen for the book illustrate these ideas in a number of concrete ways, and there are important insights to be gained from them. In particular, distraction and trivialisation strategies are clearly to be seen in "quilting talk", and in the messages in quilts themselves, and some examples will be discussed below. But there are enormous problems with the *a priori* search for resistance that this kind of approach demands.

These problems are made particularly clear in the article which relates to quilts²⁸ which is included in *Feminist Messages*. Linda Pershing's interpretation of a particular parodic or humorous quilt, "Scandalous Sue", made by a group of quiltmakers in Austin, Texas, for one of their number, is interesting and persuasive. She reads the quilters' development and adaptation of the traditionally cute and decorous pictorial quilt block design "Sunbonnet Sue" into designs which incorporate such scandalous activities as bra-burning, drinking and smoking, as a statement of their own lives as modern women, and of their personal experiences of such activities. She writes:

Encoded in the Scandalous Sue quilt are women's attempts to speak their truths about society. The Bee There quilters are middle-class, suburban women who do not use the work *feminist* to describe themselves and are not actively involved in the women's movement. Precisely because these women have filled traditional roles, the quilt is all the more significant for them; their feminist messages are not expressed overtly but through a coding process of appropriation and inversion ... By synthesising needlework and parodic process in the making of "Scandalous Sue", the quilters found a way to comment on conventional

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

²⁸ Pershing, L., " 'She Really Wanted to be Her Own Woman': Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue", in Radner J.N., (ed) *op.cit.*, pp.98-125.

expectations and to express their own sense of ambivalence about prevalent images of women. 29

The problem arises because Pershing's interpretation is so clearly at odds with the quiltmakers' own understanding of their work. The quilters explicitly reject her reading, the owner of the quilt describing the quilt as "innocent fun poked at a fictional character and at myself for wanting a simple gift. These... are bright, intelligent, and creative women who happen to be very happy with the individual lives -- they don't speak for anyone else through my quilt".³⁰ Pershing tries to deal with this by describing the trivialisation strategies used in the quilt as "cloaking the makers' commentary about the changing roles of women in the supposedly innocuous form of a humorous quilt"³¹. But in the absence of an anti-humanist theoretical framework which really enables the view that discourse speaks through the quilt without any intentionality on the part of the makers, this is not convincing. Pershing goes on to examine Sunbonnet Sue parody quilts made with a more explicit critique in the mind of the makers (such as "The Sun Sets on Sunbonnet Sue" which shows Sue dying in a variety of horrible ways). This quilt provoked outrage (it was withdrawn from exhibition at the Kansas State Expo after complaints, and described as "sick"), and the defiance of its makers in the face of criticism shows that quite a different process was taking place. Pershing, however, wants to make this continuous with the lighter intentions of the Austin women. She writes:

The parodic elements of "Scandalous Sue" are gender-differentially encoded. Only those with "competence" in the vocabulary of quilting, those who can identify the symbolic association of Sunbonnet Sue with female innocence and docility -- and hence perceive the drastic nature of the manipulation of her conventional appearance -- can fully appreciate the messages of the quilt.³²

Despite appearances, this statement reveals her view that the *feminist* critic (with competence in the vocabulary of quilting) is actually the most "competent" reader, since the makers themselves (who are quite competent in

²⁹ *ibid.*, pp.117-118

³⁰ quoted *ibid.*, p.105-6.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 107.

³² *ibid.*, p. 118.

the vocabulary of quilting, but not of feminism) have registered their disagreement that the quilt *has* such messages to deliver.³³

Looking for resistance or coded subversion does seem to lead to the phenomenon of researchers preferring those folk forms where such a message may be easily or straightforwardly seen, and to the downgrading of interest in forms which are apparently more conservative, contradictory or ambiguous. Quilting itself has suffered from this view. The attraction for politically aware folklorists of such folk forms as Chilean arpilleras is just this availability of a political message. Arpilleras are appliqued and embroidered pictures of everyday life under the Chilean junta, and many depict the torture, disappeared persons, and military presence in Chile during the time of martial law there. Others show people overcoming poverty, hardship and natural disaster. Arpilleras provide the example which opens the Radner text,³⁴ but are also discussed in many other places.³⁵ Other similar examples include the feminist attention given to the AIDS quilts in various countries³⁶, and the examinations of craft work used in various peace-related events.³⁷ While such examinations may yield interesting insights into the uses of folk arts and crafts by the politically active and informed, what they cannot show us are the ways in which the vast majority of quilters, sewers or weavers use their craft in self-definition and identity construction *without* an articulated political position or message, but *with* real effects in their lives, some of which are

³³ It is, however, to Pershing's credit that she gives the views of the quilters such prominence, and states repeatedly that they do not agree with her interpretations.

³⁴ See Radner (ed) op. cit., "Preface" p.vii.

³⁵ See for example Brett, G., *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History*, GMP Publishers, London 1986, pp.29-54. Arpilleras are in fact, becoming the canonical case of women's political needlework.

³⁶ See for example Howe, L., "A Text of the Times: the NAMES Project" in *Uncoverings 1991: Volume 12 of the Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group*, pp.11-31, Ruskin, C., *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project*, Pocket Books, NY, 1988. For the beginnings of a critique of "the almost uniformly celebratory critical response to the Names Project", on the grounds that an "art tradition developed by women, at least in part, to cushion themselves against the loss of female life and to ease female suffering in (hetero) sexual relations has been used to focus the national gaze on the loss of mostly male lives and mostly male suffering" with far greater coverage, interest and sympathy than any of the political uses of these arts by women, see Przybysz, J., "Quilts and Women's Bodies: Dis-eased and Desiring", in Young, K., (ed) *Bodylore*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville 1995, pp.??

³⁷ See for example a chapter on the Greenham Common fence as popular art in Brett, G., op cit., pp.131-154, Armstrong, N.C., "Quilts of the Gulf War, Desert Storm -- Participation or Protest?" in *Uncoverings 1992: Volume 13 of the Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group*, pp.9-44, and another article by Pershing, "Peace Work out of Piecework: Feminist Needlework Metaphors and the Ribbon around the Pentagon", in Hollis, S.T., Pershing, L., and Young, M.J., (eds) op. cit., pp.327-357.

political, in the widest sense. This is what the present study is most concerned with.

As discussed in Chapter Five, feminist art, especially that which attempted to use women's traditional skills and genres, has had to rely heavily on the controlling effect of text, and explicit avowals of feminist intent, to differentiate itself from the non-feminist women's art whose images and techniques it was appropriating. Feminist folklore studies, if it does become most interested in those forms which can be easily read as "resistant" or "oppositional", faces a similar problem: becoming unable, convincingly, to explain those popular, lively and social cultural practices which produce artefacts which cannot easily be read in this way.

However, as demonstrated in Chapters One, Two and Three, analysis of the culture and practices of women's traditional arts, rather than concentrating on the political messages of their products, if any, is a way to produce a feminist understanding of the political and social effects of subcultures which are themselves not feminist. Feminists need to know not only the ways in which women resist traditional roles and disempowerment, but also why so many of them do not resist in ways which feminists can easily discern.

2. *Creating a feminist analysis*

Margaret Yocom's article in *Feminist Messages*, briefly discussed above,³⁸ takes this further step of interpreting material which is itself neither feminist, nor easily open to a feminist interpretation, and interpreting it *in its context* such that a feminist understanding develops. Where Pershing's article refuses the interpretations of the quilt's makers, and abstracts the "Scandalous Sue" quilt *as a text* from the context and set of understandings in which it was made, Yocom's approach in all her work is to move further *into* that context, until connections and interconnections become clear. Her sympathetic account of the symbolic purposes which the making and dressing of dolls and teddy bears fulfil for the women of the logging town of Rangeley, includes their own understandings, and respects their choice of medium, in the face of the chainsaw carved bears made for sale to tourists by some of the men of the town. Yocom includes in her analysis knowledge of the context of situated gender relations in Rangeley, the influence of commercial bears and dolls, and

³⁸Yocom, M.R., "Awful Real" *op. cit.*, pp.126-54.

the changing economic base of the town's economy from logging to tourism, bringing her to the conclusion:

And for me, when Lucille takes a teddy bear dressed in a little knit outfit of aqua or lavender or pink with teddy bear buttons, and sets it in the shop next to one of her husband Rodney's carved wooden bears a shift in perspective occurs. Rodney's bears soften. His bears, carved in pine with a chainsaw to look like the powerful, agile, wide-ranging Maine black bear, look more like toys. Through this juxtaposition, Lucille calls attention to her own work and points out the similarity between her knitting and her husband's carving, both in subject matter and in quality. She transforms part of the male world into the female world.

Interestingly, this is not meaningless or offensive to the woman involved. In another article on this material, Yocom has described the process of telling Lucille Richard of this insight. Mrs Richard's response, which was neither to confirm or deny, saying only "That's interesting", seems noticeably different from the vehement denials of her interpretation with which Pershing had to contend.³⁹

Yocom's work is proof that looking at what women actually do, in context and with insight, does not preclude hermeneutic daring and creativity in interpretation. Specifically feminist insights can be produced, without necessarily seeking out clearly political or oppositional content. Such an interpretation, however, requires that the understandings of the actors involved be taken fully into account. Some further examples will now be discussed.

The uses of folklore studies

The context of cultural activities, and the ways they fit into everyday life is a crucial part of feminist folklore studies. Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff's analyses of a Sicilian-American custom in a Texas town are examples of the way in which an activity which appears to be entirely concerned with the celebration male power -- the festival of St Joseph -- can be read, from the

³⁹ See Yocom, M.R., "Fieldwork, Gender and Transformation", op. cit., pp.40-41. "When I mentioned Rodney's [disparaging] comments about dolls and teddy bears in the shop, she said, 'Well, that's Rodney's opinion. You see, he thinks his bears are the way bears ought to be. I have my own opinion and it's different'. So Lucille, invoking difference, claims herself as equal to Rodney regardless of what Rodney says. ...When I told her about my ideas about the bears shifting in perspective for me when her teddy bears were added, she just smiled and said, 'That's interesting'. I'm not sure if she agreed or not".

point of view of women, as something much more complex than it first appears. In this research, the analysis comes from the ways in which the participants organise meaning, and not from the preconceptions of external forces, either the Catholic Church or feminism. The ceremony of offering an elaborate altar covered with traditional foods to the saint, and giving a party for several hundred people could simply be read as a selfless sacrifice of women's time and energy to a male church figure representing the *pater familias*. Turner and Seriff's work results in something different:

What emerges from this reexamination of the St. Joseph's Day feast is an image of the feast -- not as a symbolic or material expression of women's subordination to men -- but rather as a kind of communitywide expression of the power of women's work both within the context of the St Joseph's story and the social practice of everyday life.⁴⁰

The elaborate rituals of the preparations, the reciprocal relationships set up by helping at someone else's altar, the homosocial bonding of women working together, and the passing of skills from older to younger women all combine to produce "a time when women receive recognition for these skills and accomplishments in a culture that otherwise provides few opportunities for such blatant acknowledgment".⁴¹ As Turner and Seriff point out, these elaborate demonstrations of women's skills, networks and power within extended families and community provide satisfactions and reward which are not available to these women in the labour market.

Turner and Seriff's informants dwell on the hard work of the festival, in their descriptions, and yet also upon its fulfilling and voluntary nature. Here, as in quilting, women use their customary and domestic skills, such as cooking and sewing, to produce something which gains them a level of public recognition which is different from the domestic appreciation of their families. Examining the feminist philosophy which posits a female 'ethic of care', 'feminist standpoint' or 'maternal thinking', Turner and Seriff argue for grounded research into women's cultures to see if women have produced

⁴⁰ Turner, K, and Seriff, S., "Giving an Altar to St Joseph': A Feminist Perspective on a Patronal Feast", in Hollis, S.T., Pershing, L., and Young, M.J., (eds) *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*, University of Illinois Press Urbana 1993 pp.89 - 117, p.93. For an earlier and significantly different version see also Turner K., and Seriff, S., "Giving an Altar;: The Ideology of Reproduction in a St. Joseph's Day Feast" *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (398) Oct-Dec 1987 pp.446-460.

⁴¹ Turner and Seriff, "Giving an Altar to St Joseph': A Feminist Perspective", p.105.

different kinds of relations between, for example, self and other, public and private. Turner and Seriff come to the conclusion that:

women's traditional expressive culture may offer the missing link between philosophy and practice. The reality of women's lore such as that made so obvious in the St. Joseph's feast unravels the abstractions of philosophy and weds them to the very content and practice of women's lives. We feel there is a crucial claim to be made for an ideology discoverable in much of women's lore that is based on their own expression of the power of reproductive labour.⁴²

The relevance of this to the conclusions in Chapter Three about the way women's quiltmaking culture has produced 'workarounds' to dualisms such as public/private, and amateur/professional is significant. Turner and Seriff, examining the intricate workings of a particular set of women's rituals, have found the altar-giving tradition to serve an analogous function:

Certainly, in the St. Joseph's celebration women promote both their willingness to give to others -- the feast is after all a sacrifice and called such by altar makers -- and an unmitigated sense of the value and worth of the domestic labor that they consider to be their expertise.⁴³

Turner and Seriff's work is indebted to the "kinwork" concept developed by Micaela Di Leonardo, and discussed in Chapter Three,⁴⁴ but they go further than she does in including the understandings of the women involved, and in recognising that they too understand the complexity and contradictory nature of their cultural activities. The St. Joseph's women are well aware that their work is both self-affirming *and* self-abnegating, just as the quilters in my study know that their quiltmaking is both useful *and* creative, self-expressive *and* an expression of the love and duty they feel for their families. This is the kind of insight which simply cannot be read from the quilts (or altars) as cultural products, but only gleaned from a detailed and contextual understanding of the cultural processes at work, and the understandings and narratives of the cultural producers' themselves.

⁴² *ibid.*, p.113.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴⁴ See di Leonardo, *op. cit.*, and Chapter Three above.

Folklore studies in Australia

Folklore studies of the kind discussed above have hardly been begun in Australia: the discipline is in its infancy here, and so discussions within this framework spend a lot of time justifying and explaining both the subject matter and the ideas of the discipline.⁴⁵ What little has been done is largely about verbal culture, or "bush crafts" and is rather antiquarian along the lines of British rather than American folklore studies.⁴⁶ Very little research tackles the craft revival from a folkloric perspective, none from a feminist one. David Hulst's piece in an anthology of critical writings on craft, shows how a relatively rigid view of what is authentically "folk" can lead to difficulty dealing with a complex and evolving subculture such as quilting. He writes

So we may find an individual who learned quilt making from her mother and produces traditional quilts, therefore for her, quilting is a folkloric activity. Another individual may purchase a book on quilting and proceed to make a quilt based on one in the book or a provided pattern and as such, in this instance, they are operating in the domain of popular culture.

Yet another individual may be completing a project for an arts degree in textiles and combine traditional motifs with contemporary designs and techniques and so doing, they are operating within the elite register. Theoretically, one individual is capable of all three, although at differing times and/or stages of development.⁴⁷

As earlier chapters of this thesis have shown, many individuals are "capable of all three", sometimes at the same time. This is of course precisely what is interesting about quilting, and what makes the application of more sophisticated folklore studies methods and perspectives to it so necessary, to explain what, if anything, could possibly hold these disparate elements in such close contact. One of the quilters Hulst cites as an elite practitioner, a textile artist, Wendy Lugg of Western Australia, is also a sought-after teacher at

⁴⁵ See for example, Hulst, D., "Australian Craft Within a Folkloric Context", in Iannou, N., (ed), *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992, pp.79-97.

⁴⁶ The journal *Australian Folklore* (1985 -) bears a far stronger resemblance to the British folklore journals than the lively, scholarly American ones.

⁴⁷ Hulst, D., op. cit., p.89-90.

group-organised quilt camps and symposiums⁴⁸. Her work is much admired and emulated by quilters all over Australia, appearing on the covers of several quilt magazines and books, and very popular at exhibitions. Hulst's delineation of the different registers in which quilting might appear is too rigid to take account of (except "theoretically") the reality that most quilters inhabit two or more of these "registers" all the time. No present day quiltmaker eschews all quilting books, magazines, designs, videos, exhibitions or other commercial or popular cultural productions. If such avoidance is part of the definition of the "folk" then there are none.

But as we have seen from the American feminist work discussed above, folkloric perspectives do not need to have such rigid divisions set up within them. This study attempts to look at a leisure world outside the narrow framework of the learning and maintenance of unbroken folk traditions. Quilting is a hybrid of commercial, traditional and postmodern communications and interactions, and as such it transcends both the rigid "registers" taxonomy of Hulst, and the nostalgic recording of a residual "dying tradition" orientation, which appears in other Australian folklore studies work.⁴⁹ It is only by taking into account the patterns of commercial provision, institutional learning, traditional transmission, informal cultures and structures, and the international transmission of American quilt culture through a variety of methods, that a picture of such a leisure world can be built up.

Because quilting is a growing, thriving pastime, building its own community of interest, within a diversifying commercial and institutional framework, there can be none of the nostalgia or regret some folklore evinces in the recording of "dying" practices, or the analysis of declining social groups. The lack of a popularly-known Australian history for quilting makes its narrative an upbeat one of growth and increasing sophistication, rather than a dwindling or faltering one. There are, as a result, a different set of tropes and images used by Australian quilters to describe themselves, their practices and their institutions. Quilters are well aware of the international history of their craft, but tend to focus more on future developments here in Australia.

⁴⁸ Most recently at the Quilt Camp '96, held at Kurrajong NSW, and organised by The Patchworkers and Quilters of the Hawkesbury, Mar 22-25 1996.

⁴⁹ See for example, Wilson, E., "Paradise Lost: Plant-lore on the Far North Coast of New South Wales" in *Australian Folklore* 9 July 1994, pp.104-113; or Murphy, D., "Going, going, gone -- Death of a Small Aussie Country Town" in *Australian Folklore* 10, July 1995, pp.175-181.

Quilting and Feminist Folklore Studies

Some examples of what can be identified as feminist folklore studies work on quilting have been discussed immediately above, and in Chapter Four.⁵⁰ The work published by the American Quilt Study Group (AQSG), in its journal *Uncoverings*, often uses the methods, approaches and conventions of folklore studies, without explicitly placing itself in that scholarly tradition, although individual writers turn up in the major folklore journals.⁵¹ Some of this is due to the AQSG policy of being consciously careful to avoid jargon, and technical language, or to do other things which might discourage amateur quilt scholars. In this, the group is reminiscent of a quilt group. This section will discuss a number of examples of folklorist perspectives applied to the study of quilts in the United States, and contrast these with my findings in Australia. The most interesting, in relation to my quilt research, are those which keep sight of the processes of cultural production which enable both the making of quilts, and the production of the collaborative social structure which is the quilting leisure world.

Because of the enormous and enduring popularity of quilting among women in North America, the large number of well-preserved old quilts, stories of bygone quilting and family traditions of quilting and, not least, the considerable cultural power of the quilt-as-image (discussed in Chapter Four), feminist folklorists have done a considerable amount of work on quilting traditions in the United States. Chapter One indicated the depth and variety of work in the "Quilt Studies" field: this section will concentrate on research that takes a contemporary ethnographic approach to American quilting.⁵²

⁵⁰ In this chapter, Pershing op. cit., and in Chapter Four, the work of JanE Hindman, op. cit.

⁵¹ An example is former president of AQSG, and editor of *Uncoverings*, Laurel Horton, who is both a quilt scholar and a folklorist.

⁵² Folklore studies do not preclude historical work, and there are reconstructive articles on historical quilting folk traditions. See for example Horton, L. "Nineteenth-Century Quilting Traditions in South Carolina" *Southern Folklore* 46 (2) 1989 pp.101-115. There are also examples of ethnographic contemporary work on quilting in other countries, such as Japan (see Nii, P and Kuroha, K., "A Glimpse of the Japanese Quilting Community: The Influence of Quilting Schools" in *The Quilt Journal: An International Review* 2 (2) 1993 pp.1-5) or cultural regions, such as Polynesia (see Hammond, J., "Polynesian Women and Tifaifai: Fabrications of Identity" *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (393) Jul/Sep 1986, p.259-279).

Joyce Ice's work on quilting communities in Texas⁵³ and in New York⁵⁴ is widely cited by other folklorists, and she herself has taken an active part in the discussions of feminist theory and folklore.⁵⁵ She emphasises the role of process in women's aesthetics:

[P]rocess ... takes on added significance when production is done by a group. In this case, quilting is a social work that depends upon cooperation and a shared aesthetic that is accepted, if not always followed, by the group. Through work with the Lytton Springs Quilting Club, I came to see a quilt not only as a symbolic object but also the quilting process as an expressive form for women.⁵⁶

Her detailed account of the conversations, preoccupations, and aesthetic choices and judgements of the Lytton Springs women is convincing in its conclusions that the group's aesthetic preferences are tied as much to the processes of their work as to the design choices of the artefacts themselves. The club members, all of them working around a large frame, charge to handquilt quilts pieced by other women, and use the money for their favoured charitable causes. These women judge quilts on what they know of the maker and her circumstances, on the relation of the quilt to the home and landscape it will be placed in, on the occasion for which it is being made, and on the technical quality of the handwork in the pieced top. They rate their own collaborative contribution -- the handquilting -- as crucial to the final aesthetic appeal of the quilt: "It's always prettier when it's finished than it is when you start with it". Machine work is disliked because it is "the lazy way...I don't think that's what quilts are about" and because it precludes the social collaboration of group quilting -- machine sewing is a solitary activity.⁵⁷

Ice's study, although conducted in a vastly different social setting from the work of this thesis in Sydney, has some marked similarities to my findings on

⁵³ Ice, J., "Women's Aesthetics and the Quilting Process", in Hollis, S.T., Pershing, L., and Young, M.J., (eds) *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*, University of Illinois Press Urbana 1993, pp.166-177, and her 1984 PhD thesis from the University of Texas at Austin "Quilting and the Pattern of Relationships in Community Life" (unavailable to this researcher).

⁵⁴ Ice, J., "Splendid Companionship and Practical Assistance" in Ice, J., and Norris, L., *Quilted Together: Women, Quilts and Communities*, Delaware County Historical Society, Delhi NY, 1989, pp.6-24 (unavailable to this researcher).

⁵⁵ Ice, J., "Review Essay: Women, Folklore, Feminism and Culture", *New York Folklore* 15 (1-2) 1989, pp.121-137

⁵⁶ Ice, J., "Women's Aesthetics" op. cit., p.167.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, passim.

this matter of process. Quilters do not look at quilts as solely visual objects, but invest them with a social context, and derive meanings from that. Even historical quilts, entirely removed from their context and with social details unrecoverable, are treated in this way. Examining a nineteenth-century quilt, quilters will invoke the maker, speculating on the (often practical) reasons for her aesthetic choices: "Look how she has used a different red here -- she must have run out of the first one".⁵⁸

Ice's closing statement emphasises the importance of the social conversation as an expressive part of aesthetic activity for women:

If we want to better understand process and its role in shaping aesthetics, it is clear that we must pay close attention to the actual doing of things -- the telling of stories, the weaving of rugs, the making of quilts -- and to the talk that is an integral part of the creative enterprise⁵⁹

This has been taken up by other scholars, with varying success. Kristin Langellier's work on Show and Tell⁶⁰ analyses the dynamics of this verbal performance, arguing that:

Show and Tell functions as an 'oppositional' practice that allows quilters to maneuver [sic] within the constraints of femininity, of public speaking and of the emergent and changing culture of the contemporary quiltmaking revival.

Langellier's characterisation of Show and Tell as 'creating a unique space' for participants that moves beyond the private sphere but does not enforce the hierarchies or divisions of the public and commercial world, is interestingly parallel to the conclusions of this thesis about the ways in which quiltmaking culture in Australia has rearranged public and private for its participants. Langellier sees Show and Tell (rather than quiltmaking culture in general) as a

live quilt show [which] resists the forces in contemporary society and quiltmaking culture that threaten to aestheticize (make quilts into autonomous art objects) and commodify (make quilts into market objects

⁵⁸ Fieldnotes, Quilter's Guild Exhibition Sydney 1993.

⁵⁹ Ice, J., "Women's Aesthetics" op. cit., p. 175.

⁶⁰ Langellier, K "Show and Tell" op. cit. See also her "Contemporary Quiltmaking in Maine: Re-fashioning Femininity" in *Uncoverings* 11, 1991, pp.29-55.

for their exchange value) quilts, forces that would effectively disconnect quilts from the concrete and complex lives of their makers.⁶¹

This is perhaps a consequence of the far greater commercial pressures on, and more extensive professionalisation of, quilting in the United States: Australian quiltmakers are not yet in danger of widespread changes of this sort. This is one of the contradictory advantages of a little known and sparse old quilt stock, almost no 'quilt-dealing' and the consequent lack of demand for realistically priced contemporary quilts. The discussion in Chapter Three of the Manly Art Gallery quilt show and the tension between 'art' and 'hobby' quilters on the matter of 'excellence' reveals that the beginnings of such changes may be incipient.⁶²

Some folklorists also recognise the kind of complexity that I have found in quilting culture, and maintain the importance of investigating this, carefully and empirically in different settings. Clover Williams' detailed explication of the way quilters in Bloomington, Indiana, understand the terms and concepts 'art' and 'tradition', shows the shifting and contextual meanings that these terms have.⁶³ Further to the points made in the discussion in Chapter Four of Christine Battersby's notions of genius, and of the assumption of the mindless pattern-following quilter, Williams notes that many 'traditional' quilters do not eschew originality, play or innovation in their work, at all. What they reject, emphatically, is the category 'art', in order to "distance themselves from an aesthetic system which ignores the values through which they define themselves and their art".⁶⁴ But in other contexts, they will still be proud of the innovation, creativity and beauty of their work, all qualities otherwise associated with 'art'. Williams observes:

It has become a commonplace in folklore studies of the past thirty years to assert that we cannot study folklore without a sense of its meaning in context. The Bloomington Quilters Guild reminds us all that context and

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 142

⁶² The rivalry between professional quiltmakers and amateur ones is very clear in the United States, as Langellier details. At the 1993 American Quilt Study Group Symposium in Portland, Maine, it became quite heated when a group of art quilters gave a session on "Excellence" and were extremely critical of popular standards, and judging in amateur shows. At that time, this was not an issue which had caused difficulty in Australia, although rumblings were discernible in *OZQUILT Newsletter*. See Chapter Three for details.

⁶³ Williams, C., "Tradition and Art: Two Layers of Meaning in the Bloomington Quilters Guild", *Uncoverings* 12, 1992 pp.118-141.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.135.

meaning are not singular, but always consist of interrelated contexts and meanings.⁶⁵

Williams' study, as my own attempts to do, shows that quilting culture produces more than just quilts, and that the quilts have most meaning understood within that constellation of ideas, practices and 'social and spiritual uses' which is produced around them. Trying to understand quilts as objects, or quilting as 'hobby' does not begin to approach the productive richness of quilting culture.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 136. Williams closes her article with a marvellous quote from one of her informants, Virginia Miller, who when asked if she thought traditional quilts and art were different, replied "No, I don't think they're different, I think they're the same. They're the same; they just feel different". p. 138.

Conclusion

Binding Quilts

The last process of finishing a quilt is to choose and sew the binding. After the patterned top has been completed, the lining or back of the quilt chosen or sewn, the batting sandwiched between these two constructed fabrics and stabilised with quilting stitches forming a different pattern of texture, light and shade on the quilt -- then comes the binding. It can contrast sharply or blend in subtly. There are canonical methods of binding, vehemently defended: in my view, double American binding, either straight cut, or on the bias for quilts with curved or scalloped edges, is the best, most durable edging for a useful quilt. A long folded strip, cut three inches wide, gives two layers of strong cotton fabric. When machine sewn onto the top of the quilt's edge, folded over and blind hemmed on the other side, it makes a sharp, strong half-inch-wide final border, neatly covering the edges of the constituent layers of the quilt, and binding in the trailing threads of its construction. Add the quilter's name and the date in embroidery or fine pen and the quilt is ready.

No such satisfying and durable conclusion is available in intellectual endeavours, and neither should it be. As Chapter Four attempted to show, trying to structure an argument like a quilt is doomed to failure. But more importantly, the kind of multidisciplinary discussion I have attempted here cannot and should not be neatly finished without trailing threads. An argument for the utility of empirical research, and for the dialectical process of producing new understandings from that research, is always an argument for more and better research. This thesis has tried to show, on a number of levels, that there are kinds of research, not presently being done, that are important for a feminist understanding of at least one kind of women's cultural production. On one level, I have described, documented and analysed a complex subculture, one of many in a category which is greatly understudied, indeed effectively ignored. Quilting culture is a specifically female example, but there are many other kinds of passionately pursued, non-market-oriented, voluntarily organised activities undertaken in cities and country towns every day, seemingly below the line of sight of the cultural critics and sociologists who study the products and reception of mass or high culture with such assiduity.

On another level, I have tried to understand why it is that, in this case, feminist analysis in a number of different fields has ignored, misinterpreted or mistakenly appropriated the products, images and understandings of quiltmakers, and by extension, those of other women choosing traditionally feminine forms of expressive activity. As Chapters Four, Five, and Six indicated, this is itself a complex blend of historically specific factors: a particular generation of feminist academics and their shifting relations with the traditional feminine roles of their mothers and grandmothers; the limitations and strategies of the academic disciplines and times in which they have found themselves; and the deep cultural power of the devaluation of women's traditional expressive forms, which even extends to those who think they have escaped it. The slogan that one cannot dismantle the Master's house with the Master's tools comes, here, clearly to mind. The people who have most successfully avoided that pervasive devaluation of women's arts, as my work, and that of Clover Williams indicates, are quiltmakers themselves. The trajectory of the Quilters' Guild of New South Wales, so far, reveals that quiltmakers are quite capable of maintaining their own relatively autonomous set of aesthetic and technical judgements, and that, in the main, the perspective of artworlds, or even feminists, worries them little.

On a third level, this thesis has attempted to describe and demonstrate the kind of analysis that may, in time, produce an understanding of women's cultural forms which might begin, not just to revalue them as creative endeavours in themselves, but to awaken an interest in the processes, collaborations and conditions of possibility which make all grassroots cultural production possible. Taking seriously the understandings of quiltmakers, and their complexly mediated relations to the mix of commercial, popular, and high culture around them, is to take the optimistic view that people *are* actually cultural producers, and not just in the somewhat impoverished sense conveyed by media studies, that is as creative interpreters of what they are given. For quiltmakers, rat-fanciers, *a capella* choir members, netball players, civil libertarians, Zoo Friends, local councillors, volunteer firefighters (and the list goes on) are not just doing whatever might be seen as the "substantive content" of their activity, but producing a particular culture around it, with its own codes, themes, structures, exclusions and rewards.

This is the real meaning of the title of this thesis. The quiltmakers I studied are, even when the quilts they make are given away to others, producing something much more complex for themselves: an identity as 'quiltmaker', a

culture which enables them, as women, to sidestep some of the barriers put in their way by the wider culture in which they live, and a homosocial context in which they find great delight and relief.

When I began this thesis I was making every error I have since identified. I was looking for coded resistance; I was determined to generalise from women's cultures to feminist politics, and I was greatly enamoured of the quilt as metaphor. I assumed that quiltmakers *should* be feminists, if they had any sense: I assumed I knew what that sense was. What I have discovered in the long course of the thesis's production, is more complex and interesting. Far from a residue of a lost time, far from a site of false consciousness, what quilting culture has produced is a "workaround": an interaction with surrounding norms, which seems to balance its own cultural innovations and traditions with commercial pressures, with new technology and with the deep conservatism of many of its adherents. It is a hybrid, of the folk and the market, the public and the private, the self-affirming and the self-abnegating, the family and the friends, art and life. Women, as makers of quilts, have also made something else, for themselves, and its effects are far-reaching for them. The semi-public women-only space they have made has much to teach feminists, if we can only see it.

Appendix: "How To Make A Quilt"
from *Traditional Quiltworks* 28, November 1993, pp.60-61

To Make A Quilt

CHOOSING A PATTERN

Read through all directions and choose a pattern or a project that is suited to your piecing and quilting abilities.

The pattern pieces in *Traditional Quiltworks* are full size. Unless otherwise noted, all pieces include 1/4" seam allowance. The solid line is the cutting line and the dashed line is the stitching line.

An "R" means that the piece will be reversed and traced.

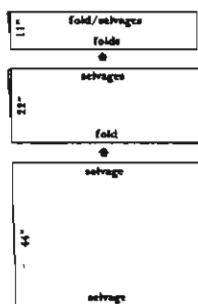
FABRIC PREPARATION

Yardage requirements are based on 44"-wide fabric. Listed amounts are adequate, but little is allowed for errors. We suggest using 100% cotton fabrics.

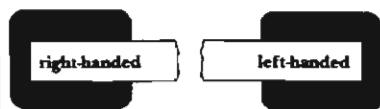
Wash all fabrics in warm water, using a mild detergent and no fabric softener. Wash dark fabrics separately and check for bleeding during the rinse cycle. If bleeding is a problem, set the color by soaking the fabric in cold water containing a mixture of equal parts of white vinegar and table salt. After your fabric has been washed (and color set, if necessary), dry it in a dryer using a warm to hot setting to shrink the fabric. Press it with a hot dry iron to remove any wrinkles. Use spray sizing to replace some of the body, if you prefer.

ROTARY CUTTING

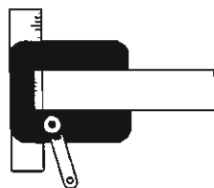
Begin by folding the fabric in half, selvage to selvage. Make sure the selvages are even and the fold edge is smooth. Fold the fabric in half again, bringing the fold and the selvages together, again making sure everything is smooth and flat.



Position the folded fabric on a cutting mat so that the fabric extends to the right for right-handed people, or to the left for left-handed people. (Mats with grid lines are recommended because the lines serve as guides to help ensure that cut strips will be straight.)



Lay the fabric so that the fold edge is along one of the horizontal lines on the mat. Place the ruler on one of the vertical lines, just over the uneven edges of the fabric. The ruler must be absolutely perpendicular to the fold edge. Trim the uneven edges with a rotary cutter. Hold the rotary cutter at a 45° angle to the mat. Make a clean cut through the fabric, beginning in front of the folds and cutting through to the opposite edge with one clean (not short and choppy) stroke. Always cut away from yourself — never toward yourself!



Move the ruler to the proper width for cutting the first strip and continue cutting until you have the required number of strips. To keep the cut edges even, always move the ruler, not the fabric. Open up one fabric strip and check the spots where there were folds. If the fabric was not evenly lined up or the ruler was incorrectly positioned, there will be a bend at each of the folds in the fabric.

When cutting many strips, check after every four or five strips to make sure the strips are straight. Leave the other strips folded in fourths until you are ready to use them.

TEMPLATES

Firm, clear plastic is best for making templates. Place a sheet of template plastic over the pattern pieces and accurately trace the cutting line and/or stitching line for each piece. NOTE: Templates for machine piecing include seam allowance. Templates for hand piecing usually do not. Templates for appliqué pieces never include seam allowance. Use a permanent marker to record on every template the name and size of block, the grainline and the number of pieces needed for one block.

MARKING FABRICS

There are many marking tools available. Select the type you like best, remembering to test for removability. Keep these pointers in mind when marking: 1) If using pencil, sharpen it often. 2) Line up the grainline on the template accurately with the grainline of the fabric. 3) Place a piece of fine sandpaper under the fabric to prevent slipping. 4) For hand piecing, mark the wrong side of the fabric. 5) Mark and cut just enough pattern pieces to make a sample block. Piece the block to determine the accuracy of each template. 6) Handle bias pieces with care to avoid stretching.

When marking fabric for appliqué, trace the templates on the right side of the fabric, placing the right side of the template against the right side of the fabric. Leave at least 3/8" around hand

appliqué templates to allow for a 3/16" turn-under allowance on each piece. If using the buttonhole stitch or machine appliqué techniques, cut directly on the traced line.

PIECING

For machine piecing, set the stitch length at 12 stitches per inch and make sure the seamline lies exactly 1/4" from the edge of the fabric. Mark the throat plate with a piece of masking tape placed 1/4" away from the point at which the needle pierces the fabric. Generally, backstitching is not necessary for machine piecing. Start and stop stitching at the cut edges of the pieces, unless a piece must be set in. For set-in pieces, start and stop stitching 1/4" from the edges of the piece, backstitching at both ends.

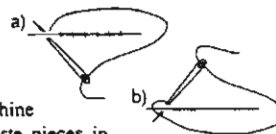
When many of the same pieced unit is required, chain piece them through the machine without stopping. Leave the presser foot down and butt the pieces against one another. Clip the threads after all the pieces are stitched.

When hand piecing, begin with a small backstitch. Continue stitching with a small running stitch, taking one small backstitch every 3 or 4 stitches. Stitch directly on the seamlines of each piece, from point to point, rather than from cut edge to cut edge. Finish each seam with another small backstitch.

APPLIQUÉ

Mark the position of the appliqué pieces on the background block. Lay the block over the pattern, matching centers and other pattern placement indicators. Trace the placement marks lightly with your favorite marking tool (again testing for removability). Use a light box or other light source such as a window to make tracing easier.

To hand appliqué, baste or pin appliqué pieces to the background block in stitching order. Use the blind stitch (a), or buttonhole stitch (b), as shown. For a smooth look, do not turn under or appliqué any edges that will lie underneath other appliqué pieces.



To machine appliqué, baste pieces in place with a long machine basting stitch or a narrow, open zigzag stitch. Then stitch over the basting with a short, wide satin stitch. Placing a piece of paper between the wrong side of the fabric and the feed dogs of the sewing machine will help stabilize the fabric. Carefully remove excess paper when stitching is complete.

FINISHING

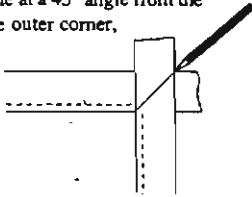
Pressing

Press seam allowances to one side unless otherwise directed. Press with a dry iron to avoid

stretching fabric. Whenever possible, press seam allowances toward the darker of the two pieces. Otherwise, press toward the lighter fabric and trim away 1/16" from the darker seam allowance. This will prevent the darker fabric from showing through the top of the quilt. Press all blocks, sashings and borders before assembling the quilt top.

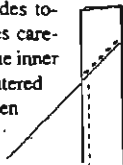
Mitering Corners

For mitered borders, allow extra length on each border strip. As a guide use the formula 2 times the border width plus 2". Stitch each border to the quilt top, beginning and ending each seamline 1/4" from the edge of the quilt top. After all borders have been attached in this manner, miter one corner at a time. With the quilt top lying right side down, lay one border over the other. Draw a straight line at a 45° angle from the inner corner to the outer corner, as shown.



Reverse the positions of the borders and mark another straight line from corner to corner, in the same manner.

Place the borders right sides together, with marked seam lines carefully matched and stitch from the inner to the outer corner. Open the mitered seam to make sure it lies flat, then trim excess fabric and press.



Marking Quilting Lines

Mark the lines for quilting before basting the quilt together with the batting and backing. We suggest using a very hard (#3 or #4) pencil or a chalk pencil (for dark fabrics) though many marking tools are available. Test any marking method to be sure that the lines will wash out and not damage the fabric in any way. Transfer paper quilting designs by placing fabric over the design and tracing. A light box or a brightly lit window may be necessary when using darker fabrics. Precut plastic stencils allow you to trace the quilting design onto the fabric from the front. Check to be sure they fit the area you wish to quilt. Use a ruler to keep lines straight and even, when marking grid lines.

Some quilting may be done without marking the top at all. Outline quilting (1/4" from the seamline) or quilting "in the ditch" can be done "by eye." Quilting "in the ditch" is done next to the seam (but not through it) on the patch opposite the pressed seam allowances.

Other straight lines may also be marked as you quilt by using the edge of masking tape as a stitching guide. For simple quilting motifs (hearts, stars, etc.) cut the shape(s) from clear, sticky-

back paper (such as Contact® Paper) and position them on your quilt top. These shapes can be reused many times. Do not leave masking tape or adhesive paper on your quilt top overnight. Remove it when you are finished quilting for the day to avoid leaving residue.

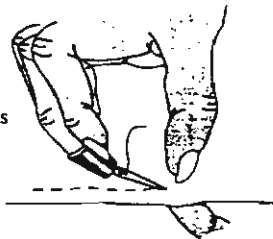
Basting

Cut the batting and backing at least 2" larger than the quilt top on all sides. Place the backing wrong side up on a flat surface and anchor in place with masking tape, if possible. Smooth the batting over the backing. Smooth the quilt top right side up over the batting. Baste the three layers together with thread or pins to form a quilt "sandwich." Begin at the center of the quilt, and baste horizontally first and then vertically. Add additional horizontal and vertical lines of stitches or pins approximately every 6" until the entire top is held together securely.

Quilting

The quilting stitch is actually a small running stitch that holds the three layers of the quilt sandwich together. Quilting is done with a very short, strong needle called a "between." The lower the number (size) of the needle the larger the needle. When learning to quilt, try a size 8 or 9 needle, progressing to a smaller one, either size 10 or 12, with practice. You will need a thimble for the middle finger of the hand that pushes the needle. Begin quilting at the center of the quilt and work toward the edges to help keep the tension even and the quilting smooth.

Thread a needle with a strand of quilting thread 18"-20" long and knot one end. Insert the needle through the quilt top *only* and bring it up exactly where you will begin the first quilting stitch. Pop the knot through the fabric, burying it in the sandwich. Then, a) push the needle with the thimble middle finger of the upper hand; b) slightly depress the fabric in front of the needle with the thumb; and c) with the middle or index finger on the lower hand, redirect the needle back to the top of the quilt, as shown.



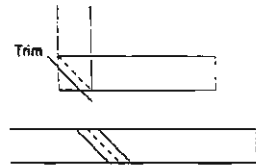
Repeat the process with each stitch, using a rocking motion. To finish a line of quilting, knot the thread close to the surface of the quilt top and pop this knot through the fabric to bury it in the sandwich. Remove basting threads or pins when the quilting is completed.

If you wish to machine quilt your quilt, study and practice the techniques outlined in any of the books available.

Binding

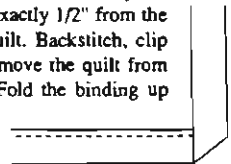
After the basting is removed, trim excess batting and backing even with the quilt top.

For most straight-edged quilts, a double-fold French binding is an attractive, durable and easy finish. (NOTE: If your quilt has curved or scalloped edges, binding strips must be cut on the bias grain of the fabric.) For double-fold French binding, cut the fabric strips 6 times as wide as the finished binding width on the cross grain of the fabric, from selvage to selvage. For example, to make 1/2" finished binding, cut each strip 3" wide. Sew binding strips (cross grain or bias) together with diagonal seams; trim and press seams open.

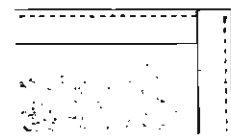


Fold the binding strip in half lengthwise, wrong sides together and press. Position the binding strip on the right side of the quilt top, so that all raw edges are even. Leave approximately 6" of binding strip free. Beginning several inches from one corner, stitch the binding to the quilt with a 1/2" seam allowance.

When you reach a corner, stop the stitching line exactly 1/2" from the edge of the quilt. Backstitch, clip threads and remove the quilt from the machine. Fold the binding up and away, creating a 45° angle, as shown.



Fold the binding down as shown, and begin stitching at the point where the previous stitching ended.



Continue stitching around the quilt in this manner. To finish the binding, overlap the binding strips at the starting point and blind-stitch the ends together. Then stitch this remaining portion of the binding to the quilt. Fold the binding over the edges of the quilt to the back and blindstitch it to the back of the quilt covering the stitches.

The End

Remove any markings visible on the quilt top. Be sure to sign and date your quilt!

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