Dearly Beloved: Transitory Relations and the Queering of 'Women's Work' in David Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1967–72)

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Several critical accounts of *A Stitch in Time* (1967–72) by David Medalla have adopted the retelling of the mythic beginnings of the work of art as if it were an originary or primary scene, one that invokes a network of cities, countries, transnational and desiring same-sex encounters between friends, lovers and strangers. In retelling the beginnings of the artwork in an interview with Adam Nankervis, Medalla (2011) says:

> *A Stitch in Time* (...) reveals the 'atomic' nature of my artworks. In 1967 two lovers of mine came to London. One was on his way from California to India, the other was on his way back from Africa to New York. I arranged to meet them at Heathrow Airport [and] gave each one a handkerchief (one black, one white), some needles and small spools of cotton thread. I told them they could stitch anything they like on the handkerchiefs, on which I had stitched my name and a brief message of love.

Medalla (2011) goes on to say:

> One day many years later, while waiting for my flight back to England at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, I noticed a handsome young man who carried a backpack to which a column of cloth was attached (...) with many little objects (...) and all kinds of embroidered messages.

The young man said someone in Bali had given him the column of cloth and told him he could stitch anything on it. I looked at the bottom of the column of cloth and saw the black handkerchief I gave to one of my lovers with my name and message on it.

It is worth considering how the narrative acts like a genesis story of homo-social and transnational encounters: multiple lovers and a fleeting conversation, that are released from the constraints of a nationalist, heteronormative and patriarchal set of conditions, as objects and intimacies beget objects and intimacies, and exchanges take place between California and India; Africa and New York; Heathrow in London; Schiphol in Amsterdam; Bali in Indonesia.

What is striking about this originary scene is that it is marked by a single material gesture, where the embroidered handkerchief stands in for the symbolic connective tissue of a sprawling network across space and time, and an uncanny loop of intimacy and estrangement. Without saying it directly, this narrative suggests that the totemic memento – an expression of tenderness and care, is passed between transitory figures. It is even intimated that the stranger, 'a handsome young man', may have also been a love interest of a former lover for whom one love interest's personalised and intimate memento, and by extension affections, may have been traded.

In framing how one relation begets another, Medalla reveals how spatial, sexual and social attitudes were being refashioned in the 1960s. There are echoes of Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity* (1995) with his focus on the impact of technology on our relationship to space, the opening up of the global through the development of commercial travel and the specificity – or not, of place. Augé uses as an example, airports, as having a transformative effect on the congregation and flow of people.

TOUCH, INVITATION AND ITS LIMITS

Like a hammock, *A Stitch in Time* consists of a long stretch of cloth suspended in a public place, not necessarily a gallery, with several spools of thread and needles that invite the public to stitch a small object or message of personal significance onto it. The colourful and highly textured result of the contributions builds evidence of a collective mark that challenges the dominant ideas about art's production: from a singular form of authorship to a collective form of production. The artwork is an invitation and a question – a choice between viewing at a distance or getting directly involved. Writer Guy Brett puts it succinctly when he says: 'It was easy to enter' – and here, Brett quotes from Medalla, who says, 'people can walk in and out of my situations' – 'and the invitation to sew took away all preconceptions associated with high art, yet the ambience exerted subtle psychological pressures' (1998, pp. 197–225).

The 'psychological pressures' inferred are propositions to the viewer to give something of themselves and to cross the threshold between self and the self-conscious production of an artwork in a public space. It has to be remembered that during this period an art-going public would have been conditioned to have a certain reverence towards artworks, which were generally considered beyond the reach of an audience's touch. The alternative to the invitation, or sense of pressure, depending on the viewer's inclination, was to keep one's distance in detached contemplation. Medalla called these artworks 'participation-production-propulsions', thus converting individual acts of contemplative energy into a glorious collective force, which returns us to Medalla's comments about his works being 'atomic': a singular and irreducible component that contributes to a larger system.

David Medalla, *A Stitch in Time*, 1967–2017, Arsenale Venice Biennale.
Courtesy another vacant space, Berlin. Photograph and © Adam Nankervis.

As an artwork, *A Stitch in Time* can be seen as a counter-narrative to the accelerated time and points of departure of global travel as sign-posted in Augé's Non-Places, instead Medalla asks the audience/ contributors to stop, sit, give and make by hand in slow-time. What is being presented is a site, or to be more precise, a sculptural-event, through and around which friends and strangers can congregate around the act of sewing. As Medalla (2011) has noted: 'The thing I like best about this work is that whenever anyone is involved in the act of stitching, he or she is inside his or her own private space, even though the act of stitching might occur in a public space.'

A Stitch in Time has been shown several times, and as a consequence of its production and the people that decide to get involved, it changes with each iteration. Versions have been shown in places such as documenta 5 (1972) curated by Harald Szeemann in Kassel, and the Gallery House in London, in the exhibition *A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain* (1972) curated by Sigi Krauss and Rosetta Brooks. A slightly earlier version was shown in the much-maligned exhibition 'POPA at MOMA: Pioneers of Part-Art at the Museum of Modern Art' in Oxford, in 1971, where, as Hilary Floe has pointed out the emergent questions about a participatory practice were being tested.

In her essay 'Everything Was Getting Smashed: Three Case Studies of Play and Participation, 1965–71', Floe discusses three exhibitions where instances of chaotic 'over-participation' occurs. One of the exhibitions Floe discusses is 'POPA at MOMA: Pioneers of Part-Art' (short for Participatory Art) in which *A Stitch in Time* was displayed, and which closed almost as soon as the exhibition opened. The curators for the exhibition were keen to promote the most apposite developments in this burgeoning field and looked to the practices that had been foregrounded by Signals gallery on Wigmore Street in London, which was run by Medalla, Guy Brett, Paul Keeler, Gustav Metzger and Marcello Salvadori (1964–6). Although Signals at the time would not have described its focus as participation art, but more aligned with kinetic art, the international range of artists exhibited in its short life – Takis, Sérgio de Camargo, Mira Schendel, Lygia Clark, Liliane Lijn, Mary Martin, Hélio Oiticica and Li Yuan-chia among many others – played an important role in defining London in the 1960s as a centre for internationally radical artistic expression.

Along with pieces by Medalla, 'POPA at MOMA' also comprised the works of Clark, Oiticica, John Dugger, Yuan-chia and Graham Stevens, with a poster that announced the exhibition's intention to break down the symbolic barrier around art objects, with a very feisty hand-written declaration on the exhibition poster by Medalla stating 'PARTicipation ART is opposed to TOTALitarian ART', which Floe (2014) surmised 'implied newfound liberation from all conventions of artistic appreciation'. She goes on to explain:

> At the opening the largely undergraduate audience apparently took such statements at their word and, buoyed by the complimentary wine and the energising effects of bouncing on Graham Steven's large inflatables, began to physically engage with works of art in ways unintended by their creators. Medalla and Dugger, who arrived at the exhibition three-quarters of an hour late, were indignant at what they saw. Medalla, a Buddhist, objected to the serving of wine at the preview and, according to the Birmingham Post, 'told the audience: "You are all Philistines. People should know how to treat works of art."'
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> (...) Medalla and Dugger withdrew their works from the exhibition immediately, while Stevens pulled out the following day. Sensational headlines such as 'Art Preview Ends in Uproar' and 'Artists Call Spectators Philistines – And Quit' appeared in local and national newspapers...

The fraught relations between intention and outcome are very clear in this example and may go some way to giving credence to the proliferation of Instructional art as an important hallmark of Conceptual art as it unfolded. In fact, this tension remains a question if one is to consider the continued interest in works like *A Stitch in Time*.

Between 2016 and 2017, *A Stitch in Time* was gaining momentum as a significant artwork of the mid-twentieth century. It became a nominee for the inaugural Hepworth Prize for Sculpture in Wakefield; it was shown in the exhibition 'This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect' at Raven Row Gallery in London; and, in the Arsenale during the 57th Venice Biennale, where several people noted the prominence of individual business cards that were sewn onto the cloth.

It is, perhaps, to be expected in our neoliberal and social-media times that the devices of participatory practices, community engagement and the democratisation of art's production would bleed and be turned on their head to become an opportunity for enterprise culture to regard as another marketing platform. Enterprise culture seems to be an avaricious process of co-option that strives to gain sovereignty over anything and everything, including practices that are regarded as a radical alternative and make it capitulate to the captive demands of the market.

WHAT'S CONCEPTUAL ART GOT TO DO WITH IT?

We are all familiar with the sweeping changes that took place around the world during the 1960s. These social upheavals were exemplified by the Vietnam War, the emergence of the civil rights movement and Stonewall protests, widespread national liberation struggles opposing colonial rule and the advocacy of women's rights through the growing feminist movement. There was also a defining break made from the dominant attitude towards art. Shifts were occurring from the New Sculpture of the post-war period, most notably turning away from artists like Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, who art historian Andrew Causey suggests maintained a 'tightly guarded boundary between art and life' (1998, p. 256). John A. Walker, in his book *Art Since Pop* gives an account of the material and conceptual new ground that was being forged by artists in Britain, when he says: 'Sculptors have traditionally favoured hard, durable materials in order to create rigid objects that remain constant in form. However, no sooner had Minimal art established itself publicly that a different attitude to form and a more catholic approach to materials was manifested' (1975, p. 32).

Instead, a formlessness emerged that searched for a non-rigid and less formulaic set of conditions away from the autonomy of art, to its context, or from art's formalist essence, to its spectorial effect. This move towards greater social awareness was sweeping away the old guard as articulated in Lucy R. Lippard's *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (1973). Lippard remarks that a radical emergent group of Conceptual artists were keen to 'escape the frame-and-pedestal syndrome in which art found itself' (1973, p. viii).

The line-up of key figures inducted into our collective understanding as bona fide Conceptual artists appears quite certain. At the top of the list of major players are artists and collectives like Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, Piero Manzoni, Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Yoko Ono, Hanne Darboven and Sol LeWitt. The often-rehearsed canonisation process, it would seem, leaves little room for revision on the one hand, or interrogation on the other.

In her introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue *Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art* (2011), Hannah Mathews outlines six key tropes of Conceptual art: 1) that it is often language-based; 2) images are often black and white, and print-based; 3) the use of lo-fi technologies; 4) the works are executed via instruction; 5) it is experiential; and, 6) it often exists outside of the gallery context, questioning the nature of art and how we experience it. By this account, *A Stitch in Time* could be seen as employing at least three or four of these strategies. Yet, Medalla would seem to occupy a nebulous position within the story of Conceptual art as it has been told.

It is often forgotten or downplayed that Medalla was at the forefront of this emerging trend. He was one of the artists invited to take part in the landmark exhibition 'Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)', curated by Harald Szeemann in Bern in 1969. The actual details of his contribution to the exhibition seem difficult to trace. There is a suggestion that he sent some items via the post to be displayed in a vitrine as part of the 'Information' section, although the inventory of items is unclear. Medalla's entry in the exhibition catalogue consists of a hand-written letter to Szeemann, denoting what had become his trade-mark journeying from Venice to Bombay; Mombasa in Kenya; the Philippines Embassy in New Delhi; Dakar in Senegal; Kerala in South India; Ceylon, as well as his ongoing collaborations with artists and writers: John Dugger from the United States; and Guy Brett in London (1969, p. 105).

Why has it been so easy to displace him from this genealogy? If accounts framed by the recent Tate Britain exhibition in 2016, 'Conceptual Art in Britain, 1964–1979' is anything to go by, where Medalla was quite obviously overlooked. In her essay 'An Art of Refusal' for the exhibition catalogue *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–75*, Rosetta Brooks makes a challenging statement when she says: 'It could be argued that when the art world attempted to dump Gustav Metzger, John Latham and David Medalla at the end of the 60s, they buried the existential roots of Conceptual art in Britain' (2000, p. 32). Let's also not forget the impact of Feminist art practices and critiques, which was a key ingredient of the sweeping changes taking place in the 1960s.

BETWEEN THE BODY AND THE OBJECT

I have been thinking about a work by Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece* first performed in Kyoto in 1964, and then in New York and London. While pointing to a more aggressive message than *A Stitch in Time*, I have been drawing connections between the two works. In *Cut Piece*, the artist sat alone on a stage dressed in her best suit with a pair of scissors in front of her. The audience were told that they could take turns approaching her and use the scissors to cut off a small piece of her clothing, which was theirs to keep.

Cloth-cutting and stitching, the private and the public, as well as the boundaries between the individual and the collective, are what partially connects these two artworks. Remarkably, in the critical reception of *A Stitch in Time*, little has been said about the employment of needlecraft as its basis – a practice that was once considered 'women's work'. Which begs the question: to what extent is *A Stitch in Time* in dialogue with Feminist and Conceptual art critiques of the hierarchical values within art?

Roszika Parker, in her highly influential book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) chronicles the devalued histories of women's involvement in needlecraft via mending, as

well as through acts of destruction and resistance. In the book, she reveals the coded framing of repressed and displaced female sexuality as a projected representational trope that situates the lone figure of a mainly white middle-class female – a feminine ideal – waiting at home, presumably for her husband, quietly engrossed in her domestic activities of cultured embroidery. Parker notes the historical division between the arts, where fine arts are pitched against craft as a major factor in the marginalisation of women's creative expression.

I am not suggesting that *A Stitch in Time* is a Feminist artwork – I am wary of making such claims after some feminist criticisms of artists like Mike Kelley who have been chastised for appropriating radical Feminist art strategies that have recouped methods like stitching and knitting as part of its critical armoury. However, Feminist art discourses have inevitably brought into sharp focus the aligning of gender in relation to contemporary visual arts practices. So much so, that several recent exhibitions like 'Boys Who Sew' held at the Crafts Council in London (2004) and 'Pricked: Extreme Embroidery' held at the Museum of Art and Design in New York (2007) have sought to challenge gender expectations in a bid to change societal norms.

In reviewing 'Pricked: Extreme Embroidery', Karen Rosenberg noted: 'In the 70s artists who swapped their paint brushes for a needle and thread were making a feminist statement. Today, as both men and women fill galleries with crocheted sculpture and stitched canvas, the gesture isn't quite so specific' (2007). It is only in recent years that audiences for contemporary art have become accustomed to the protocols and invitation to get actively involved in artworks by entering installations, touching objects and performing the work of art. When, in 1965, the team at Signals invited Lygia Clark to exhibit, thus introducing her work to a London audience, Medalla continued a dialogue with a kindred spirit who was also concerned with the liberating possibilities of group encounters as art.

In her essay 'Play, Ritual and Politics: Transitional Artworks in the 1960s', Anna Dezeuze (2010, p. 32) writes:

> In their shared interest in (...) human engagement with the world of things, [Lygia] Clark, [Hélio] Oiticica, [Yoko] Ono and [Bertolt] Brecht created works that set up a new space of 'in-between-ness' – between subject and object, mind and matter, inside and outside. This in-between-ness, I would argue, can be usefully compared to the 'intermediate area of experience', that was delineated by British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicot in his notion of the 'transitional object'. Winnicot explained how a favourite toy, blanket or other object can play an important role in the process through which infants and small children gradually learn to differentiate themselves from their mother's bodies, and to perceive themselves as separate human beings.

One can easily align *A Stitch in Time* with this scenario of 'in-between-ness' and the meanings to be drawn from connected bodies and things: of the stitcher, the cloth, the message, and, its intended recipient, or indeed, through other works like Exploding Galaxies (1967–8), a collective of artists, musicians, poets and dancers who carried creative expression into new territories. Jill Drower in her book *99 Balls Pond Road: The Story of the Exploding Galaxy* (2014) chronicles the collective and its protagonists who lived together as a community and defied the boundaries between the practices of art and life.

However, there is possibly a different path to take from the adult-child power relations indicative of transitional object-relations theory that Dezeuze (2010, p. 32) outlines:

> The transitional object exists in an 'intermediate' area because it is perceived by the child simultaneously

as two contradictory experiences. On the one hand, the transitional object appears to be totally controlled by the child, as in the infant's experience of being able to 'possess' and become at one with the mother's breast when it cries out to be fed. On the other hand, it exists in itself, separately from the child who chose it, just like the mother who is gradually perceived as a different (and sometimes absent) person.

What Dezeuze argues is how these artists shift the focus from works of art as commodities, recognising that objects and subject-object relations have the potential for social transformation, while underscoring an inter-dependency between self, other and the object as a replacement or intermediary device.

I would like to offer another reading where transitory relations, and by that, I mean temporary exchanges between people and objects in *A Stitch in Time*, has a different register to transitional object-relations. Whilst still bearing an emotional connection or expressing a personal situation through the stitching of personal messages, transitory relations are shifted from the recriminations projected onto the mother's body for being either a 'good enough mother' or a 'bad mother': the figure who has neglected the child and is, thus, absent.

There is a different kind of 'abandonment' issue from the mother-child scenario so favoured within psycho-analytic theory, because an ambivalence prevails in *A Stitch in Time* that is both festive and throw-away, that is hopeful in its poly-vocal accumulations and at the same time melancholic. I go back to the original story of Medalla's messages of love, intimacy and care. There must be an element of sadness that an item that was quite personal, and maybe treasured, had been traded. Also, that the future life of that handkerchief (and those interpersonal connections) – its status, becomes uncertain.

By departing from the relational debates that are anchored on the mother's body, *A Stitch in Time* opens up other possibilities. It revels in the coexistence of different cultural signs and meanings; its 'origins' narrative validates homo-social and transnational spaces and offers a gender-contested context – eschewing sewing as a gender-specific activity. Instead, the work of art becomes an opening for potentially subversive encounters.

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