

Designs of the Oppressed
Week 5 (10-16/11/2022): Handmade

Carmem Saito

In this lecture I want to bring up a reflection about the making of things, our relationship to things that are made and to how they are made.

With the advancement of technology it seems hard to keep track of how things come to be made in the world. Industrialization, mass production and particularly the formation of world market factories in the Global South have placed a vast distance between consumers and the production of things. It's very common that the term "handmade" is used freely to describe items that are exclusive, artisanal, high quality or sustainable, alluding to the idea that something was made without the support of machines. Still, with or without the use of tools or machines, hands are, more often than not, present in the making of things – but are made invisible.

An example of this is the Sewbo the sewing robot:

[Robot Sewing from Sewbo](#)

Sewbo was launched in 2016 and more recently they've partnered with [Siemens](#) to further their efforts in achieving automation in the manufacturing of clothing. Notable here is how the founder came up with the idea to delve into this industry in the first place. He shamelessly says in interviews that he watched a [TV show](#) about the production of denim trousers and realised that clothes aren't made by robots.

≡ **WIRED** Why Robots Can't Sew Your T-Shirt



Sewbo founder Jon Zornow did not start out in the apparel industry. He credits an interest in robotics and an episode of the TV show *How It's Made* with inspiring him to work toward automated clothing production. "One day they did blue jeans, and instead of these serene, repetitive machines, it was all manual," he says. "That was the moment I realized, oh wait, people make our clothes?"

What I want to focus here is not on automation, but more the fact that white north american man with no understanding of how textiles behave and how clothes are made – who was literally shocked that "people make our clothes" – decided [this was a problem that he could solve](#). His software developer background renders his work as highly skilled. Unlike those of garment workers who are regarded as being unskilled. Young racialized women in the Global South overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of garment factories. Factories in the Global North also employ mostly racialized women with immigrant backgrounds as a cheap labour force. The irony is that often these women are hired precisely because they already

possess the knowledge and skills required to work in those factories – very rarely there’s extensive training given on the job. However, as it is with many forms of labour associated with private domestic settings – sewing being only one example – they are made invisible and devalued under a naturalisation of such skills (Buckley, 2020). This is starker when looking at the experience of racialized women. A Malaysian investment brochure for factories reads:

The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl (emphasis added). - passage in a Malaysian investment brochure (Elson & Pearson, 1981)

Even caring for clothes is something somewhat unfashionable – “caring about fashion” is commonly regarded as intrinsically feminine and therefore frivolous and irrational. Care, however, involves the knowledge of how something is made in order to care for it. In the case of clothes it means knowing how to wash different fabrics, if and how to iron clothes, how to fold and store them, how to mend them, how to reuse them, etc. Consequently, market jobs that require such forms of labour are classified as 'unskilled'. Buckley stresses the need to reassess our ideas of “making”. This is important both theoretically and in a practical sense as she points out that the place of making is crucial in defining how something is perceived. I add that the bodies and the hands of those who make them are equally important in defining value. Fashion scholar Minh-Ha T. Pham (Pham, 2020) makes a brilliant contribution to the notion of making using the example of mask making during the Covid-19 pandemic. She points to how white women in the US who were making fabric masks at home and selling them on crafts platforms like Etsy, were making good profit and were celebrated as feminist heroes. This was in direct contrast to racialized women who produced actual protective equipment and earned close to nothing after being laid off from their previous jobs when Western fashion brands cancelled their orders in the beginning of the pandemic.

Indeed, the hands, the bodies, especially those placed in factories in various countries in Asia, are too easily connected to low quality, cheap materials and poor construction. Labels bearing the words “Made in China”, “Made in Bangladesh”, “Made in Vietnam” and so on, tend to raise both ethical and quality alarms on consumers.



Still, as mentioned before, garment workers acquire their skills long before they join factories and have their labour labelled unskilled. This knowledge is passed down through generations along many others that might become obsolete due to the lack of practice and exchange value. Highlighting that these skills existed before markets were constructed around them implies that there were also making cultures, material cultures and dressing practices that were displaced and erased through the shift of making Western fashions. Textile designer and socialist William Morris (2008) hints at a possible interpretation for this debate when he defines the production of waste, that is, the labour wasted in the production of goods that only serve the making of profit for the non-producing classes – the bourgeoisie. For Morris, taking the means of production meant they would go “into the hands of the community, to be used for the good of all alike, so that we might all work at ‘supplying’ the real ‘demands’ of each and all” (Morris, 2008). I would like to conclude by inviting you all to reflect on the hands that make things and those who make hands make things.

“will you not be bewildered, as I am, at the thought of the mass of things which no sane man could desire, but which our useless toil makes – and sells?”

- William Morris in Useful Work versus Useless Toil

Bibliography

Buckley, C. (2020). Made in Patriarchy II: Researching (or Re-Searching) Women and Design. *Design Issues*, 36(1), 19–29. https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00572

Elson, D., & Pearson, R. (1981). 'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers': An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing. *Feminist Review*, 7, 87–107.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1394761>

Morris, W. (2008). *Useful work v. Useless toil*. Penguin.

Pham. (2020). "How to Make a Mask": Quarantine Feminism and Global Supply Chains.

Feminist Studies, 46(2), 316. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.46.2.0316>