

So hi, and thanks to the Voices of Textiles team for putting together this really fascinating roundtable this afternoon. I'm currently a researcher in residence at the University of Edinburgh's *Women Make Cities* network. I'm one of the managers of decorating dissidence, which is a project that looks at the roles of craft and making in culture, society and politics, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. I'm just going to give a quick overview of decorating dissidence's work and focus before, before then turning to a sort of case study of a textile artist who I think offers a particularly powerful example of decorating dissidence in action and a very timely one, an artist called Hannah Ryggen.

So decorating dissidence was set up as a response to the systematic devaluation of women, women's art and the persistent critical neglect of arts defined as feminine, such as textile art, interior design and craft. Finding collaborative and non-hierarchical ways of researching, curating, making, and writing about modern textile art and design is at the heart of the project, and so we run a journal and a podcast, and we put together exhibitions and workshops that explore the history of craft and making in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how contemporary artists are responding to those legacies today. Our 2019 exhibition *Weave It*, for example, celebrated the centenary of the Bauhaus by taking a mix of present day artists and weavers, whose work is taking weaving in alternative directions, with themes of migration, the digital world, intimacy and community. And on the left there, is an example of the wall hanging that we showed, which was a collaboration between a weaving artist called Majeda Clarke, and she was working with the citizens of the world choir. And to bring, to make this work together, the members of the choir all brought objects that reminded them of home and the things they had to leave behind when they fled their homelands. And Majeda wove that into this kind of amazing tapestry.

And so the focus of decorating dissidence begins with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and modernism, because it was at this point that a hierarchy between art and craft emerged, which was enforced by art critics and usually male artists. Modernism brought in a line, brought in an era of clean lines and unembellished surfaces and rationality and simplicity. And that aesthetic is coded masculine and, by contrast, craft is associated with all the others of modernism, such as the decorative, the feminine and the domestic. And this is in part a false dichotomy, that hides the ways that craft practices are a part of modern art, and that modernism takes and appropriates non western art forms. Faith Ringgold, an artist who uses textile and quilting in her work, spoke out about her issue with having the term 'craft' applied to her work, and her issue with the label craft more generally, saying "at one time, I thought what we meant by craft was the use of certain kinds of materials, but that's not right because Claes Oldenburg's soft typewriters are sewn pieces and I never heard anyone call them craft – it's who's doing it. What Ringgold draws attention to there is the way that male artists might use textiles or ceramics in their practice, without their status as a serious artist being questioned. But, by contrast, women and artists outside of the white western tradition, will be classed as crafts people whose work is of lesser value. And you can see there, on the left, Oldenburg's typewriter next to Ringgold's quilt, 'Who's afraid of Aunt Jemima'. Both are textile works, but one has been accepted into the world of high art and another was, you know, being classed as decorative craft, women's work. Obviously those, those ideas are really seriously being challenged at the moment, thankfully, not before long, but I think it's still a dominant attitude that we're having to unpick and work against.

As the other speakers today are highlighting, textile art is often an important part of social and political movements. It's a powerful means of expressing communal acts of protest and protest solidarity. But it's also an inherently political medium, because it carries with it gendered assumptions about what counts as art, who gets to be an artist, and what art is for. But this also gives – it's what gives us, um, textile art, sorry, its subversive power. Textile art is ostensibly non-threatening, and in this way it allows people to express thoughts, feelings and identities that would otherwise be censored. Just as it's provided an avenue for creativity, for those out of our schools and institutions. And this leads me to the work of Hannah Ryggen.

During the Nazi occupation of Norway in the 1940s, soldiers marching prisoners to a prison camp near the village of Ørlandet might have noticed an unassuming farmer's wife hanging rugs on the washing line outside her farmhouse. They didn't take a second look – what could these folksy, handwoven fabrics mean to them? But a closer look would have revealed the farmer's wife was actually Hannah Ryggen, engaging in an act of domestic resistance. The homely rugs were in fact anti-fascist tapestries, protesting against Nazi atrocities. Hannah Ryggen's tapestries offer perhaps one of the most striking bodies of politically charged textile art of the 20th century. The Swedish born Ryggen became a prolific and well known artist in her adopted Norway. But despite its global focus, her work never found international recognition, and she became largely forgotten in the years after her death. This is in part due to her, due to Ryggen's principles – she was a committed Communist, she rejected the art market and she wouldn't sell her work to private collectors. And also, although she kept up to date with politics and culture, she lived on a remote farm, her and her husband were self-sufficient, and they had no access to electricity. So she was outside of those kind of modern art networks that would support other artists and allow them to collaborate and exhibit together. And for aesthetic as much as practical reasons, Ryggen rejected the machine in favour of a labour intensive, hands on weaving process, in which she, she dyed wool that was shorn from her own sheep, and she wove it on custom looms which were constructed by her husband. Her work is as uncompromising and utterly singular as the artist that made it, so it's not surprising that her tapestries have been excluded from the often rigid narrative of 20th century modern art. They challenge dichotomies between so called high art and craft, folk traditions and modernist experimentation, and the private and the public world. By combining abstract styles with dramatic narrative scenes, Ryggen challenges conventional interpretive frameworks. Like the art she created, Ryggen's development as an artist was atypical. She worked as a school teacher, and started studying painting as a hobby, before then embarking on a very slow process of teaching herself weaving. Ryggen's move to the isolated farmhouse is cited as a factor in her decision to, to focus on weaving rather than painting, but a letter from Hans that predates their marriage suggests it was more keenly motivated by her artistic development. In the letter he says "are you giving up painting, and in favour of an art discipline that demands far more diligence and perseverance. Weaving art – I've never seen much of that, but it must be hard". In other words, Ryggen's weaving practice was born less of necessity, and more of a determination to pioneer, pioneer a new art form that could best express her response to the modern world. Although the medium is associated with craft and domesticity, Ryggen defined herself as "a painter, not a weaver; a painter whose tool is not the brush, but the loom". This attitude speaks of the resistance many women artist felt towards labels associated with craft and domestic art, due to fears that their art would be further marginalised. Yes, we can think back to Faith Ringgold's comment there.

Despite its id- sorry, idiosyncrasies, Ryggen's art was distinctly of its time. Her innovative work on the loom offers a significant contribution to modern art, while her specific choice of medium allowed her to engage with the political and cultural peoples of the early 20th century, from the rise of fascism to the Cold War. The tapestries offer radical responses to the trauma and chaos of modern life, whilst also exploring new ways of living in and with the world. She allows the brutality of the 20th century to burst through her tapestries angular patterns and flat colour fields, raising questions about the politics of modernism and the purpose of art in a troubled world. Ryggen's mastery of the form coincided with the global rise of fascism, charging her art with extra potency. 1935's *Ethiopia* is a tapestry made in response to the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia. At first glance, it looks like an abstract pattern, but in fact we can see along the top layer rows of chained hands, and repeated lines of barbed wire. The muted colour scheme references weaponry, and the colour of Benito Mussolini's uniform. Mussolini himself can be found at the top right of the tapestry, his head hanging from the spear of an Ethiopian warrior – a piece of wishful thinking on Ryggen's part. *Ethiopian* was displayed at the 1937 Paris World Fair, along with Picasso's *Guernica*. But its violent imagery provided proved to be too

much of the organisers, and they censored the image of Mussolini's murder by turning over the top corner of the tapestry, so as not to offend the Italian delegates.

And throughout the years of Nazi terror that followed, Ryggen continued to use woven art as a form of protest, even as her husband was interned in a prisoner of war camp and some of the couple's friends were murdered. You can see a couple of examples there, and on the left there's some really great examples. We've got Hitler falling down, he's got kind of feathers coming out of his bum, and Winston Churchill, there, is a kind of ... she likes to parody and to send up these kind of authoritarian figures, and champion the kind of the common man and everyone's ordinary people's protest in the face of these political figures who even, you know, even Churchill here, I think she's criticising part of all leaders not doing enough

And if the imagery in many of Ryggen's tapestries represent the destruction of all by fascism and war, her materials and methods offer the hope of renewal and reconstruction. By creating every dye by hand, using flora and fauna gathered from around her home, Ryggen quite literally wove the Norwegian landscape into her tapestries. Her commitment to this method was such that she even invited guests to her house to pee in a bucket, because one of her favourite colours, pot blue, was made with fermented urine. And pot blue lends its name to this striking tapestry on the left, which is a self portrait that depicts Ryggen as sort of a mythical sprite-like figure, merging with her paint pot. Pot blue as a colour was used by Ryggen to represent the spiritual realm and the positive life force over and against the destruction of war. It can be seen again on the right as well in *'We are living on the star'* which a tap- this tapestry became part of Norwegian political history again when it was ripped in the 2011 terror attack in Oslo. Pot blue emphasises the way that Ryggen's work draws on preindustrial feminine crafts, and what the critic Constance Classen refers to as the feminine sensory-based basis of domesticity and witchcraft, particularly touch, to resist the mechanised structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Like the witch who Classen describes as transgressing the social order by using cooking pots to make spells, and sewing needles to pierce effigies, Ryggen turns domestic craft into a subversive act of feminist resistance. Significantly, Ryggen used a synthetic dye in her tapestries just once, in *Blood in the Grass* here, and this was a piece that criticised President Lyndon B Johnson and the Vietnam war. And she used the really vivid, unnatural colours to allude to the devastation on Vietnam by the use of napalm. We can see throughout the works of the 1950s and 60s she repeatedly condemns the threat of nuclear war and chemical weapons and the destruction that would, that those weapons would bring to the natural environment.

Throughout her tapestries, Ryggen rethinks our relationship with animals and with the world around us. She creates ethical artworks that remind us of the bonds that connect us to each other and to our environment, even in the darkest moments. Her work anticipated eco-feminist arguments such as to enlarge ruined worlds, reevaluate nature and deconstruct the hierarchies between nature and culture, men and women, human and non human. Ryggen's legacy is a modern feminist art that eschews patriarchal capitalist structures and the masculine destructive violence of fascism and chemical warfare. Instead she offers us an alternative vision of life and creativity, a vision I think we can agree is still needed in this present moment.

I'm going to leave you with an image there of Hannah Ryggen and her family on her farm and Ryggen is upset and kind of we can see her there in the middle with her hand over her face, she can't bear to eat the animals that she's tended to, so it's kind of the distress that having to have to butcher the animals on the farm. And a couple of links there to decorating dissidence, and you can find out more about the Weave It exhibition I mentioned, and this article is my feminism. Thank you.