

Pluralities ∞ Plural Singularities ∞ Singular Pluralities ∞ Plural Singularities

Five Questions for Pip Culbert

1

Is a seam the strongest or weakest point in a garment? I'm no seamstress, I really don't know. One would think that a thread holding two edges together would bind the fabric and give it extra strength. But then again, it's so often the case that fabric ends fray and stitches are the first to come undone. I'm thinking of the mending I've done; the rare occasions when I use an iron to smooth out creases, feeling my way around the little imperfections I don't notice when I'm wearing something. Equivocation about the strength or otherwise of a seam is one of the questions Pip Culbert's sculptures raise. That's because they are literally all seam; that is, her works are the skeletons of made things, what's left when all the fabric is cut away. Pinned flat on the wall, drooping or stretched in space, her works are ghostly reminders of what they once were: a row of shirts, a string of pockets, three aprons, an umbrella, a tent, a rucksack, the wavy edge of an awning, the hub-and-spokes of a parachute. These were all useful once, designed to clothe us, keep us warm, hold things, and protect us from the elements. But without the planes of cloth or canvas the seams once held together, they've lost their purpose. We see them now at their weakest. Yet these outlines seem definitive: they give the object structure, they are its very architecture; which of course is their strength.

2

What does usefulness have to do with it? I would have thought that the definition of, say, an apron, is its service as a protective garment; something worn over clothing to keep clean, especially when cooking. An apron is a useful thing, made to serve a purpose. So what becomes of such a thing, when its function is literally stripped away, when the fabric is removed and all that is left are some seams that are then pinned to the wall in a gallery, as is the case with several works by Pip Culbert? Well of course, the easy answer is that the apron becomes art, which, we all understand, is categorically useless. Under the regime of art and in art's proper context, attention turns to appearance: the shape the construction makes on the wall, its colour, the elegance of its arrangement, its visual effects as a pleasing geometry. But is this all? Martin Heidegger argued otherwise when he wrote about a painting of peasant's shoes by Vincent van Gogh.¹ Following Heidegger, one might say that the 'work' of the work of art is not only in the realm of aesthetics; Culbert's aprons, transfigured as useless things to be looked at, now speak of apron-ness: of what it means to be worn, of the hands that tied the cords and wiped the cloth, of meals prepared and dishes done. They perform now as spurs for thinking about the nature of things; and it is their transformation into art that has enabled this; their uselessness as aprons is their usefulness as art.

Christina Barton

3

Would you call these sculptures soft? 'Soft sculpture'; there's a term that's done the rounds and may still have its advocates. I think of it as an attempt to bridge the art-craft divide, with handmade things made from fabric, often stuffed, more crafty than arty, unless of course you move into the larger-than-life, with Claes Oldenburg or Magdalena Abakanowicz; or the redemptive, think Joseph Beuys; or the uncanny, with the likes of Annette Messager or Mike Kelley; or the clever-funny, like Kathy Temin. Culbert doesn't fit these models, mostly because her work is the opposite of stuffed, but she does work with fabric and her aesthetic is decidedly anti-monumental. Hers is a softness without volume, perhaps 'soft drawing' rather than soft sculpture. And could there be a politics to this droopy draughting, as was the case for women artists who brought craft techniques and textiles into art in the 1970s? I think so, especially when Culbert converts a quilt into a gridded abstraction or lines up 'three black aprons' as a minimalist series. If Oldenburg and Judd took on the modes of mass production in the first industrial age and either over- or under-played the handmade in their individual practices, Culbert seems to be tracing the lineaments of women's labour as homemakers and in modern factory conditions where off-the-rack clothing and equipment is manufactured. Her process of cutting away, in which she follows the line of the sewing machine with her scissors, is an undoing or reversal that reverently takes her hand-held tool on a pilgrimage that honours such labour as the very crux of the garment's identity. Somewhere I've seen a work Culbert has made with all the labels she has removed from the items she has adjusted. Taking the brand names away and treating them as something separate only reinforces this reading.

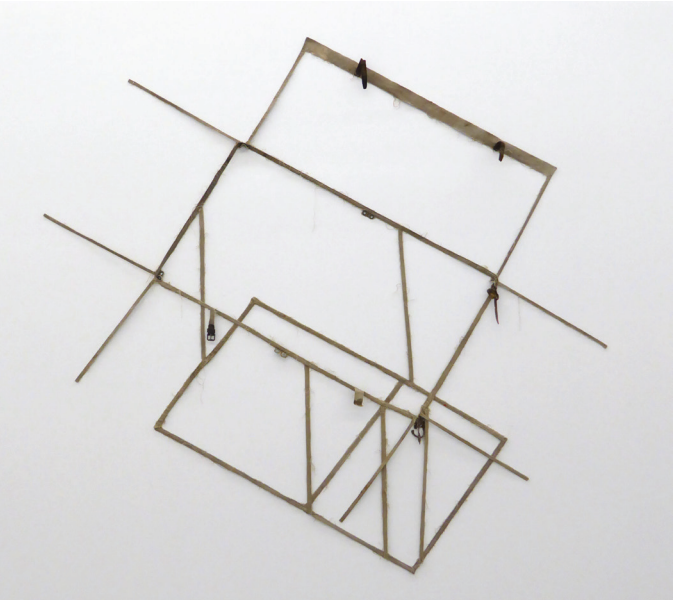
4

Could you wear one of Pip's shirts? Well, hell yes! Just look at Miley Cyrus at the 2015 MTV Music Awards and any number of other celebrities showing off their bodies through 'naked dresses', a trend kicked off famously by Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s (according to elle.com), and perpetuated everywhere from wet T-shirt contests to Adobe Photoshop tutorials on how to achieve x-ray effects. And at the other end of the fashion spectrum—its cerebral edge—think of Japanese designers Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, and Europeans like Ann Demeulemeester and Martin Margiela, who rocked the industry with their exposed seams, shredded denim, de- and re-constructed clothing that reflexively unpacked the rules of good sewing and redefined the relation of a garment to its wearer's body. Of course the gulf between the see-through dress and Comme des Garçons is the difference between the (self-) objectification of women and a cultural and conceptual examination of clothing as form. But somewhere in this rift I can see Culbert's work cleaving. Her shirts, pockets, aprons and pinafores are pinned

or hung as the reductio ad absurdum of themselves, but don't we as viewers fill them with the bodies that are missing? And don't those soft and draping seams, with their roughly cut edges and delicate fraying threads refuse a reading as 2-D drawing, suggesting both the processes of making and unmaking (that is, the time taken by hand and machine) and the building up of layers that still yield to gravity?

5

So where does Pip Culbert fit? I wonder if Culbert's cut-out art works could themselves allegorise her relationship to art history and to the categories we use to define art practice in general and her working methods in particular? I've tried to corral her work into the category of 'soft sculpture', others describe it as 'minimal'; neither serve, despite her clever referencing of seriality as organising principle and her use of fabric as her favoured medium. I'm unsure whether to call Culbert's works sculptures, drawings or even paintings: they are delineated depictions, wall-bound, pencil-slim, yet they bear with them traces of the figure; they would crumple in a heap if they were left to their own devices. Not-quite-readymades, they are found and then *un*-made. Spatially they seem infra-thin, hardly there, all holes and gaps, and yet the robustness of what's left: the stitched-together layers have a certain presence that exceeds their status as lines on a wall, they bulge and sag and cast shadows. But their spatial heft is also an illusion: set against a flat surface their traceries suggest perspectival recession into depth: rucksack pouches fill with only-imagined volume, the lineaments of a tent project a shelter that magically hangs in space. The work for me evokes a play between presence and absence, between a thing



Pip Culbert, *Trunk Cover*, Malle 1990
Canvas, leather straps, metal buckles, 1450x1750mm
Courtesy Pip Culbert Estate and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland

of the world and the stuff of art, between the domestic and the feminine and the abstract and conceptual. It is there but not there, overshadowed by more robust forms, quietly to one side of a partner's better-known practice. Most of all, I can imagine it scrunched into the bottom of a suitcase. A whole exhibition of space-defying scale could probably be safely stowed as hand luggage. Those tacked-up seams are seldom perfectly straight; they carry with them signs of wear and the exigencies of travel. I imagine the artist picking items up en route, cutting away to lighten the load. They are a restless and welcome remainder, often of the very things we need when we take flight: a change of clothes, a carry-bag, an emergency cover, an escape device. Perhaps we could say Culbert was happiest on the fringes, it's where she found herself and what she chose to work on.

- 1 Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 1935, extract published in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Donald Preziosi, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 284-294.