



# WHY A GLOSSARY?

by Aaron McIntosh

I was invited by **Astrid Bennett** (SDA President) last year to lead a breakout session for the biannual summer conference, *Making Our Mark*, held in Portland, Oregon, August 3–6, 2017. I considered what are the pressing issues for the next generation of fiber and textile artists. Issues of diversity, equity and inclusion came foremost to mind, perhaps because I was reminded of the frank, awkward, and refreshing conversations occurring around race and the overwhelming whiteness of attendees and presenters at the 15<sup>th</sup> Biannual **Textile Society of America** (TSA) conference, “From the Global to the Local (and Back Again): The Practice of Cultural Contestation and Reinvention” in Savannah, Georgia (2016). A roundtable at TSA, “The Global Language of Contemporary Art,” led by **Karen Hampton**, **Namita Gupta Wiggers**, **Susanna White**, and **Raksha Parekh**, broached the lack of diversity in the textile fields. **Stephanie Syjuco**, in the Closing Plenary,<sup>1</sup> refocused her remarks away from her own practice to address the problems of the prevalent ethnographic gaze in textile scholarship and the contemporary disconnects she had witnessed during the conference. Overall, the parting message was clear: “We need to diversify our field to make it thrive.”

With American culture in the midst of severe partisan divides, similar to the culture wars that defined the 1980s and 1990s, it is no surprise that contemporary concerns within the Fiber Arts field might stand out at this moment, more so than formal or aesthetic-historical discussions of fiber and textiles. From my own place of academic privilege, I often struggle with how I can add anything additional or meaningful to the dialogues that are already taking place, though largely in the margins of the field: sidebar conversations and social media comment threads.

Most importantly, I wanted to abandon the format of a traditional lecture, and have a more decentralized dialogue. Also, I wanted to build upon a group-led participation structure that I was introduced to by **Judith Leeman** and **Jesse Harrod**, fellow fiber educators. For a public discussion of the *Queer Threads* exhibition (April 29–July 10, 2016) at the **Boston Center for the Arts**, we each came up with key context words, letting the audience pull these from a hat to generate dialogue. Selected words drew us all over the map of textile and queer thought, and the exercise proved educational, participatory and open-ended.

## A Set of Useful Terms

I find precise words and language helpful in understanding and tackling complex topics. I have gleaned much from field-specific and social movement glossaries over the years, and decided it would be great to focus on what a glossary for the fiber field might include in 2017. Initially, I wanted to create a critical rejoinder to the expansive material and technical glossaries of the famous early Fabric Art Movement texts by **Mildred Constantine** and **Jack Lenore Larsen**.<sup>2</sup> As I researched other kinds of glossaries, I became inspired by the online glossary of the **Movement for Black Lives**<sup>3</sup> and an illustrated glossary of LGBTQ history and theory in *Queer: A Graphic History* by **Meg-John Barker** and **Julia Scheele**.

### Glossary of Terms Used:

**BOBBIN LACE** A lace based on plaiting in which, for individual control, each end is wound on a weighted bobbin; synonymous with pillow lace.

**BROCADE** A woven cloth in which a supplementary element is introduced onto the two-element ground; brocades may be in the filling or the warp or may be discontinuous.

**CABLE PLY YARN** A firm, round yarn usually of eight or more strands twisted together.

**COUCHING** An embroidery technique in which one element is laid over the cloth, then stitched to it by another, usually finer, element.

**ECCENTRIC** Term applied to woven elements deviating from the horizontal-vertical definition of textiles.

**ELEMENT** In the construction of fabric, a component or set of components: knitting is a typical single-element technique; most weaving is two-element; pile fabrics and brocade are three-element; double cloth is four-element, etc.

**FABRIC** A pliable plane of any material or technique. Most fabrics are constructed of fibrous yarns.

**GIMP** A yarn in which one strand is spirally wrapped around a core of yarn or yarns.

**GOBELIN** From the famous French tapestry center of Gobelin: conventional tapestry joinings in which wefts of adjacent areas are looped around each other.

**HARNESS** In the loom, a frame from which are suspended the heddles, through which the warp yarns are threaded.

**INTERLACE** To engage the filling yarns with the warp ends to make a web or woven cloth.

**LENO** A technique for woven fabric in which pairs of warp ends are twisted between each insertion of weft.

**PLAITING** A fabric technique employing two elements which are interlaced over and under in the manner of braiding or plain weaving. Often both elements run on the diagonal.

**PICK** A single shot of weft.

**RYA** The Finnish designation for a woven rug with a long, hand-knotted pile.

**SELVAGE (literally, self-edge)** In a woven cloth, the warpwise edges at which the weft wraps around the outermost warps as it re-enters the web. The selvages prevent unraveling. A few hand-woven cloths, especially those woven on a frame or backstrap loom have horizontal selvages as well, and so are four-selvaged.

**SETT (also set)** Usually refers to the disposition of the warp ends in the dents of the reed, determining the density of the cloth. Cloth sett includes the closeness of the weft as well.

**TEXTILE** A fabric woven with two or more sets of elements.

**TWINING** A construction older than weaving which is based on twisting pairs of elements. Weft twining involves a warp plus pairs of wefts. Warp twining may have a weft or be single-element (sprang).

**WARP** The lengthwise or vertical element in woven cloth which is threaded into the loom. The warp is composed of many yarns individually called "ends."

**WEFT** Horizontal or crosswise element(s) in woven cloth; also called filling (see also Pick).

I set out to think through critical and useful fiber/textile terms by organizing "case studies" of recent textile exhibitions, intercultural scholarship, and studio trends into broad contextual categories for the participants to respond to. Through thoughtful and colorful discussions, participants collectively built a loose glossary of useful terms for understanding the complex and interwoven worlds of material culture, textile production, labor, studio art practice, critical thinking/writing, intersectional understanding, globalization and civic engagement. The following sections capture elements of the presentations, conversations and stand-out useful terms collected during the breakout session.

### Shaping a Field & Useful Terms of Legacy

In recent years, we have seen rising fascination with the origins of and early iterations of Fiber Art. Artists such as **Sheila Hicks**, **Claire Zeisler**, **Françoise Grossen**, and **Ed Rossbach** are the subjects of numerous retrospectives. The groundbreaking 1969 exhibitions *Wall Hangings*, **MOMA**, New York and *Perspectief in Textie*, **Stedelijk Museum**, Amsterdam were partially recreated in *Fiber Sculpture: 1960-Present* at the **Boston Institute of Contemporary Art** in 2016 and *Textiles: Open Letter* at the

Left page: *Queer Threads* exhibition (installation view) curated by **John Chaich** at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) 2016, with the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Artists left to right: **Sheila Pepe**, **James Gobel**, **Jesse Harrod**, **Larry Krone**, **Liz Collins**, **Harmony Hammond**, **Aaron McIntosh**, **LJ Roberts**. Photo: Dan Meyers, courtesy of MICA.





**Abteiberg Museum** in Germany in 2013. Despite such interest, outside opinions leveled at the field were perplexing. With *Fiber Sculpture* curator **Jenelle Porter** suggesting “critical interest waned during the intervening decades,” and **Glenn Adamson** comparing the Fiber movement to a “flaccid penis” in the exhibition’s catalogue, the uninitiated might imagine it was a field resuscitated from a state of failure.<sup>4,5</sup> Other scholarship focused solely on the early Fiber pioneers and their most recent antecedents neglects the entire generation of fiber artists working between the 1980s and early 2000s.

Dialogue and suggested terms were derived from the following questions: Who can claim authority in a field? Who is/is not represented in these surveys? How is the artwork or practice contextualized? Participants brought up memories of the early movement, and discussed how weaving had predominated conversations (leading to the creation of the SDA). Thoughts also turned to art world hierarchies and how skill and craft have shaped legacies, while new generations question such bona fides.

Installation View, *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-present*, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2014-15. Photo by Charles Mayor Photography.



### Contextualizing a Global Textile Phenomenon & Useful Terms of History

In an ongoing struggle to legitimate Fiber as fine art, Fiber Art often separates itself from the broader cultural history of textiles, and simultaneously appropriates many non-Western techniques and traditions. New scholarship has sought to draw multitudinous lines of connection to the ways that nearly all textiles are inherently connected through global trade and aesthetic trends. The *Interwoven Globe* (2013–2014) exhibition at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** traced 300 years of cultural exchanges and economic impacts of the global textile trade

between European powers and the rest of the world. Two other exhibitions addressed this disconnect, *Mood Indigo* (2016) at the **Seattle Asian Art Museum** and *Scraps* (2016–2017) at the **Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum**, which viewed materiality and process through the uniquely global lens of textiles. Each exhibition featured historic examples of Western and non-Western textiles alongside contemporary artists and designers using the same methods or materials. Despite exhibitions that seek to bridge textile practices across cultures, we find that hierarchical distinctions between what constitutes “fiber art,” “folk art,” and “traditional crafts” are persistent, and their impacts uninterrogated in our field.

The questions I posed for this section were: What should be new directions for textile historical scholarship? Whose perspectives are/are not represented in these surveys? Since textiles are inherently global, how do we address appropriation and cultural theft in contemporary times? We acknowledged these as complex problems for our field. Dialogue focused on the disconnects between Fiber Art, ethnographic study and design colonialism. Questions around power, labor and exploitation of cultural capital generated many of the key terms.



*Scraps: Fashion, Textiles, and Creative Reuse* (installation view) 2016.  
Photo: Matt Flynn. © Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.







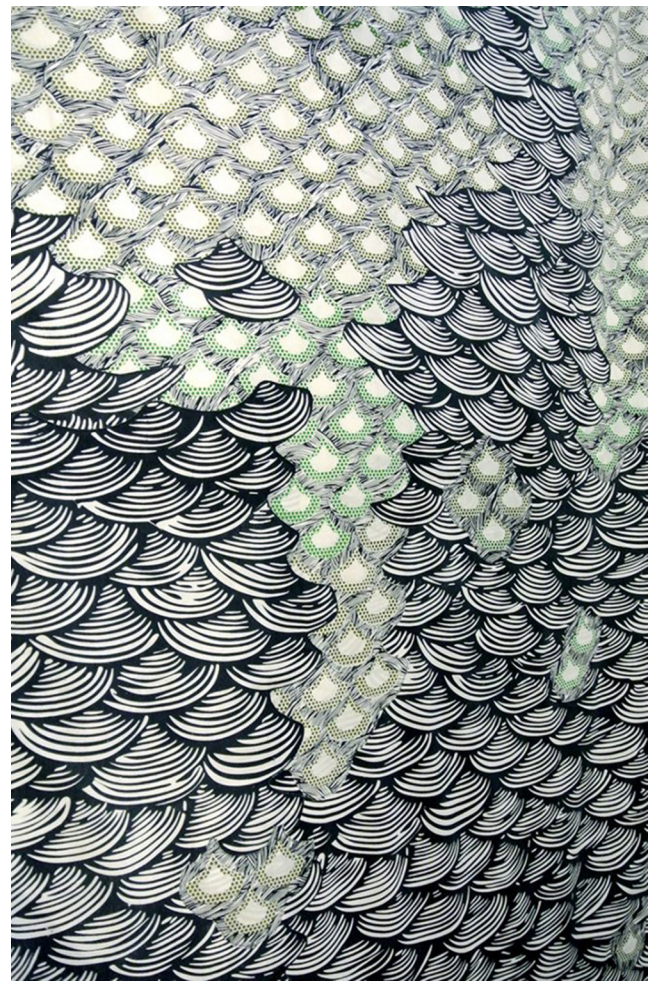
### Contemporary Intersections & Useful Terms of Identity

Does the homogeneity of our conferences reflect problems specific to the field, or the broader inequities of American culture? The past five years have witnessed a number of fiber/textile exhibitions focusing on matters of identity and margins. A few stand-out ones include *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity & Community* (2016) at the **Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art** in New York; *Stories of Migration: Contemporary Artists Interpret Diaspora* (2016) at the **The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum**; and *Everything Has Been Material for Scissors to Shape* (2017) at the **Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience** in Seattle. These exhibitions highlighted the creative capacity of textiles seized on by LGBTQ, Asian American, and immigrant communities to tell their varied stories. These exhibitions represent a diverse way forward, but they can't mask the fact that the institutional

For a movement with feminist and multicultural origins, but Eurocentric institutions, Fiber must now look toward the future with intersectional understanding.

**Faith Ringgold** *The Crown Heights Children's History Quilt* 1996, painted, pieced fabric, 108" x 144". Courtesy of the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum. © 2018 Faith Ringgold, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.





Fiber field remains largely homogenous. For a movement with feminist and multicultural origins, but Eurocentric institutions, Fiber must now look toward the future with intersectional understanding.

The questions I posed for this section were: Who is/is not represented in these surveys? What identities are being highlighted? What does inclusion and equity look like? What do we expect from a critically-aware field? And why isn't "craftivism" solving the issue of racial disparity in the Fiber field? This was one of the most impassioned dialogues, with much discussion about the idea of "voice" and whose authority bestows it upon underrepresented groups. Some participants called for more interrogation of whiteness and its histories from a critical race theory perspective. There was an exasperated final call for Fiber to look to the language and thinking of other fields to better address inclusion and equity.

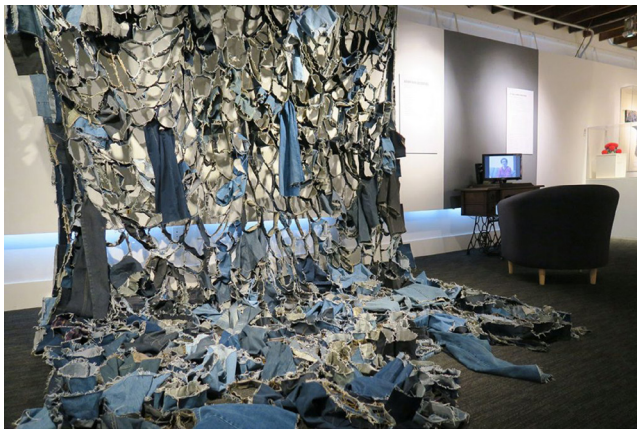


Left: **Surabhi Ghosh** *A Hair's Breath, the Unfurled Sea* (installation) 2016, otton cloth, tencel yarn, textile ink, thread, 44" x 88½'. Photo: The Wing Luke. Right: detail.









### Gathering Words for a Resource

In the spirit of fiber artist and activist **Aram Han Sifuentes**—whose database collects artist names for the larger project of “Steps Towards Decolonizing Craft”<sup>6</sup>—all words collected thus far have been added to a publicly-accessible and open-source Google Drive spreadsheet.<sup>7</sup> This list is by no means comprehensive, and is only a place to start. Feel free to define a critical term or add your own useful terms and share widely. I hope this resource is helpful to all current and future generations of fiber artists, curators with an interest in textiles, and scholars who write about textiles.

Between recent exhibitions, intercultural scholarship, and large-scale activist projects, textile and fiber arts have perhaps never been more poised to tackle the complex human questions of our contemporary times. As a field, we only have more to gain by greater understanding and application of cultural criticism and theory that shapes many other creative disciplines. There are new demands on our field to enact diversity, equity, and inclusion measures to make sure the future of Fiber Art is not homogenous. This glossary, in addition to other critical texts, gives us some language to help unpack the history and trajectory of the Fiber field and build on textiles’ capacity to be deeply complex, heterogeneous and intersectional. The remaining challenge is to make words into actions, and enact the diversity we want to see in the field.

<sup>1</sup> “From the Global to the Local (and Back Again): The Practice of Cultural Contestation and Reinvention.” Closing Plenary. *Cross Currents: Land, Labor & the Port*. Textile Society of America 15<sup>th</sup> Biennial Symposium. Savannah, GA, October 19–23, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See Constantine, Mildred, and Larsen, Jack Lenor. *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973; Constantine, Mildred, and Larsen, Jack Lenor. *The Art Fabric*:

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*Mainstream*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981, for an introduction to the technical fiber glossaries.

<sup>3</sup> Porter, Jenelle. “The Materialists.” In *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-Present*. Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art and Prestel Publishing (2014), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Adamson states: “...the material spills to the floor, curls upon itself, unexcited and directionless, referencing sexual dysfunction...A certain uncomfortable flaccidity is strongly associated with this material. This may be one reason why it did not, as hoped, enter the mainstream.”

<sup>5</sup> *The Movement for Black Lives*. Blog. Glossary. [policy.m4bl.org/glossary/](http://policy.m4bl.org/glossary/)

<sup>6</sup> Sifuentes, Aram Han. “Steps Towards Decolonizing Craft.” [textilesocietyofamerica.org/6728/steps-towards-decolonizing-craft/](http://textilesocietyofamerica.org/6728/steps-towards-decolonizing-craft/)

<sup>7</sup> To access glossary, see: McIntosh, Aaron, organizer. “Critical Fiber Glossary.” 2018. [docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18q5M4oRp9dGLExE3bQYpn1lhZc4WRYUM5oWG-ooONys/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18q5M4oRp9dGLExE3bQYpn1lhZc4WRYUM5oWG-ooONys/edit?usp=sharing)

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Left page: **Stephanie Syjuco** *Cargo Cults* 2013, self-portrait, digital print on outdoor vinyl, 46" x 60". Photo: The Wing Luke.

Above: **Aram Han Sifuentes** *A Mend: A Collection of Scraps from Local Seamstresses and Tailors* 2013, jean scraps, gold denim thread, vellum, 9' x 15'. Video Archives from The Wing Luke's collection in background. Photo: The Wing Luke.