STITCH AND BITCH

JENNI SORKIN

Julia Couzens is a special kind of vandal: reworking the ever-present cultural symbols of art world fame that chafe and scratch at women artists of a certain generation, like bad undergarments digging into the skin. The men of their own generation have been rewarded: teaching jobs, gallery representation, marriages—multiple—and children like accessories, matched to a particular era. Instead, women have consistently had to make choices, both big and small: career or family; temporary studio assistant or storage space; self-funded trip to the group show opening or down payment on the next project; salvage or splurge; pitch or save. All the while, the art world had already made its choices: eliminating women artists through the imperiousness of extreme marginalization: ignore her queries enough times, and she will eventually get the message, because *who does she think she is*? She is certainly pushy: Let's let her into a group show maybe, but just a summer one. That way, maybe she'll donate something for the holiday auction. It's not a feminist cause, but women are doers, they feel called to action, or pressured at any rate. Whatever works. Exhausted and worn down, eventually, they'll stop trying to assert their audacious desires, their deliberate agitation for *inclusion*, for their 51%, for their half of the pie. Decades on, more tired than angry, they might eventually even settle for less. Settling even, for a slice. A deliberately modest one, hold the Wayne Thiebaud clouds of impastoed whipped cream.

Couzens's fabric collages are simultaneously a critique and a revelation: materializing the sexism that undergirds the art world's blatant inequities by targeting the gallery advertisements found in *Artforum*, its most high profile English-language art magazine. She intervenes in the slick, photographic sheen of the male artist's solo show advertisement, symbolically covering over the men with a feminized art form, her materially-driven graffiti, known as *Textile Tags* (2014-ongoing). The tactility of her casual needlework effects a satisfying aesthetic revisionism: seen in the minimalist Carl Andre, whose terse wooden cube is transformed into a cheap decorative trinket, framed by a jagged yellow quilt, its batting visible, and trimmed in garishly bright pink, green, and orange stitches; while the German Neo-Expressionist Markus Lüpertz is smothered by a lace doily, an affront to his odd figurative sculpture. There are roots for this work in Couzens's own sculptural practice: with a history of fully wrapping domestic items in found textiles in a nearly concurrent series titled *Bundles* (2009-2018).

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In *Textile Tags*, Couzens targets the solo shows of male artists only, those exhibiting at mainly blue chip art galleries, but also museums large and small across the country whose informal partnerships with the gallery industry are

laid bare through their fine-print sponsorship, in effect, creating a direct pipeline for their own artists. The full-page ad is representative of an extreme form of indulgence and expense: particularly wasteful, in that most magazines, as a whole, end up in the trash bin. Like television, it is only through advertising revenue that print media stays afloat. However, these advertisements, in turn, fully influence content, in the sense that editors privilege solo, for-profit gallery shows for their reviews section, rather than, say, group exhibitions in non-profit spaces. As such, the mere existence of the solo advertisement is proof that visibility serves as its own kind of (price) pointed affirmation, creating a clear class divide between artists (statistically male) represented by blue-chip art galleries, and artists (female, non-binary, people of color) that reinforce the existence of a one-percent art world. The budget to run a full page ad could likely fund rent on an urban studio space for an entire month. Thus, Couzens calls out such financial extravagance through her own decorative excess: a raucous revelry of textiles, both found and made.

Sometimes the artwork beckons, like a call, and Couzens is compelled to an authentic response, engaged in a formal collaboration with the artist depicted, such as the ceramist Ron Nagle's signature cups. His ad for Matthew Marks Galley features a singular, angular vessel set upon a lurid orange base, which Couzens essentially yarn bombs in matching primary colors, building upward an intricate macramé-like column that lodges upon
p. 78 Nagle's sculpture like a coral reef growing underwater upon the stanchions of an oil rig, forming an alliance of sorts. Through her looped and knotted construction, she offers the viewer the seductive surface texture that is impossible in a photographic reproduction of a sculpture. In this sense, she one-ups Nagle, while still acknowledging their joint investment in materiality.

Despite her formal jeering, on the whole, Couzens seems to have a soft spot for California galleries and their artists, viewing them, perhaps, as underdogs in the complex blood sport of money, representation, and promotion that the art world has become. Los Angeles's recent meteoric rise notwithstanding, the remainder of California is diverse, fully overlooked nationally, and oft-dismissed as regional, in particular, the Sacramento area with which Couzens is most closely affiliated: she earned her MFA at UC Davis in 1990, and had her first major solo efforts hosted throughout the 1990s at university art galleries and regional museums across the West, including University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Cal State Sacramento, UC Davis, Sonoma Museum of Art, and the Claremont Graduate School.

Just the opposite occurs when it comes to New York spaces vested with cultural authority and prestige: scratching them out, covering over with found appliqué flowers, or quilt squares, a form of undoing or blotting out the representation of accrued, perhaps misplaced, status. Instead, Couzens seems particularly inclined to erasures when it comes to New York.

For instance, she puts forth a pointed critique about the Museum of Modern Art's blindspots, adding its logo to a series of fabric ripples, taken from a cut-up sweater, that conflate the museum's cultural power with the defacement of a fifth avenue gallery—highlighting the long-term neglect of women artists within New York's upper East Side in its entirety. As Couzens explains, her tags

were rooted in, as she describes it, "the impulse to scribble over—a burst of feeling, that became more nuanced and mindful as it went on."[1]

In this sense, there is often real communion with the works of art themselves: in an Ace Galley advertisement, Frank Stella's shaped canvas is beautifully embellished with craft yarn. Couzens offers two complementary yellow and orange chain stitches as a rather tender tribute, softening
p. 45 Stella's hard edges with a colorful outline (yellow) and midpoint (orange).

In another instance of sunny markmaking, Picasso as genius-creator is demoted to utter self-involvement, his advertisement reworked so that his paintbrush seems to render a textured golden lightning bolt, devilishly stitched in by Couzens. Her approach highlights the literal daftness—a thunderbolt moment of genius, captured for all eternity—of seeing Picasso advertised as god-like, both shirtless and enraptured by his own creation,
p. 60 courtesy the Palo Alto outpost of Pace Gallery.

As a resolutely West Coast artist, Couzens's series is also a way of lampooning *Artforum* for ever leaving the West Coast to begin with: the magazine was established in San Francisco in 1962 by two art critics, John Coplans and Phillip Leider, publishing its inaugural issue in June 1963. The publication subsequently moved twice: to Los Angeles in 1965 and then permanently to New York in 1967. However, its early years on the West Coast are pivotal: some of its most influential articles and issues came about during its first five years. Couzens's is also fully influenced by her mother's own history as the founding editor of the first, but little-known contemporary art publication on the West Coast: *WestArt*, 1962–early 1980's.

Textile Tags also are redolent of another West Coast phenomenon: the invention of what Miriam Schapiro called *femmage*, combining female and collage. An invented word, Schapiro merged feminine with collage to create "femmage," suggesting a continuity between high art collage and works created by anonymous women. This was an umbrella term for, as Schapiro wrote, "the diversity, beauty, and significance of the original makers of collage," that is, women who engaged in the Victorian past-time of pasting and decorating scrapbooks, cutting out images from valentines, postcards, souvenirs, collected shells, feathers, and the like and creating ornamental designs that trolled in sentiment, exotic places, and whimsy.[2]

Further, anonymous women engaged in textile practices such as quilting and applique, also utilized abstraction as a guiding design principle. Schapiro posited an important theory: as a feminine version of collage, *femmage*, in fact, precedes the so-called high art collage of *papier collier*, or the Cubist collage works of Picasso and Braque. Schapiro reassigns amateur women as the original inventors of collage, collecting castoffs and found materials, but moreover, scraps and domestic items, like buttons and string. Castoffs and salvage are aesthetic choices that mask necessary attributes of pragmatism and thrift. The long-documented gender imbalance in the art world has resulted in women artists who have never gotten the full financial support perpetually extended to their male peers, as Couzens rigorously and repeatedly points out. *Textile Tags* enact Schapiro's lineage of whimsical patterning, colorful found fabrics, and the use of reclaimed textiles in order to remake *Artforum* in her own image, as both a *femmaged* and a resolutely feminist series of interconnected artworks.

1. Phone conversation with the artist, December 28, 2020.

2. Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled," *Heresies. Issue 4: Women's Traditional Arts* (vol. 4) 1978, 66-69.

MENDING THE GAP: JULIA COUZENS'S TEXTILE TAGS

MARIA PORGES

I.

A needle is a pencil, a thread is a line.
–Julia Couzens

Julia Couzens's engagement with textiles began over a decade ago, propelled by a desire to experience, once again, a beginner's freshness, an almost visceral need to make work without the burden of knowledge that leads to easy solutions. A consummate draftsperson, Couzens knew that she needed to leave her technical prowess behind if she wanted to stay in a state of 'not knowing' for as long as possible. To escape predictability, she had to give up certainty about where a piece was going, what it would ultimately look like—or whether it would fail.

In ambitiously scaled installations as well as complex singular works, she has explored her current materials with a thoroughness that is both intuitive and conceptually grounded. Couzens—who can't embroider, knit or crochet—isn't a textile artist, per se, but rather an artist who works with textiles. Her palette encompasses many interesting variations of *found*: discarded, worn or damaged material thrifted at Goodwills and junk stores, scraps of all kinds, and even bundles of leftover fabric pitched into the trash by sweat shops in L.A.

The Textile Tags began a few years ago, as a kind of side project: a way to keep thinking and making between installations or exhibitions of sculpture. Her initial inspiration was a Guerilla Girls statistic about the gargantuan disparity of gender representation in *Artforum*'s ads. In the sample the GG cited from 2014, 73 ads were for men's shows and 11 were for women's.

A spark of sheer rage at the inequity of the art world inspired Couzens to assert her own artistic primacy over one such ad, using needle and thread. 'Tagging' describes a graffiti artist's spray-painted signature. There's a subtle joke here as well—a second meaning lying underneath the first, like a hidden lining. The word tag is also associated with price, or even with the label sewn into a garment that identifies its maker, and thus its status value. Without such a label—a man's name, specifically—the artworks depicted in these ads would have little to differentiate them from those of women. Except, of course, the fact that artworks by men are priced about 42% higher than those made by women.[1]

One altered ad led to another, and another. Couzens even bought a box of old magazines on eBay, picking through them for good material. There's a disarming directness and immediacy to the way she attaches various elements to the heavy coated paper used for such publications. In some

1. https://www.ecmny.org/engage/heres-like-mens-art-women/#:~:text=Artworks%20by%20men%20are%20priced,the%20last%20half%20of%20century.

pieces, her additions have the spontaneity of a sprayed line, achieved through sewing down crisscrossing or spiraling strips of cloth with quick stitches. Sometimes, ragged edges seem to suggest that a piece was cut from a larger swatch in haste.

Often, her process begins with a riff on color, shape or texture. These include single gestures, like the ovoid piece of black fabric sewn with an explosion of stitches onto a vegetal field of green that creates an elegant visual hole in the
p. 27 middle of a Bruce Conner film still. Sometimes, a simple formal intervention extends an artist's work—or subverts it hilariously. A long piece of black lace trim, folded in a square and quickly sewn down, feminizes the dour monochromatic
p. 22 angularity of an Ellsworth Kelly painting. A lumpy yellow-and-orange chain stitch outline belies the humorless purity of an early Frank Stella, and an eviscerated potholder tenderly cuddles a Carl Andre sculpture, softening the edges of its brutish cube.

Sometimes Couzens's fabric additions cover the pictured art completely. The title of Yto Barrada's Pace show—'how to do nothing with nobody all alone by yourself'—takes on a new meaning when Barrada's work has been transformed into swatches of plaid flannel and a bit of mattress ticking, stitched down with red and
p. 26 blue thread. In an ad for a Cy Twombly show, the artist's signature scribbled lines are barely visible behind a spiral of black fabric punctuated with shiny sequins—a border, perhaps, removed from some long-gone party dress. Couzens' addition seems more evocative of the show's title, "Orpheus," than whatever might be hiding behind it.

Examining this project as a whole, it becomes clear that certain ads are as much about promoting the gallery's brand as they are about the art being shown and sold. Pace Gallery's predilection for featuring mysterious details offers Couzens some interesting opportunities. To a close-up of a fragment of a Richard Poussette-Dart drawing, for example, she adds a startling cloth eye. In another Pace ad, the mysterious p. 69 nature of some striped material in shades of green suggests that if you don't know what it is you are looking at, you don't deserve to. Helpfully (or, perhaps, humorously), Couzens centers a bit of green and black needlework over the show's enigmatic title: *New Sculpture/Configurations*. In a third, roughly rectangular layers of material in a dizzying array of patterns and colors become surrogates for the 'classic paintings' alluded to in the show title printed across the bottom of the page.

II.

Fierce was her needle, and she wore it like a sword.
–Catherynne Valente

Throughout these Textile Tags, Couzens's ingenious obliteration of artist's names is both funny and pointed—a response, perhaps, to the way women have been rendered invisible, pushed out to the art world's margins.[2] Though she often allows her viewers to make their own assessments of the meaning of such gestures, at times there is no doubt. In one, a scrap of felt, folded and
p. 93 stitched, blocks our view of the studio behind it — insisting that we look at it, and only it, ignoring the sculpture arranged on the room's attractively paint-stained floor.

Overall, these pieces radiate a deceptive naïvete: a fetishistic, outsider-ish approach to textiles as *stuff*, rather than as an arena in which to perform virtuoso acts of tatting, lacemaking, quilting, or embroidering. At the same time, it's clear that Couzens is no longer a beginner, and has learned ways to make her materials do some beautiful things. Layers of tulle create delicate shifting fields of color. Dots of felt, their edges tinted to suggest a trompe-l'oeil effect of volume, are like tiny paintings within paintings. Sometimes there's slapstick—like when a bit of patterned cotton becomes a skirt for a muscular paint-flinger in mid-toss. But the gestures that linger: the ones to which we return, as if turning the pages back instead forward, are the pieces in which her inspired additions transfigure the slick paper image, making it her own.

2.
Although the numbers are more favorable today—in a recent issue of Artforum, there were 46 men's ads to 30 for women—women's presence in museum collections, gallery affiliation and prices remain far more lopsided. Works by women make up only 2% of the art market. https://news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/female-artists-represent-just-2-percent-market-heres-can-change-1654954