

Playing Slow

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Biography

Madiha Sikander has a BFA from the National College of Arts, Pakistan and an MFA from University of British Columbia, Canada. Her work has been exhibited in Pakistan and internationally; in India, Singapore, Paris, London, USA, and Switzerland. Her work was a part of the Colombo Art Biennale, Sri Lanka, in 2012, and the Kochi Biennale, India, in 2014 and the Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh, 2019. She has participated in residencies at the Theertha Artist Collective, Sri Lanka, Bundanon Arts Trust, Australia, and the International Wasanii Workshop in Kenya. She was awarded the UNESCO Aschberg Award for Emerging Artists in 2014 and the B. C. Binning Award in 2017.

Candice Okada has a BA in Sociology from University of British Columbia, a BFA in Visual Art from University of the Fraser Valley and an MFA from University of British Columbia. Her artwork has been exhibited in North America, and her writing published within Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. She has been awarded the Roloff Beny Scholarship for Photography and a BC Council of Arts Senior Scholarship. She has received a SSHRC grant for her research into postfeminism and most recently participated in an artist residency in Murcia, Spain.

Abstract

This paper investigates processes that include weaving, macramé, and needlework. The very nature of these practices requires devoted physical presence, firmly fixed for long hours to build rhythm. Labourious and tedious, these crafts bring one to the present by means of minute and constrained gestures.

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Enduring the process at hand, the psyche is anxious and persistently apprehensive. Despite this, the work is undertaken with pleasure, entangling the practitioner such that she is unable to depart the site of labour. Touch and the repetitive working and reworking of materials allow for pleasure, enjoyment and being focused on the present moment. These lived experiences are what feminist scholar Anne Cvetkovich accredits to “the value of process and the art of daily living” through an “embodied practice.” Drawing from feminist interpretations of Lacanian jouissance, this paper locates presence and attentiveness via slowness as a primary site of female creativity that differs. Both as a gesture of delaying and as being other, a play Derrida refers to as ‘Différance’ it is particularly generative for new ways of knowing. As a means of refinement that “work upon or shape” the practices of needlework, macramé and weaving can be understood as means of knowledge and ways of being in the world.

Keywords

Slowness, invisible labour, feminine labour and value, embodied practice, artistic practice and collaboration.

A collaborative process is beyond the fair division of labour. It is not merely voluntary cooperation. It is a process of negotiation, supplementation, and questioning that sometimes has visible seams and other times is seamless. Since texts that originate from single authorizing origins are easier to value and pin, whatever the subject, whatever the agenda, collaboration becomes a political act as it moves away from the individual, and the claims to originality and authority that come with the individual; Whose words are these anyway? Does this matter?

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The act of collaboration is usually initiated with the need to complete a task, solve a problem, or achieve a goal. Here, individuals' skills coalesce to create a high-functioning and productive entity. For us, this was not the case. The decision to collaborate originated not from necessity, nor a shared end goal, but from a shared experience and a shared grievance. We were two women, trying to make contemporary art with traditionally and conventionally feminine techniques: be that embroidery, weaving, macramé, etc. And while this is not a novel practice, our physical proximity to one another ensured we acknowledged our shared actions. There were long, labourious hours, tense shoulders, painful fingers, and strained eyes. Yet ultimately, very little in the way of "artistic" production, and even less in the way of "value". These acknowledgements eventually gave way to a shared practice; not to pursue an ultimate end goal, but as an effort to work through and reconcile some of the recurring concerns and themes we encountered in both our physical, female bodies, and our understanding of the very techniques that led us to such precarious artistic productions, even though we were from two different cultures and parts of the world.

Stitch after stich, bead after bead, knot after knot, clove after clove—the repetitive and uncountable nature of our practices brings us together and urges the viewer to question *how* the work was done and brings attention to the material and labour associated to that labour.

As we lovingly and endlessly labour over a macramé project, our silence and stillness, once misconceived as repression and constraint, are in fact signs of serious concentration and contemplation. The feeling of various fibres running across our fingers and the coolness of the metal canopy hoops in and out of our hands, but also the cramping of our necks and shoulders, the crunching of our brows, and the use of our bodies to measure lengths of fiber, embody the experience of macramé. We observed how *over-thinking* our knots resulted in forgetting them or getting them wrong. And so, the practice demanded that we work instinctively through our particularities of woman-ness as we share stories of Pakistan and Canada. These felt experiences

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are what feminist scholar Ann Cvetkovich accredits to “the value of process and the art of daily living” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. xi). She explores craft as an “embodied practice” and highlights the aesthetics and materiality of craft as providing an antidote to the very disembodied nature of digital work and its pervasiveness in everyday life. Cvetkovich also describes practitioners as being highly attuned to the senses through colour, touch, and the repetitive working and reworking of materials, all of which allow for pleasure, enjoyment and presence. The slowness of needlework, macramé, weaving, etc. does not merely offer a break from the high speed and instantaneous nature of the internet and digital culture, but creates a sense of parallel time that is decelerated and inverts the speed of contemporary life. In that sense, the labourious and tedious nature of these processes has—and always has had—potentially generative implications for the way we perceive art and life.

We are interested in Lutz Koepnick’s (Koepnick, 2014) conceptualization of slowness as an extended structure of temporality, with tactics of hesitation, delay, and deceleration, that serve to make us pause and experience a passing present in all its heterogeneity and difference. It is always easier to define things for what they are not, or as lacking. Slowness, an elapsed dimension, unlike chronological time, is non-linear. It lacks speed, which is quite literally an understanding of space mapped against duration ($\text{speed} = \text{Distance}/\text{Time}$). Force is never indeed present; it is an interaction of different quantities. There would be no forces without the play of difference between two forces. This difference is their essence, even if they are in opposing directions. That is to say, slowness allows us to behold the passing of time, and in doing so it has the potential to complicate and refract dominant understandings of movement, change, mobility, and progress.

As Koepnick suggests, “slowness is what allows us to recognize given spaces as heterogeneous because it allows us to see *dissimilar* rates of change, movement, and mobility at work at the same time” (ibid, emphasis added). However, slowness while differing, also means to defer.

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That is, the “taking account of time and forces in an operation that implies. . . a detour, a respite, a delay, a reserve. . .” (Derrida, 1968) These two qualities allow a reading of slowness as *différance*. They both play in ways that cannot be said but only possibly be shown or performed. Let us consider two accounts of this:

On his way to a dinner at Agathon’s place with his friend Aristodemus, Socrates becomes absorbed in his thoughts and begins lagging behind. Each time his friend waits for him to catch up, he bids his friend to go on without him. On arrival Aristodemus is asked about Socrates, who should have been right behind him. A slave was sent to inquire and found him in the neighbour’s porch deep in thought. When bidden to join, Socrates refused.¹ Agathon considers soliciting again. However, Aristodemus forbade, “No, let him alone,” he said. “It is a habit he has. Occasionally he turns aside, anywhere at random, and there he stands. So, do not disturb him; let him be” (*Plato’s Symposium*, 1997, pp. 174d–175e). He assures them that these moments don’t last long. And evidently in this account it doesn’t, as Socrates joins the group shortly.(*ibid*, pp. 220c–d)

This account interpret slowness, first a lagging and then a standstill, as impervious to the surroundings—immobile mobility. However, such stillness does not delineate any measure of success, or lack of it. There is no sense of commencement. His stillness is supplemented by the movement of those around him and of the sun (light being the epitome of the collapsing of time and space). Socrates becomes a spectacle in the spatio-temporal regime and takes meaning from *différance* and in this way creates a sense of alterity and deferral. While this example of slowness is critiqued with positive and generative potential, they fail to address notions of slowness with regard to women.

If we substitute Socrates for a woman, she would surely be read as inept and unproductive. When slowness is discussed in relation to women, it has been rendered as an unfavorable

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characteristic, a problematic obstacle to women's liberation. Consider the example given by Roszika Parker in her seminal book *The Subversive Stitch*:

“You never saw a woman sit so still. Her stillness seemed part and cause of that still summer. Day after day she sat in a basket chair in the stones beneath the pretty white iron spiral staircase, sewing among her roses... Rose's hand seemed usually to be still, though the needle was layers threaded. She drove men demented.”
(Parker, 1984, p. 10)

For both Rose and Socrates, the slowness and attentiveness of the labour are offered in supreme stillness, and immobile mobility. However, in Parker's version, and one readily relating to female forms of creative labour, this stillness—the slowness, concentration, attentiveness—is interpreted as a state of being merely maintained for and broken by men. It is this stereotypical and derogatory interpretation of women's crafts and labour that has led to the inaccurate disavowal of women's creativity, and self-autonomy. But if we consider women's relationship to a lack of speed in equal terms—and not under gendered presumptions—slowness here becomes something subversive and discursive. And so, we observe traces of effects in other effects, objects in other objects, words in other words, gestures in other gestures, times in other times, spaces in other spaces, cycles in other cycles. This relational state points to the spatio-temporal aspect of *différance* that allows for the recognition of space and time as heterogeneous.

The objects or products that result from needlework, macramé, weaving, etc. generally have two primary purposes: first, to hold, be occupied by, conceal or protect an object. And second, to do all this aesthetically, to render the object visually pleasurable. Recall a beautifully embroidered pillowcase, an intricately knotted macramé plant holder. Initially merely decorative, but as objects they also become signifiers, and their signified meanings represent absence. Put another way, their presence is directly indicative of another's absence. The pillowcase with/out a pillow, the plant holder with/out the plant. Because rather than present the object, the meaning

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of the sign (needlework, macramé, weaving, etc.) is continuously deferred because the thing represented is eternally absent, therefore perpetually deferred. These works are defined and identified within the negative; they signify what is absent.

It is the slowness of these practices that allows for an interruption, in the form of a stalling. This interruption muddles the labour-time value structure which, under capitalism, is directly related to speed (or the lack of it) and power (or the lack of it). Therefore, both femininity and slowness are always defined by what they are not or what they lack and are hence both negatives. While the sum of the two may not result in a positive, their product does. This refers to both the mathematical product of slowness and femininity, as well as the physical object these artistic practices produce. Consider the following basic equations based upon the aforementioned conceptualizations of women and slowness:

$$X = \text{Man} \quad -X = \text{Woman}$$

$$Y = \text{Speed} \quad -Y = \text{Slowness}$$

$$X(Y) = XY \quad \text{Positive outcome}$$

$$X(-Y) = -XY \quad \text{Negative outcome}$$

$$-X(Y) = -XY \quad \text{Negative outcome}$$

$$-X(-Y) = XY \quad \text{Positive outcome}$$

In this situation, our artistic practice does not result from the addition of femininity and slowness but is established and validated in the multiplication of femininity by slowness, specifically in that order. Where the addition of the two elemental components of our practice will always sum negatively, their product will have a positive impact, metaphorically, literally and mathematically. Our practice is the accumulation of the product and byproduct of multiplying femininity by slowness. These products produce knowledge, and the byproduct is each individual stitch, knot, etc.

In a recent book entitled “Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles”, the authors redirect attention to the power of the needle as an epistemic tool that exceeds the limits

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of an ocular focus. (Goggin & Tobin, 2010) That is to say, they suggest that there are forms of knowledge and ways of being in this world that can only be accessed through learning and practice, or more generally, through the processes of making. By shifting knowledge away from the ocular—the dominance of vision—and towards the body. It is also a move in the direction towards a positive, and therefore productive, artistic practice from the integration of femininity and slowness as we previously discussed. To emphasize the process of making, here this refers to femininity being multiplied by slowness, directly implicates the present body. The knotting of threads and ropes, the intertwining of needles and fabrics, all occur with such slowness, and potentially idleness, that progress becomes secondary to process. In this transition, process gives the practitioner an embodied knowledge that cannot be replaced by neither vision, nor text.

For contemporary artistic practices, to recast and reconsider women and their (now “our”) art with the reverie of a new conceptualization of epistemic knowledge and the generative potential of slowness is to recover and elicit those forms of embodied knowledge that have been all too often dismissed. It is validation of a positive and productive practice derived from two negative elements, and it is this productive (femininity x slowness) knowledge that can be felt within the body; a type of muscle memory. Importantly, this can also be taught, adapted and queered by each practitioner so that this muscle memory becomes part of a larger body of knowledge working towards remaking and understanding the world from the perspective of a female body.

Needlework, weaving and macramé are not forms of labour and creative production that immediately recall a bodily presence. Unlike abstract painting or interpretive dance, the marks of the body are not easily accessible. But the body is inevitably and irrevocably present. The knots of macramé are constructed distinctively; the presence of two practitioners is made visible with different angles, tensions, ordering and placement. The same style knot slightly changes each time it is produced, as result of the woman’s bodily relation to the work. The very nature

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of the practices requires devoted physical presence, firmly fixed for long hours to build a tempo. Labourious, tedious, and repetitive, these skills sought to necessitate attention: the need to attune the body and senses to the material. These pursuits of time become acts of creation and reception. Repetitions and tediousness transform into a skill of perception, and as Jacqueline Rose reminds us repetition signifies a psychic knot² which is “an insistence, that is, the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten”. An artistic practice (and objects) created through the use of conventionally feminine techniques, like needlework, is a place of recurrent return from which there is little release. Projects may take weeks, months, and sometimes years to complete, just for another to begin.

For the practitioner, there is always just another stitch, just another knot, then just another row. And this pattern of counting stitches, knots and rows continually repeats, rolling from one project to the next. Counting is definitive in the way that it sets a bracket on either end, often denoting finitude. It places things in space and time. It feels seemingly safe and predictable and makes the labour endurable. This form of counting is nonlinear and folds many trajectories into one. It is a counting not just towards the beginning, but towards an end simultaneously. It moves waywardly towards both depletion and accumulation, simultaneously, but independently. For example, one runs out of rope in the process but creates knots.

Counting, for us, becomes a way of being and labouring. The labourer becomes consumed, or overtaken by the work they are doing. Temporality, spatiality and sensibility are all reinforced in this still state, which forces one to address the concept of duration.

In this essay we have offered an interpretation of traditionally conceived female creative forms that situates the slowness of labour as a primary site for revisiting the political and social, if not subversive potential of these peripheral practices. We currently live in an era characterized by speed, movement, and evermore unrest. It is the rarity of slowness and stillness where that frames our contemporary mindset. To decrease speed, it must be met with resistance. And

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to maintain a desired slowness, obstacles need to be established to prevent reacceleration. Not in an aim to hinder progress, but to reveal the potential for renegotiating dominant narratives through slowness and stillness. For our practice, resistance comes in the continual return to labor-intensive creative methods, and the obstacles we are trying to establish revolve around a reconceptualization of value imbued in this labor. We by no means seek to essentialize female creativity, nor make grand claims about women's artistic labour. Furthermore, we did not make a distinction between whether practices are actually more innately feminine, or if this is just a characteristic imposed by patriarchy. Regardless of the answer (which is probably a combination of both), the outcome is stable. Women historically have, and continue to, participate in and enjoy the labours of needlework, weaving and macramé, indifferent to its economic or intellectual appreciation. Whereas men, who practice it in both the East and West mostly do so for economic or social recognition or remuneration. This too, is a stable outcome. Nevertheless, for women the slowness and idleness of these acts have never been given the same consideration nor seriousness of the slowness enacted by men. As a result, the likes of needlework, macramé and weaving, etc. have yet to experience their full potential. Our aim here was to dissect and investigate a primary characteristic of needlework, weaving, macramé, etc. In opening up and expanding on the concept of slowness, we were able to contribute to the validation and acceptance of these sidelined media within contemporary fine art practice. Like many of the cultural feminists before us, we have re-identified these differences as women's strengths, rather than women's weaknesses and we celebrate them. Women's art, women's craft, and women's ways of knowing should be recognized as such. Much like women themselves, these practices are "a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined by space and time. . ." (Foucault, 2002, p.117).

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Notes

¹It is unclear in the account whether he refuses by responding or refuses to respond.

²Knots are also symbolic for counting and remembering.