

# The Plea for Peace and Interconnection through Public Textile Projects

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## Abstract

Strategies used in interdisciplinary needlework-textiles in public installation-performance are outlined. My paper discusses the particulars of my *Irish Linen Memorial*, begun in 2001, Justine Merritt's *Ribbon around the Pentagon*, 1982-85, and Suzanne Lacy's *The Crystal Quilt*, 1987.

I discuss the sculptural use of textiles in public space and ritual, such as their historically political use as banners, as well as creations symbolic of the interconnectedness of life. More currently, textiles metaphorically illustrate violence and trauma inflicted upon the body, loss of life and the rupture of the fabric of social order which war involves. Cloth can be used as a reminder of displaced persons, the migrant identity and the plea for global stability.

My collaboration with choreographer-dancer, Elizabeth Cameron-Dalman, OAM, is an example of international collaboration between Australia and Canada, on the issue of Northern Ireland's sectarian violence, 1969-2000.

## Keywords

Peace, feminism, needlework, interdisciplinary, public art

*"What is needed [is]... to create a more values-led, ethical globalization... – a century of human rights at the heart of peace."*

--Mary Robinson, 2002 recipient of the Sydney Peace Prize.

My discussion centres on how women communicate an anti-violence message in the public political arena, through the medium of textiles-needlework. This paper expands on the interdisciplinary synthesis of the space between textiles and installation-performance art. A review into artistic intercultural exchange, in a global context, is made by examining how monumental textiles-based projects, considered 'new genre public art,' overlap with women's community. I also address creations, which have combined textiles and performance, process work, installation and public site. I discuss my *Irish Linen Memorial*, begun in 2001, including collaboration with dancer-choreographer, Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, OAM. As well, I examine Justine Merritt's *Ribbon around the Pentagon*, 1982-85, Suzanne Lacy's *The Crystal Quilt*, 1987 and *Women In Black*, 1988 – ongoing.

There are important contemporary associations inherent in the sculptural use of textiles. First, both textiles and performance art can represent common forms for expressing the contemporary migrant experience. Second, textiles/needlework may represent simultaneously both the sacred (in their historic, ceremonial, or religious use, for rituals of life's defining passages) as well as the profane (i.e. the use of cloth to care for a body inflicted with wounds or debased by violent acts). Finally, textiles are symbolic of interconnectedness, as touch is an inherent component of cloth.

*the space between* Conference brings together contemporary craft theorists debating themes in textiles and design, from costume to cultural sign. My research is concerned with the object as concrete – as in craft, or ephemeral, as in performance, as well as in ritual, incorporating the use of time.

Textiles/needlework, in particular, have been used as a vehicle by which international and local women's groups, led by female artists or crafts workers, have publicly pleaded for human rights and security. Such creative projects tend to fall between 'the simultaneous elements of social conformity and critique' (Pershing 1993, p. 333). The use of non-confrontational techniques has been intrinsic to the socio-historic construction of both the project of women's domestic craft practices, and the socially acceptable means by which women have been allowed to congregate for personal discussion, which often would have included political issues.

Women have felt comfortable with the intimacy-secrecy whereby needlework processes and techniques can convey 'encoded political statement,' (Pershing 1993, p. 338), communicating controversial ideas specific and dear to them, which could be seen as radical or divisive in the greater public arena. Linda Pershing, USA, has pointed out, in her article *Peace Work out of Piecework* how armed conflict endangers existence, metaphorically causing strain and wear in the greater social fabric (p. 341, 345). Analyses of women's moral and ethical decision-making processes, as articulated by educational psychologist Carol Gilligan, USA, reflect a prioritization of the values of interrelationship and care. Community sewing and crafting groups bear such hallmarks, showing

How people relate to and manipulate objects in order to express themselves, their notions of identity, and their personal and cultural values [in the study of material culture] (see Bronner, 1983, 1986; Jones, 1980; Sherzer and Sherzer, 1976). (Pershing 1993, p. 335)

**Description of Artworks: The Irish Linen Memorial, begun 2001; The Ribbon around the Pentagon, 1982-5; The Crystal Quilt, 1987.**

Armed conflict, and its attendant violence, are disrespectful of life and shatter home and community interrelations, where women have often exercised significant degrees of control. So, women artists have used textile metaphors to particular effect in ritual-performance artworks, to subtly remind the public of a more civilized social order, where interconnectedness between people of difference and the rhythms, of ordinary domestic experience are valued.

I have taken a sculptural-interdisciplinary approach to needlework in my evolving mobile memorial, called *The Irish Linen Memorial*, begun in 2001. This artwork lists the names of all those who died in Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict, in 1969-2000, commonly known as 'The Troubles'. The 3,658 names are printed in the chronological order from the moment of death, following the comprehensive research of four seasoned journalists who produced a book called *Lost Lives: The Stories of the men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*, published in 2000. The artwork-memorial, composed of hundreds of linen handkerchiefs, is in the process of being embroidered in chain stitch by my aunt, Margot Damon, (née Mc Gladdery; b. Belfast, 1937), a former home-economics professor.

Various volunteers, such as Edith Morriott, from Berridale, New South Wales, Australia, are involved in tating the handkerchiefs' edges. Also, I have sewn spots of hair on to the handkerchiefs, while Morriott carefully incorporated some strands of hair into her edging. The *memento mori* of the hair is done in tiny spots as imperfections on the linen, to draw attention to the marking of the pure, white cloth to symbolize that Northern Irish society has been stained by bloodshed. Such spots symbolically associate with the freckled skin typical of many people of Celtic descent. I use longer strands of hair to haphazardly visually link the listed order of names between the various handkerchiefs. The sewn hair gives the material object a disturbing resonance and direct reference to the body. Deliberately incorporating these hairy imperfections into the handkerchiefs references the artwork of Anne Wilson, U.S.A. and Doris Salcedo, Colombia. Australian contemporary theorist, Jill Bennett, refers to such a

quality in artworks as the presence of 'affect.' Such unsettling markings reference the body and signify a type of monstrous femininity, as in Julia Kristeva's use of 'abjection,' popular in 1980s art theory.

This traveling monument has been installed in the U.S.A, Canada and Australia to date. In 2005, I hope to take it to Dublin and Belfast, to unveil it in public places. In my exhibits in 2002 and 2004, the artwork-memorial incorporated an original soundscape by Australian composer-violinist, Thomas Fitzgerald, and a movement work by Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, OAM, a pioneer of modern dance in Australia. This multidisciplinary collaboration produced a more immersive experience for viewers at *Craft ACT Craft and Design Centre*, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT), February, 2004.

Elizabeth Cameron Dalman (b. Adelaide) has a career history grounded in commitment to environmental and social justice issues. The dramatic dance-theatre work, created specifically for my memorial, illustrated the human condition in the aftermath of violence and trauma. The dance involved three women at different stages in their lives. Her work served to contextualize the use of cloth, of which the memorial is composed, and to integrate the elements of linen: the handkerchief, and, by analogy, a bed sheet (collaged with Irish tea-towels), or funerary shroud, and strips of fabric bandages. The movement of the dancers included the binding of wounds, washing, and connecting with one another in sharing grief.

Both the intimate craft processes and the public performance during the memorial's exhibit typify two contradictory aspects of stereotypical femininity. Embroidery, as well documented by Rosita Parker and Griselda Pollock, 1984, is symbolic of feminine virtuousness and duty. In contrast, the spots of sewn hair that mar the white linen, as well as the dancers' movements, remind viewers of the baseness of the body and the human emotional states inflicted by trauma, such as hysteria, often considered a peculiarly feminine pathology.

As well as being complex, crafted objects in themselves, textiles inherently define movement through performance. Cameron Dalman explains,

The human body and well-designed costuming are two complementary elements of dance. The symbolism of the material becomes a part of the choreography. Lycia's work interests me because of the human rights issue and anti-war expression. I think the arts are a very powerful vehicle to be able to reach people's hearts; to actually reach people on a human level, different from the political, and make people think about the issues. (Radio interview with Sylvie Stern, 2XX FM, Canberra, February 9, 2004)

Cameron Dalman's approach is reiterated in the objectives of the major public work, *The Ribbon around the Pentagon*, U.S.A. Mary Francis Jaster, its national coordinator, spoke about touching 'enough individuals [so that] 'the powers that be' could be challenged by that.' (Pershing, p.332)



Figure 1: The Ribbon ceremony in Washington, D.C. with the Lincoln Memorial in the background. (photographer unknown). Reprinted from *The Ribbon Around the Pentagon: Peace by Piecemakers* by Linda Pershing. copyright 1999.

Gloria Orenstein, U.S.A, known for her work on surrealism and feminism, posits the importance of expressive creative gatherings as catalysts of political and social change,

The ceremonial aspect of art is now understood to be potent enough to...evoke visions... thoughts, and images that, when merged with the energy of political acts (such as the protests at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, the Livermore Weapons Lab, the Nevada Test Site, the women's peace camp at the Greenham military base in England, and the Women's Pentagon Action [*The Ribbon*]) can create a critical mass powerful enough to alter the energy field of the participants. The rituals enhance and augment the political actions, binding the participants together in a shared spiritual community and creating the opportunity for healing. (1990, p. 279)

*The Ribbon around the Pentagon* was conceived by Justine Merritt (1982-85). Merritt, an educator and needle-worker, who taught classes such as one entitled, 'Embroidered Memories,' had been inspired by the communal needlework involved in Judy Chicago's exhibit, *The Dinner Party*, late 1970s. *The Ribbon* was conceived as 'an immense ...decorated fabric to tie around the Pentagon,' in preparation for the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 4, 1985 (Pershing, p. 327). 'It acted as a ceremonial plea for peace' with embroidered text and imagery signifying things which Merritt described as, 'I cannot bear to think of as lost forever in a nuclear war.' The Pentagon was chosen, in Merritt's words as 'a symbol of my nation's violence and of my own.' (Philbin 1985, p. 11; Pershing 1993, p. 328) The final production involved a crowd of thousands and a ritual-performance with the 'flowing band of cloth' composed of 25,000 panels, 'more than fifteen times the number needed to surround the Pentagon.' (1999 Pershing, p.1-2)

*The Ribbon's* impact was felt strongly in the making process. Dialogue among the women<sup>i</sup> occurred through this comfortably familiar crafting, together with the planning of a monumental display of the group's closely held values, typically estranged in the greater public arena. This was a safe way for primarily Caucasian, middle-class women, to build a national community, over a two-year period, in a meaningful artistic and conceptual project. *The Ribbon* communicated a moving media-savvy message which drew upon the emotive sentiment of touch, (together with its aligned ideas of connection,

healing and life-giving values), through handicraft. Although the Reagan governmental military or nuclear policy was not altered as a result, a critical mass of the American public witnessed this cultural event, and participants felt transformed by the exhibiting of anti-violence concepts, in a beautiful way, which was ‘a matter of conscience’ to many. (Pershing pp. 332-3)

The political use of textiles is prefigured by other twentieth century women’s protests. In 1995, British art theorist, Janis Jefferies commented on how the primary means of communicating and staging such a message through event-demonstrations is by the fabric arts,

...Textiles have been mobilized as banners for Suffragette resistance, trade union rights, wrapping the Greenham Common [anti-nuclear protest] fence and honouring those who have died of AIDS. (p. 164)

*The Ribbon* project illustrates what U.S.A. artist Suzanne Lacy calls ‘new genre’ and which U.S.A. critic

Lucy Lippard<sup>ii</sup> names ‘community-based’ public art. By the mid-1990s, this kind of monumental public art became a common method of working for women and minorities with limited opportunities for site-specific public commissions in the high-end fine art market. *The Ribbon* involved non-commodity, site-contextual ways of working with public ritual in an era known for its overt materialism.

Suzanne Lacy advocates for this genre of large-scale public art or ‘enormous, community art projects’ which involve collaborators and participants (Cheng, p. 129). Hers is a feminist-based practice emphasizing the sociological themes of anti-violence and anti-racism. As a way of engaging the local population of a place and national media, Lacy expands the role of artist to include that of producer/coordinator during the lengthy planning period leading up to an event-installation. Meiling Cheng, in her book *In Other Los Angeles: Multicentric Performance Art*, 2002, states that there is a distinct Lacy School apparent today – one that reconsiders the *space* between artist and audience, or the participatory other/selves, and one which witnesses the *affectability* the artwork-event (authors’ italics; Cheng, p. 130-131).

Lacy’s *The Crystal Quilt*, although not specifically addressing anti-violence, is a piece, which illustrates my argument in this paper. *The Quilt* involved five hundred women, twenty staff and fifteen collaborating artists, including painter Miriam Schapiro and sound artist, Susan Stone. Enormous group effort, shown in the organized public display of the minutiae of needlework, can make a ‘felt impact’ by its accompanying values – the intergenerational survival skills of women. *The Crystal Quilt* positioned women’s expressive behaviour -- aesthetics, values, politics -- within a well-situated setting, that of a centralized international corridor of power. The juxtaposition of that which is personal and in contrast to public life and procedures is a crucial part of the artwork. The chosen environment for *The Quilt* was the Philip Johnson-designed *Crystal Court* atrium of the prestigious high-rise, The IDS Centre, Minneapolis, Minnesota. By situating craft processes within a significant architectural space, as *The Ribbon* did when it encircled the Pentagon, domestic concerns are emphasized as occupying equal importance as the historically male-privileged public space. Thus, *The Crystal Quilt* installation-performance, held on Mother’s Day, 1987, added another layer to the narrative and memory of the building itself.

As part of *The Crystal Quilt*, Lacy developed a statewide leadership organization for older women. Values associated with motherhood and the interests of older women, were foregrounded through *The Quilt*’s aesthetically pleasing, orderly choreographic ensemble. The expanded role of older women, as

knowledgeable spokespersons in contemporary community and public affairs was, therefore, reiterated and given visibility through this artwork. Thus, the silent or secretive needlework-quilting metaphor was turned on its head and made public.

Pershing has encouraged expanding the literary research into quilting metaphors over the last twenty years, to reach beyond these and to examine other needlework symbolism, like that of *drawnwork*. Drawnwork uses a technique of de-threading and enhances the borders of napkins, tablecloths and other domestic linens, 'elevating their status as everyday objects' (Jasper 1987, p.3; Pershing pp.345-7). A drawnwork metaphor may be used to discuss critical aspects of interpreting public protest in needlework-based artwork by 'those who are often trivialized or ignored by legislators and policymakers'. Drawnwork is complex and difficult, and can be used as a metaphor for the removal of those life-affirming values in public policy making of the fabric of civil society (pp. 344-5).

One specific value -- upholding peace -- has arisen in a global protest movement outside of the gallery system of contemporary art. A group called, *Women in Black* began demonstrating internationally since 1991, and use broad-based textiles symbolism, together with a motto that 'silence is visible' to protest the use of military means to solve disputes between nations or ethnic groups ([www.womeninblack.net/mission.html](http://www.womeninblack.net/mission.html), Nov 11, 2002). This group has attracted the membership of significant female artists. Their method of demonstrating is by women wearing the dark color traditionally associated with mourning and by standing still in silence. The intercultural underpinnings of such a movement, are summed up in this statement by Betty Reardon,

While there may be no common definition of peace with which all women throughout the world would agree, there are emerging notions of what constitutes peace and how it can be achieved. (1996, p.219)

Through my own installation in Canada, U.S.A, and Australia I believe that intercultural and international artistic exchanges can assist in working toward common goals. My memorial, although specific to the Northern Ireland ethnic conflict, may be seen as echoing other contemporary twentieth century conflicts. For example, as well as working on *The Irish Linen Memorial*, Cameron Dalman re-staged a dance work from 1972, called 'Release of an Oath,' in Taipei and Sydney, 2004. This dance work resurrected the fervor of the global socio-political concerns of the civil rights epoch and included a segment about violence in Northern Ireland. She stated, 'I believe my work on human rights and anti-war produces a social comment about the present, but with ideas that are also universal. My work comments on how power corrupts human nature, but also on how the soul and spirit can never be crushed.' (Radio interview with Sylvie Stern, 2XX Canberra, February 9, 2004)

Various artists, across cultures, are making similar investigations in communities coming-out-of-conflict, or places that have been marked by colonialism and political terror. One way for migrant artists to work is with a carefully enunciated definition of hybridity. The ease and efficiency of online technology have greatly facilitated international creative development<sup>iii</sup> in certain phases of artistic installations or mobile projects. My hope is that the new millennium becomes a time when the tiresome definitions between high art and low art, as put forth so persuasively since 1939 by Greenberg, may, once and for all, be replaced by plurality of exhibition strategies and integration of concepts, materials and methods. The Commonwealth countries of Australia, Canada and Britain are in the process of re-examining their national art policies, creating further opportunities for migrant artists of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CLDB).

I conclude by reiterating the pressing issue of peace, which is at the core of my recent artistic endeavours: The former High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, and former President of the Republic of Ireland, Mary Robinson, relates in her lecture upon the receipt of the Sydney Peace Prize, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002:

This has to be the century when women make a difference. Let me pay a special tribute here to ...both international and local women's groups – in peace building...the Security Council and the General Assembly [has recently] afforded proper recognition to the leading role of women as actors for peace...Virginia Woolf described how women should act:

“We can best help you prevent war, not by repeating your words and repeating Your methods, but by finding new words and creating new methods.”

Social protest, through needlework and community-based installation-performance and public art practices may be one of the methods Woolf would have endorsed!

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Although some men were involved and two were state coordinators, 98% of the ribbon panels were made by women. This is documented in two surveys of *The Ribbon* project by sociologists Gabriella Miller and Carol Cockrell at Texas Woman's University, 1985-6, (Wilcox 1985, p. 18; Pershing, p. 329)

<sup>ii</sup> Lippard evaluates the criteria and models public art in her book, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* p. 24 and 286.

<sup>iii</sup> For the interdisciplinary version of my *Irish Linen Memorial*, 2002-4: Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, Thomas Fitzgerald and I worked in three different locations for a certain part of its creative development: between Bungendore, NSW and Melbourne, Victoria, Australia and Vancouver, B.C., Canada. For example, I gathered a number of audio materials in digital format on location in Canada and sent them online to Fitzgerald for his use in the original score development.

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## Biography

Lycia Trouton, DCA candidate University of Wollongong - visual arts/installation art. MFA BFA (hons), both in sculpture. Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland; Canadian citizen and worked for past ten years in the USA, exhibited widely in North America and Britain. Pursuing a thesis on counter-memory, memorials and nomadic textiles installations ; likes to collaborate on international intermedia projects. Currently involved with MAPD - Multicultural Arts Professional Development program, based in Victoria - a national Oz Co initiative with RMIT University. personal research project information: <http://www.linenmemorial.org>