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Ben-Ary and Harwood's *Immaterial*

Vahri McKenzie

In Susan Glaspell's one-act play *Trifles* (1916), a group of men and women try to figure out the story behind an apparently senseless murder. While the men focus on material facts present in the house and barn, the women solve the mystery. They notice the 'trifles' that the men do not: clues present in the kitchen and amongst the sewing things that suggest domestic abuse led a wife to strangle her husband. They do not tell the men what they have seen. Thus, those things of little value and importance to the men are secretly recouped and used to buy the freedom of the accused woman. The play illustrates a link between the personal qualities of care and camaraderie, and the associated materials: sewing and kitchen things. All are gendered female.

In *Immaterial*, Gemma Ben-Ary and Mandy Harwood bring together a range of works – two and three dimensional, as well as digital pieces – that reflect their abiding interest in the possibilities and meanings of materials. Further, they situate this interest in the sphere of the feminine, linking the cultural meanings of womanhood to unrecognised labour. The exhibition's title consciously echoes the title of Italian sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato's essay 'Immaterial Labour' (1996). That term is now used to describe those aspect of work overlooked by conventional calculations of the value of labour, such as the thought and care required to produce cultural content: 'the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards', in Lazzarato's words. A forerunner of this concept is seen in the International 'Wages for Housework' Campaign that began in Italy in 1972. This global social movement

demonstrated that industrial labour is only possible because of the unpaid domestic labours of childrearing and housework that support the workers, and argued that such labours should be compensated with a wage.

The connections between care, labour, and value are literally manifested in the works of these artists. In Ben-Ary's *Milk is liquid love*, the invisible labour of women's work is not only rendered visible, but paid in gold: for each hour she spends weaving raffia and raw wool, the artist rewards herself with a 'payday' of weaving in a small amount of gold thread. This creates a vivid illustration of the slow labour of weaving by hand, and develops a narrative of sorts as we follow the spiralling line as it builds from the centre out. At first there are few paydays; there appear to be more paydays as we travel out, but the circles get larger with each loop. Has the artist recorded her labour accurately, and rewarded herself commensurably?

Art and culture, too, depend upon unpaid labour; German artist Hito Steyerl writes that 'Free labour and rampant exploitation are the invisible dark matter that keeps the culture sector going'. For Harwood and Ben-Ary, it is the matter that matters; in Harwood's work there is a commitment to repurposing 'unheroic' materials, with the sign of her hands everywhere present. Her glitter-tape-on-handkerchief works such as *She gives it for free* speak explicitly to women's affective labour. We only have to switch the pronouns to see how these pieces operate: 'He gives it for free' sounds like a loss-leader in a business plan. And there was no venture capital invested in this start-up: the artist retrieved the materials from a bin.

In Harwood's *Biophilia* series, plant things, animal things, and unknown things come together on repurposed sheet fabric. Their thingness is established through free-floating representation in calming green, yellow-green, blue-green grounds. While leaves and small creatures might be naïve or whimsical, other things are less comforting. Flowers, fruit and diamonds give way to strange creatures, sharp tools and masses of unknown stuff; organic shapes suggest organs, while other things look like surgical tools for removing organs. Words appear amongst the things, and these, too, become thing-like in their lack of context. 'Drunk enough baby' might be a question that a breastfeeding mother

rhetorically asks of her suckling infant; it might be something a young woman hears in a nightclub. But some things leak, spread, and echo; thingness remains but is less easily distinguished from the ground: things are all in the same world, connected by their grounds.

The artists' material exploration of the immaterial recoups the unimportant and irrelevant; it relinquishes to transcend. Their material immaterial is light, more concerned with the world of spirit rather than with concrete. Many of Ben-Ary's works employ weaving, that traditional women's work; this literal 'basket weaving' dares us to dismiss it. Sometimes the 'basket' is already full and cannot be utilized, and sometimes the choice of materials, kitchen string, say, sharpens the risk. In many of the woven works, the artist commits to including animal products, in an intersectional nod to mutual oppression. This isn't necessarily a comfortable position for an artist to take, and may raise a critique that suggests Ben-Ary's choice of materials reinforces an oppressive position over non-human animals rather than expressing solidarity between women and other subjugated beings. The artist's project, however, is an aesthetic one that acknowledges human complicity within the natural world, and recalls our historical relationships with horses, rabbits, pigs, sheep and bees. It is a deep history; before agriculture there was a primal relation, such as that explored within Joseph Beuys' shamanism. Ben-Ary's woven animal product works have a resonance that could not be achieved with synthetic materials; complex reactions are a testament to this.

The etymology of 'camaraderie', via 'comrade', comes from the Spanish *camarada*, a group living together in a single room, and Latin *camera*, chamber. The trust and friendship between Harwood and Ben-Ary was a jumping off point for this project, in spite of the challenges they face in physically getting into the studio together. We see a conversation between shapes that form and transform between their works. This spirit of the collection is found in *Conversation piece*, which began with the exchange, 'Thank you for that' / 'It's nothing', stitched into belting material like writing on ticker tape. This captures something wonderful that might add to the phenomenon of reactionary 'slow movements': radical slow communication. More radical than snail mail, this is a physical artefact where the

creation of the worded message is clearly more laborious than the quantity of words expressed. And when those words are of thanks and appreciation, the slowness is made a fetish or a message in itself. The material is the message. The message of thanks is responded to with the civility, 'It's nothing', meaning 'You're welcome', but here taking on something more in the context of 'immateriality'. The nothing that is communicated clearly was quite something: time, labour, layers of joke and in-joke as well as loving kindness. Ben-Ary's and Harwood's *Immaterial* embraces and makes manifest the connections between art, women and the value of labour. In all these works, the abject and the delicate work together: rubbish is repurposed, that which a body would expel is retrieved and crafted into a loved offering.

Works cited

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