

# THE WAY THINGS WORK: JOSH FAUGHT IN CONVERSATION WITH KATE MONDLOCH

Kate Mondloch, assistant professor of contemporary art history and theory, University of Oregon on  
Josh Faught, assistant professor and program coordinator of fibers, University of Oregon

**Kate Mondloch:** Tell me about your first experience with what you would call “craft” in your art practice.

**Josh Faught:** Knitting was passed down to me from my grandmother. However, I attribute most of my early experiences with craft to my time in summer camp. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that I learned to weave before I learned to draw or paint. It’s a biographical aspect of my work that I still like to talk about since it locates my skill set from a time iconically loaded with issues of identity construction. In college, I studied art history and English but when I graduated I gained a bit more confidence in my creative abilities. I later went to the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York to study textiles but realized that the design world wasn’t really where I wanted to be either. Although I was interested in textiles, I wanted to put those techniques toward a more idea-based application: one which could be parlayed into my then-nascent interests in trying to articulate or visualize queer subjectivity. I began collecting these pamphlets and DIY instructionals on macramé and crocheted wall hangings as part of my research. Ultimately, it wasn’t until graduate school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago that I really began to synthesize the two facets of the work.

**KM:** You mentioned your long-term investment in the question of “visualizing queerness,” and other critics have written about this aspect of your work.<sup>1</sup> Can queerness or queer desire be given material form?

**JF:** It’s a key question and I don’t know if I have an answer to it. In 1977, Hal Fischer wrote a piece entitled “Gay Semiotics” which, in a questionably sincere manner, describes the archetypal forms/codes that “signal” a queer presence.<sup>2</sup> Obviously things get more complicated with poststructural and multicultural critiques – I don’t want to propose any solid notion of identity or queerness that could somehow adhere to an object. But I feel that there is a need to somehow index a queer experience, especially as popular representations of queerness now seem skewed more than ever. On the other hand, sometimes I wonder if work can be queered without iconic imagery or declarative queer content: an equally assertive voice but one that ambiguously works to remake new codes for queerness. I’m also attracted to the idea of tentative or inexperienced hands making the work – almost a queering of labor.

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1. See, for example, Lacey Jane Roberts, “Put Your Thing Down Flip It and Reverse It: Re-imagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft Culture and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (forthcoming from Duke University Press).

2. Hal Fischer, *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (San Francisco: NSF Press, 1977).

**KM:** When people think of craft or textiles they usually think of skill and the maker's hand being important to the final product. Not only does much of your work look deliberately slapdash, but also you've used studio assistants to prepare some of the pieces. This idea of an outsourced DIY really destabilizes how we think about craft – someone else can DIY for you!

**JF:** Yeah – I have a general idea of what I want the work to look like, but I don't necessarily have to be involved in it. There's such a strong relationship between craft and ownership. Recently I needed some help sewing a casing to the back of one of my woven pieces, and I asked someone who worked at the craft store to help me with it but she refused, saying that if she helped me "then it wouldn't be my work."

**KM:** Seriously? It seems so incongruous.

**JF:** It does, but I actually like the idea of incompatible things being adjacent to each other. It helps to queer the work. For example, I saw this amazing video on YouTube recently – I think it was called "Queer Theory Books."<sup>3</sup> The camera pans up and down the rows of a bookshelf, scanning titles, and you see some obvious things, like Foucault or Genet, but there's something really amazing about the earnest tone of this 30 second piece where you can hear the whirr of the video camera and the videographer's breathing, and see the shakiness of the hands on the camera. Given the way that this piece is shot, I like the way that the titles of the books themselves could just as easily have been *The Guide to Gay Liberation* as, say, an Agatha Christie novel, but through the intimacy of this experience, the objects that the viewer watches are performing as queer. Potentially, it is through this kind of agency that we can reconfigure objects to say, "this is queer, but it's not what we typically think of as queer."

**KM:** You recently taught a seminar at the uo (University of Oregon) on art and queer theory where you asked a lot of these questions.

**JF:** And I didn't have all of the answers. I had the opportunity to teach whatever I wanted to and I put a lot out there for students to contend with. It was really challenging because many of them didn't have an art or theory background. Initially the students were very invested in either distancing themselves from the material or declaring mastery over it based on their own sense of sexual identity. But by the end of the class a lot of them would say, "I think everything is queer." I don't know if that's quite what I was going for. It made me wonder if there was even any value to delineating something as queer or not queer.

**KM:** Did the students' reactions change the way you think about your art audience? The classroom is like a lab where you can watch the students process the ideas and materials that you've been thinking about in your own work. Did it give you a window onto how the "uninitiated" might experience your work?

**JF:** Sometimes. I don't often show my own work in class but I think the experience of teaching does help to articulate verbally how I read or code various objects in my own creative practice.

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3. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wt\\_aCkndppo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wt_aCkndppo)

**KM:** Your work in this show, and most of what we're looking at in your studio, looks backward to the '60s and '70s in terms of both materials and process. You're clearly mining the terrain of early feminist art, the history of craft or textiles, and various aesthetic strategies such as assemblage, readymades, monochromes, etc. What is your relationship to that history? There are a lot of ostensibly divergent things collapsed and layered onto one another.

**JF:** It's misremembering but a purposeful misremembering. It's not just a meaningless collage because I'm really invested in these forms. I think of it as more like a stalking of history and its forms, as if I'm saying: "I'm going to obsess and reframe these ideas and materials until I work this out." You might say that I appropriate strategies from the past to "bastardize" them for queerness, in a sense.

**KM:** Is there a particular artist or movement to whom you feel most allied?

**JF:** I'm really interested in the period from about 1972 to 1975. I always think that if I could go back and meet Ed Rossbach that would be amazing. I want to work in his basketry studio! (Laughter). He was doing really similar things – using collage and popular culture together with textile forms – although our content is quite different.

**KM:** That makes a lot of sense in terms of your work. You do a lot of layering and putting incompatible things next to each other in the two pieces in this show, for example. You have found objects (for example the disaster blanket) literally stitched together with handmade, "crafted" textiles, and, on top of all of this, there is spray-painted text (yet another appropriation). The techniques and materials are incongruous next to one another, but they seem to be unified by their "low" status. You're weaving together these pathetic and "feminized" texts, processes, materials...it's the über-object!

**JF:** I feel like I use that strategy all the time –it's about adjacency again. It's like I'm going to push this down as far as it will go. I'm going to pick a low material, cover it in a really sloppy way, and then I'm going to choose a really pathetic text that brings it even lower...I'm going to make the pride and dignity of the piece sink as much as it's trying to tower and monumentalize itself.

**JF:** And yet it's not entirely ironic. There's still something unsettling about these pieces – the materials and the accusatory text ["Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired" or "You know who you are"]<sup>4</sup> – that makes the viewer want to back away and try not to be implicated by their address.

**JF:** It's like a cry for help, but whose cry is it? Ideally I'd love for it to psychically pass off its negative energy to its reader. You'd ask, "Oh my god, am I 'hungry, angry, lonely, tired'? This piece is a mirror!"

**KM:** Yes, I can definitely see myself in it! (Laughter). The writing is placed frontally just in front of the viewer and there's an ambiguous projection that happens.

**JF:** The pink spray-painted words could have been written by the viewer or they could be directed *at* the viewer.

**KM:** Exactly. The ambiguity plays really well here.

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4. The text "Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired," used in *four signs to suicide prevention* (2009, on view), was appropriated from suicide prevention literature. The text "You know who you are," used in *no fats or femmes, please* (2009, on view), was extrapolated from an exacting personals ad.

**JF:** Thanks.

**KM:** To switch gears for a moment, I wonder what you think about the recent resurgence of interest in art informed by feminism (another “low” form making a reappearance). I think it’s Peggy Phelan who said that feminism is like a trauma for contemporary society, one that gets reactivated in times of crisis.<sup>5</sup> Do you think that this helps explain the renewed interest in these issues and forms in recent years?

**JF:** I think in terms of craft that makes a lot of sense. Even as craft and textile artists are constantly trying to gain mainstream recognition and acceptance they have to occupy the space of the Other, and to embrace it to some degree. You can use textiles or fibers for political terms, but the minute it loses sight of its liminal history, it’s not effective politically anymore.

**KM:** What would that political or critical power be?

**JF:** It’s a strategy, like the feminist art movement that revalorized craft-based materials and craft objects. But it fails when craft becomes just sculpture. Once it’s considered sculpture it turns into an acceptable material. Sculpture is an imperialist force! There’s a problem of “trend aesthetics” and I have anxiety about the political potential of textiles getting subsumed into sculpture. My students get mad because I teach textiles with a political urgency behind it.

**KM:** It’s as if once craft becomes just another trope, once it gets caught up in the cycle of being “mainstream” again, you won’t have anything to latch onto or to work against? It explains your sense of urgency.

**JF:** Right.

**KM:** So what’s next?

**JF:** I’ve thought a lot about how I can go back and forth between self-loathing and narrative using textile-based practices. They have these interesting mirrored qualities to them. Indigo is “what’s next.” I’ve been using it a lot and there’s something really poetic about the saddening of indigo and how everything blues and gets darker and darker the more times you dip it.

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5. See, for example, Phelan, ed. *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001).