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## **Slipstitch: a survey of contemporary narrative-based stitch and embroidery practices in Australia**

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*Slipstitch*, an Australian exhibition of contemporary stitch artworks was discussed in a panel session titled, *Allegory and Subversion: contemporary stitch narratives, cross-cultural influences and international perspectives*. This presentation situated the exhibition as one example within a broader view of contemporary allegorical, speculative and provisional stitch practices emerging within Australia and Internationally.

*Slipstitch* is an Ararat Regional Art Gallery and National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria touring exhibition (2015-2017), curated by Dr Belinda von Mengersen.

*Slipstitch* presented an Australian perspective on the contemporary uptake of stitch and embroidery practice by a new generation of artists. Long overdue, it was the first national survey of contemporary stitch or embroidery touring exhibition to be undertaken in 29 years<sup>1</sup>. The exhibition included work by emerging artists contextualized alongside the work of established artists to offer an insight into the historical progression of practice, ideas and cross-pollination, especially between the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. In particular, *Slipstitch*<sup>2</sup> considered the occurrence of figurative embroidery in recent visual art practice. The exhibition also explored a perceived 'slippage' occurring between art and craft; drawing and stitching; concept and execution, and technique<sup>3</sup> versus intuition.

Instead of describing pieces included within the exhibition or individual artists' work in detail, a series of observational questions was proposed in the presentation that emerged from the curatorial development of *Slipstitch* act as a catalyst for a broader discussion of stitch practice. Firstly, selected *Slipstitch* exhibition works were discussed in relation to the historical evolution of contemporary stitch in Australia as informed by educational practices in the UK. Secondly, a series of speculative questions that emerged from the conceptual curation of *Slipstitch* which apply to contemporary stitch practice. Thirdly, a set of terms developed in response to these questions is outlined and the work of a relatively unknown Australian artist John Barbour<sup>4</sup> whose liberal practice and provocative conceptual ideas have challenged stitch practice in Australia introduced.

<sup>1</sup>Fletcher documented an Australian national touring exhibiton of contemporary free-machine embroidery work that occurred in 1989, see Marion Fletcher, *Needlework in Australia: A History of the Development of Embroidery* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Belinda vonMengersen, "Beneath the Surface: Embroidery as Drawing in Recent Art," in *Slipstitch, Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. NETS (Melbourne: NETS, 2015), 8-13.

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Hurlstone, "Drawing and the Chimera of Embroidery," in *Hand Stitch Perspectives*, ed. Alice Kettle & Jane McKeating (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 146-53.

<sup>4</sup> E. McDonald, Australian Experimental Art Foundation AEAF, and J. Barbour, *Hard/Soft: John Barbour* (Australian Experimental Art Foundation, 2011); Museum of Contemporary Art MCA, "John Barbour," Museum of Contemporary Art, <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artist/barbour-john/>.

**Exhibition:** *Slipstitch*<sup>5</sup> was a curated group exhibition developed in collaboration with Ararat Regional Art Gallery, and NETS Victoria. The exhibition opened at Ararat Regional Art Gallery in March 2015 and toured five galleries in Victoria. The tour continued through 2017 and included two New South Wales regional art galleries. The exhibition images and details about each artists' work are available here: <http://netsvictoria.org.au/exhibition/slipstitch/>

Conceptually the aim of the exhibition was to survey contemporary stitch practice in Australia and pragmatically to tour the exhibition through regional centers. *Slipstitch* presents an Australian perspective on the contemporary uptake of embroidery by a new generation of artists. The exhibition features recent work from Mae Finlayson, David Green, Lucas Grogan, Alice Kettle, Tim Moore, Silke Raetze, Demelza Sherwood, Matt Siwerski, Jane Theau, Sera Waters, Elyse Watkins and Ilka White. Regional galleries in Australia have a history of supporting textile exhibitions. Three regional galleries – Ararat, -Wangaratta in Victoria and – Tamworth, in New South Wales<sup>6</sup> hold nationally significant collections of contemporary textile and fibre art (from the mid 1970's) and continue to initiate textile exhibitions. NETS Victoria is an exhibition touring organisation that promotes the distribution of contemporary art to regional Victoria. The partnership between Ararat Regional Gallery NETS has resulted in funding and management for the regional tour, a catalogue publication and educational resource for schools.<sup>7</sup>

Collectively, the figurative works in *Slipstitch* reveal embroidery's distinctive capacity for gesture and expression. The term '*Slipstitch*' indicates work loosely stitched together, as figurative narration and autobiographical, three-dimensional drawing. In recent years, contemporary artists in Australia have embraced embroidery for its capacity for poignant and reflective narrative. The re-emergence of embroidery is part of a broader questioning of the hierarchy of materials that has gained momentum since the 1990's. Embroidered objects have often been read literally and relegated within a domestic framework. Contemporary works break down preconceptions by exploring what embroidery can become once it transcends the regularity of pattern and decoration. Historically, embroidery like the Bayeux Tapestry was used as a storytelling tool for political narrative. *Slipstitch* aimed to introduce a contemporary audience to the capacity of embroidery for drawing and narrative.

Curatorially, the exhibition focused on stitch works based on narrative, drawing and the figurative.<sup>8</sup> It also aimed to trace some of the significant cultural influences of contemporary embroidery practice in the UK and how this has and continues to influence emerging contemporary visual artists in their use of stitch. It includes the work of contemporary UK artist Alice Kettle, UK immigrant and maverick educator David Green, alongside the work of established and emerging Australian-based visual artists. Contemporary embroidery in Australia has long been influenced by what was being taught in the UK, particularly by innovators like Constance Howard working at Goldsmiths College, London. More recently embroidery has re-emerged and gained significant currency as a contemporary form in the USA, including through the exhibition, "Pricked: Extreme Embroidery," at the Museum of Art and Design, New York in

<sup>5</sup> Belinda vonMengersen, "Slipstitch," NETS, Victoria, <http://netsvictoria.org.au/exhibition/slipstitch/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Tamworth Textile Touring Exhibitions," *Journal of Textile Design Research and Practice* 1, no. 1 (2013): 109-17.

<sup>7</sup> NETS, "Slipstitch Learning Guide," NETS, [http://netsvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Slipstitch\\_EducationResource\\_FINAL\\_sml.pdf](http://netsvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Slipstitch_EducationResource_FINAL_sml.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> vonMengersen.

2008. Also, in the UK through events like 'The Subversive Stitch Revisited: the politics of cloth', a symposium and exhibition by Whitworth Art Gallery and Goldsmiths College, London held at the Sackler Centre for Arts Education at The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, November 2013. The works in this Australian touring exhibition challenge perceptions of embroidery through use of form, scale, technique and poignant personal narratives.

Sue Wood researched many ways in which contemporary embroidery practice in Australia (from 1960 to 1975) was influenced by contemporary embroidery, educational practices emerging in the UK and particular practitioners who disseminated those ideas across Australia.<sup>9</sup> In Australia, many influential ideas were introduced by immigrant artists, notably David Green, who is still active as an artist and academic. Green initially visited Australia, as did many other UK stitch artists, on a teaching tour when working at Goldsmiths. After immigrating to Australia, he worked at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). In 1985, he joined Charles Sturt University (CSU) in Wagga Wagga, regional NSW. He was appointed the inaugural Professor of Visual Arts in 1990. Artists and educators like David Green have informed a provocative approach to contemporary stitch in Australia. Green has been described as a risk-taker and therefore the best kind of educator – one who encourages students to find their own approach to practice.<sup>10</sup> Green continues to be credited with influencing new work including that of renowned contemporary UK embroiderer Anne Morrell.<sup>11</sup> Many of Green's students in Australia remember his unique embroidery methodology as captured in these quotes: "a stitch is precious – don't waste them"; "A 12mm RSJ going through a concrete block is a stitch"; "There are only outcomes, no simple answers or solutions."<sup>12</sup> These statements clarify the gesture, drawing and subversion at the heart of his practice and, also just how liberal he was in terms of his use of embroidery and stitch as method. Tellingly, such questions still echo through Australian stitch work – especially in relation to that sense of an investigative, experimental approach. Stitch, used as a drawing tool, becomes a medium for autobiographical storytelling: for figurative gestures, text, cultural symbolism or nuanced metaphors. In material culture, embroidered objects have often been read literally and relegated to a domestic framework. The works included in *Slipstitch* address such préconceptions, exploring what embroidery becomes once it moves away from regular pattern, motif or decoration and becomes instead a tool for personal and political narrative.<sup>13</sup> *Slipstitch* considers how stitch and embroidery is used now: suggesting a certain 'slippage' between the traditional and contemporary approaches to embroidery and subversive adaptations. The exhibition unearths artists who have come to use embroidery somewhat accidentally in pursuing a divergent practice that seeks to confront the hierarchy of materials by adopting practices marginal in the history of art.

So, despite the aforementioned influences in Australian secondary education many of the artists in *Slipstitch*, when questioned, state that they are 'un-trained' in stitch or embroidery and/or have no formal training in textiles at all. Many, however, do have a fine-arts educational background, and often these artists will describe how they 'discovered' or 'sought' embroidery as a way of working. Tim Moore's story is a serendipitous example: "Several years ago, Tim Moore left his

<sup>9</sup> Susan G Wood, "Creative Embroidery in New South Wales, 1960-1975" (PhD diss., RMIT, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Julie Montgarett, "Remembering the Memorable – David Green," *Textile Fibre Forum* 74 (2004): 14-17.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Morrell, "From Madras to Manchester: A Narrative on the Desire to Hand-Stitch," in *Hand Stitch Perspectives*, ed. Alice Kettle and Jane McKeating (London: Bloomsbury 2012), 90-103.

<sup>12</sup> Montgarett.

<sup>13</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1984).

pencil case at Heathrow when flying to his new home, Australia. Minus a pencil case he could not sketch on board flight JAL214 so improvising he did his first embroidery on a sick bag, using the in-flight sewing kit, he landed at Kingsford Smith with four embroidered sick bags and a brand new skill” (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> Consequently, many of the artists in *Slipstitch* use relatively simple hand-embroidery methods and a very limited ‘palette’ of stitches, using a needle and thread in simple and intuitive ways as a drawing tool. Lucas Grogan, Elyse Watkins, Matt Siwerski and Demelza Sherwood describe a physical, conceptual and creative freedom in using this humble technology: the needle. Initially, it may seem limiting to only know or use a few stitches and yet, paradoxically, that is exactly what educators like Green and Howard have always proposed: to experiment and innovate with a few stitches. Interestingly this point is also echoed by professional embroiderer James Hunting who suggests that his career has “been based on five stitches: stem stitch, couching, the French knot, blanket stitch and the generic stitch of entry and exit of a needle through cloth.”<sup>15</sup>

Tim Moore (Figure 1) describes how he came to use embroidery in a very pragmatic and essentially improvised way (in-transit). His initial works led to a series characterized by their shrewd wit. Each piece tells a story and triggers an intimate double-take in response to his astute subversion of many aspects of the domestic ‘modes’ of embroidery, and the presentation of small, detailed images and text packaged in a ‘kit or cartoon-character-like’ drawing style. A viewer’s double take or giggle as they lean in closely – the unexpected mirth in a setting requiring reverie.



Figure 1, Tim Moore, *Ice Ice Baby Arm Two* 2011, Cotton embroidery thread on vintage Irish linen, Collection of Paola Morabito, Photographer: Cam Neville

<sup>14</sup> vonMengersen.

<sup>15</sup> James Hunting, "The Professional Embroiderer?," in *Hand Stitch Perspectives*, ed. Alice Kettle and Jane McKeating (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 138-46.

Silke Raetze (Figure 2) subverts the symbolism of historical embroidered samplers that aimed to develop both needlecraft skills and humility in girls. Using traditional small-scale framed cross-stitches, Raetze poignantly asks confronting questions of her viewers through embroidered text.



*Figure 2, Silke Raetze, Fortune & Good Things (Proverbs series) 2012, Cotton fabric and thread, Courtesy of the artist, Photographer: Per Ericson*

Lucas Grogan (Figure 3) describes a drawing process where images are worked onto the cloth and stitches evolve or are tested intuitively. This improvisation is based on one or two stitches learned at an embroiders' guild workshop which serve as his palette.



*Figure 3, Lucas Grogan, The Universe Quilt 2013, Cotton thread on laminated cotton cloth, Purchased with the assistance of the Robert Salzer Foundation and Ararat Rural City Council, 2013, Ararat Regional Art Gallery Collection, Photographer: Andrew Curtis*

Sera Waters' (Figure 4) work is enigmatic: deeply conceptual and capable of encompassing shifting turns in technique, materials and form dependent upon what is required. Waters' work is also only deceptively classical: of all the artists in the exhibition she is one of the few with formal training in embroidery, deliberately pursued post art-school at the Royal School of Needlework, Hampton Court Palace, UK.



Figure 4, Sera Waters, *The Great Australian Bite: Gums 2011*, Linen, cotton, crewel, beads, sequins, trimmings, chain, card, stuffing, leather, tea-towel, felt. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Andrew Curtis.

Ilka White (Figure 5) is best known as a weaver which is echoed in her stitch – she describes the ‘bodily process’ of stitching. For her recent triptych, running stitch was chosen as its pace reflected the quiet in-out concept of breathing and the pace of breath. Collaboration with other stitch artists, a print-maker have also have informed her specific use of stitch.



Figure 5, Ilka White, *Sustenance 2015*, Indigo dyed hemp thread, digitally printed silk twill, silk organza lining Courtesy of the artist Photographer: Kristian Laemmle-Ruff

Elyse Watkins (Figure 6) works with horse hair. Hair has a long history of use for stitch, with some samples of embroidery worked in hair dating from 1790.<sup>16</sup> Its buoyancy is capable of producing strong, fine-graphic lines. Watkins uses almost ‘unfinished’ or open-ended stitches, working into the cloth but leaving the threads hanging from either end.



Figure 6, Elyse Watkins, *Apron and Ovaries - Unbridled Mind series 2010 (detail)*, Hand embroidery with horsehair on two layers of silk; horsehair, silk organza, silk georgette, photographic heat transfer. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Andrew Curtis

<sup>16</sup> Tracy Gill, "Research and the Imprint of Stitch," 176-85.

**Speculation and Allegory: speculative stitch practices and the role of allegory.** During the process of developing this exhibition several speculative questions about the nature of stitch have arisen. For, during a research process we often don't find exactly what we set out to look for in the first place, and instead are drawn towards an alternative pathway. Drawn to explore another insistent yet elusive question which rests at the edge of our consciousness. In this case that elusive question was: Why stitch?

One answer could be stitches' capacity for both 'Allegory' (discussed below) and "Subversion."<sup>17</sup> Another answer might be less conceptual and more pragmatic: Nigel Hurlstone comments on how careers in embroidery can be made with two or three stitches, this suggests that it is the intuition of the stitcher that matters, and that innovation within a limited 'palette' is valid. Hurlstone also reminds us of Alice Kettle's description of the "paradox of stitching, balancing together its slowness in the making with the constant emergence of new ideas."<sup>18</sup> In his discussion of these ideas, Hurlstone considers that this 'slowing down' of perception is vital to the understanding of stitch as a practice where an expansion of ideas "arise from the process of making embroidery itself."<sup>19</sup> These comments offer some insights into why an artist may choose to stitch. Artists including Narelle Jubelin<sup>20</sup> have also described how they can carry needlepoint in a small bag, easily transportable, which allows them to work in airports and other transitory locations. The provisional nature of the technique, requiring simple tools and materials, was in many ways an asset enabling them to work whenever and wherever time allowed with low cost and simple tools.

Collectively, the artists in Slipstitch discuss the accessibility and directness of embroidery, and consider stitch to be a dynamic, drawing tool that is at once gestural, immediate and transportable. For, the majority of these artists cannot draw upon a formal training period or educational experience in embroidery, even if they may have briefly sought it out at some point. Perhaps partially, because of this, many of these practitioners use a few simple stitches and work intuitively within that vocabulary. The interesting dichotomy here is that perhaps it is the limitation itself (as suggested by Howard<sup>21</sup> and Green<sup>22</sup>) that drives their creative impulse, forcing the question – just what can be achieved within this range?

Textiles are extra-ordinarily nuanced. Textiles present a complex web of inter-relationships – their capacity for profound non-verbal communication, through cultural representation, metaphors and allegory is renowned. Textiles like allegory are not simply or read or straightforwardly interpreted because they never operate on just one level. Allegory relates to the notion of a story being able to simultaneously communicate multiple layers of meaning. Allegory is analogous to textiles in that they likewise never have but one layer of meaning – the use of this term takes us beyond simple metaphorical readings. Textiles are adroit and nuanced – concepts can be read through any of the following aspects and usually are read through several of these simultaneously. The artists in this exhibition are telling personal and social stories through their work. They are acutely aware of the capacity for stitch and textiles to communicate on some or

<sup>17</sup> Parker, *The Subservise Stitch*.

<sup>18</sup> Hurlstone, "Drawing and the Chimera of Embroidery."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> OCULA, "Narelle Jubelin, Flamenca Primitiva," *The Commerical*, <https://ocula.com/artists/narelle-jubelin/>.

<sup>21</sup> Janis Jefferies, "Obituary: Constance Howard," *Crafts (London, England)* September/October 2000, no. 166 (2000): 64.

<sup>22</sup> Montgarett, "Remembering the Memorable."



all levels including: materiality (textile); technique/s (stitch); imagery; narrative; text; concept; and subversive use of a particular convention like a stitch sampler.

The concept of 'allegory' informs the theoretical framework of the exhibition in this way - suggesting that a narrative rendered in stitch on textiles is always allegorical. A number of textile theorists have explored the multifaceted capacity of textiles. Mitchell<sup>23</sup> discusses the relationship between Textile, text, techne'. Dormor<sup>24</sup> speaks of writing textile, making text and cloth and stitch as an agency for disorderly text referencing Barthes, Kristeva, and Ettinger. Pajaczkowska considers the complexity of cloth<sup>25</sup> and proposes nine forms of tacit knowledge held within the cultures of textile.<sup>26</sup> Tim Ingold<sup>27</sup> introduces the concept of improvisation as a type of creative speculation in the making process of textiles – here I am thinking about praxis – the dialogue between concept and material practice. "Making... in which practitioners bind their own pathways or lines of becoming into the texture of material flows comprising the lifeworld. Rather than reading creativity 'backwards', from a finished object to an initial intention in the mind of an agent, this entails reading it forwards, in an ongoing generative movement that is at once itinerant, improvisatory and rhythmic."<sup>28</sup> Terms including subversion, allegory, speculation and improvisation have become integral to a discussion of the performative nature of textile practice but not always discussed in specific relation to stitch. Whilst an expanded version of this theoretical discussion lies beyond the scope of the presentation it sets up propositional territory for further discussion.

**Irrationality, Speculation and the Provisional: exploring terms for contemporary stitch practices.** The 'Why' question has led to thinking about emerging voices and influences on contemporary stitch practice in Australia. Such influences, embodied in the work of John Barbour, for example, make a case for including the terms irrationality, speculation and the provisional in the language of stitch.

*Irrationality* – this is related to that question of why stitch so I will simply set out some rhetorical questions: What is it that compels artists to stitch? What occurs when an artist 'discovers' stitch or learns to stitch? What provokes them to stitch, and why are they compelled to keep doing it? I would like to suggest this could be described as a kind of sounding-out – or a listening to the 'sonics of stitch'... that the ideas arise if the artist is paying attention. La Belle in relation to the sonics of language describes how: "vocalizing speaks through the sonicity of utterance, all extending and contracting against individual desire, memory and the urgencies of speaking, writing and hearing" – and of how through the process one is "seeking to locate the tension and volition inherent to language"<sup>29</sup>. So, I wonder, is the imperative to stitch so very different?

<sup>23</sup> Victoria Mitchell, "Textiles, Text and Techne," *Obscure Objects of Desire: Reviewing the Crafts in the Twentieth Century*, London, Crafts Council (1997): 324-32.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Dormor, "Writing Textile, Making Text: Cloth and Stitch as Agency for Disorderly Text," (2014). Accessed on 9/28/2017 from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/926/>

<sup>25</sup> Claire Pajaczkowska, "On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth," *Textile* 3, no. 3 (2005): 220-49.

<sup>26</sup> "The Textiles Toolbox - Psychoanalysis of Nine Types of Textile Thinking," in *The Handbook of Textile Culture*, ed. Diana Wood-Conroy Janis Jefferies, Hazel Clark (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 79-94.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Ingold, "The Textility of Making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, no. 1 (2009): 91-102.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Brandon LaBelle, "Raw Orality: Sound Poetry and Live Bodies," *VOICE-Vocal Aesthetics in Digital* (2010): 147-71.

*Speculation* - linked to the irrationality of stitch is the sense of speculation – of making-blind and trusting that the work will reveal itself to you. Speculation is needed for Carter who speaks about how research in creative practice calls upon the necessity of invention: “the condition of invention – the state of being that allows a state of becoming to emerge – is a perception, or recognition, of the ambiguity of appearances. Invention begins when what signifies exceeds its signification – when what means one thing, or conventionally functions in one role, discloses other possibilities.”<sup>30</sup> Carter describes a “double movement”, of a “decontextualization in which the found elements are rendered strange, and of recontextualization, in which new families of association and structures of meaning are established.”<sup>31</sup> He suggests that “this double movement characterizes any conceptual advance” and, further, that “technique is necessary, but in the transformation it falls away” – “allowing the unpredictable and differential situation to influence what is found.”<sup>32</sup>



Figure 7, John Barbour, *I will not steal*, 2003, image courtesy of AEAf, Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide

*Provisional* – a sense of the provisional is a recurrent and influential thread in Australian contemporary stitch practice. We have discussed how the UK has influenced Australian stitch practices, but what I have also observed during the curation of this exhibition is the equally visible local influence. I am not suggesting that provisional modes of stitching have not and do not occur elsewhere – instead, that this way of working is becoming more visible: Barbour’s<sup>33</sup> notion of the provisional was very influenced by Bois and Krauss’s<sup>34</sup> discussion of Entropy: which can be described as a kind of process of breaking down of boundaries (going as far as

<sup>30</sup> Paul Carter, "Interest: The Ethics of Invention" in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B.Tauris., 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 15-25.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Australian Experimental Art Foundation AEAf, "John Barbour: Work for Now," Australian Experimental Art Foundation, [http://aeaf.org.au/exhibitions/10\\_barbour.html](http://aeaf.org.au/exhibitions/10_barbour.html); MCA.

<sup>34</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, "A User's Guide to Entropy," *October* 78 (1996): 39-88.

sublimation) or more generally, the process of dissolution from order into chaos. In Barbour's work this has been developed through the tension of stitches – like a set of movements between drawing and erasure, where the stitches are barely tensioned against the cloth and appear in sections to be coming undone. He subverts conventions of the fixedness of stitch through this entropic approach. Barbour sought the liminal physicality of drawing through provisional stitch and interrogated the language of stitch in a unique way. He was drawn to stitch for its capacity for provisional mark making and for what in his mind was an intimate relationship to the intangibility and transience of language. Other Australian artists who are working with the provisional capacity of stitch include Ruth Hadlow, Michelle Elliot, Gillian Lavery and Jessica Rankin. McDonald discussing Barbour's work suggests that in this provisional mode: "Barbour's frail, threadbare embroideries as jotting and thoughts defy their materiality... they remind us of a world barely stitched together."<sup>35</sup> Lee discusses the process of drawing in her catalogue essay for the exhibition *Afterimage* which considered drawing practices in process art, describing: "the actualities of drawing: [ as being] the entropic, the transitive, the contingent."<sup>36</sup> All the artists in *Slipstitch* intuit their stitch practice as a form of drawing. Barbour and others have pushed this imperative through entropy and unmaking. So, if the imperative to stitch can be related to both sonics and speculation, invention and entropy – then what is the relationship between an entropic or provisional form of stitch? A stitch that is coming undone, that is barely tethered to the cloth...



Figure 8, John Barbour, untitled object, 2002, image courtesy of AEA, Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide

**In conclusion**, perhaps then all stitch not bound by the imperative of pattern is speculative. A speculation which is both literal and conceptual. And, it is this speculative impulse that allows the needle to traverse space, time and language. That the arc of the needle is not predetermined but occurs irrationally in response to many and varied provocations. Where stitchers are

<sup>35</sup> McDonald and Barbour, *Hard/Soft*.

<sup>36</sup> Pamela M Lee, "Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art," *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process* (1999): 25-48.

prospectors. So, stitch to speculate. Because stitch asks us hard questions. And speculation enables amplification.

Dedication, I would like to remember Sue Rowley – a teacher and mentor who passed in 2016. Vale Emeritus Professor Sue Rowley influenced Textile theory in Australia through a series of articles and publications including *Reinventing Textiles: Volume 1: Tradition and Innovation*; Sue Rowley (ed.).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Sue Rowley, *Reinventing Textiles: Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Telos Art Publishing, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Winchester 2001).

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