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Queerly Made: Harmony Hammond's Floorpieces

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Abstract

In 1973, the artist Harmony Hammond made a series of artworks entitled *Floorpieces*. Based on traditional rag-rug techniques, these braided fabric pieces were selectively painted and then placed, like rugs, directly on the ground. The making of the *Floorpieces* coincided with Hammond coming out, and their spiraling, braided form is suggestive of both lesbian erotics and traditions of women's handicraft. Hammond's work challenges many of the binary oppositions that continue to structure conversations of craft—high/low, masculine/feminine, functional/decorative. This article argues that Hammond's destruction of binaries activates a queer space, and that her handmade abstractions open up possible directions for a productive queering of the category of craft that is attentive to sexuality and class.

Keywords: Harmony Hammond, craft, queer theory, feminism, class, lesbian art.

Crafting the Floorpieces

In 1973, US artist Harmony Hammond came out as a lesbian. That same year, she created a series of six watershed artworks—her *Floorpiece* sculptures (Figure 1). Made using



Fig I Harmony Hammond, Floorpiece V, 1973. Cloth and acrylic, 59 in. (149 cm) diameter. Courtesy Dwight Hackett projects, Sante Fe, New Mexico. © Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

traditional braided rug techniques, the circular, spiraling Floorpieces were comprised of recycled knit cloth found during Hammond's rag-picking excursions in New York City's garment district. These industrial cast-offs were braided together, tightly coiled, stitched to a heavy cloth backing, and then selectively painted with acrylic. Hammond has called the Floorpieces "her most radical works." The term "radical" invokes its Latin origins—a rooting in, or return to, foundations—while it also suggests a strident politics. This article considers the Floorpieces' radicalism anew within two related contexts: Hammond's craft-based process, and the concurrent emergence of her queer identity. However, one need not have recourse to the biographical to make claims about craft's perhaps inherent queerness.

To understand the Floorpieces as queer craft is to write a feminist art history that is defiantly lesbian as well as sensitive to class.² Few artists in 1973 were as dedicated as Hammond was to bringing art down, while

also bringing craft up. In a statement for her solo show in 1973 at A.I.R., the women-only alternative cooperative gallery of which she was a cofounder. Hammond wrote of her "desire to break down the distinctions between painting and sculpture, between art and women's work, and between art in craft and craft in art." Many other craft-based fine arts, such as tablecloths or guilts, rely upon a spatial shift from horizontal to vertical as they are institutionally framed and legitimized as art—such as Robert Rauschenberg's Bed (1955) or Faith Ringgold's story quilts. ⁴ This move to the wall cancels out the work's utility: such use-value, of course, is one standard dividing line between craft and art. Hammond's Floorpieces, however, stubbornly resist that change in orientation. They are laid on the ground as rugs—insistently low, although any functionality they have in that capacity is partial, and intentionally compromised.

Hammond's work is positioned within several overlapping art historical movements. The Floorpieces have been exhibited alongside other gendered, handmade art ("Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art," curated by Lydia Yee at the Bronx Museum of Art, 1995), as well as seen as expanding the definition of painting in the late 1960s and early 1970s ("High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975," curated by Katy Siegel, 2006). While these are relevant critical contexts. Hammond's work also exceeds them. bringing together feminist politics, avantgarde abstraction, queer sensuality, and "middlebrow" hobbyist crafting.

As Elissa Auther has argued in a previous issue of this journal, fiber crafts and fine arts, while sharing common ground aesthetically, were often segregated in this era and subject to hierarchical divisions.⁵ Some of this separation was challenged by feminism, and the Floorpieces reference a range of 1970s feminist concerns: namely, the elevation of the domestic arts, the dismantling of gendered hierarchies of art and craft, and the dignifying of historically feminized labor. They also key into other social and political issues of that decade. Hammond's use of remnants from garbage dumpsters had an ecological component, for instance, and relates to the nascent environmental and do-it-yourself anti-capitalist movement. And the braided pieces are embedded in a kind of femoprimitivism that attempted to link women's art cross-culturally and trans-historically with indigenous and traditional craft practices. The Floorpieces' spiraled forms relate to Native American pottery and basket-making, which are based on similar coiling, and Hammond has long been concerned with the ritualistic stitching of much women's work.

Yet within art history, the Floorpieces are most often retrospectively understood as in dialogue with other 1960s and 1970s floor-based artworks, such as Lynda Benglis's poured paintings and the metal sculptures of Carl Andre (Figure 2). Much has been made of the differences between Hammond and Andre in particular, in language that is stereotypically, even hyperbolically gendered: circular versus square; soft, warm fabric versus hard, cold metal; saturated, applied color versus neutral, inherent tones; and handcrafted domestic surfaces versus found industrial material. Hammond's integration and braiding together of her cloth strands to create a unified, spiral rug is at odds with Andre's placement of individual units that remain separate even when subsumed within his precise grids. However, such easy dichotomies disregard the fact that both artists shared an interest in flatness, baselessness, and the phenomenological activation of the viewer's space. What is more, Hammond's materials—strips from the end-cuts of large bolts of machine-knit fabric—are just as industrial as Andre's metals.

Ironically, perhaps the most important difference between Andre's work and Hammond's Floorpieces, which she views as "lateral paintings," is that the latter are not meant to be walked on. Andre's metal pieces—stepped onto and trod upon—are in clear dialogue with utilitarian floor coverings, but the artist himself was strongly opposed to this reading, as it pushed his sculptures dangerously close to the long-dismissed realm of craft. Phil Leider referred to Andre's floor works as "rugs" in his 1968 review of Andre's solo show at Dwan Gallery in New York, a terminology

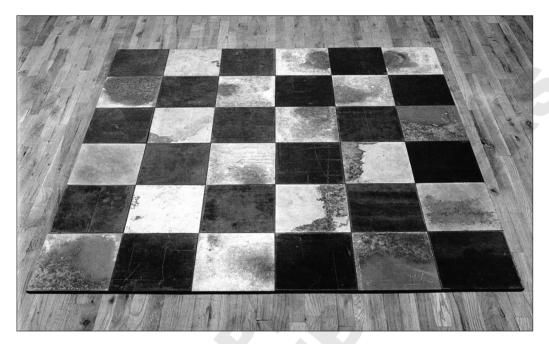


Fig 2 Carl Andre, Steel-Magnesium Plain, 1969. Steel and magnesium, thirty-six-unit square, eighteen plates of each metal alternating, each plate $\frac{3}{8} \times 12 \times 12$ in. (1 × 30 × 30 cm); overall: $\frac{3}{8} \times 72 \times 72$ in. (1 × 182 × 182 cm). © Carl Andre. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

that had wide circulation despite Andre's objections.⁷ As the artist wrote in a letter to the editor in Artforum in 1973—the same year that Hammond made her floor-based sculptures—"My work derives from the working-class crafts of bricklaying, tile-setting, and stone-masonry. I have pointed this out over and over again and yet my works are described as 'rugs.'''8

Andre's insistence that his art derives from (masculine) artisanal labor ignores the fact that a rug might as easily be considered a "working-class craft." "Rug" becomes a pejorative term, and Andre distances himself from its low, feminine origins. Andre's masculine, classed identity was especially at issue in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

a time when he was a vocal member of the Art Workers' Coalition and signaled his identity as an "art worker" by sporting a daily uniform of worker's overalls. 9 What Andre's letter does not mention is that rugs, too, are in dialogue with labor; Hammond's Floorpieces are feminist, class-conscious comments on work—floors are, after all, loaded sites of women's housekeeping.

If Andre is one "father" of floor-based art, Lynda Benglis might be considered a "mother." Starting in the late 1960s, Benglis poured pigmented latex directly on the ground in large colorful swaths. Benglis also used industrial materials such as polyurethane foam to create droopy, bulbous forms on the floor. With their

almost fluorescent, intentionally vulgar colors and debased materials, Benglis's "fallen" paintings were, like Hammond's work, feminist challenges to fine art hierarchies. 10 Though similarly interested in sensuality and the registration of the body in her art, Benglis's process is distinct from Hammond's investment in handwork. A Life magazine article from 1970 entitled "Fling, Dribble and Dip" famously placed Benglis's art on a continuum with Jackson Pollock's actions. 11 The photographs accompanying the article depict the artist at work, wielding a bucket of latex with gloves on. Keeping such materials at arm's length, the photos show Benglis's literal distance from the fetish of the artist's hand. By contrast, with the Floorpieces, Hammond deftly integrated the modernist painterly fixations on support, flatness, and edge seen in both Andre and Benglis with an investment in touch and traditional women's fiber crafts.

Because Hammond's work troubles the line between art and craft, the Floorpieces do not sit easily within strict categories. More recently, they have been understood almost as conceptual works or assisted readymades—fairly straightforward appropriations of the traditional form of the braided rag rug. This reading proposes that Hammond is performing a Duchampian act, injecting inappropriate objects into a fine art context, as if the Floorpieces are exactly what they resemble—barely altered rag rugs that have been moved from the domestic sphere into the art institution. 12 This misreading is due in part to the fact that the works are somewhat difficult to read in reproduction. Their vividly painted passages, which make them quite unlike actual rag rugs, are only evident when viewed in person. Their

surfaces rely on subtle textural contrasts not clearly visible in photographs—especially since the paint has often soaked into the fabric. Hammond let the patterns of the found rags guide her painting, and mimicked their colors, using the paint to only slightly brighten or intensify the fabrics' hues. These areas are even more difficult to discern in photographs. This fugitivity is central to the Floorpieces as they insist on the importance of the spectator's presence and skirt the border between visibility and invisibility. In addition, Hammond pointedly used acrylic pigment, not fabric dye, to apply color; this refusal to adopt rug-making techniques whole-cloth further hybridizes the works as craft, painting, and sculpture.

Their scale (another quality hard to capture in a photograph) is also distorted from "real" rag rugs in ways not easy to detect in documentation. However, it is crucial that the Floorpieces are exaggerated and outsized. Hammond's tight coiling method has rendered them firmer and more rigid than actual rugs, and at about 5 ft. (1.5 m) in diameter each and almost 2 in. (5 cm) in height, they are too thick to comfortably walk upon. To step from the bare floor to one of these awkwardly elevated surfaces would cause a slight stutter in gait, unlike the relatively unimpeded foot traffic that an Andre metal plate piece permits.

Hammond's first Floorpiece, which the artist considers transitional and does not show publicly, illustrates somewhat more clearly how her sculptures differ from regular rag rugs (Figure 3). Still experimenting with an earth-toned palette, she painted this piece with the same muted tans and browns used in her Presences series from 1972, the



Fig 3 Harmony Hammond, Floorpiece I, 1973. Cloth and acrylic, 52 in. (132 cm) diameter. Courtesy Dwight Hackett projects, Sante Fe, New Mexico. © Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

large-scale cloth bodies that immediately preceded her move to the floor. In Floorpiece I, the acrylic paint is stiff, almost leathery as it is heavily layered on top of the fabric, and the form has been unified by the all-over color into a series of concentric circles. By contrast, in the remaining, fully realized five works of the series, she respected the patterns of the found rags themselves—as her spiraling misaligned the various rows of mismatched fabric and she emphasized the arbitrary designs made by braiding. Hammond also began to selectively paint the surfaces of the works, using the pigment to accentuate the fabrics' colors or to clarify their edges or boundaries. The passages of paint, by turns subtle and outlandish, are more than mere decoration, for it is the play between painted and not-painted that gives these works part of their critical indecipherability.

Thus it is not quite right when Blake Gopnik writes in his 2006 review of the "High Times, Hard Times" exhibit that Hammond's works "borrowed intact" techniques of fabric art, as they were "laid out on the gallery floor rather like a circular

rag rug. Almost exactly like a rag rug, in fact. Folk art gave Hammond access to an informality and modesty that earlier, prissier abstraction had avoided ... [as she is] making objects that barely register as more than slight conceits, modestly realized. 13 Note the coded gendered language of Gopnik's review: the word "modest" is used twice—not to mention "prissy." It is, however, immodesty, shamelessness, and vulgarity that is flaunted in these works, especially as they exist in tension with their own restraint and handcrafted "homeliness." Hammond's insistence on fusing art and craft and her repositioning of painting to ground level are strident, not modest, gestures. She contests the primacy of verticality by insisting on horizontality as active rather than passive.

What did the horizontal composition of the Floorpieces mean to Hammond? Her description of her process—"I would literally sit on the floor in the center of one of the pieces, coiling the fabric, pushing it out from the center to fill a space and create a circular boundary" 14—reflects, first of all, her growing interest in martial

arts. She took up aikido in 1973, the same year she made the Floorpieces, and the discipline's emphasis on channeling spirals of energy has been central to her work ever since. Like many feminists at the time, Hammond was concerned with reclaiming space, and her braided works grew larger to mark out an ever-wider area. Further, this creation of a circular space drew upon her contemporary investment in consciousnessraising, a process she describes as going around "the proverbial feminist circle." In fact, the Floorpieces were first shown in 1974 in the show "A Woman's Group" at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York. The exhibition included work made by women in Hammond's feminist art and consciousnessraising group, including Louise Fishman, Patsy Norvell, and Jenny Snider, although little of it had direct reference to the issues they discussed. As Hammond has reflected, "Like the early work of many women my age my work was personal. But we learned to hide this aspect for fear that the work would be ignored or ridiculed ... So we hid our sources and disguised the meaning of our imagery in formal concerns." Indeed, the Floorpieces are thick with metaphor and layered with shades of meaning. Analysis of Hammond's investments in abstraction—and in metaphor—helps to untangle how they are bound up in queerness, even as that queerness is not necessarily overtly legible.

Queer Space

Hammond has written: "I came out as a lesbian artist—meaning the two are connected and affect each other." Created as Hammond was beginning to discover her lesbianism and proclaim it (to herself and to others), the Floorpieces are widely

acknowledged as her breakthrough pieces. The tactility of the works and the act of physically making them were crucial to this breakthrough; she had to bodily enact the various handiworks of braiding, spiraling, stitching, and painting. Hammond writes, "I find that materials which suggest direct hand manipulation ... seem to carry with them sexual references." This new exploration of bodily processes connected her work to onanistic sensuality—as she related making by hand to "touching oneself" and reveled in the "heightened erotic sense" she felt in her studio. 19 The corporeal process of making the works in 1973 is aligned, then, with the deepening awareness of her own same-sex desire.

Importantly, the Floorpieces are not crocheted—nor knit, woven, or hooked—but braided. The braid for Hammond is a potent carrier of gueer identity; as she wrote in the introduction to her book Lesbian Art In America, "I like to think of lesbian art as a braid with three strands, gender, sexuality, and art, though from time to time other stands, such as history or identity, are woven in and out."²⁰ The three strands of the braid invoke a radical queer "third space"—an orientation beyond the heteronormative binary.²¹ So, too, does braiding evoke for Hammond a kind of power in collectivity; she writes, "The strands remain discrete, but the final braid is stronger than any one strand—how's that for metaphor!"22 The braid is a further symbol for lesbian community formations famous for its complex enmeshments and entanglements.

Unconnected to any head and lying flat on the ground, the Floorpieces suggest piles of cut-off braids. Paul Eli Ivy declares, "In 1974, after a devastating fire in her Bowery loft, [Hammond] cut off her long hair. Her new crew cut was a cleansing, a visual sign of change in her life, and a proclamation of her gender and lesbian sexuality."23 Hammond has continued to use hair as a substitute for bodies as well as words. In Speaking Braids, from 2000–2002, a hemp braid emerges from the mouth of a bronze woman's head, projecting like a tongue, or an elaborately woven sentence (Figure 4). The braids tumbling onto the ground in a loose heap connect this work back to the coiled Floorpieces, as they heap up around a sculptural element that resembles a book. As charged bearers of sexual codes, the braid, the crew cut, and the bald head all signify and queerly speak.

For Hammond, the spiral form of the Floorpieces was also significantly gendered, and in later works, it became an animated female figure. In her 1982 painting, My Little Fan Lady, the spiral is a woman, and the artist has referred to this motif as a "spinning spinster" (Figure 5). (As this phrase indicates, Hammond is a keen wordsmith who frequently employs double meanings.) The Fan Lady encapsulates Hammond's use of spirals and braids as erotic female stand-ins, as well as her irreverent wordplay: "A woman who whirls and twirls and turns things upside down. Wrapping/spiral. The spiral of the oval braids and floorpieces is the spiraling of the wrapped shapes. The spiral becomes Fan Lady's body ... Insidious. Outrageous. She goes where she wants and opens herself up. She does not take herself too seriously."²⁴ Beyond the queer indeterminacy of the "third term" of the lesbian braid, a spiral is suggestive of female sexuality, as it is one continuous line that auto-erotically folds back in on itself.25



Fig 4 Harmony Hammond, Speaking Braids, 2000-02. Bronze, acrylic, hemp and wax, $83 \times 22 \times 22$ in. (210 × 55 × 55 cm). Courtesy Dwight Hackett projects, Sante Fe, New Mexico. © Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

In a 1933 lecture on femininity, Freud discussed what he singled out as women's premier invention in the history of civilization—the processes of braiding,



Fig 5 Harmony Hammond, My Little Fan Lady, 1982. Acrylic and oil crayon on paper, $30 \times 20^{1/4}$ in. (76 × 51 cm). Collection: Jo Ann Teter. Courtesy Dwight Hackett projects, Sante Fe, New Mexico. © Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

weaving, and plaiting. These activities stemmed, in his thesis, from penis envy, as women's shame—what he called "a feminine characteristic par excellence"—drove them to try to braid their pubic hair together to conceal their "genital deficiency." While positing braiding as an anxious compensatory activity for the lack of a phallus seems absurd and sexist, for many lesbians the notion of a stand-in phallus is not necessarily offensive hands, tongues, and dildos are all eagerly pressed into service as queer surrogates.

One definition of craft is "skill in making or doing things, especially by hand."This could be a line from a women-seeking-women personal ad; many lesbians take pride in their dexterity in doing things "by hand."

Along with their braided shapes, the bright, unevenly painted surfaces of the Floorpieces are likewise queer. (It is no accident that Anna Chave has called their reds and blues "gaily colored." Might the Floorpieces be understood as burlesques of rag rugs—or better, rugs in drag, like a partially made-up queen whose fabulous makeup sits somewhat unevenly on the surface of her face? The Floorpieces are "rugs," not rugs, and invoke Susan Sontag's 1964 definition of camp as a way of seeing the world in quotes.²⁸ Understanding Hammond as camp puts a different, queer spin on the hyperbole of the presumed essential femininity taken for granted in the comparisons between her and Andre. As with all drag, the Floorpieces parodically inhabit that feminine stereotype to such excess that any suggestion of essence collapses.²⁹ By performatively citing the rag rug, but then skewing it and thwarting its utilitarian purpose, the works point to a new understanding of the queer potential of craft, at least as practiced by Hammond, to transgress the oppositions of "authentic" versus "sham," functionality versus decoration, private versus public, furniture versus art.

The Floorpieces enact a dismantling of binaries that is distinctly queer, not least their blurring of boundaries between art and work, craft and art. ("Art is essentially work," Hammond declared in 1977.³⁰) As Hammond was coming out, she began seeking models that moved beyond the sex/gender divide. She was drawn to the

work of French feminist Monique Wittig, in particular her 1973 book The Lesbian Body. Written in vividly corporeal language, Wittig's experimental novel plays with language and dismantles the rigid boundaries between its subjects, to suggest an indeterminacy between the I and the you. Hammond's spiraling three-strand braids indicate that she was formally drawn to the imaginative possibilities opened up by this queer thirdness.

In the catalog of the recent exhibition "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution." curator Helen Molesworth writes about the marginalization of feminist abstraction, while artist Catherine Lord discusses the invisibility of lesbian art within feminism.³¹ Despite the recent smattering of attention given to Hammond's Floorpieces, the works still hover beneath the sightline of most histories of art—not only because they are feminist abstractions (Molesworth), or because they are lesbian (Lord), but also because they are indebted to vocabularies of craft. Hammond's crafty lesbian abstraction, that is, faces a triple erasure compounded by her use of widely denigrated folk techniques.

The works themselves thematize and trope that invisibility. Lesbian writer Jill Johnston wrote in 1972, "Recently a prominent feminist told me 'We want to sweep the lesbian issue under the rug."32 This metaphor crops up again in a review in The Advocate of Hammond's groundbreaking survey book, Lesbian Art in America, published in 2000: "Lesbian artists have been swept under the rug of history—but a thoughtprovoking new book seeks to give them their due."33 Hammond's Floorpieces literalize the metaphor of the rug as a secret place where dirt is gathered and hidden. The language of

sweeping things "under the rug" activates a sense of domestic space and invisibility that is similar, perhaps, to the metaphor of the closet (also an enclosed, dark place where things are meant to be kept out of sight). This spatial dimension of the sculptures matters—they delineate an area or an arena for action.

The Floorpieces are complex utterances, as all artworks are, and one thing they might propose is a coded "talking back" to the straight feminist aversion to emerging lesbian sensibilities. The lesbian handiwork explodes one persistent assumption about craft as rooted in the primarily straight, domestic sphere, and made in distinction to men's work. Lesbian art critic Laura Cottingham critiqued the 1995 exhibition "Division of Labor," which featured Hammond's work, for the way that it "heterosexualizes the feminist art movement" by presuming that women are "cast as men's domestic servants, housekeepers, and wives." 34 What happens, Cottingham asks, when craft is removed from that connotation, when the domestic is not predicated on a male/female divide? She raises important questions about the erasure of lesbians from a feminist art history that has become increasingly consolidated. While most lesbians in the 1970s were feminists, some straight feminists saw themselves at odds with lesbian concerns. Betty Friedan was quoted in The New York Times in 1973 saying that lesbians were at the center of a CIA plot to infiltrate and discredit the National Organization for Women.³⁵ The socalled "lavender menace" threatened at times to splinter the feminist movement.

These are conditions under which the Floorpieces were made—a time not long after the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, when

declarations of lesbianism could be treated with suspicion or outright hostility, when announcing one's homosexuality could have negative repercussions in one's family life and workplace. Yet Hammond's coming out story is not dominated by secrecy or repression. Beginning in the early 1970s, Hammond has played an active, vocal role in shaping both feminist and lesbian art history. She was a founder of the alternative women's cooperative gallery A.I.R., and one of the first A.I.R. members to come out. She was one of the openly lesbian board members of the feminist collective Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics. She has advocated for lesbian visibility since the 1970s, and curated the first US lesbian art exhibition, in 1978, at 112 Green Street, called "A Lesbian Show," which consisted mostly of abstract work. The show was in some respects difficult to organize, as many lesbian artists were too afraid of discrimination and stereotyping to participate; she has conjectured that explicitly sexual content might have been rechanneled into allusion. As she wrote in 1978, "I believe there is something as yet undefinable in my work, and other work that we might call 'lesbian sensibility,' but for the most part it is hidden."36

Queer theorist Gavin Butt has recently theorized the importance of gossip for spreading queer knowledge.³⁷ To gossip, I would add the related concept of euphemism: forced to speak in code, gay men and lesbians invented new words and language amongst themselves, such as terms for lesbian relationships like "sisters," "dear friends," or "companions." Queerness relies upon sexual puns, and an in-language flourishes within communities bracing

themselves against hostility toward open expressions of desire. With this in mind, the Floorpieces resonate as visual lesbian slangone not meant to be visible to the entire population but only made legible within specific subcultural contexts. Hammond's floor-bound works take their horizontality in a decidedly sexualized orientation, as a euphemism for "going down"—that is to say, oral sex between women. Hammond has said that museums often want to show her works hung on walls, but she is insistent that they stay on the ground. Going down, rug licking, carpet munching, and other coded lingo for oral sex between women render this horizontality and lowness specifically lesbian.³⁸ Hammond's 'rugs''—also slang for the female pubic region—emphasize the sexual vulgarity of much "central core" imagery in feminist art. (Judy Chicago's installation The Dinner Party [1974–1979], with its elaborately designed vulvas on plates, has likewise been seen as reference to "eating out" a woman.³⁹)

Hammond's abstractions thus function on some level as dense and elaborate puns. These rugs have an understated, yet wicked and knowing humor. The Floorpieces could also be read as functioning as jokes for "embarrassing" female bodily processes: being "on the rag," for instance, is a euphemism for menstruation. They also slyly burlesque the alignment of women with passivity and floor-based crafts. Horizontality is not just lesbian-specific: it is the primary position of women in art history, as evidenced by the ubiquity of the odalisque or sleeping nude. With their defiant, even shameless lying down, the Floorpieces also prefigure the flip in orientation suggested when the feminist journal Off Our Backs

spawned a counter publication, On Our Backs, in 1984. The upright stance implied by the title of Off Our Backs was sassily laid low by the lesbian porn magazine as it implied that horizontality need not be a position of powerlessness.

Class Matters

While Hammond's Floorpieces are inextricable from issues of sexuality, they are also bound up in economic questions. Hammond's decision to leave her artworkcum-rug on the floor comes on the heels of a wider reconsideration of the place women's craft, one that is fundamentally connected to class. Hammond herself broached these connections in her 1977 article "Class Notes," published in the "Lesbian Art and Artists" issue of Heresies. In this text, she puts her "lower middle-class background" in dialog with her queerness. She writes that, since lesbians have less access to capital and have less class privilege than do straight women who can "marry up," few have had the time or resources to make art. As a result, many lesbian artists have historically been independently wealthy. Not so Hammond, and her lower middle-class status was implicated in her use of found rags. As a single mom in the 1970s with limited funds, she scrounged for materials.

"Class Notes" also calls for the explosion of "aesthetic hierarchies" such as good and bad taste. 40 As Lucy Lippard has commented, traditional handiwork like quilt-making is not just at the bottom of the high/low, art/craft division, for "there are also high crafts and 'low' ones," freighted with different levels of respectability.⁴¹ For instance, the rhythmic opticality produced by the Floorpieces'

integration of form and pattern recalls the ringed colors of Sonia Delaunay, as seen in the tapestry Syncopé from 1970 (Figure 6). Beginning in the early twentieth century, Delaunay was at the forefront of artists blurring the line between fine art and crafts such as textiles, rugs, and costume design. Yet Delaunay's crafts were always dignified by their association with her painting and other fine art practices. Destined for decorative arts museums or a collector's walls, such tapestries are examples of "high" craft. "Low" craft, by contrast, is classed "middlebrow" and usually put into service as a functional object. It is often gendered female (though craft can be gendered at both high and low registers, depending on medium, format, etc.).

While Hammond's use of the braided rug form stemmed in part from genuine practicality, it is reductive and anachronistic to think of the Floorpieces simply as manifestations of thrift—the 1970s were not the pioneer days, or even the 1940s, when the expediencies of the US wartime economy led to a national obsession with frugality. In the Second World War era, countless newspaper and magazine articles urged women to recycle used stockings or discarded neckties into braided rugs. But by the early 1960s, it was just as cheap, and definitely quicker and more convenient, to buy a factory-made rug than to make one. This is narrated in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, published in 1963:

Once when I visited Buddy I found Mrs. Willard braiding a rug out of strips of wool from Mr. Willard's old suits. She'd spent a week on that rug, and I had admired the tweedy browns and greens and blues patterning the braid, but after



Fig 6 Sonia Delaunay, Syncopé, 1970. Woven Aubusson tapestry, $77^{1/2} \times 68^{7/8}$ in. $(196 \times 175 \text{ cm}).$ © L&M Services B.V., The Hague 20080314.

Mrs. Willard was through, instead of hanging the rug on the wall the way I would have done, she put it down in place of her kitchen mat, and in a few days it was soiled and dull and indistinguishable from any mat you could buy for under a dollar in the five and ten.

Plath signals a generational shift away from utilitarian handmaking to the emerging field of hobbyist craft. Such a generational shift was already afoot in the years before second-wave feminism. Postwar industrialism—with its surplus of cheap, manufactured material goods at the five and dime—or what Mike Davis calls the

"overconsumptionist" stage in late capitalism, started in the early 1960s.⁴² It was this economic shift, even more than feminism, that made it increasingly unlikely that women such as Plath's narrator would make a rag rug out of necessity.

In the immediate postwar decades, such handiwork began to signify a leisure-time activity whose product would be admired on the wall, rather than the grind of domestic labor resulting in something to be dirtied underfoot. The women who would make such objects were increasingly unlikely to be working-class women who worked outside the home. The domestic crafts become a middle-class, free-time pursuit—in other

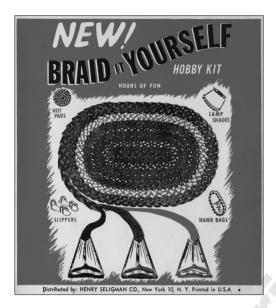


Fig 7 Braid it Yourself Hobby Kit, c. 1950. Henry Seligman Co., ink on cardboard, $7 \times 6^{3/4}$ in. $(178 \times 171 \text{ mm}).$

words, a hobby. It was precisely these years that saw an upsurge in mass-market, storebought "Braid it Yourself" kits—heralding a new market for manufactured instructions and tools like metal braid folders to assist with, simplify, or speed up the making of handmade objects. Paradoxically, as women entered the workforce, many turned to domestic activities formerly coded as chores (such as knitting or rug-making) not out of duty, but for pleasure. The packaging for a hobby kit by the Henry Seligman Company promises "hours of fun" as it gives its users the tools to make everything from hot pads to handbags using the traditional three-strand braiding technique (Figure 7). If followed correctly, the instructions claim, these "hours of fun" are a great time saving over previous methods of making, which might require



Fig 8 Photograph of "The Plymouth" rug design, from "How to Braid a Rug in One Day," 1949. Nu-Flex Company, $6\frac{1}{2} \times 7$ in. (165 × 178 mm).

days or weeks. The graphic rendering of the rug-in-progress curiously echoes Hammond's Fan Lady, as the metal folders—wildly out of scale—become little legs that animate the braided form as if it might scurry away.

For many women, craft projects such as braided rugs offered a measure of handson control otherwise lacking in their jobs and were seen as a positive creative outlet. The instructional manual, "How to Braid a Rug in One Day," published by the Nu-Flex Company in 1949, describes braiding rugs as the "work of women" and "a happy work." It features photographs of some of the most popular designs in situ, including "The Plymouth" (Figure 8). Here the rug is placed in an interior scene, demarcating a cozy area of domestic relaxation. A welcoming easy chair is set in the corner next to a woodpaneled radio. The (presumably female) spectator is beckoned into this scene of leisure, as a magazine is left open at an image



Fig 9 Harmony Hammond, Floorpiece VI, 1973. Cloth, acrylic, 65 in. (165 cm) diameter. Courtesy Dwight Hackett projects, Sante Fe, New Mexico. @ Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

of a fashion model, and a pair of house slippers waits on the edge of the rug. The rug's contrasting rings of light and dark pick up the wooden detailing of both the chair and the radio, and its design bears a strong formal resemblance to Hammond's Floorpiece VI (Figure 9). Comparing her art with this photo reminds us of the distance between her museum-sited works and the space of the home, but the similarities between Hammond's piece and this handmade rug demonstrate that she was appropriating the realm of middle-class hobby culture as well as indebted to the traditional "high" crafts such as Delaunay's tapestries.

The Floorpieces' reference to the rag rug is thus not an ironic citation of the "low," but an earnest appreciation of this form of making in all its classed cultural iterations.

This leads back to Hammond's rugs as a sort of camp, for, according to Sontag, camp is the genuine reveling in the base or the low and transforming it with something like love.

The claim that Hammond's work implicitly refers to lesbian sexuality might be open to debate, but there is no question that she experienced craft as a gesture of physical gratification, motored by bodily desires and pleasures. It is a desire that, within some circles of postwar art that eschewed such overt hands-on making, has been repressed. As an illegitimate passion that dare not speak its name, craft dovetails with queerness. The Floorpeices align handmaking with queer world-making to propose art as an unruly and libidinal terrain, and lay the ground for alternative identities within both domestic and institutional contexts.

In their ideal installation, Hammond envisions all five of the completed Floorbieces (not including the early, transitional piece seen in Figure 3) together in the same space, with nothing on the walls. Unfortunately, she has never been given the opportunity to display them this way. Instead, they are usually exhibited singly, in isolation from the rest of the series, and placed near wall-based works. (Because of this, although they were originally exhibited directly on the ground, she now shows them on top of low, round platforms 1½ in. [4 cm] high, painted to match the gallery floor so people do not accidentally trample on them as they back up to see the nearby wall works.) If viewed together on the same plane, they would become relational, each spiral a distinct personage that might also refer to the leveling of difference within same-sex relationships, or evoking a collective conversation.

Desiring History

After the catalyzing process of creating the Floorpieces, Hammond began making the abstract, sensual sculptures for which she is most well known, such as Duo from 1980 (Figure 10). These ladder-like structures refer back to braids—there is a type of braid called a ladder braid—and their visceral, bodily shapes also suggest interdependency, leaning in, and mutual support. (They also recall The Ladder, the magazine for the pre-Stonewall lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis.) Two similar objects set side by side have come to obliquely signify homosexuality—from Jasper Johns's Ale Cans (1964) to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's wall clocks in Perfect Lovers (1991)—and Duo echoes this abstract, same-sex dynamic. 43 With their biomorphic, skeletal armatures covered



Fig 10 Harmony Hammond, Duo, 1980. Wood, cloth, gesso, acrylic, rhoplex, beads, and glitter. Two units, 84×45 in. (213 × 114 cm) each. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Judith Danziger, 2006. Courtesy Dwight Hackett projects, Sante Fe, New Mexico. © Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

in soft cloth, Duo's wrapped forms also allude to the butch/femme dynamic, with its interplay between strong black and glittering, ruffled, frilly pink. Hammond undergoes a tactile, full-body process when making such sculptures (they are often over lifesize), and there is a muscular eroticism to works such as Duo, with its swollen forms, ligatures, and obsessive bandaging.

In this work and others, Hammond continues to draw inspiration from craft techniques, but none of her works have flaunted their crafty origins as flagrantly as the Floorpieces. Those were unique in her oeuvre, singularly unembarrassed about their debt to craft as well as unembarrassed about their allusions to female bodily processes that are often the source of shame and pleasure, such as menstruation and lesbian sex. As such, they are also about vulnerability—they could after all get stepped on. Alongside pleasure and desire, it is this vulnerability, as well as a measure of embarassment about its "inferior" status, that crucially binds queerness to craft.

For artists and art historians alike, craft has been unfairly opposed to conceptual practices, and thus cast as a bad object choice, unworthy of serious contemplation. There continues to be a lingering taint about craft as "low," a formation that is articulated through class as well as gender. The drive to get distance from craft is demonstrated in the recent decisions to excise the word from the California College of Arts and Crafts and the American Craft Museum. Yet many artists and art historians are recognizing that conceptually oriented art need not be separated from craft-based practices, and that to utilize traditional handiwork techniques is not necessarily to nostalgically fetishize the touch of the artist's hand. A new generation of younger artists—many of them queer—are embracing and celebrating craft. Lacey Jane Roberts, for instance, who has also written on craft and queer theory, installed a guerrilla, handmade "& Crafts" sign at the entrance of the California College of the Arts in 2005, to remind the institution that it gave up a crucial part of its history and identity when it dropped the word. 44

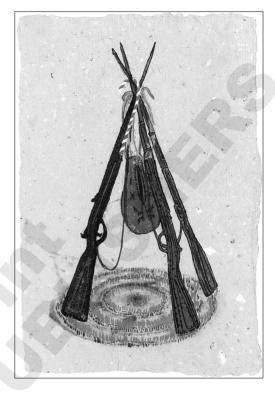


Fig II Allison Smith, 2004, Stack-Arms (study for a sculpture of the same name, featuring wool rug, carved wood guns, and cloth pocket with painted bandana pattern). $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ in. (22 × 14 cm). Gouache on handmade paper. Photo credit Allison Smith. Courtesy of the artist.

Many young lesbian artists have been influenced in particular by Hammond's use of craft. To cite one example, a work by Allison Smith called Stack-Arms from 2004 features as its centerpiece a circular rag rug (seen in a drawing of the installation) (Figure 11). Smith's work refers to Civil War reenactments, among other interests, and here, in a conscious homage to Hammond's Floorpieces, the rug becomes the foundation for a stack-arms formation of handmade.

guns, a configuration that indicates readiness for battle. Draped over the guns is a small, handmade pouch. Based on the small pouches women carried before clothes had pockets, this historical object was distinctly gueered by Smith as she remade it out of a paisley bandana. The bandana refers to gay male flagging—the practice of men signaling their particular sexual desires by placing bandanas of different colors in their back pockets, thereby rendering those desires visible in spaces of cruising but illegible to those unfamiliar with these codes. Its queerness is not just male but also lesbian-Smith calls the pouch an "erotic pocket" and a "pussy pocket," noting that the paisley pattern takes on vaginal connotations. 45

For Smith, craft is rich with meaning, and she utilizes handiwork and conventional modes of making as conceptual methods to investigate historical artifacts and how they are interpreted. As such her installations are dense with allusion; for Smith, the spiral rug is a way to honor Hammond's queer craft and bring it into the present. For spectators such as Smith, Hammond's painted, floor-bound sculptures offer up a profoundly flirtatious encounter. Hammond's important activism in the lesbian arts community—as well as her use of craft—paved the way for queer, feminist artists interested in handmaking, and in Stack-Arms her work becomes a literal support. With this piece, Smith also activates and makes evident the sexual euphemisms embedded within the Floorpieces.

Cottingham states that "An examination of Hammond's work from the 1970s does not immediately reveal the lesbian identity of its maker; nor does it indicate—through any abrupt alteration in content, color, style, or form—at what point she underwent this transition from straight to lesbian."46 Yet while Hammond never conceived of the Floorpieces as explicitly lesbian, one might conjecture that this declaration of queer desire was embedded in or complexly constitutive of the process of making these works. Although Hammond did not think of her use of craft as queer at the time and did not intend her Floorpieces as coming out statements, to revisit them with a queer lens is to produce a lesbian art history that polemically does not rely on intention but is motivated by productive misreadings, metaphoric leaps, and imaginative provocations. This queering is not a forensic hunt for hidden codes that might magically unlock the "real" meaning of the art, as if such things are ever totally knowable, stable, or unified, but an intentionally open-ended engagement with the work, with its potential to mean in many different registers as it is continually resignified for new audiences queer or not. This does not involve the "unmasking" of hidden symbols, but instead posits that some readings attach themselves, belatedly, to art in ways that their maker might not have foreseen.

In recent years Hammond's Floorpieces have been positioned either as readymade sculpture, seen as formal examples of the expansion of painting, or recuperated as examples of feminist craft. But they are none of those things—or, rather, they are all of them. Beyond their braided and painted materials, the sculptures interweave somewhat disparate conceptual strands—sexuality, abstract painting, and hobbyist craft culture. They exist in a liminal, queer in-between space that also conjoins lesbian handiwork with feminist labor. In this, Hammond stages an unresolved

encounter between class, camp, and the handmade. She has never been interested in a simple inversion of craft and art. As she noted about what is included in the white Western male art tradition: "Women are out. However, many of us are questioning if we even want in. Getting 'crafts' into the 'fine art' museum is not the answer."⁴⁷ Craft objects, like gueer desires, are multiple, crossing beyond the high/low divide: they are props, they are surrogates, they are functional, they are decorative, they are frivolous, and they are usable. Mostly, they refuse to be any one thing.

In 1982, a roundtable discussion was convened at the New School to discuss the guestion: "Is there a homosexual aesthetic?" Hammond was there, as was gay art critic John Perreault, who said:

On a deep level, we are male or female or both. We're examples of bothness rather than either/or-ness. Art work is not form or content. It is both. Craft is craft and art at the same time. We must apply insight to other artificial binary models. The gay aesthetic should yield good art, be against the dull, the drab, and against the pretentious. It should be biographical, personal, universal, embarrassing; it should celebrate the arbitrary nature of gender, be against "good taste." If we are outsiders, act like it.48

Perreault's statement has the ring of a manifesto; Hammond's Floorpieces go as far as any artworks do to enact his exhortations. With their insistence on slipperiness of categories, their blurring of binary identity, their embrace of the embarrassing and the shameless, their investment in pleasure, their transgressive reveling in lowness, they

demonstrate how craft and queerness have long been braided together. The "places" activated by Floorpieces are also multiple: the works insist on the place for craft within contemporary art, the place of class within formations of gender and sexuality, and the place of lesbian desire within feminist art history. These histories have not always been openly stated, but now refuse to be swept under the rug.

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Notes

- I Unless otherwise attributed, direct quotes from Hammond are taken from a series of phone interviews with the author, spring/summer 2007.
- 2 Though there is some overlap, "queer" and "lesbian" are by no means interchangeable terms. I deploy "queer" to gesture to a broad spectrum of non-normative sexualities, practices, and subjectpositions, while keeping alive the specificities of lesbianism.
- **3** Harmony Hammond, "Statement Accompanying Exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery, NYC, 1973," reprinted in Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art, and the Martial Arts, p. 9. New York: Time and Space Limited Press, 1984.
- 4 Leo Steinberg famously categorized Rauschenberg's use of the horizontal as the "flatbed picture plane" in Other Criteria:

- Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, but Bed is importantly not meant to be exhibited off the wall.
- **5** Elissa Auther, Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960–80. *Journal of Modern Craft* 1(1) (2008): 13–34.
- 6 There is a vast and important feminist literature on the gendering of craft; for two especially influential examples, see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts. In: Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology, pp. 50–81. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981; and Rozsika Parker, The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine. London: Routledge, 1989.
- **7** Philip Leider, Carl Andre, *Artforum* (February 1968): 46.
- **8** Carl Andre, Letter to the Editor, *Artforum* (April 1973): 9.
- **9** See Jeanne Siegel, Carl Andre: Artworker, Studio International (November 1970): 175–9.
- 10 See Amelia Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject, pp. 94–97. Minneapolis: Univesity of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- II David Bourdon, Fling, Dribble and Dip, Life (February 27, 1970): 62–3.
- 12 See, for instance, Blake Gopnik, Stretching the Canvas: At the Katzen Center, Abstraction Off the Wall, Washington Post (December 25, 2006): COI.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Harmony Hammond, Spiral, New Art Examiner (November 1982); reprinted in Wrappings, p. 64.
- 15 Harmony Hammond, Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History, p. 19. New York: Rizzoli, 2000.
- 16 Harmony Hammond, Creating Feminist Works, Creating Feminist Works: A Panel Discussion from The Scholar and the Feminist V. New York: Barnard College Women's Center, 1978; reprinted in Wrappings, p. 12.

- 17 Harmony Hammond, Lesbian Artists, Our Right to Love, ed. Ginny Vida. New York: Prentice Hall, 1978; reprinted in Wrappings, p. 41.
- 18 Harmony Hammond, A Sense of Touch, first version New Art Examiner (Summer 1979); second version Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics (Issue 12, 1981); reprinted in Wrappings, p. 80.
- 19 Hammond, A Sense of Touch, p. 80.
- 20 Hammond, Lesbian Art in America, p. 10.
- 21 For more on the notion of queer orientation, see Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology:
 Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- **22** E-mail correspondence with the author, August 2007.
- 23 Paul Eli Ivey, In the Succeeding Silence. In: Harmony Hammond: Dialogues and Meditations exhibition catalog, n.p. Tucson, AZ: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002.
- 24 Hammond, Spiral; reprinted in Wrappings, p. 65.
- 25 This mirrors French feminist Luce Irigaray's formulation of the "two lips" of female "sex which is not one," Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un, translated by Catherine Porter with Caroline Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- **26** Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, 33: Femininity Lecture. *Standard Edition* 22 (1933): 136–57.
- 27 Anna C. Chave, Outlaws: Women, Abstraction, and Painting in New York, 1967–1975. In: Katy Siegel, ed., High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975, p. 134. New York: Independent Curators International, 2006.
- 28 Susan Sontag, Notes on 'Camp.' In: Against Interpretation and Other Essays, pp. 275–92. New York: Dell, 1964.
- 29 See, for instance, the discussion of drag in Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990. This gloss does not do justice to the complicated

- nuances in Butler's text, and her theorizations about the force of the law under which these parodies exist.
- 30 Harmony Hammond, Class Notes, Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics 3 (Fall 1977); reprinted in Wrappings, p. 36.
- **31** Helen Molesworth, Painting with Ambivalence. In: Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed. WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution (exhibition catalog for exhibition organized by Cornelia Butler), pp. 428–39. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007; Catherine Lord, Their Memory is Playing Tricks on Her: Notes Toward a Calligraphy of Rage. In: WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, pp. 440-57.
- 32 Jill Johnston, Dyke Nationalism and Heterosexuality (October 12, 1972); reprinted in Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years, p. 173. London: Serpent's Tail, 1998.
- 33 Malik Gaines, "Through Women's Eyes," The Advocate (July 4, 2000): 76.
- 34 Laura Cottingham, Notes on Lesbian, Art Journal 55(4) (Winter 1996): 72-7.
- **35** "Up from the Kitchen Floor," New York Times Magazine (March 4, 1973): 33-34. For more on this conflict, see Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- **36** Hammond, Lesbian Artists, in *Wrappings*, p. 41.
- 37 Gavin Butt, Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005.
- 38 Given the unofficial, "underground" nature of such lingo, it is difficult to know exactly which of these terms were in circulation in the 1970s; "going down" certainly was. Librarian Nancy Silverrod at the San Francisco Public Library did a great deal of etymological work for me on the history of postwar lesbian sexual slang, and I thank her for her incredible thoroughness.

- 39 See Laura Cottingham, Eating From the "Dinner Party" Plates and Other Myths, Metaphors, and Moments of Lesbian Enunciation in Feminism and in its Art Movement, in Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art, pp. 208–28 (Amsterdam: G and B Arts, 2000); this is a reading Chicago herself has denied. For more on Chicago and craft, see Amelia Jones, ed., Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art in association with the University of California Press, 1996.
- 40 Hammond, Class Notes, pp. 34-6.
- 41 Lucy R. Lippard, Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's 'Hobby Art'), Heresies, issue 4 (Winter 1978); reprinted in Lippard, The Pink Glass Swan, p. 130 (New York: The New Press, 1995).
- **42** See Mike Davis, Prisoners of the American Dream. London: Verso Books, 1986.
- 43 Several such pairings appear under the heading "Couples" in the queer exhibition and accompanying catalog edited by Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder and Amy Scholder, In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995.
- 44 Lacey Jane Roberts, Put Your Thing Down, Flip It, and Reverse It: Re-imagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory. In: Maria Buszek, ed. Extra/Ordinary: Craft Culture and Contemporary Art. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming.
- 45 Interview with the author, May 25, 2007.
- 46 Cottingham, Eating From the Dinner Party Plates
- **47** Hammond, Creating Feminist Works, reprinted in Wrappings, p. 14.
- **48** Transcript of the conference proceedings first published in Women Artists' News (Spring 1983), transcript by Gladys Osterman; reprinted in Judy Siegel, ed. Mutiny and the Mainstream: Talk that Changed Art 1975–1990, p. 213. New York: Midmarch Art Press, 1992.